John Ashbery and Surrealism

David Spittle

Submitted for Doctor of Philosophy

Newcastle University

School of English Literature, Language & Linguistics

April 2016

Page Left Intentionally Blank

Abstract

This thesis will demonstrate that an engagement with Surrealism alongside John Ashbery's poetry can provide a mutually beneficial discussion through which to further understand both. Through its phenomenological attention, Ashbery's poetry configures the everyday experience of his reality in a way that responds to, and invites, a surrealist perspective. The first chapter explores Joseph Cornell, collecting and the 'found object', with an emphasis on Ashbery's first collection, *Some Trees* (1956). The second Chapter examines dreams and dreaming throughout Ashbery's first four collections, ending with an analysis of *Three Poems* (1972). Merleau-Ponty is used to demonstrate the oneiric implications of Ashbery's poetics of phenomenology as a basis for Surrealism, whereby a perception of reality becomes comparable to a dream. My third chapter presents Ashbery's book-length poem *Flow Chart* (1991) alongside the Canadian filmmaker, Guy Maddin. The concept of noise, alongside the pioneering presence of Surrealism in early radio, is used to understand treatments of memory that connect Maddin's films to Ashbery's interruptive poetics and lead both to be understood through Georges Bataille's notion of 'The Labyrinth'. The fourth chapter discusses the relationship between visual perspective and a surrealist imagining of childhood. This chapter returns to the enduring importance of 'The Skaters' in order to understand the poem's relation to collage, 'play' and metaphor as key examples of how Ashbery's poetry comes to realise Breton's surrealist dictum: 'always for the first time'.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my two supervisors, John Beck and Kirsten Macleod, without their support, intelligence and guidance this project would not have been possible. I am grateful for Newcastle University for providing me with the funding that allowed me to travel to America. I am indebted to the staff at Houghton Library at Harvard University, for their patience in helping me explore their archival resources. I would also like to acknowledge the friendly coffees, lunches and conversation I enjoyed with Oli Hazzard, while at Harvard. Recalling this period of research would not be complete without extending my deepest gratitude to both David Kermani and John Ashbery for their generosity, friendliness and hospitality. I am also incredibly grateful for the enthusiastic, warm and open correspondence with Guy Maddin. In the challenges, confusion and frustration that came with navigating a PhD, the support of friends has been essential: thank you to John and Kris for being my bastions of fun, friendship and poetry; to the infinite and caffeinated pep-talks of Alex Adams and Mani Sharpe; the basement solidarity and conversational companionship of Simon, Chris, Rob, Sadek, Faye, Tom, Claire, Joe, Marie, Janelle, Helen and Bea; and the lifeline phone-calls of film chat, inspiration and understanding from Anthony Lee. A huge thank you to Steve for his technological wizardry – the salvation of computer literacy and patience. To Charlotte, for joining me in this Northern voyage, for always listening/enduring, and for being there for me - with happiness and love and plentiful humour, I cannot thank you enough. Finally, I want to thank my parents, for their consistent belief, kindness and encouragement, in allowing me to realise and pursue my love of poetry.

Page Left Intentionally Blank

Contents

Table of Figures

Figures 1 – 7 appear in the 'Appendix' whereas Figures I-IV are included in the body of the text in Chapter 4. This presentation distinction is made in response to the way in which the analysis addresses the image. In Chapter 1 the images act as a helpful reference to turn to in order to consolidate the analysis. In contrast Chapter 4 relies on a closer familiarity to convey its argument, thus the pictures appear embedded in the text.

Abbreviations

John Ashbery:

AG	*April Galleons*
AW	*A Wave*
AWK	*As We Know*
DDS	*The Double Dream of Spring*
FC	*Flow Chart*
HD	*Houseboat Days*
RM	*Rivers and Mountains*
Sh	*Shadow Train*
SP	*Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror*
ST	*Some Trees*
TCO	*The Tennis Court Oath*
TP	*Three Poems*
VN	*The Vermont Notebook*

André Breton:

FM	'Manifesto of Surrealism'
SM	'Second Manifesto of Surrealism'

Introduction

'And I watched over myself and my thoughts like a night-watchman'

— André Breton

Between the poetry of John Ashbery and the ideas of Surrealism exists a dialogue that, like the poetry itself, refuses to settle. It is not a relationship that can be explained solely through influence, nor should any attempt to understand this relationship seek to map one in terms of the other. To understand this restless dialogue involves a methodology that resists claiming either Ashbery or Surrealism in any definitive sense, as to do so would betray the fundamental nature of both. Ashbery himself has observed that, with critics, he is 'sometimes considered a harebrained, homegrown surrealist whose poetry defies even the rules and logic of Surrealism'.[1]This thesis will explore how Ashbery's poetry relates to Surrealism and why, without lazily or erroneously branding him as a surrealist, such a project can mutually advance understandings of his work and the continuing presence of Surrealism as an active body of thought. Surrealism, as approached in this thesis, is not a code of aesthetics, a literary style, or a conscious exercise of principle, but is instead a condition of experience discovered and enacted in Ashbery's poetry.

The significance of Surrealism in relation to Ashbery's poetry has been consistently acknowledged throughout criticism and yet is rarely afforded the sustained analysis it so clearly deserves. From the somewhat frosty ambivalence of W.H. Auden's foreword to *Some Trees* (1956), in which he observes a ' "surrealistic" style', right through to the later criticism of Marjorie Perloff – where '[n]ot *what* one dreams but *how*' is at stake, Surrealism or its suggestion has never been far from Ashbery's poetry.[2] David Shapiro declared Ashbery to be 'a child of the muse of Rimbaud' and spoke of the New York School sharing 'a common *tradition* of French surrealism'; John Shoptaw observed that the 'French surrealist tongue helped Ashbery ring in the new'; Daniel Kane explored surrealist film as a way to better understand methods of poetic disjunction; Ernesto Suarez-Toste discerned a particular Surrealism that navigates between Oulipian influences and the spirit of Giorgio de Chirico; and Andrew DuBois has furthered Perloff's investigation of the dream, framed in regards to a

[1] John Ashbery, 'Second Presentation of Elizabeth Bishop', *Selected Prose* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004), p.164.
[2] For an elaborated account and further quotation relating to Auden's response to *Some Trees,* see Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (Illinois: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 249- 252.

modulation of (in)attention.[3] Ashbery himself has written widely on Surrealism in the context of his own art criticism, contributing pieces on the surrealist exhibition at the Galerie Charpentier in Paris (1964), the 'Space and Dream' exhibition at the Knoedler Gallery in New York (1967) and the 'Dada, Surrealism and their Heritage' exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1968). In addition to these reviews he has also written on and translated various writers and artists related to or self-proclaimed as surrealist.[4] However, despite Ashbery's ranging involvement with the texts and ideas of Surrealism there has been no extended study on the topic.

There are a number of reasons why critics have been reticent to fully engage with what Surrealism might mean alongside and through Ashbery's poetry. Firstly, and most obviously, there is Ashbery's own aversion to being labelled a 'surrealist'. The uncomfortable tag of 'surrealist' can, depending on opinion and context, evoke a stiflingly reified anachronism – reductively synonymous with André Breton, rigid historicity and the practice of automatic writing. Or, alternatively, Surrealism suggests an etymologically vague descendant of what *had* meaning at one time but that is now mired in its own popularized misuse. Keen to deflect erroneous beliefs that his poetics might be compared to automatic writing, or that being related to or interested in Surrealism immediately presumes a kind of automatic writing, Ashbery frequently denounces its value: 'I don't believe in automatic writing as the Surrealists were supposed to have practiced it, simply because it is not a reflection of the whole mind, which is partly logical and reasonable, and that part should have its say too.'[5] Whilst it is automatic writing that appears most often as a point of contention, Ashbery has also extended his criticism to the problematic legacy of Breton.

---

[3] David Shapiro, *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 18 and p. 25; John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 49; Daniel Kane, 'Reading John Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath* through Man ray's Eye', *Textual Practice*, (2007) 21:3, 551-575; Ernesto Suarez-Toste, ' "The Tension is in the Concept": John Ashbery's surrealism', *Style*, 38 (2004); Andrew DuBois, *Ashbery's Forms of Attention* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2006).

[4] In his art criticism (first for the Paris *Herald Tribune*, then as executive editor of *ARTnews*, later writing for *New York* and *Newsweek*) Ashbery has written on Surrealist exhibitions, Joseph Cornell, Yves Tanguy and Giorgio de Chirico, as well as interviewing the writer/painter/avid explorer of mescaline, Henri Michaux. Elsewhere Ashbery has written a range of prose pieces relating to Surrealism and figures associated with its history: the eccentric French writer Raymond Roussel (whose works were passionately adopted by the surrealists), Pierre Reverdy, Antonin Artaud, the pulp phenomenon of *Fantômas*, and the digressive and dream-like films of Jacques Rivette. Ashbery has also published a full translation of Arthur Rimbaud's *Illuminations* (2011). In 2014 Carcanet published two large volumes (separated into prose and poetry) of Ashbery's French translations. The extensive translations unsurprisingly roam through and around the far-reaching influence of Surrealism in French writing: from Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Max Jacob, to Arthur Cravan, Pierre Reverdy, Paul Eluard and René Char. The 'Prose' collection includes Ashbery's translations of de Chirico's short stories and extracts from *Hebdomeros*, the entirety of Reverdy's *Haunted House*, the first chapter from Raymond Roussel's *Impressions of* Africa and the posthumously discovered *Documents to Serve as an Outline*; in addition to these larger translations is the correspondence between Artaud and Jacques Rivière, and texts by Georges Bataille, Salvador Dalí, Michaux and Michel Leiris.

[5] John Ashbery, interviewed by Peter A. Stitt, 'The Art of Poetry', *The Paris Review*, 90 (Winter 1983).

Ethically, aesthetically and philosophically, Breton's jurisdiction over Surrealism can be a taxing deterrent (both in criticism and as a poetic influence), as necessary in its difficulty as it is uncomfortable in its hypocrisy. Despite Breton's exclamations of freedom and the surrealist fascination with sexuality, Ashbery notes that a Bretonian perspective of '[s]exual liberty […] meant every conceivable kind of sexual act except for homosexuality'.[6] This hypocrisy was compounded by the suicide of 'one of the most brilliant of the Surrealist writers, René Crevel' who, like Ashbery, 'happened to be homosexual' and as Ashbery surmised, 'must have felt like an exile in the promised land he helped to discover'.[7] It would be entirely possible to advance a reading of Surrealism in reference to Ashbery's poetic articulation of homosexuality. Drawing from Shoptaw's emphasis on 'homotextuality', Surrealism could even be examined as a self-censoring aesthetic (in earlier collections) that enabled Ashbery to covertly or indirectly address aspects of homosexual identity. Any such analysis would also have to reflect on and interrogate the historical homophobia and sexual complexity (at times closer to a disappointing and sexist simplicity) that infects much of the earlier texts of Surrealism. To cover this area with any convincing merit would require a discussion that examined sexuality, representation and gender alongside (already extensively and hotly debated) theories of avant-garde politics, in addition to a more philosophical consideration of Surrealism. For reasons of practicality and length, in order to privilege the textual analysis of Ashbery's poetry (in which, despite Shoptaw's emphatic insistence, sexuality remains a relatively rare and muted subject) such questions will not be addressed here.[8]

Ashbery was also clearly uninspired by Breton's writing, referring to Breton's famous novel *Nadja* as a work that 'has aged badly and reads like an intermittent solemn put-on'.[9] The doctrinal politics, hierarchical management and infamous excommunications with which Breton chose to conduct the activities and representation of Surrealism led Ashbery to observe: 'Breton is right in claiming that Surrealism is very much alive, but it remains so in spite of the politics and court etiquette which he has sought to impose on it'.[10] Ashbery then consolidated this statement by concluding that Breton was 'right also in pointing out

---

[6] John Ashbery, 'The Heritage of Dada and Surrealism', *Reported Sightings*, ed. David Bergman (New York: Knopf, 1989), p.6.
[7] Ashbery, *Reported Sightings* p.6.
[8] For an introduction to the misogyny and exclusionary gender and sexual politics that were rife in Surrealism, see Susan Rubin Suleima, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). For research on Ashbery's sexuality, see John Vincent, 'Reports of Looting and Insane Buggery behind Altars: John Ashbery's Queer Poetics', *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Summer, 1998), pp. 155-175; and on 'homotextuality', see John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).
[9] John Ashbery, 'The Decline of the Verbs: Giorgio de Chirico', *Selected Prose*, p.88.
[10] 'The Heritage of Dada and Surrealism', *Reported Sightings*, p.4.

Surrealism existed before him and will survive him'.[11] Consequently this thesis will look to figures like Giorgio de Chirico, Georges Bataille, Joseph Cornell and Guy Maddin to expand and challenge our understanding of Surrealism. Perspectives that, beyond those traditionally associated with established (and limiting) notions of a surrealist orthodoxy, allow the implications and under-examined aspects of Surrealism to overcome an exclusively Bretonian doctrine.

Unsurprisingly Ashbery has expressed an affinity with figures that *relate to Surrealism* without being unequivocally *defined as surrealist*; writers that prefigured and influenced Surrealism, or those that retained agency in orbit of or peripheral to its 'hard core of young disciples'.[12] The poets that anticipated Surrealism and were retroactively adopted in its name, from Comte de Lautréamont (pseudonym of Isidore-Lucien Ducasse) and Arthur Rimbaud to Max Jacob and Pierre Reverdy, were all more valued by Ashbery than the later surrealist poets that assembled around Breton. Equally important were those figures that overlapped or interacted with Surrealism, like Raymond Roussel, de Chirico and Cornell, but remained autonomous in their practice. To approach Surrealism in this manner is to resist a definition based on the monopoly of self-identified surrealists and their validation of a contained movement. Moving between various figures, in and out of the self-identified orthodoxy of Surrealism, allows for a conceptual appreciation in which Surrealism exists as a set of ideas and the movement of related concerns and tendencies. In one way this enthusiasm for those outside of the movement can be related to Michael Leddy's response to Ashbery's *Girls on the Run* (1999), a book-length poem inspired by Henry Darger's work. Leddy suggests that there are 'marked affinities between Darger and other strange, singular creators who have long been important to Ashbery – Joseph Cornell, Raymond Roussel, and the imaginary Ern Malley', suggesting a fondness for the eccentric outsider.[13] Arguably not unlike the impetus behind his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, entitled *Other Traditions* (published in 2000), it is the artists/writers/poets who seem potentially marginal, neglected, or perhaps hard to categorize that appeal to Ashbery. Rather than demonstrating a facile taste for curiosity, skirting categories and challenging familiar structures of recognition are both integral aspects to the spirit of Surrealism.

Attributing Surrealism solely to Breton and his cohort, or to confine its definition to those self-identified as 'surrealist' is to adhere to an absolutism that betrays the necessity of its evasive spirit. Breton himself declared, 'Surrealism's confidence cannot be well or ill placed for the simple reason that it is not placed' and yet, despite this, continued to enforce

[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Michael Leddy, 'Lives and Art: John Ashbery and Henry Darger', *Jacket*, 17 (June 2002).

judgements as to what qualified as surrealist.[14] Breton thus encouraged a doctrinal exclusivity to Surrealism entirely at odds with its own principles. Ashbery infers this central tension by remarking that 'like all revolutions, it substituted some new restrictions for old ones' and that, through the false freedom of automatic writing, Breton's wielding of authority and the struggle to unite with communism, Surrealism was ultimately stifled by 'the narrow interpretation of its theologians'.[15] Therefore an explicit preference for writers and poets that interact with but do not submit to Surrealism, could be seen as ironically more in keeping with Surrealism than an outright surrealist allegiance.[16] This tangential relationship, exemplified by people like Giorgio de Chirico, Joseph Cornell and, as this thesis will argue, the contemporary filmmaker Guy Maddin, invokes Surrealism as a mercurial unrest that – unspoken and without definitive stasis – preserves its own possibility. By cultivating a dialogue with Surrealism, as opposed to presuming to speak on its behalf, analysis can begin to indirectly address the dichotomy of Georges Bataille's observation that 'Surrealism is *mutism*: if it spoke it would cease to be what it wanted to be, but if it failed to speak it could only lend itself to misunderstanding'.[17]

Not as a Movement but in the Movement of Relation: A Dialogue

In his essay on Ashbery and de Chirico, Ernesto Suarez-Toste positions Ashbery as 'not an American Surrealist but a surrealist American', a distinction he clarifies:

> that is, he was not a writer whose main perception of the movement came from the 1940s interaction of the New York period of surrealism, but a poet and art critic who lived in Paris for a long part of his life and acquired insider's knowledge of the original movement as it was conceived.[18]

This thesis also has no intention of framing Ashbery's poetry in accordance with 'American Surrealism'. A decision to discount 'American Surrealism' in this context not only responds

---

[14] André Breton, 'Second Manifesto of Surrealism' (1930), *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. by Richards Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Michigan: Ann Arbor, 2010), p.131. All further references will be to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text (FM for the first 'Manifesto of Surrealism' and SM for 'Second Manifesto of Surrealism').

[15] 'The Heritage of Dada and Surrealism', *Reported Sightings*, p.6.

[16] This thesis will capitalize the 'S' of Surrealism but not of 'surrealist'. Critics tend to unpredictably move between the two without much in the way of a defining logic, sometimes inconsistently within the same article or book. My justification is in a refusal to adhere to the notion of 'surrealist' as an unproblematic, self-identification of *belonging* to Surrealism as a movement. I use 'surrealist' more commonly as an adjective to denote what is in some way pertaining to Surrealism, as opposed to a marker of membership.

[17] Georges Bataille, 'Surrealism', *The Absence of Myth* (London: Verso, 2006), p.56.

[18] Ernesto Suarez-Toste, '"The Tension is in the Concept": John Ashbery's surrealism', *Style*, 38 (2004), p.2.

to Ashbery's first-hand appreciation of the European roots of Surrealism, but also because to address 'American Surrealism' would erroneously imply a legacy of poets far more indebted to the surrealist orthodoxy promoted by Breton. This legacy hinges upon the 1940s period of surrealist exile in New York, the magazine *View* (1940 -1947) founded by Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler, the influence of poet Philip Lamantia (originally an assistant editor at *View*) and the founding of the Chicago Surrealist Group (1966) by Franklin and Penelope Rosemont.[19] However, unlike Toste, this thesis is also reluctant to introduce the alternative identification of Ashbery as a 'surrealist American'. Rather than seeking to define Ashbery as 'surrealist' or aiming to prove the validity of Surrealism in his poetry through a study of influence, this thesis is instead concerned with managing a discursive correspondence *between* Ashbery and Surrealism. Through opening a critical dialogue between the two, Ashbery's poetry can reinvigorate an understanding of Surrealism, just as areas of Surrealism can better enable an understanding of his poetry.

To address Surrealism requires an understanding of historical context that avoids reifying its parameters or intentions or, put another way, requires an ability to perceive its presence as contemporary and continual without betraying the spirit and detail of its past. Therefore my critical stance relies on a balance, whereby the documents and history of Parisian Surrealism – from early 1920s through to its American phase in the 1940s and a decline marked by Breton's death in 1966 – are known and familiar coordinates but not defining laws, a balance that resembles Ashbery's own relationship with Surrealism. By not rigidly confining Surrealism to its various components (the unconscious, automatic writing, the marvellous, objective chance etc.) which were themselves always in fluctuation and subject to revision, Surrealism and being 'surrealist' should not be quantifiably ascribed or explained but encountered *in relation*.

[19] It would be entirely possible to explore Surrealism in relation to many other poets contemporaneous to Ashbery (other New York poets, Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, Russel Edson, Tom Clarke – to name a few) but to include them in this thesis would have changed the emphasis from re-approaching Surrealism through Ashbery to a more general, national consideration of the culture of American poetry. It would have also limited my ability to then engage with other artistic mediums (film/collage/visual art). This thesis was concerned with avoiding reductive grouping in relation to Surrealism, hence avoiding the capitalised use of the term 'Surrealist' as it misleadingly suggests a reified 'group', in its demarcated sense of artistic property, ownership, and unifiable certainty. Therefore, to bring in other poets without a greater space to address them, and only on the basis of their shared nationality, would be to hypocritically reduce the complexity of their work in a way contrary to the treatment of my central subject. An alternative implication of American Surrealism might look to the latent suggestions of a lighter surrealist inflection in the poetry of Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop, or, as David Arnold explores in *Poetry and Language Writing: Objective and Surreal*, the relation to Objectivism that considers Surrealism in William Carlos Williams. For more information regarding American Surrealism, see: Dickran Tashjian, *A Boatload of Madmen* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001); Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Pro Helvetia, 1997); Andrew Joron, *Neo- Surrealism, or The Sun at Night* (Oakland: Kolourmeim Press, 2010); *Poetry and Language Writing* and Charles Borkhuis, 'Writing from Inside Language: Late Surrealism and Textual Poetry in France and the United States', in *Telling it Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics in the 1990s* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), pp. 237-53.

Before explaining the significance of Surrealism *in relation*, it is necessary to briefly contextualize the relevant and preceding developments in criticism. Surrealism has weathered several phases of academic neglect, identified by Hal Foster as the result of Anglo-American accounts of modernism: ignored by abstractionist trajectories founded on Cubism, overlooked by neo-avant-garde histories that favoured a focus on Dada and Russian constructivism, and 'considered a deviant art movement: improperly visual and impertinently literary' by formalist criticism.[20] Yet during the 1970s and 1980s, emergent models of deconstruction – applied to both sexual and social subjectivity, and in the proliferation of media images – encouraged questions for which the visual, real and textual could offer their own relative versions of an unconscious valence, interpreted between psychoanalytical, Marxist or poststructuralist critiques. Alongside these critical frameworks, the critique of representation that characterised elements of postmodern art also invited Surrealism to resurface as a newly potent source for historical comparison. In his later influential study, *Compulsive Beauty* (1993), Foster channelled the cumulative attributes of that critical climate and reimagined Surrealism through the uncanny. Foster argued that the contemporaneous significance of Freudian psychoanalysis to Surrealism leant his use of the uncanny a particular strength in its temporal relevance. However, what was clearly part of the strength of that study, in the significant historicity of its frames of psychoanalytical reference, also defined a weakness. Foster's Surrealism was structured as a past to decode, implicitly misrepresenting its ideas by imposing upon it the brackets of *a movement*.

Surrealism should not be reductively narrated in terms of a movement, as Maurice Blanchot, a writer and thinker at the periphery of surrealist circles and close friends with Bataille, warned: '[o]ne cannot speak of what was neither a system or a school, nor a movement of art or literature (a practice of the whole, bearing its own knowledge, a practical theory) in a determinate temporal modality.'[21] Though an occasional victim of its own convictions, Foster's study did realise, via Pierre Naville's (1903-1993) dismissal of 'surrealist painting', the existence of

> an early recognition that no given categories, aesthetic *or* surrealist, could comprehend surrealism conceptually – could account for its heterogeneous practices or address its quintessential concerns with psychic conflict and social contradiction.[22]

[20] Hal Foster, 'Preface', *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p.xii.
[21] Maurice Blanchot, 'Tomorrow is at Stake', *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 407.
[22] Foster, 'Preface', p.xvi

This was then followed by the awkward academic announcement that '[a]nother model is still needed'.[23] Although Foster advanced an understanding of Surrealism beyond social history or stylistic analysis, insisting on a 'model' belied the resistance to such structuring that paradoxically (un)structured Surrealism. As a result, this thesis takes its cue from Michael Richardson's assessment of criticism's failure to apprehend this problematic (un)structuring:

> They seek something – a theme, a particular type of imagery, certain concepts – they can identify as 'surrealist' in order to provide a criterion of judgement […] this goes against the very essence of surrealism which refuses to be *here* but is always *elsewhere*. It is not a thing but a relation between things […].[24]

It is a complaint that also rings with the words of Louis Aragon (1897-1982) who, alongside Breton, was at the heart of Surrealism in the 1920s:

> Nothing will make such people understand the true nature of the real: that it is a relation like any other, that the essence of things is in no way tied to their reality, that there are other relations other than the real that the mind is capable of grasping, and that are also primary, like chance, illusion, the fantastic, the dream.[25]

Allowing Surrealism to breathe, without the domineering insistence of a narrow historicity or doctrinal rigidity (as if either could ever be reconciled with the desired freedom of Surrealism) does not mean this thesis will neglect regular reference to its documents, Breton and historical specifics. However, I am keen to avoid any gestures that situate Surrealism too emphatically as an objectified past. One of the results of this is that I will not refer to Surrealism as 'avant-garde'. Not only is the 'avant-garde' critically overburdened as a term, but it also holds a historically ambiguous, even contentious, relationship with Surrealism. This ambiguity comes to light in the relationship between Surrealism and film discussed in Chapter 3. Secondly, in William Watkins' *In The Process of Poetry*, there already exists a comprehensive study made of Ashbery in relation to the avant-garde. Even more recently, with the proliferation of MFA creative writing courses in America, the institutionalised legacy of Language poetry (let alone the multitude of Ashbery acolytes) and the academic visibility that consistently supported so-called Conceptual poetry, the use and connotations of a collective and politicised 'avant-garde' have been further contorted. For

[23] Ibid.
[24] Michael Richardson, 'Introduction', *Surrealism and Cinema* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), p3.
[25] Louis Aragon, *Une vague de rêves* (A Wave of Dreams, 1924), cited by Raihan Kadri, *Reimagining Life: Philosophical Pessimism and the Revolution of Surrealism* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011) p.7.

Ashbery, and for this thesis, it is not in the allegiance to a movement or responding to a collective identity but in the representation of reality, in and as a process of relation, that Surrealism is encountered. There is no desire in the following study to sketch an unfaithful portrait of Ashbery *as a surrealist* or as a poet producing *surrealist poetry*; I instead propose an exploration of poetry drawn towards Surrealism in the flux of experiencing and articulating experience.

The Experience of Experience as the Experience of Surrealism

In proposing an alternative trajectory in Modernist poetry from Rimbaud through to Cage, Perloff defined a 'poetics of indeterminacy' that, for Ashbery, she notes in his attention to'[n]ot *what* one dreams but *how*', reflecting an emphasis expressed in Ashbery's own description of Gertrude Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* (1956): 'it is usually not events which interest Miss Stein, rather it is their "way of happening,"'.[26] The shift of focus draws attention from a designated and referential meaning towards a more experiential and mobile assimilation of meaning; without specificity, content in the poem is constituted by the process of its own coming into being. Rather than being an exclusively poetic reflexivity, this emphasis in Ashbery's poetry broadens out to address the phenomenological attention of what he famously refers to as 'the experience of experience'.[27] In describing his poem 'Leaving Atocha Station' (from *The Tennis Court Oath*, 1962), this phenomenological approach is further elucidated:

> The dirt, the noises, the sliding away seem to be a movement in the poem. The poem was probably trying to express that, not for itself but as an epitome of something experienced; I think that is what my poems are about. I mean it doesn't particularly matter about the experience; the movement of experiencing is what I'm trying to get down.[28]

Ashbery's phenomenological attention creates a poetics of mediacy (the in-between of perception that experiences experience and prevents contact with an immediate world) that renders the everyday, and our capacity to interpret and interact with its experience, in dream-

[26] Marjorie Perloff, '"Mysteries of Construction": The Dream Songs of John Ashbery', *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (Princeton University Press, 1999), p.252.
[27] A. Poulin Jnr, 'The experience of experience: a conversation with John Ashbery', *The Michigan Quarterly*, 22:3 (Summer 1981), p.245.
[28] Ibid.

like articulations of constant motion.[29] These are poetic articulations of restless presence and absence, constructed in the in-between of play. This thesis will demonstrate how Ashbery's 'movement of experiencing', characterised through its 'way of happening' or way of *meaning*, corresponds with Surrealism as also composed from passages of and in the play and movement of relation.

Surrealism, like Ashbery's poetry, is also intimately concerned with what constitutes experience. Walter Benjamin remarked that surrealist writing could not be understood as 'literature' and nor was it intended as such. Instead, 'the writings are concerned literally with experiences, not with theories and still less with phantasms'.[30] Blanchot arrives at a definition of the surrealist experience that, furthering Benjamin's assertion, proposes a phenomenological impulse even closer to Ashbery's:

> The surrealist experience [*experience*] is the experience of experience, whether it seeks itself in a theoretical or practical form: an experience that deranges and deranges itself, disarranges as it unfolds and, in unfolding, interrupts itself. It is in this that surrealism – poetry itself – is the experience of thought itself.[31]

Yet, despite this parallel prioritising of experience, surrealist texts, specifically those attributed to automatic writing (in the works of, for example, Breton, Soupault, Robert Desnos, Paul Éluard, Louis Aragon, René Crevel, Benjamin Péret, Roger Vitrac and so on) are clearly far removed in style and content from Ashbery's poetry. Though automatic writing, and indeed some of the aesthetics of later 'surrealist poetry', may appear as the unfinished records or transcriptions of a particular flurry of momentum, to suggest they communicate that movement and its 'way of happening' is to overlook the repetitive, syntactically traditional and grammatically correct nature of these pieces, all of which presume a level of naïve linguistic and experiential transparency. Consequently, it is unsurprising that Ashbery harbours a reluctance to associate his poetry too closely with Surrealism. Rather than conduct a study that tautologically proves the obvious, that such early works in the so-called 'heroic phase' of Surrealism bear limited importance to Ashbery's writing, this will be a reading beyond the treatment of Surrealism as a movement; Surrealism is to be understood instead as an ineluctable part of understanding and expressing everyday experience.

---

[29] This use of 'mediacy' develops its logic from Ben Lerner's essay: 'The Future Continuous: Ashbery's Lyric Mediacy', *boundary 2*, Volume 37 (Duke University Press, 2010).
[30] Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' (1929), *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), p.1087.
[31] Blanchot, 'Tomorrow is at Stake', p.421.

In Ashbery's phenomenological model for poetry, experience and the modes of perception that facilitate experience only ever exist in the play and passage of their realisation; any *being* is only ever present in its *coming-into-being*, for which presence is contingent on a restless play of relation, described and experienced through its correspondence with Surrealism. This meaning-as-movement is registered both as a condition of language and existentially as a human and embodied experience, though the two are entwined and often analogous. Jody Norton encapsulates this in her gnomic assertion that for Ashbery 'life is but exists as', going on to elaborate that 'the subject, while he can never be fully objectified in language, can be enacted as his very transitivity.'[32] Referred to in Ashbery's poem 'Soonest Mended' as 'The moving and not wanting to be moved, the loose/meaning' (DDS, 185), it is this transitivity that creates a space of play of significance to Surrealism.

Susan Laxton defines the 'overarching characteristic' of play as indeterminacy: '[a]ccordingly , play is repeatedly defined in aesthetic and cultural discourse by what it is *not*, rather than by an essence: there is nothing at its centre; it signifies the absence of essence'.[33] What Ashbery describes as the 'urge to nowhere' manifests throughout Surrealism in its pursuit of play: in the *errance* of city wandering that became an antecedent for the *derivé* of Situationism; in the chance and collaboration of games like *cadavre exquis*; in the complex attitudes toward childhood; as a politicised resistance to bourgeois modes of production and work; and through the focus on language as a process privileged above authorial intention (to name the most notable examples).[34] Despite Breton's initially dogmatic definition of psychic automatism waning in conviction after the first 'Manifesto of Surrealism' (1924), its famous articulation had within it the basis of a principle that endured: 'in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested *play* of thought' (italics mine, FM, 26).

In discussing play in relation to Ashbery and Surrealism, there is of course an obvious resonance with aspects of poststructuralism. However, rather than drawing upon such a wide and differing pool of thinkers, this thesis acknowledges the relevance of poststructuralism without prioritising it, as to do so would curtail the focus of my intended analysis. Though one could justifiably argue for the relevance of Jacques Derrida's 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Humanities' (1966), his concept of *différance*, or the overlapping of

---

[32] Jody Norton, '"Whispers Out of Time": The Syntax of Being in the Poetry of John Ashbery', *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Autumn 1995), p. 288.
[33] Susan Laxton, 'The Guarantor of Chance: Surrealism's Ludic Practices', *Papers of Surrealism*, Issue 1(Winter 2003).
[34] John Ashbery, 'Sunrise in Suburbia', from *The Double Dream of Spring*, in *John Ashbery Collected Poems 1956-1987*, ed. by Mark Ford (Manchester: Carcanet, 2010). All further references are to this edition and will be given parenthetically, with the abbreviated collection name and page number, in the text.

Jacques Lacan with the surrealist milieu or its journals, the focus here is squarely on the poetry of John Ashbery. In particular, I will focus on poems that offer a certain experiential encounter with reading. By the emphasis on an 'experiential' relation to the poem, I am suggesting ways of meaning in Ashbery's poetics that extend beyond the immediately referential and which encourage a more cumulative or mobile assimilation of such meaning. I trace this development as beginning most importantly in the long poem 'The Skaters' (from *Rivers and Mountains*, 1966) a poem I will continually return to throughout the thesis, evolving in the prose-poetry of *Three Poems* (1972), and ambitiously expanding in *Flow Chart* (1991).[35]

In approaching the experiential nature of Surrealism in Ashbery's poetry as a result of types of play, I will further Roger Gilbert's notion of 'lucid and ludic'/ 'saying and playing' as a way to characterise a certain dynamic within Ashbery's poetry. Gilbert suggested, in distinguishing a change between Ashbery's major collections in the 1970s (*the Double Dream of Spring*, *Three Poems* and *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*) and his much later work, a shift from the more philosophically cogent earlier period to a more mischievous irreverence: from *saying* to *playing*.[36] Whilst Gilbert's observation is certainly useful and there is indeed a marked shift in Ashbery's poetry, which his formulation goes some way to clarifying, it does suggest a shift that (though emphasised in degree and not as two modes) underplays the significance of play *throughout* Ashbery's poetry as inseparably part of saying. It seems more helpful to imagine Ashbery's recognition of saying *as* playing, in which articulation and experience exist through the motion of language and perception, never more than the indeterminacy of playing. For the relevance of Surrealism, it is important to note the significance of Mary Ann Caws' study *The Metapoetics of Passage* as equally attuned to this restlessness. Caws identifies the 'passage' as a restless and ambiguous space of Surrealism, in which she observes a 'determinedly mobile architexture, and not an unchangeable, monumental architecture'.[37] It is Caws' notion of the passage that, like ideas of movement, the in-between and play, lend an approximation of structure to this dialogue between Surrealism and Ashbery – structure being precisely that which both Surrealism and Ashbery

[35] It is due to this emphasis on experiential aspects to Ashbery's poetics that I have decided to largely omit discussion of 'Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror' (from *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, 1975). As perhaps his most famous poem, 'Self-portrait…' has been widely discussed (although Ashbery himself frequently refers to his own dislike of the poem), but it is not for this reason that I directed my attention elsewhere. Though the poem is undoubtedly a stunning and often lyrical, ekphrastic exploration of subjectivity, it retains a relative referential clarity that (for Ashbery) proves the exception and not the rule for his unique poetics. Of course such a judgment on his poetics is here necessarily tied to the concerns of my thesis, namely a phenomenological interaction with, and relevance to, Surrealism.

[36] Roger Gilbert, 'Ludic Eloquence: On John Ashbery's Recent Poetry', *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Summer 2007), pp. 195-226.

[37] Mary Ann Caws, *A Metapoetics of the Passage* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 1981), p.35.

seek to problematize. These motifs of movement are surrealist traversals, all encountered in Ashbery: imagined through evocations of the labyrinth or the forest; in the 'saying as playing' of language; between the seeing and what is seen; moving between subject and object, self and other, conscious and unconscious, adult and child; and in the ambiguity that expresses the experience of everyday waking reality in the rhythm and logic of dreaming.

Chapter 1 opens this dialogue between Ashbery and Surrealism with the figure of Joseph Cornell and an analysis of the surrealist found object. Focusing on Ashbery's first collection *Some Trees* (1956), I argue that Surrealism presents itself in ways comparable to Cornell's interest in collecting and the object, inviting a consideration of time. The early presence of Surrealism is then further discussed in relation to the motif of the 'forest', which I examine as a popular surrealist metaphor. Chapter 2 explores the central surrealist fascination with the dream and dreaming, charting its interaction with Ashbery's poetic development, from *Some Trees* through to *Three Poems* (1972). The unique prose poetry of *Three Poems* demonstrates a culmination of evolving poetics that, in reference to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, provides a way to understand Ashbery's oneiric articulation and experience of everyday perception. Chapter 3 addresses the achievement of Ashbery's book-length, sprawling poem *Flow Chart* (1991), alongside the notion of radio as a surrealist medium and the presence of memory and noise in the films of Guy Maddin. I read the interruptive poetics of *Flow Chart* as a phenomenological mimesis of acoustic interference that, in its enactment of a kind of textual static, opens up the passages of memory in a play of presence and absence. In conjunction with Maddin's films (with an emphasis on *My Winnipeg*, 2007, and *Keyhole*, 2011), I then introduce Bataille's concept of 'the labyrinth' as a motif that, like 'the forest', is helpful in further understanding Surrealism in relation to Ashbery. [38] The final chapter returns to 'The Skaters', a poem I will continually prioritise as a milestone in Ashbery's development and that in this chapter illustrates the playful role of childhood and poetic efforts to renew perspective. This chapter will explore how the writing and painting of Giorgio de Chirico, an interest in collage, and the mobile disruption and

[38] During the completion of this thesis Ashbery and Maddin's collaborative relationship developed significantly. From the production of an isolated short film (words by Ashbery), entitled *How to Take a Bath* (completed late 2013) to its incorporation into a feature length, *Forbidden Room* (2015). The labyrinthine narratives-within-narratives structure of the *The Forbidden Room* is reportedly indebted to both Ashbery and Raymond Roussel. In addition to this, in July 2015 Maddin and Ashbery enjoyed their first shared exhibition at the Tibor de Nagy gallery. The exhibition is a presentation of both Maddin and Ashbery's collages, of often-similar styles, presented in tandem alongside each other. As with *The Forbidden Room*, if this exhibition had appeared at an earlier date it would have featured in the following study. As it stands, neither *The Forbidden Room* nor the Tibor de Nagy shared exhibition will feature – except in brief mention – within my thesis. However, I take it to be an encouraging sign of the prescient relationship between Ashbery and Maddin's work and its on-going interaction with Surrealism. In this light, the analysis in Chapter 3 can act as a timely introduction to the logic of this relationship, offering a way to map its points of contact just as they seem to be excitingly, and more concretely, manifesting.

expansion of metaphor allows Ashbery's poetry to invigorate the Surrealism of 'always coming back/To the mooring of starting out'.[39]

[39] John Ashbery, *Collected Poems 1956 – 1987*, revised edition, ed. by Mark Ford (Manchester: Carcanet, 2010), p. 186. All further references will be made to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text with the specific book abbreviation and page number. All of Ashbery's books, from *Some Trees* through to *April Galleons* will be referenced using this edition.

Chapter 1

Some Trees and the 'Enchanted Forest' of Joseph Cornell

Creative filing
Creative arranging
as poetics
as joyous creation

— Joseph Cornell, diary entry, March 9, 1959

On the 7th December, 1936, New York's Museum of Modern Art presented the exhibition, *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*; its subsequent coverage in *Life* magazine provided the young John Ashbery with his first glimpse of Surrealism. From the age of about ten, having come to the enthusiastic conclusion that he too was a Surrealist, Ashbery remembers seeking out books to supplement this excitement at his local library.[1] On discovering Joseph Cornell, through reproduced pictures and his scenario for a film in Julien Levy's *Anthology of Surrealism*, he vividly recalls the 'immediate shock', explaining that he 'was still close enough to the soap bubble sets, marbles, and toy birds in his work to experience them as paraphernalia of everyday life rather than as mementos of a remembered past.'[2] Outside of a book, Ashbery saw Cornell's art for the first time at the Egan Gallery in 1949 and later, when writing articles for *ArtNews* (of which he served as executive editor from 1965-1972), he frequently spoke on the phone with Cornell – but only ever met him once: 'It had been perfect; the man had deepened the feeling his work had always had on me, and yet at the same time remained somehow adjacent to it, not interfering, as though he knew that this was the way.'[3]

Cornell's art, like Ashbery's poetry, has not only posed continual resistance to comfortable definitions of form and medium but has also invited a constant – and highly individual – relationship with Surrealism. Cornell was beginning to exhibit and develop his art at the same time, and alongside, surrealists who had moved to New York with the outbreak World War II.[4] However, as a result of the New York born art dealer Julien Levy, Cornell's

[1] John Ashbery, 'Foreword', *Joseph Cornell's Theater of the Mind: Selected Diaries, Letters and Files*, ed. by Mary Ann Caws (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), p.9.
[2] John Ashbery, 'Foreword', *Theater of the Mind*, p.9.
[3] John Ashbery, *Theater of the Mind*, p.12.
[4] For a more detailed account of Surrealism in relation to the American Avant-Garde (between 1920 and 1950), including Joseph Cornell, see Dickran Tashjian, *A Boatload of Madmen* (London: Thames &Hudson Ltd, 2001).

art had been displayed from as early as 1932.[5] Whilst Cornell remained artistically in contact with Surrealism throughout his life, moving through varying phases of fascination and peripheral involvement, it was always tempered by a distrust of what he called its 'black magic'.[6] From the 1920s onwards he became a lifelong believer in Christian Science, drawing inspiration from the writings of Mary Baker Eddy and Jacques Maritain. It was in a spiritual allegiance that both advocated and searched for the transcendental in everyday minutiae, which Cornell felt to be in opposition with the often lurid and sexualized melodrama of much of surrealist art. Therefore his engagement with surrealist ideas, like Ashbery's, was always, although for different reasons, filtered through a personally selective discernment and consequently only ever approached through his own terms. In a diary entry from 1967, having been in correspondence with and having met Ashbery, Cornell provides a startlingly insightful contemplation on his relationship to Surrealism; it is a relationship that for him comes to explicitly incorporate Ashbery:

> in the mood of the "white working" some timeless phenomenon deep down in the psyche – but now recalling "Surrealism" from 2 areas
>
> Ashbery – Maritain
>
> down the cellar starts again the nebulous nature of the influence of of Surrealism the nature of it so that someone like Jacques Maritain can come to grips with it, react to it logically affirmatively –
>
> exposure to Surrealism's philosophy relative to, concern with, the "objet" – a kind of happy marriage with my life-long preoccupation

[5] Levy had travelled to Paris and became acquainted, through his new friend Marcel Duchamp, with the development of Surrealism. On returning to New York, in 1931 the Julien Levy gallery was established and Levy quickly became responsible for introducing America to many of Surrealism's influential proponents. Significantly, in among the work of Man Ray, Max Ernst, Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dalí, Levy always sought to include Joseph Cornell. Levy's constant support of Cornell and the generous representation, through his various exhibitions, was not only fundamental for Cornell's understanding and introduction to Surrealism and its artists, but also in influencing a presiding way of contextualising his art as so closely related to the movement. Beyond his own and personal affinities with Surrealism, the other two figures responsible for knitting Cornell into the fabric of Surrealism were Charles Henri Ford and, perhaps surprisingly, Susan Sontag. In collaboration with Parker Tyler, Ford edited the primarily Surrealist magazine *View* (from 1940-7), to which Cornell was invited to contribute and, for the 1943 'Americana Fantastica' issue, designed the front cover. Cornell remained in regular correspondence with Ford and in 1940 provided the front cover collage to his poetry collection *ABC's*. Meanwhile the influence of Sontag came much later in Cornell's life when, after reading her collection of essays, *Against Interpretation* (1966), he re-encountered the thoughts of Breton, specifically in *Les Vases Communicants* (*Communicating Vessels*, 1932) and his poem, 'Tournesol' ('Sunflower'). Not only did Cornell go on to produce collaged tributes to Breton in 1966 (using Man Ray's famous profile) and boxes dedicated to Sontag herself, but he would also often refer to his phase of creativity from 1966 through to the end of his life as the 'communicating vessel' or 'sunflower' experience (as referenced by Caws, *Theater of the Mind,* p.316).

[6] Mary Ann Caws, *Theater of the Mind*, p.31.

> with things. Especially with regard to the past, a futile reminiscence of the Mill notion that everything is good & valuable – mystical sense of the past – empathy for antiques – nostalgia for old books, period documents, prints, photographs, etc.[7]

In what capacity 'Ashbery' relates to Surrealism for Cornell is not entirely clear; many of his collected diary entries take the appropriately fragmented form of association. However what *is* clear is that Surrealism was always going to be a considered 'negotiation' between points, between the belief in Christian Science as a 'white working' and a more literary or poetic source of departure. What is also made clear from this extract is the association, in Cornell's mind, between Ashbery, Surrealism and the significance of the "objet".

It will be through a consideration of the "objet", specifically the surrealist 'found object' (*objet trouvé*) and the shared impulse to collect, that a common poetics, selectively interacting with elements of Surrealism, reveals itself between Ashbery and Cornell. Through focusing on Ashbery's first collection *Some Trees* (1956), an early indication of the proximity between his own preoccupations and ambitions as a poet and Cornell's comparable obsessions as a *maker of things* can begin to be mapped.[8] The chapter will address the surrealist relevance of the 'found object', its integration into a collection of objects and what the enthusiasm for collecting comes to mean in both Ashbery and Cornell. In progressing from the singularity of the 'found object' to its contiguous relationship as one-of-many in a collection, this chapter will then consider the nuanced treatment of presence and absence in Cornell's compositions and Ashbery's exploration of language. No longer transfixed by the 'object' but exploring an articulation from between objects leads my analysis of Ashbery and Cornell to consider the role of plurality, mobility and the play of allusions in their comparable constructions of meaning. Whilst Ashbery's poetry is clearly not engaging the 'found object' with the same literal plasticity of Cornell's practice, and though his poems are not interchangeable with the proposition of a three-dimensional box, in order to understand a certain surrealist strain to his poetics the discursive comparison bears productive connections. This analysis will then be drawn together and understood through the surrealist motif of the forest. From the object and collecting to facilitating a seductive flux of meaning, this discussion can begin to shed light on the surrealist implications of Ashbery's own description

[7] Joseph Cornell, *Theater of the Mind*, p.387

[8] Ashbery's very first publication was Tibor de Nagy's limited release of *Turandot and other Poems* (1953), which included four drawings by Jane Freilicher. All of the poems in this collection, except for 'White' and 'Turandot', appear in 'Some Trees'. Both 'White' and 'Turandot' can be found in the *Collected Poems 1956-1987* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2010).

of Cornell's art as equally befitting of his own poetry, when he notes: 'the spirit of the work flickers everywhere but stays elusive as mercury'.[9]

The Found Object

In his novel *Nadja* (1928), André Breton loops the entire obsessive narrative of desire around an intoxication with the found object and its encounter, as when recounting the Saint-Ouen Flea Market he remarks: 'I go there often, searching for objects that can be found nowhere else: old fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensible, even perverse'.[10] The introduction of everyday or unexpected objects within art had begun to be explored as early as 1912, in Pablo Picasso's 'Still Life with Chair Caning'. Following this, mixed medium interjections of *the found object*(s) within art find notable examples in the Dadaist work of Frances Picabia (combs glued to the canvas of 'The Handsome Pork Butcher', 1924-35), Man Ray (the aggressive hand-iron studded with nails entitled 'The Gift', 1921, and objects used in his photogram series, modestly named *Rayographs*, 1922-8) and, perhaps most notoriously, Marcel Duchamp's 'readymades' ('Bicycle Wheel', 1913, 'Bottle Rack', 1914 and the infamous 'Fountain', 1917). While Dadaism embraced collage and the use of objects to launch provocative gestures against 'art' as a sanctified structure that had become socially and politically institutionalised, these same techniques were then adopted in Surrealism to serve a more Romantic impulse. Through his definitions of the 'marvellous' and 'convulsive beauty', Breton ascribed the found object with its own mysterious transcendence; a surrealist fascination that revelled in the enigma of chance and accident, while also selectively engaging with Freud's theories of the unconscious.

Another factor in considering the found object's prominence is that, coinciding with the earlier years of Surrealism, Ethnology and Ethnography emerged as a burgeoning area of study.[11] In 1925 the *Institute of Ethnology* was founded in the University of Paris,

---

[9] John Ashbery, 'Joseph Cornell', *Reported Sightings, Art Chronicles 1957-1987*, ed. by David Bergman (New York: Knopf, 1989), p.16.

[10] André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Penguin, 1999), p.52.
The found object is also articulated through the tragically exoticised Nadja who, as was the case with many women in early Surrealism, is herself encountered as an object. I don't mention this in the body of the text as the problematic sexual politics of Breton (and much of his early coterie) would, in this instance, be too distracting a topic to do justice in addition to the more aesthetic questions of collecting and the object within art - relevant to Ashbery and Cornell. However, this is not to suggest that a more consciously gendered or sexual reading would not merit exploration, far from it (Cornell's depiction of young girls in relation to the treatment and preservation of his objects would certainly present substantial material for separate research).

[11] See: Hal Foster, 'The "Primitive" Unconscious of Modern Art', MIT Press, October, Vol. 34 (Autumn, 1985), pp. 45-70; James Clifford, 'Histories of the Tribal and the Modern', in *The Predicament of Culture* (Massachusetts: Harvard University, 2002), p.189-215; Louise Thyacott, 'Introduction', *Surrealism and the Exotic* (London: Routledge, 2003).

encouraging a hive of inter-disciplinary creativity between artists and poets with museum curators, archaeologists, ethnographers and sociologists. In the 1936 issue of surrealist journal *Minotaure*,'Ethnologie' was considered significant enough to find itself included alongside 'Psychology' and 'Mythology' in a string of definitions relevant to Surrealism. Through a more radicalised interpretation ethnographic writing and its influence also became a regular element in George Bataille's 'dissident' surrealist journal *Documents*.[12] As Louise Thyacott explores in *Surrealism and the Exotic,* ethnography garnered an enthusiasm that focussed a familiar surrealist tension – between its progressive stance of disrupting ideological assumptions and a practice often complicit in simultaneously reproducing such ideologies; Surrealism *was* embracing an international model of inclusion and change, questioning traditions of Western art, however it was also fetishizing a patronising and decontextualized notion of primitivism which – at its worse – was spreading a form of cultural imperialism in the pretence of claiming aesthetic affinities between artistic modernity and tribal art. Consequently many surrealists were also prolific collectors of 'Non-Western' objects, appropriated as surrealist art and often displayed at exhibitions of Surrealism. Breton and Paul Eluard's renowned sale of a selection of their amassed objects, at the Hôtel Drovot in 1931, was received as one of the most important art auctions between the wars.[13] Therefore the emergence of ethnography as a new and growing academic discipline in France had not only renewed the status of 'object', with exoticised otherness and a challenge to Eurocentric traditions, but also came to reinvigorate cultures of collecting.

As well as the found object in Surrealism challenging cultural precedents and celebrating romanticised experiences of incongruity, it also built upon the legacy of Dadaism to further merge life with art. Boundaries between art and life were made more urgently permeable, not simply because the material proof and detritus of living was now readily incorporated in and exhibited as art, but because Surrealism was so vehemently allied to being an all-encompassing reimagining of life and how to live. Never intended as an 'art movement', following the first wave of supposed psychic automatism and in the wake of Breton's first manifesto, the 'Second Manifesto of Surrealism' opposed definition and

[12] I put dissident in quotations as to be dissident implies a structural centre to the movement (which, as various sources and critics have rightly contested, was also resistant to the preconceived concept of a 'movement' as associated with traditions of art history) and although the general and historicized analysis of Surrealism places Breton at the centre, this should not be adopted without acknowledging its complexity. It would be illogical to ignore Breton's leading influence, however for his presence to be perpetuated as the comparative yardstick from which to gauge others is an oversimplification. This reduces those around Breton's cohort, who were not interested in his ownership and jurisdiction of what Surrealism was to be, and Breton's own vision, into a dialectic that implicitly reproduces the mantra of Breton *as* Surrealism. While Breton himself cultivated this same hypocritical hierarchy in what was allegedly a free and formless endeavour, and, while those contemporaries outside of his view, or favour, were forced into positions against Surrealism, analysis should not be complacently void of the perspective to problematize these definitions.

[13] Louise Thyacott, 'Introduction', *Surrealism and the Exotic* (London: Routledge, 2003).

prioritised its protean reach as 'an attack on conscience' that 'plunges its roots into life'.[14] Any definition that could be readily assimilated into recognisable or structured modes of discourse was met with opposition on principle: 'We combat, in whatever form they may appear, poetic indifference, the distraction of art, scholarly research, pure speculation; we want nothing whatever to do with those, either large or small, who use their minds as they would a savings bank' (SM, 129). As with much of Breton, here he demonstrates a public rhetoric for Surrealism that poetically (but impractically) wields its defiance with a performative style reliably mired in the vague. Whilst there is much in this style and spirit that held Surrealism back, often denying the sustained or concrete application that its manifestoes seem to hunger after, there was also a side to this 'vagueness' which should not be homogeneously misunderstood as a weakness of naivety but as in fact central to its ethos. Refusing to anchor Surrealism in any one specific ambition or commitment, Breton wanted to advocate its value not as a school or discipline but as an alternative understanding and living of life. Subsequently, understood as a practice of living and not a rubric of teaching or aesthetics, it was concluded that 'Surrealism's confidence cannot be well or ill placed for the simple reason that it is not placed' (SM, 131). In this light, the found object enacts the surrealist refusal to *belong* with any singular demarcation; it marked a transition from art as meditative spectatorship to transformative involvement, becoming not simply a comment on life but interchangeable with, and part of, life.

Found Objects in Cornell and Ashbery

In Cornell's art there is a delicately handled tension between the materiality of each box as somehow part of and incorporating life while being arranged in a manner that invites awareness of it as artifice. In the opening poem to *Some Trees*, Ashbery conveys a similarly split impulse; the title 'Two Scenes' immediately connotes the staged sense of arrangement while the opening line insists on an ability to 'see us as we truly behave' (ST, 3). As the very first poem in *Some Trees,* in just eighteen lines separated into two equal stanzas, Ashbery begins what has become a vast poetic oeuvre with startling concision. The two stanzas, presented as parts I and II, manage to pair their controlled and formal restraint with such a restlessly receptive ability to prompt and beguile interpretation that, like many of Ashbery's best poems, it seems to offer itself anew on each reading. There is much in the poem that

[14] André Breton, 'First Manifesto', in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Michigan: Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 2010), p.26; 'Second Manifesto', pp.123-4. All further references to the manifestoes will be from this edition and will be indicated parenthetically by the abbreviations FM and SM, followed by page number.

merits productive comparison with Cornell's homespun and particular spirit of Surrealism, especially when considering the possibility and influence of the found object. In the first line, 'We see us as we truly behave' (ST, 3), Ashbery immediately introduces a mobile relationship with pronouns where the 'we' is not straining for authoritative declaration, on condescending behalf of an implied universal, but is instead opening towards plurality and range. The 'we' is not a gesture of unifying cohesion for which the poem becomes representative but is instead an invitation to an almost boundless variation, of which the poem's own ambiguity contributes to and embodies. This ambiguity is not a bland opening to *anything goes* analysis but, like Cornell's boxes, constructs a charged and mysterious space where 'Everything has a schedule, if you can find out what it is' (ST, 3).

Returning to the first line, Ashbery playfully twists the familiarity of 'to see ourselves as others see us' into a contraction whereby the *seeing* and the *being seen* are emphasised in their simultaneity.[15] The grammatical awkwardness of 'we see us' embodies a tension in its implied flux between being both the subject that sees and the 'us' objectified as seen. It is this dynamic, between the active involvement of looking and the passive stasis of looked at, which condenses the poem's priority to *mean* through a collaborative exchange of reader and poet: 'you can find out what it is'. Whilst this will later develop into more dexterously reflexive questions of language in his later poetry, here it is closer to Cornell's own 'scenes'. Many of Cornell's boxes allow for and encourage the viewer to interact with their contents: moving coloured sand (in *Red Sandbox,* 1940, *Sandbox*, 1944, *Sand Fountain*, 1957-59), revealing the obscured or hidden contents of small jars and bottles (*Pharmacy*, 1943, *Museum*, 1944-48) or moving rubber or wooden balls along shelves and shaking the composition into new life (*Forgotten Game*, 1949, the *Dovecot* series, 1954-56). It was as if his objects could never be art in a stultified gallery sense, but instead offered artifacts to be delicately explored or antique toys worn down by years of play and now resting, exhibited in a kind of hushed reverence. This constant interactive dimension to Cornell's work most logically relates back to his original impetus for creating such objects, which was to entertain and distract his severely disabled brother, Robert. Cornell's experimentations with film were partially inspired for the same reason; when his brother and he tired of watching the same projected shorts on loop Cornell decided to re-edit them, splicing in different footage and cutting scenes to renew their viewing appeal. It was in Cornell's collecting and making of objects (and in his films) that he acquired a sensitivity to not only the child-like joy attached to interaction, but

[15] This line could be a slippery reference to Robert Burns' 'To a Louse': 'O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us/To see oursels as ithers see us!' However, it seems more likely that Ashbery was drawn to it through the phrase's resonance in common colloquial usage, providing an example of the weathered cliché that was to become a frequent site of interest in his poetry.

also the way in which he could draw attention to our own fascinations through showcasing his own. In looking at a Cornell box, it is not simply an observation on the arrangement of objects but an awareness of our own fascination, through which we become sensitively conscious of *how* we are looking: 'We see us as we truly behave'.[16]

Whilst 'Two Scenes' is not demonstrably a poem that uses found language like found objects (this being the case in later poems), it does present each stanza with the self-sufficient logic of a scene *as though* it were found. By this I mean, though the two presented 'scenes' of each stanza bring together disparate elements in a near cryptic fashion (the first stanza coordinates a 'table', 'sparks', a 'train', a 'water-pilot', 'hair' and 'mountains') there is a persuasive logic that compels the reader into believing them part of system; as though an unfamiliar mechanism had been found, and while its functions may remain a mystery its internal coherence appears to *work*. Consequently, the first poem of Ashbery's first collection comes to imply the possibility of poetry as a process of finding and collecting, a process that can privilege the encounter of such scenes above their referential value. This distinctly surrealist sense of the encounter is not consciously prioritized but instead connected to Ashbery's playful relationship with allusion. When the poems do come to incorporate found material, rather than collaged prose or speech becoming an elitist or academic tool of literary nods and winks, it instigates instead a far more playful and bizarre paper trail of oddities. This playful prompt in Ashbery's poetry, for the responsive interaction of the reader, surfaces in an interview while discussing *A Nest of Ninnies*, his collaborative novel:

> A gag that's probably gone unnoticed turns up in the last sentence of the novel I wrote with James Schuyler. Actually it's my sentence. It reads: "So it was that the cliff dwellers, after bidding their cousins good night, moved off towards the parking area, while the latter bent their steps toward the partially rebuilt shopping plaza in the teeth of the freshening foehn." *Foehn* is a kind of warm wind that blows in Bavaria that produces a fog. I would doubt that many people know that. I liked the idea that people, if they bothered to, would have to open the dictionary to find out what the last word in the novel meant. They'd be closing one book and opening another.[17]

Consequently there is the suggestion that to experience the work of Cornell or Ashbery (whether seen or read), can be to actively partake in the process of curiosity through which their work is created. The second line of 'Two Scenes' articulates this curiosity in a way

---

[16] For a discussion of the connections between Ashbery and Cornell's phenomenological affinities, how both encourage an increased attention of our own attentions, see Ariane Mildenberg, 'Through the Wrong End of the Telescope: Thresholds of Perception in Joseph Cornell, John Ashbery, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty', in *Joseph Cornell: Opening the Box,* ed. Jason Edwards and Stephanie L. Taylor (Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 137-156.

[17]John Ashbery, interviewed by Peter A. Stitt, 'The art of poetry XXXIII: John Ashbery', ed. George Plimpton *Poets at Work: The Paris Review Interviews* (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin, 1989) <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3014/the-art-of-poetry-no-33-john-ashbery >[accessed August, 2014]

which uncovers its connection with a collecting spirit and the artistic anticipation of the found object: 'From every corner comes a distinct offering'. This readiness to appreciate an observation or experience, combed from a larger impression of how 'we truly behave' and then treasured as 'a distinct offering' reflects the presiding tone of Cornell's poetic diary entries. For Cornell, moments in which a joy or sense of significance could be intimated amidst the experiences and materials of everyday became consecrated clues, attached (but often inscrutably so) to a sensation that could then transcends the everyday and from which, later, a box could evolve: 'Endless marveling at the way in which routine experience suddenly becomes magically imbued and transformed with a joy too elusive to catch in words.'[18] It is a moment like this in 'Two Scenes', after the 'distinctive offering' and the train's arrival (intuiting a sense of happening, an excitement of the new – also possibly evoking the surrealist locomotives of René Magritte or de Chirico), that Ashbery presents in his own 'magically imbued' instant: 'The sparks it strikes illuminate the table' (ST, 3).

In 'Hotel Dauphin', another poem from *Some Trees*, Ashbery provides an early point of comparison with Cornell's desire to possess, or express, the ephemeral: 'But its smallest possession – a hair or a sneeze/ I wanted.' (ST 26). It is a line reminiscent of Cornell's beloved 'métaphysique d'ephemera', a term he borrowed from the nineteenth century French poet, Gérard de Nerval, to describe the significance of the trivial and banal transformed through imagination. 'Hotel Dauphin', as a title, also immediately evokes Cornell's 'Hotel Series' (a link Ashbery returns to in the title of his 1992 book *Hotel Lautréamont*, the cover of which featured a Cornell collage). In the third stanza, the line 'I lose myself/In others' dreams' (ST, 27), offers an almost Bretonian conception of the found object's allure, recalling the last – and often quoted – line of the 1924 'Manifesto of Surrealism': 'Existence is elsewhere' (FM, 47). A Surrealist declaration that Tashjian associates with Cornell: 'Like Breton at the conclusion of the first manifesto, Cornell knew that "existence is elsewhere." It was to be found in the life of his objects derived from the aesthetic feeling discovered in unique moments of his life. Transference was everything'.[19]

Central to the symbolic value and potency of the found object was its *coming-in-to-being*, arrived upon as the *found* aleatory distraction in which the present tense activity of *finding* can culminate. It becomes emblematic of an experiential ambling, not furnished with a particular direction, purpose or arrival but imbued with the same mobility of chance and meaning which facilitates its *being found*.[20] In Tashjian's study of Surrealism in America from the 1920s through to 1950s, he notes that, '[m]ore than the Surrealists, Cornell made the

[18] Joseph Cornell, diary entry (noted 'Sun AM 9:45 4/27/58') *Theatre of the Mind*, p. 235.
[19] Dickran Tashjian, *A Boatload of Madmen*, p.245.

serendipitous quest an integral part of his life and a necessary aspect of the boxes that eventually housed the jetsam garnered from chance encounters.'[21] Cornell defined his meandering expeditions as 'wanderlusting' and, like a New York flâneur, had favourite avenues, coffee shops, cafeterias, squares and monuments; it was from this wandering that the inspiration of surrealist 'chance encounters' could manifest.[22] In a short typed letter to Ashbery from 1967, Cornell refers to 'the quiet unsuspected surprises of back-street, back-yard rambling'.[23] Similarly, Ashbery was also known to have wandered the New York streets in his twenties, carrying a Dictaphone to record snatches of the overheard and 'unsuspected surprises' of conversation.[24] After moving to Paris, it was the absence of a surrounding first language that proved to be one of the most difficult adjustments for his writing. As he has said, in an interview:

> My own poetry derives very much from colloquial or, even worse, American being spoken around me. Especially in New York where you overhear strange things being said – and I often incorporate them into poetry. I didn't have that, sort of cushion, in France.[25]

Just as Cornell would stumble upon objects to fill his boxes, Ashbery would happen upon overheard words with which to inspire and include in his poems. How the poem can be understood as a presentation of found objects begins to merge into the possibility of conceptualising the poem as itself a found object.

'Glazunoviana': The Poem arranged as Found Object

Following his selection of Ashbery's 'Some Trees' in the annual Yale Series of Younger Poets Competition, W.H. Auden wrote to Frank O'Hara (whose manuscript came second behind Ashbery's) outlining reservations he had harboured about their shared 'surrealistic style': 'namely of confusing authentic non-logical relations which arouse wonder with accidental ones which arouse mere surprise and in the end fatigue.'[26] While both Ashbery and

---

[21] *A Boatload of Madmen*, p.236.
[22] Details of Cornell's wandering habits are referenced throughout his diary, and elaborated upon in Mary Ann Caws' *Theater Of The Mind.*
[23] Joseph Cornell, letter to John Ashbery, dated 6.6.67, in *Joseph Cornell's Theater of the Mind*, p.372.
[24] As referenced by Eliot D'Silva, '"An illustration changes us": Images of Innocence in John Ashbery', *Hypocrite Reader* (Issue 12, March 2012)< http://hypocritereader.com/14/an-image-changes-us >[accessed August 2014]
[25] From 'The Poet's View', available online: < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fevto6EKzzo > [accessed September 2014]
[26] W.H. Auden, letter to Frank O'Hara (3 March 1955), cited in Brad Gooch, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (New York: Knopf, 1993), p.261.

O'Hara were to later deploy elements of the 'accidental' and 'occasional' as invigorating methods in their poetics, at this early juncture I would argue that Auden was misreading the nature of, certainly Ashbery's, 'surrealistic style'. Rather than indulging a surrealist game of juxtapositions and chance (like *Cadavre Exquis*), I want to suggest that in *Some Trees* the construction of Ashbery's poems are far more concerted and precise than Auden suggests. In contrast to addressing the reflexive poetics within the poems, our reading can be adjusted to allow for a conception of the poem itself as a found object or collection; approached through a more compositional awareness, not dissimilar from looking into one of Cornell's 'shadow boxes'. *Some Trees*, like Cornell's own approach, is delicately concerned with arrangement. Rather than focus on the traditionally formal aspects to the poems as indicative of their arrangement (*Some Trees* features an eclogue, pantoum, sestina, canzone and two sonnets), I will trace the supposedly 'non-logical relations' alongside Cornell's own preoccupations to demonstrate the similarities of arrangement. The poem I will use to exemplify this analysis is 'Glazunoviana'. Little has been critically said on the poem and additionally, due to its length, it can be appreciated in full.

When considering its form in relation to the boxes of Cornell, in order to appropriately convey Ashbery's poem as a coherent composition or scene in itself, the poem should not be broken up:

> The man with the red hat
> And the polar bear, is he here too?
> The window giving on shade,
> Is that here too?
> And all the little helps,
> My initials in the sky,
> The hay of an arctic summer night?
>
> The bear
> Drops dead in sight of the window.
> Lovely tribes have just moved to the north.
> In the flickering evening the martins grow denser.
> Rivers of wings surround us and vast tribulation.
>
> (ST, 10)

The title refers to Alexander Glazunov, a Russian composer from the late Romantic period.[27] In the vein of Americ*ana* or Victori*ana*, the title's suffix presents the poem as an artefact,

[27]Ashbery mentioned the poem in an interview (February 1, 2013) with *The Spectator*: 'I have a great love of 19th century Russian composers, such as Arensky and Glazunov. (In my first book there's a poem called 'Glazunoviana.') These minor figures I find very moving.' <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/books/2013/02/interview-with-a-writer-john-ashbery/> [Accessed July 2014]

trinket or collection pertaining to the composer. Significantly such connotations grant the poem with the implications of having been collected, found or in someway exhibited after selection, again drawing it towards the atmosphere of a Cornell box. More obviously, in referencing a composer, the title draws interpretation towards a consideration of the role and influence of music in Ashbery's poetry. At just twelve (short) lines in length and with its absurdist conjuring of an impressively strange scene, 'Glazunoviana' persuasively crafts its own and odd enigma partly because it doesn't subscribe to a conventionally literary transmission of meaning. It is in this way that the title's evocation of music chimes with Ashbery's most frequently repeated observation regarding music: 'What I like about music is its ability to be convincing, to carry an argument through successfully to the finish, though the terms of the argument remain unknown quantities . . . I would like to do this in poetry.'[28] To convey the significance of an argument without an explanatory banister for how and where to specifically define that significance is a sensation that Cornell was gifted in communicating. Even without being familiar with Cornell's vast map of cross associations and how his eccentric systems of obsession informed each box, looking into any number of his creations could still palpably impress upon the viewer a feeling of mystery.

There are three definable elements to 'Glazunoviana' that lend its wonderfully odd scene the atmosphere of a Cornell box. Firstly there is an uncomplicated plainness to the first line, 'The man with the red hat' that, when followed by a cheerfully decontextualized polar bear suggests the beginnings of a children's tale. The constant use of questioning in the first stanza, alongside its conjunction of the simple ('man with the red hat') with the surprising ('the polar bear') or mysteriously strange ('The hay of an arctic summer night') creates a tone of innocent curiosity. It is as if the voice of the poem were that of a small child, staring into a museum cabinet and tugging on the sleeve of an adult, asking constant and repeated questions. There is even a child-like pride in the affirmation of self with 'My initials in the sky', recalling a young and gleeful scribbling of names in the sand, or of making shapes that hang in the air from sparklers. Cornell had an intensely romanticized fascination with children and the perception of the child; it was a fascination that, like many of his obsessions, was cultivated primarily in the mythologizing of his own imagination, as opposed to through common interaction or experience. His boxes are full of the talismans and tokens of childhood: the playfully cosmic analogy of bubbles in his *Soap Bubble Series* (1936-48, see *fig.1*, Appendix); jars of collected shells and butterflies (*Pharmacy*, 1942-3, see *fig. 2*, Appendix, and *Museum*, 1944-8); the plastic toy lobsters in *A Pantry Ballet*, 1942, and *Zizi*

[28] John Ashbery, interviewed by Richard Kostelanetz, 'How to be a Difficult Poet', *New York Times Magazine* (23 May, 1976), cited by Ben Hickman, *John Ashbery and English Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p.124.

Jeanmarie Lobster Ballet Box, 1948; the child portraits in the *Medici Series* (1942-54); and the use of jacks and rubber balls (from his early untitled *objets* of the 30s through to inclusion in the *Medici Series*). Cornell's veneration for these objects and their evocation of the child and childhood contributes to the wide eyed wonder with which his boxes are received. It is this same enchantment of the unexpected and often unexplained or inexplicable, as a child-like joy, which stirs in 'Glazunoviana'.

The second most notable feature in the poem that invites a parallel with Cornell is the emphasized and repeated inclusion of a window. After the possible and questioned sighting of the man with a red hat and the polar bear, the poem enquires: 'The window giving on shade, /Is that here too?' followed, in the second stanza, by 'The bear/Drops dead in sight of the window.' These two allusions are situated within what the poem presents as a half disclosed scene, therefore encouraging the 'window' to become a suitable motif for the poem's concern with looking, seeing and not seeing. To read 'Glazunoviona' prompts the impression of peering into something private and inscrutable and yet, in the first stanza, it remains a welcoming sensation – as if moving towards a visual understanding in which 'all the little helps'. In an anecdote recounting the inspiration for his box constructions, Cornell describes noticing a display of compasses in a shop window:

> I thought, everything can be used in a lifetime, can't it, and went on walking. I'd scarcely gone two blocks when I came on another shop window full of boxes, all different kinds...Halfway home on the train that night, I thought of the compasses and boxes, it occurred to me to put the two together. [29]

So, for Cornell, windows became integral to his entire *modus operandi* and a continual source of artistic renewal, as he notes in his diary: 'original inspiration of the magic simplicity of store windows' (a comment coincidentally made in the same year that *Some Trees* was published, 1956).[30] Cornell was also enamored with Eugene Atget's evocative photographs (taken between 1897 and 1927) of Parisian shop windows, a haunting and nostalgic documentation of Paris championed by Man Ray (who published several in *le Révolution surréaliste*) among other surrealists. Windows are foregrounded and recreated in many of Cornell's box constructions (*Butterfly Habit*, 1940, the framed panes of the *Medici Series*, the night sky windows of the *Hotel Series*, and more obvious examples like *Window Façade,* 1951), while also existing in the very nature of a box's glass fronted form. The front of each box becomes the window through which Cornell's crafted scenes are viewed. Elsewhere, in *Some Trees*, the window surfaces as a point of departure for 'The Instruction Manual', where

[29] Joseph Cornell, Diary entry (Autumn 1947), *Theater of the Mind*.
[30] Joseph Cornell (1956), *Theater of the Mind*, p. 220.

its ruminating and imaginary travelogue begins: ‘As I sit looking out of a window’ (ST, 5). For the more autobiographically troubled, ‘A Boy’, the window seems to metaphorically evoke the anxiety of memory as ‘that other livid window’ through which a remembering ‘tide pushes an awful lot of monsters’ (ST, 9). Returning to ‘Two Scenes’, it is that same inaugural looking and being looked at of ‘we see us’ that allows the window, as an image of that which mediates between dialectics of sight, to become just as important as it was for Cornell.

In this reading of ‘Glazunoviana’ and Cornell’s box constructions, the poem and the box can be simultaneously seen as a composite of found objects and, unified through arrangement (as a scene/ window/poem/box), as a macrocosmic found object in itself. Not unlike Cornell’s ‘magic simplicity of store windows’, the poem becomes the framed presentation of a collection observed in coherence as a singular system, while also existing within itself as an arrangement of objects seen in plurality. So, while ‘Glazunoviana’ in its brevity communicates the confused glimpse of a strange scene or a glance through a window, it is also just as able – through interpretation – to shrug off its poetic *sum* for the constituent *parts*. By which I mean there is, in the poem, an ability to move between its oddly coherent world and a more fragmented dissection of – line by line – how it manages that (in)coherence.

There are competing tones that bring the reader to scrutinize each line separately and, in doing so, lose the overall ‘sight’ of the scene. The simple, if bizarre, questioning that begins the first stanza is tripped up by the seemingly incomplete ambiguity of ‘And all the little helps’. As mentioned earlier this could be taken to imply a gathering of clues which moves the reader towards visual understanding, however it could just as easily be seen as a clunky or even arbitrary placeholder to transition from questioning the aforementioned scene and introducing the ‘initials in the sky’ and the more perplexing ‘hay of an arctic summer night’. Therefore the reader might be drawn back to question all the little *what?* Helps *what*? Or *who?* Why has the voice changed tack from questioning to an affirmative? Why, after the ‘initials in the sky’, does the poem slip into another question – or, like a token gesture of conformity, add a question mark? Then there is the cryptic image of the ‘hay of an arctic summer night’, a line that becomes hauntingly lodged in the mind and broken off from its context in the poem. To continue this instability, the second stanza drops into a more kinetic description where things are not simply observed (or trying to be observed) but are demonstrably *happening*: the bear drops dead, tribes are moving, evening is flickering and we have become surrounded. It is as if the first stanza provides a photographic tableaux, albeit warped and without certainty, whereas the second stanza delivers a flickering short – like the half-forgotten reels of film Cornell salvaged and spliced together. Therefore we can be left wondering where a compelling phrase comes from and what, if any, its intentions may have

been, or continue to be. The poem subsequently moves interpretation between a cohesion that embodies the entirety of 'Glazunoviana' encountered like a found object, and a disparity, as a collection of found objects pointing beyond the housed parameters of the poem.

Similarly, this tension that strains against containment can be observed in most of Cornell's boxes. Although an analysis that atomizes Cornell's constructions for various and heterogeneous components could begin in any one of his boxes, for the sake of demonstration I will briefly suggest those in the *Aviary Series.* The reappearance of birds in Cornell's boxes, and his allusions to cages, perches, dovecotes and nesting, appropriately chimes with the last poem in *Some Trees*, 'Le livre est sur la table', with its 'bird-house' and the men who 'live in boxes' (ST, 39). In the *Hotel Eden* (1945, see *fig.3*, Appendix) while all the objects displayed correlate with Cornell's highly personalised network of symbols, the box also presents its scene in a manner similar to 'Glazunoviana'. Firstly we notice the brightly coloured bird (child-like, it carries the same simple joy as the man with the red hat and the polar bear), then a profusion of frames suggesting compartments or windows within windows, a yellow ball suspended, a wire spiral in a top corner, a bottle of what looks like painted cork cylinders, and scraps of paper (one that bears the title 'Hotel Eden') half concealed by flecks of white paint. The composition in its planes of depth and arrangement, combined with its colours and interplay of texture, immediately conjure the box as a world of its own; a geometry with laws unto itself. However, the longer one spends with the box, like the poem, the singularity of each object begins to unfurl, implying other and further puzzles.

As if each object were separately brought in and out of focus, the coherence of the box as a *whole* gives way to the relation between each object, as an interactive plurality of *parts*. Like a line from Ashbery's 'Errors', in which 'found boxes' are 'littered with snow', Cornell's boxes are transformed into 'eavesdropping palaces' (ST, 23), in which we try to overhear imagined connections and understand how each object corresponds. It is in this way, through an oscillation between the box and poem as found object and box and poem as an assembly of found objects, that both Ashbery and Cornell resist stasis in their scenes; the shapes in the window are always moving. This effect is sought after with scribbled fanaticism in Cornell's diary, as he confesses a 'recurrent obsession to make objects move'.[31] A pursuit of restless mobility that also supplies 'Glazunoviana' with its last and otherworldly image: 'Rivers of wings surround us and vast tribulation.' The anxiety of 'tribulation', in its proximity to 'Rivers' offers an echoed suggestion of 'vast tributaries', except rather than streams flowing into a main river, it is the semblance of a main river, poem, scene or box from which the 'vast' connections spread. The scene is no longer contained and we cannot be

[31] Joseph Cornell, (5/8/59), *Theater of the Mind,* p.256.

only and separately detached in our looking; it is around us flowing and like Cornell's aviaries, always alluding to a flight outside of the frame.

The Found Object beyond Some Trees

Although many of the poems in *Some Trees* are inflected with a consideration of the found object, it is only in his later work that this develops: from its implication and description to a later textual enactment, exercised as a poetic tool. In his experimental second collection, *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), the poem 'Europe' revolves heavily around the fragmented collage of a novel by William le Queux that Ashbery found while in Paris: 'I cannibalized a book for teenage girls published in England during World War One, that I found in a bookstall along the Seine in Paris, called *Beryl of the Biplane*.'[32] There was evidently a wry enjoyment to be had in subjecting Le Queux's book, with its detective fiction genre tropes, to a fractured form that more radically imagined its themes of mystery; presenting a disjunctive style that seems in itself an array of muddled clues and unsolved puzzles. The bones of Le Queux's narrative are chaotically broken and rearranged until encountered only as teasing scraps, from which reading cumulatively intuits the faint outline of what *was* the narrative, now a partially visible object to be found.

Reading the poem provides its own witty parallel to Ashbery's own finding of the book and its use in the poem's composition as a found object. The impression of reading the poem as a recreation of the original and chance finding of the book acquires its own reflexive encapsulation in part 8. This part is composed of a long, collaged extract followed by a separate, lone line affirming: 'All was now ready for the continuance of the journey' (TCO, 93). Ashbery brings the 'journey' and its present 'continuance' into suggestive proximity with the collaged text, allowing the poem's found object to extend an invitation to the poem's reader. It is an invitation to partake in a further finding which preserves the temporal emphasis on a renewable present. This is the reader's interpretive journey that, like Ashbery's mining of the unlikely source material, amends the observation: 'He had mistaken the book for garbarge' (TCO, 93). This line from 'Europe' was, somewhat brutally, used to critique the collection in a scathing review of *The Tennis Court Oath*, as Ashbery remembers:

> John Simon, the dreaded theatre critic of *New York* magazine, reviewed it for the *Hudson Review*, and quoted a line from [the poem] 'Europe' which was 'he had

[32]John Ashbery, interviewed by John Tranter, May 1988, *Jacket*, Issue 2 (1998) <http://jacketmagazine.com/02/jaiv1988.html >[accessed August 2013]

> mistaken his book for garbage', and he said 'If the poet says this, what more can the reviewer add?'[33]

However, sidestepping Simon's neatly harsh condemnation, the original line perfectly recognizes the poetic debt to the found object in 'Europe' as indicative of moments in which cultural detritus ('garbage') can be raised from refuse and neglect to the attentions of poetry ('book'). Befitting of the poem's primary found object (the spy 'book' that wasn't 'garbage': *Beryl of the Biplane*) this discovery is depicted with the thrill of espionage: 'together they try to piece together the secret/ message of today's paper' (TCO, 99).

There are other examples in *The Tennis Court Oath* that further demonstrate the found object as a furtive element of Ashbery's 'difficult second album' in its pursuit of an experimentally reinvigorated poetics. In the poem 'Idaho', *The Tennis Court Oath'*s final poem, Shoptaw notes: '[t]he poem is assembled almost entirely from *Soundings* (1925), a popular novel by A. Hamilton Gibbs, which Ashbery found in his parents' home in Sodus.'[34] Shoptaw then goes on to observe: 'Several of the line breaks […] reproduce the layout of the Little, Brown edition of Gibbs's novel, as though it were a *found poem'* (italics mine).[35] Ashbery's adoption of the found object, as a poetic premise, is also responsible for one of the most alluringly cryptic lines in the innovative collection: '"This honey is delicious/ *Though it burns the throat."* ' (TCO 44). Taken from ' "They Dream Only of America" ', the mysteriously ominous line came from a remark that Pierre Martory (to whom the book is dedicated) made on the day the poem was written (thought to have been Ashbery's birthday: July 28, 1957).[36] Such use of overheard and decontextualized conversation has often been cited as a recurrent technique and inspiration for Ashbery's poems, offering up their islands of estranged banality like verbal found objects:

> I often put in things that I have overheard people say, on the street for instance. Suddenly something fixes itself in the flow that is going on around one and seems to have a significance. In fact, there is an example of that in this poem, "What Is Poetry?" In a bookstore I overheard a boy saying to a girl this last line: "It might give us—what?—some flowers soon?" I have no idea what the context was, but it suddenly seemed the way to end my poem. I am a believer in fortuitous accidents.[37]

---

[33] Ibid.

[34] Shoptaw, p.53.

[35] Shoptaw, p.55.

[36] Cited by Shoptaw, p65.

[37] John Ashbery, interviewed by Peter A. Stitt, 'The art of poetry XXXIII: John Ashbery,' in *Poets at Work: The Paris Interviews*, ed. by George Pimperton (New York: Penguin Books, 1989) <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3014/the-art-of-poetry-no-33-john-ashbery > [accessed September 2013].

Herd suggests that in '"They Dream Only of America"', whenever symbolism seems to enamor or direct the poem, be it the influence of Whitman's 'honeyed homoerotic pastoral' or of the 'Kerouac-like road trip', Ashbery consciously reins in the language to a more matter-of-fact register.[38] He explains this as Ashbery's avoidance of becoming 'too attached to signs' that would, in turn, render the poetry 'detached from the world of objects'.[39] The words in the poem, like Breton's insistence that Surrealism 'plunges its roots into life' (SM, 124), are drawn from encounters that reinforce an impression of language as lived, lending it the objective status of a thing worn and used through its currency in everyday experience.

Scavenging 'from the world of objects' did not fade after the radical experimentation of *The Tennis Court Oath*, but later reappears in *Rivers and Mountains* (1966), in the long and oneiric journey poem 'The Skaters'. Ashbery includes and works from passages taken from a kind of boy's annual of activities called *Three Hundred Things a Bright Boy Can Do* (an account of Ashbery's fragmented use of this source is addressed in Chapter 4).[40] In 'The Skaters' we encounter a characteristic and restless desire to include: 'Labels on bottles/And all kinds of discarded objects that ought to be described' (RM, 152). It is this attention, arguably born from the same impetus that compelled Ashbery to choose overlooked or marginalized poets for his Norton lectures and that substantiates his title for that series of talks and a later poem in *Houseboat Days* (1977) as establishing (and not without a certain humor) 'The Other Tradition'. Not only a reference to the wide, eclectic and Eurocentric reading that separated many of the New York poets from their contemporaries, but, more principally, a pledge to *notice* what often seemed below, or outside the esteems of 'literary' writing; a celebration of what 'The New Spirit' calls 'so much debris of living' (TP, 249). Later on in 'The Skaters' we reach a description that seems exemplary of this commitment:

> With here and there an old map or illustration. Here's one for
> instance –
> Looks like a weather map . . . or a coiled bit of wallpaper
> with a design
> Of faded hollyhocks, or abstract fruit and gumdrops in
> chains
>
> (RM, 156)

[38] David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) p.85.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Many Hands, *Three Hundred Things a Bright Boy Can Do* (London: Sampson Low, 1914)
< http://www.text-works.org/Texts/Ashbery/JA-Sk_data/JA-Sk_Sources.html > [accessed September 2013]

It is this same appetite for the everyday, or the eccentric clutter of yesterday, that continues to inspire much of Ashbery's later poetry and perhaps most famously, injected 'Daffy Duck in Hollywood' with its memorably specific list:

> Of Rumford's Baking Powder, a celluloid earring, Speedy
> Gonzalez, the latest from Helen Topping Miller's fertile
> Escritoire, a sheaf of suggestive pix on greige, deckle-edged
> Stock – to come clattering through the rainbow trellis
>
> (HD, 510)

What begins to emerge in 'The Skaters' and in this instance from 'Daffy Duck…' is a transition in focus: from the found object to the collection of objects. Ashbery's developing poetics of democratic inclusion, inspired with its suggested 'Other Tradition' and in turn occasionally indebted to the breathless and panegyric listing of Whitman, must also be positioned in relation to Cornell, as both share a surrealist slant in their appetites for eccentric hoarding.

Collecting in Ashbery and Cornell

In 1929 the Cornell family moved into 3708 Utopia Parkway in Queens; almost fifty years later in 1978 (a year after the publication of *Houseboat Days*) Ashbery bought a large Victorian townhouse in the Hudson Valley. For both men these domestic spaces became havens, not only accommodating for and encouraging their creative routines but also eventually meriting an appreciation in conjunction with their artistic practice. Cornell went from originally occupying the basement as a studio for his files (obsessions that he entitled 'explorations'), boxes under construction and hoarded objects, to considering the house in its entirety as a mythologized component in his art: 'this house – now stands a lone surviving sentinel (from its vantage point) a sanctuary for all my chaotic treasures – a celestial repository'.[41] On visiting Cornell's house (for the first and only time) Ashbery observed 'several rooms that seemed crammed with tiny objects, both unusual and ordinary; strange antique toys as well as more pedestrian ones that might have been giveaways from a local filling station.' [42] It is a description that could be applied to elements of his own Hudson house, as frequently demonstrated by Roger Gilbert's essay, 'On the Inside Looking In', as in

[41] Joseph Cornell, diary entry (8/21/47), *Theater of the Mind*, p.146.
[42] John Ashbery, 'Foreword', *Theater of the Mind*, p. 11.

his observation that: 'Willowware plates and cups rub elbows with a ceramic mug adorned with a portrait of little Orphan Annie'.[43]

Further exploring the Hudson house (an act partially recreated in the beautiful exhibition, 'John Ashbery Collects: Poet Among Things', in the Loretta Howard Gallery, September 12th – November 2nd, 2013) reveals a vast array of art, objects, collections and styles, their jostling variety in mischievous divergence from the austere Victorian architecture. From Japanese prints, Victorian cartoons and tin advertising signs to the paintings of artists that were contemporaries and, often, friends: Joe Brainard, Jane Frielicher, Larry Rivers, Trevor Winkfield, Alex Katz and Fairfield Porter – to name just a few. Elsewhere, stained glass windows, oak panelling and upholstered armchairs flirt with parodies of period décor ('bright patches of modernism vie for attention with Persian carpets and Chippendale furniture')[44]while shelves of B-movie cassettes, old fashion telephones and wax fruit are arranged in nestled collections, distracted by elaborate wallpaper (William Morris and Lincrusta Walton).[45] David Kermani has described the house and its significance to Ashbery as a kind of 'physical poetry… a three dimensional Ashberian milieu.'[46] Burgeoning with eclecticism and lovingly arranged (and re-arranged) over the years, it has become in itself a point of study, as demonstrated by the creative and critical collaborative project: 'Created Spaces: John Ashbery's Textual and Domestic Environments'.[47] Whilst the diverse issues uncovered by that project attest to a range of critical possibilities inspired by the house as a reflection of and extension to Ashbery's work, perhaps its most defining role is, like Cornell's Utopia Parkway, as a 'sanctuary' to house 'chaotic treasures'. Both houses enable and showcase a highly personal form of collecting.

The New York School painter, Robert Motherwell, commented upon the array of Cornell's obsessions in a breathless avalanche that evokes his restless collecting habits:

> 'And what obsessions! Birds and cages, empty cages, mirrors, ballerinas and theatre folk (living and dead), foreign cities, Americana, Tom Thumb, Greta Garbo, Mallarmé, Charlie Chaplin, neglected children, charts of the stars, wineglasses, pipes, corks, thimbles, indigo blue and milky white, silver tinsel, rubbed wood, wooden drawers filled with treasures, knobs, bright-coloured minerals, cheese boxes (as a

[43] Roger Gilbert, 'On the Outside Looking In,' as part of the 'Created Spaces: John Ashbery's Textual and Domestic Environments', *Rain Taxi* (Summer 2008) <http://www.raintaxi.com/literary-features/john-ashbery-created-spaces/on-the-inside-looking-in/> [accessed July 2013]
[44] Roger Gilbert, 'On the Inside Looking In'.
[45] For more on the specifics of objects, décor and the ambitiously individual interior design of the Hudson House, see Roseanne Wasserman, 'Hudson 1993: A Tour of John Ashbery's Home', as part of the 'John Ashbery's Created Spaces: A Dream of this Room', ed. by Micaela Morrissette, *Rain Taxi* (Summer 2008).
[46] David Kermani, quoted in Roger Gilbert, 'On the Inside Looking In'. Of further interest, Kermani also contributed his own essay, 'John Ashbery's Cinema Paradiso: Domestic Elements as Poetry', to 'Created Spaces'.
[47] *Rain Taxi* (Summer 2008).

> joke), wooden balls, hoops, rings, corridors, prison bars, infinite alleys – the list is endless.'[48]

The fact that Cornell's idiosyncratic and ranging enthusiasms appealed to Ashbery is suggested in his essay (*ArtNews*, Summer 1967) on Cornell. As an introduction to the artist, Ashbery includes an extract from the adopted surrealist icon, Arthur Rimbaud, which perfectly celebrates Cornell's (and his own) collecting sensibility:

> I loved stupid paintings, decorated transoms, stage-sets, carnival booths, signs, popular engravings; old fashioned literature, church Latin, erotic books with non-existent spelling, the novels of our grandmothers, fairy tales, children's books, old operas, silly refrains, naïve rhythms.[49]

Looming in this appetite for the incongruous is an echo of another adopted icon of Surrealism, the decedent and hallucinatory work of Comte de Lautréamont (pseudonym of Isidore-Lucien Ducasse), with his immortal phrase: 'Beautiful as the chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table.'[50] A taste for the enigma of certain unexpected arrangements, so privileged by the surrealists, can develop an intimation of the meaningful without referential specificity that recalls the poem, 'Errors', from *Some Trees*, where an atmosphere is described in which, 'All is ominous, luminous' (ST, 23). The cryptic persuasion of this surrealist dictum of (dis)arrangement is expounded in 'Le Livre est sur la table', as if it were, for Ashbery, a defining principle of his early poetics: 'All beauty, resonance, integrity,/Exist by deprivation or logic/Of strange position' (ST, 38). Correlating with the way in which the found object becomes a manifest substitute for the process of its own finding, the collection comes to embody the artistic thought and chance that, through an act of selection, constitutes is 'resonance'. Brice Brown articulates this point, using Cornell as a natural comparison when considering Ashbery's Chelsea apartment (Ashbery divides his time between the apartment and the Hudson house):

> Joseph Cornell gathers ordinary, seemingly unrelated items together so that chance associations can generate metaphorically rich ideas about the enigma of the ordinary object. In a similar way, the contents of Ashbery's Chelsea apartment render the familiar strange, twitching the veil that hides the mystery behind the banal or the

[48] Robert Motherwell, cited by Caws in *Theatre of the Mind*, p.15.
[49] Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell* (1873) cited by Ashbery in 'Joseph Cornell', *Reported Sightings Art Chronicles 1957-1987*, p. 13.
[50] Comte de Lautréamont, *Maldoror and Poems*, trans. by Paul Knight (London: Penguin, 1978), p. 217. In his early collage, 'Woman and Sewing Machine' (1931), Cornell clearly references Lautréamont's phrase through the depiction of a woman under a sewing machine, thus suggesting the 'dissecting table'.

> evident. The poetry, the curatorship, the act of imagination is concentrated not in a final, frozen, formal assemblage, but in the act of selecting, arranging, pairing, isolating, or seeing.

Beyond demonstrating the importance of process as content and prioritising art that merges itself with the movement and materials of life, collecting as an 'act of selecting, arranging, pairing, isolating, or seeing' can elucidate and deepen our understanding of Ashbery and Cornell's Surrealism.

Collecting and the Collection

In his essay, 'The System of Collecting', Jean Baudrillard distinguishes between the object as an implement of functional currency and the object as 'possessed' and subsequently '*divested of its function and made relative to the subject*' (Baudrillard's italics); once abstracted from utility and with a newly acquired 'subjective status', the object's destiny is to be collected: 'this is where the passionate enterprise of possession can achieve its ambitions'.[51] Baudrillard conceptualises collecting as a retreat from the 'real world', to be turned to in the subject's attempt to establish an alternative and independent sense of mastery. If each object in a collection refers back to the subject, he reasons 'it is invariably *oneself* that one collects'; through entertaining notions of uniqueness and 'interposing, in that space between the irreversible flux of existence and our own selves, a screen that is discontinuous', the habits of collecting allow for a sense of mastery not only of the self but over time as well:

> the profound power exerted by collected objects derives not from their singularity nor their specific historicity. It is not because of these that we see the time of the collection as diverging from real time, but rather because *the setting up of a collection itself displaces real time.* Doubtless this is the fundamental project of all collecting – to translate real time into the dimensions of a system.[52]

Behind their glass fronts, Cornell's box constructions can resemble the airless detachment of a museum case, granting its objects with the power to seem exempt from time, protected and sealed off from change. As Baudrillard suggests, collecting begins to displace '*real time*' and in doing so, as in Cornell's art, stages its alternative: a seemingly contained world with a sense of its own symbolic autonomy.

---

[51] Jean Baudrillard, 'The System of Collecting', in *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed. by John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), pp.7-8.
[52] Baudrillard, 'The System of Collecting', p.16.

The connection between collecting and time, in which a collection is envisaged as a 'discontinuous' defence ordered apart from and against time, otherwise uncontrollable in its formless and unrelenting continuity, is made by Ashbery in a passage from 'The Skaters':

> But how much survives? How much of any one of us
> survives?
> The articles we'd collect – stamps of the colonies
> With greasy cancellation marks, mauve, magenta, and
> chocolate,
> Or funny looking dogs we'd see in the street, or bright
> remarks.
> One collects bullets. An Indianapolis, Indiana man collects
> slingshots of all epochs, and so on.
>
> Subtracted from our collections, though, these go on a little
> while, collecting aimlessly. We still support them.
> But so little energy they have! And up the swollen sands
> Staggers the darkness fiend, with the storm fiend close behind
> him!
>
> (RM, 147-8)

When the specifics of stamp collecting and the sight of 'funny looking dogs' follow the vulnerable question of survival, collecting is reduced through humorous inadequacy as an exercise in futile preservation, weakly structured in the face of elemental change. Whether obscurantist ('slingshots of all epochs') or quotidian ('dogs we'd see in the street, or bright/remarks'), efforts to collect, as Baudrillard puts it, strive to '*transcend the realities of an existence before whose irreversibility and contingency* [one] *remains powerless*'.[53] The stamp collecting and the bathos of 'funny looking dogs' become pathetic distractions ('so little energy they have!') powerless beneath the crushing inevitability of more continuous forces: 'up the swollen sands/Staggers the darkness fiend, with the storm fiend close behind/him!' What Ashbery acknowledges in 'The Skaters', in a manner quite different from Cornell, is the tragicomic frailty of the collection. Baudrillard emphasised that a collector's desire was not 'that he can somehow outlive himself' but that through creating fixed counters with which to negotiate and recycle anxieties of temporality 'collecting represents the perpetual fresh beginning of a controlled cycle', in which 'man can indulge in the great game of birth and death.'[54] It is the recourse to a suggestion of control, meticulously arranged, that so appealed to Cornell.

[53] Baudrillard, p.17.
[54] Baudrillard, p.16

Just as Cornell's treatment of found objects involved a Bretonian transference of the subject whereby 'existence is elsewhere' (FM, 47), his collecting, understood through Baudrillard, also reflects another of Breton's memorable maxims: 'Always for the first time'.[55] A possibility to engineer 'the perpetual fresh beginning' correlates with Breton's poeticised vision of love. For Breton, love was entwined with the same intoxicating and interpretive delirium that characterised the found object and collecting. Understood in terms of its function (even when divested of practical function, the possessed object as an item of passion enters into new personal codes of function) the object is 'the mediation of a *wish*' and therefore an expression of desire.[56] Breton's poem 'Always for the first time', although evoking a romantic 'you' indicative of an intimate human relationship, is also illuminating for understanding the surrealist collecting spirit.[57] By quoting the first and last five lines of Breton's poem, even in atmosphere alone it seems suggestive of Cornell's art:

> Always for the first time
> Hardly do I know you by sight
> You return at some hour of the night to a house at an angle to my window
> A wholly imaginary house
> It is there that from one second to the next
>
> By my leaning over the precipice
> Of your presence and your absence in hopeless fusion
> My finding the secret
> Of loving you
> Always for the first time.[58]

The poem immediately engages sight as a source of mystery ('Hardly do I know you by sight'), implying an allure that exists through compromised or partially obscured sight while also extending the thought into what might be known beyond sight. It is the tension that exists in so many of Cornell's boxes: what we see is often framed to suggest a selective glimpse (as in the *Untitled, Penny Arcade of Lauren Bacall*, 1945-6), placed behind objects (the doll ensnared in a forest of twigs, *Untitled – Bébé Marie*, 1940s), seen through holes (*"Dovecote" – American Gothic*, 1954-6), through wire (*Keepsake Parakeet*, 1949-53), behind broken glass (in *The Aviary Series*, late 40s to early 50s) or hidden away in draws and jars (*Pharmacy,* 1943, *Museum,* 1944-8). Yet, despite Cornell's predilection for the faded, crumpled, broken or obscured there is also, as in the poem, a suggestion of knowing beyond

[55] André Breton, 'Always for the First Time', *L 'Air* (1934), in *Poems of André Breton*, ed. and trans. by Jean-Pierre Cauvin and Mary Ann Caws (Boston: Black Widow Press, 2006), p.153.
[56] Baudrillard, p.17.
[57] For further connections between desire, the object, and collecting see André Breton's *L'Amour Fou* (1937).
[58] André Breton, 'Always for the first time', *Airwater* (1934), in *Poems of André Breton*, trans. Jean-Pierre Cauvin and Mary Ann Caws (Boston: Black Widow Press, 2014), pp. 153-155.

what is literally seen. As Ashbery describes it, Cornell presents 'the object and its nimbus of sensations' so that, even if only glimpsed or guessed at, an object can extend beyond its visual parameters and play amongst more personal interpretive connections.[59] Following this declaration of sight (or its lack), Breton moves into a temporal vagueness ('some hour'), a house seen through a window and its existence as 'wholly imagined', before once more returning to time, 'from one second to the next'. Seeing the object and its collection as intimately related to impressions of time leads both Cornell and Ashbery to approach moments and memories as part of an internalised process of collecting.

As already suggested, tangibly collecting becomes an act inseparable from the intangible in its corresponding motivations and experiences as rooted in the subject, what Cornell and Ashbery achieve is to turn this latent relationship into a more conscious exploration. Collecting as an inward preoccupation, a way of understanding or expressing mental faculties such that moments become equivalent to stored objects has its first intimation in *Some Trees* with the poem 'Popular Songs'. Ashbery explains the poem as 'an attempt to conjure up the kind of impression you would get from riding in the car, changing the radio stations and at the same time aware of the passing landscape', subsequently curating the passing of moments.[60] The objective to capture passing moments was to be given a more developed and sustained attention in the jumbled travel diary, *The Vermont Notebook* (1975).[61] Illustrated by Joe Brainard, *The Vermont Notebook* was written by Ashbery on a coach journey around New England (although apparently not Vermont). It consists of long lists, humorously bizarre and digressive observations, newspaper articles reproduced verbatim and absorbed into the prose poetry as if in extended parody, and throughout, the same fondness for curious or colloquial expressions that characterises his collaborative novel with Schuyler, *A Nest of Ninnies* (1969). Everywhere in *The Vermont Notebook*, collaged language and the central compulsion toward compiling a heterogeneous record is managed through the efforts of collecting (like the impressions of a passing landscape and radio stations Ashbery sought to collect in 'Popular Songs').

Though it is not simply the collecting of names, texts or objects in *The Vermont Notebook* but instead, as anticipated by the attempt to capture an 'impression' in 'Popular Songs', it is an application of that scavenging to *moments*:

---

[59] John Ashbery, 'Joseph Cornell' (1967), *Reported Sightings*, ed. by David Bergman (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), p.16.
[60] John Ashbery, interviewed by Sue Gangel, 'An interview with John Ashbery', *San Francisco Review of Books* (November 1977), pp. 17-18.

> clenching in his teeth all those distraught objects of the recent past – the way someone looked at him, seeming not seeing but just seeing. The sandwich the way it was. The coffee, how much better or how much worse than the last time. The clerk peeping at his papers. These collect and dissipate like gnats on a screen door – some penetrate the holes in the screen, others move on outside and are replaced by new shoals and whorls, but the movement is the same, grudging giving and giving back. So many marvellous empty mountains.
>
> (VN, 357)

Half-glances and observations are collected alongside vague impressions and sensations; caught in the teeth of a day's digestion memory becomes its own collection: a landscape of 'marvellous empty mountains'. It is here that we can return to Breton's 'Always for the first time', as it is through Ashbery's internal collecting of memory that a heightened awareness of his activity involves: 'leaning over the precipice/ Of your presence and your absence in hopeless fusion'. In the collecting of what can only exist as a presence internally, Ashbery chooses a landscape for which mountains are empty and the interaction with such 'distraught objects of the recent past' will both 'collect and dissipate'.

A vacillation between presence and absence as a condition of moments remembered, or retraced in representation, often steered the obsessive nature of Cornell's collecting. Although Cornell was often associated with nostalgia, Adam Gopnick insightfully distinguishes his specific nostalgia as, '[a] kind that finds a bottomless melancholy in the simple desolation of life by time.'[62] He further elaborates this form of nostalgia in relation to '[t]he false kind of nostalgia [that] promotes the superiority of life past', which is exchanged instead for 'the true kind [that] captures the sadness of life passing'.[63] In his melancholy appreciation of 'the sadness of life passing', Cornell developed a fixation with the significance of moments. Moments became romanticised as instances in which, through a convergence of factors (observations, mood, weather, words, music, tastes etc.), a sense of epiphanic significance could be experienced as transcendent. This is articulated in his 'Garden Center' (1944) notes:

> a feeling that a particular moment of the past was transmuting a present moment with an unnamed but significant touch (a lyrical feeling although there was the ever lessening strain of morbid obsession with the past – a thing from childhood never outgrown).[64]

---

[62] Adam Gopnick, 'Sparkings : Joseph Cornell and the art of nostalgia', *The New Yorker* (February 17, 2003) < http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/02/17/030217crat_atlarge#ixzz1iyVlmQvM> [accessed September 2013]

[63] Adam Gopnick, 'Sparkings : Joseph Cornell and the art of nostalgia'.

[64] Joseph Cornell, *Garden Center '44* 'Random notes' (1944), *Theater of the Mind* p.109. *Garden Center* was the name Cornell gave to an extensive file of collected thoughts and observations. It was named after a nursery in

Such moments were recounted in detail and appear scattered throughout his various diaries:

> A brief swirl of snow suddenly came covering everything with a fine coat and then letting up before a short bus ride to Twelth Street. Unexpected illumination and evocation of the past in these circumstances with feeling about Madison Square, etc[65]

The temporal sensation of a moment's significance was accompanied, for Cornell, with the need to somehow record or recreate the experience. It could be the fleeting impression of a memory or the glimpse of a passer-by, or a convergence of both, and Cornell would be enthralled with an impulse to retrieve the experience. He described his efforts to utilize and recreate this sensation as an attempt to 'catch-up' with the experience.[66]

Due to the elliptical pattern of much of Cornell's interests (referred to by Dore Ashton as 'one grand circular field of vision filled with cross references')[67], conversations, and associations it is perhaps unsurprising that he admitted: "Memory is more important to me than my boxes."[68] Ashbery taps into this acutely compulsive relationship in his poem 'Pantoum' (from *Some Trees*). Later reprinted with the subtitle 'Homage to Saint-Simon, Ravel, and Joseph Cornell', it conjures an uneasy and cryptic evocation of memory, the form's sequential shuffling evocatively mimetic of remembering, as a process of fluctuating clarity. 'Pantoum' inhabits a restless and dream-like yearning that is never entirely knowable. Its confusing flux becomes comparable to Cornell's mystic search for associations: a search to resurrect what remains tantalizingly ineffable. Given the evasive essence of this search, it is entirely fitting that Ashbery's poem seems cryptic and intangible, quoted here are the first four stanzas:

> Eyes shining without mystery,
> Footprints eager for the past
> Through the vague snow of many clay pipes,
> And what is in store?
>
> Footprints eager for the past,
> The usual obtuse blanket.
> And what is in store
> For those dearest to the king?

Flushing, owned by a practitioner of Christian Science. According to Mary Ann Caws, the file orientated loosely around themes of an 'Arcadian atmosphere.'

[65] Joseph Cornell, January 4th, 1943, *Theater of the Mind*, p.99.

[66] *Theater of the Mind*, p.23.

[67] Dore Ashton, *A Joseph Cornell Album* (Massachusetts: De Capo Press, 2009), p.19.

[68] Cornell, cited by Ashton, p.19.

The usual obtuse blanket.
Of legless regrets and amplifications
For those dearest to the king.
Yes, sirs, connoisseurs of oblivion,

Of legless regrets and amplifications,
That is why a watchdog is shy.
Yes, sirs, connoisseurs of oblivion,
These days are short, brittle; there is only one night.

(ST 14)

Not too cryptic to disguise the presence of Cornell, invoked most demonstrably through the mention of 'clay pipes' (which appear numerously throughout Cornell's work) and the familiar poignant portrayal of time. The 'snow' suggests a drifting motion; each floating particle (each line, each word) gradually accumulates as the poem's 'vague' landscape.

Each image seems to conjure a lost and wandering sense of puzzlement: the 'Footprints eager for the past' connote a trace of time as something precious but perhaps fading, 'The usual obtuse blanket' corroborates with the concealing anonymity of snow, and the 'Legless regrets and amplifications' in extended metaphor playfully recalls the footprints, alluding to an undulation of meaning with perceptible impression but lacking a recognisable referent (no legs behind the trace of footprints). Rather than an image recognisably 'making sense' at one point and then obscured the next, it feels as if each enigmatic line is always on the verge of revealing its secret. In this sense, every image becomes akin to a half remembered moment, a haunting reoccurrence like the miniature portraits in Cornell's *Medici Princess* (1952-4, see *fig.4*, Appendix), each one repeated but troublingly incomplete.

The inability to satisfyingly recapture feelings, conceding that any expression seems reduced to a displacement, haunts Cornell, as so often demonstrated by his diary entries: 'a familiar experience attempting to capture certain moments of a real kind of happiness but only seeming to come out in the most factual kind of recounting.'[69] A similar disappointment in expression, inevitably straying from the actuality of what is trying to be expressed emerges in 'The Picture of Little J.A.': 'Still, as the loveliest feelings// Must soon find words, and these, yes, / Displace them' (ST 14). In the last two lines of the poem, in an isolated couplet, Cornell's gentle melancholy seems to fuse with Ashbery's sensibility: 'And only in the light of lost words/ Can we imagine our rewards' (ST 14). Addressing a certain presence in absence, Ashbery characterizes the 'light of lost words' as a space occupied and charged by unresolved imaginings. Like the ellipsis favoured by Emily Dickinson (one of Cornell's

[69] Joseph Cornell, diary entry (May 21st 1949), *Theater of the Mind*, p.156.

favourite poets), Ashbery and Cornell both realise the potency of imagined presence that can be communicated in absence, recalling Dickinson's observation 'that the most intangible thing is the most adhesive.'[70]

It is a principle that furnishes boxes like *"Toward the Blue Peninsula"* (1953, see *fig. 5*, Appendix), tellingly dedicated to Dickinson, or *Deserted Perch* (1949, see *fig.6*, Appendix), with such a palpably haunted melancholy. It is also a principle that helped compose some of Ashbery's best poems, as in 'The Skaters':

> Nothing but a bitter impression of absence, which as we
> know involves presence, but still.
> Nevertheless these are fundamental absences, struggling to
> get up and be off themselves.
>
> (RM, 152)

or, in the very first lines of 'The New Spirit' where absence is again announced as a basis for poetics:

> I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one
> way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out
> would be another, and truer, way.
>
> (TP, 247)

Whether literal, in the arranged space of Cornell, or in correlation to Ashbery's use of language and syntax to suspend certain expectations of meaning, absence accommodates for the play and renewal of interpretation. In a fragment simply entitled 'MALLARME' (lack of accent Cornell's), Cornell included an enigmatic 'Note to the Mallarmé poem', drawing from the prose poem 'Le Nénuphar Blanc' ('The White Water Lilly'). The included quote appears to be a summary, tailored perfectly in emphasis to Cornell's romanticism of the fleeting or unseen:

> The rower becomes aware that he is in the grounds of a woman he knows. She may be there, close to him; raising his eyes he might see her. The silence throbs with every possibility. And to the poet comes the idea of not raising his eyes, of keeping the possibilities intact and going away with the memory of that moment.[71]

[70] Emily Dickinson, *Selected Letters,* ed. by Thomas Herbert Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p.240.
[71] Joseph Cornell, 'Note to Mallarmé poem', *Theater of the Mind*, p.149.

In attempting to recreate or induce the significance of a moment, as opposed to addressing its particulars, Cornell, like Ashbery, constructs an indeterminacy that 'throbs with every possibility'.

The Forest

In *Mad Love* (1937), Breton remarked: 'Interpretive delirium begins only when man, ill-prepared, is taken by a sudden fear in the *forest of symbols*' and yet, it was precisely this delirium that attracted Surrealism.[72] It was through fostering a giddy interpretive energy, through escalations of the illusory (as in Dalí's critical paranoiac method), Freudian obsessions (from dreams, the unconscious and the Uncanny, to childhood, sexuality and madness), games of chance and linguistic hallucination that surrealists chased Breton's ambition to perceive *for the first time*. Seen as a complex, the forest depicts a network of symbols into which the poet (or the artist, and subsequently the viewer/reader) wilfully enters and responds; where certainty and singular interpretation are replaced by the equivocal and endless.

In 1967 Ashbery wrote an article for *ArtNews* on Cornell that summarised with the enigmatic line: 'We all live in his enchanted forest.'[73] For the Surrealists the forest became a potent motif with its most relevant origins traced back to Baudelaire's poem 'Correspondances', from *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857):

> Nature is a temple in which living pillars
> Sometimes give voice to confused words;
> Man passes there through forests of symbols
> Which look at him with understanding eyes.
>
> Like prolonged echoes mingling in the distance
> In a deep and tenebrous unity,
> Vast as the dark of night and as the light of day,
> Perfumes, sounds, and colors correspond.
>
> There are perfumes as cool as the flesh of children,
> Sweet as oboes, green as meadows
> And others are corrupt, and rich, triumphant,
>
> With power to expand into infinity,
> Like amber and incense, musk, benzoin,

[72] André Breton, *Mad Love*, trans. by Mary Ann Caws (Nebraska: Bison books, 1988), p.15.
[73] John Ashbery, 'Joseph Cornell', *Reported Sightings*, p.18.

That sing the ecstasy of the soul and senses. [74]

Baudelaire's famous sonnet presents the forest as the perfect symbol through which to evoke the very process of symbolism itself. The forest in Baudelaire's context presented a symbolist model for the evocation ('prolonged echoes') of transcendent ideals ('to expand into infinity'). The influence of Baudelaire was hugely important to both Mallarmé and Rimbaud, who in turn were adopted by the surrealists as natural predecessors, retroactively defined by Breton in terms of their surrealist credentials. Mallarmé and Rimbaud were of course also of great importance to Cornell, whose literary tastes, like Ashbery's, consistently found inspiration in French poetry.[75] In tracing poetry from Baudelaire through to the surrealists, the forest can provide one example through which to understand a transition from symbolist legacies into, what Marjorie Perloff described as, a 'poetics of indeterminacy'.[76]

Therefore, if we are to start with Baudelaire and move through into Surrealism, the forest morphs in its implication from a controlled process of symbols that work toward indicating a transcendent ideal, to a more exploratory immersion within the process of symbolism itself. Charles Tomlinson has argued that '[i]n the reaction of Rimbaud to Baudelaire lies the germ of half the subsequent history of French poetry', a memorable assertion with which Perloff introduces her own thesis. In Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, Perloff highlights a reaction to and subsequent departure from Baudelaire's symbolist pursuit of depth in favour of 'the notion of enigma, of the poem as a language construction in which the free play of possible significations replaces iconic representation'.[77] Ashbery himself has translated a version of *Illuminations* (published in 2011). In the translation a doubling can be sensed in which Rimbaud's bustling and exclamatory prose poetry appropriately coincides in its indeterminacy and indulgent eclecticism with Ashbery's own celebration of those priorities – as the basis of what he considers to be 'absolutely modern' in poetry. [78] Not dissimilar from Tomlinson or Perloff, Ashbery also argues for Rimbaud's recognition as one of the primary roots of 'fertile destabilization' within twentieth century art.[79] Whilst it is traditionally Rimbaud's imagined cities that are remembered, there are, additionally, several very surrealist forests. One particularly striking example arrives in 'Childhood':

---

[74] Charles Baudelaire, 'Correspondances', *Les Fleurs du Mal*, trans. by William Aggeler (Fresno, CA: Academy Library Guild, 1954). < http://fleursdumal.org/poem/103 > [accessed November, 2014].
[75] The extent of Ashbery's engagement with French poetry has been further consolidated with the recent publication (2013) of his translations of French poetry and prose, collected in two weighty volumes by *Carcanet*.
[76] Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*.
[77] Perloff, p.66.
[78] John Ashbery, 'Preface', in Arthur Rimbaud, *Illuminations*, trans. by John Ashbery (New York: Norton, 2011), p. 16.
[79] Ibid.

> At the edge of the forest – dream flowers chime, burst,
> lighten, – the girl with the orange lip, her knees crossed
> in the clear deluge that wells up from the meadows,
> nakedness shaded, crossed and clothed by rainbows,
> flora and sea.[80]

The 'edge of the forest' romanticizes an interaction between the known and unknown, from which point observations and images are suddenly tumbling 'in the clear deluge', where a kind of jubilant chaos takes over. Like Rimbaud's cities, the forest becomes a model for delirious juxtaposition and surprise; a site of instability through which the spirit of Baudelaire's flâneur is reincarnated, renewed with the unpredictable energy of a hallucination.

On the front cover to the final issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* (1929) was a collage by René Magritte, surrounding his painted depiction of a naked woman were the words: 'je ne vois pas la cachée [picture of woman] dans la forêt' (see *fig. 7*, Appendix), this was then surrounded by photographs of the surrealists with their eyes closed. With eyes closed the forest becomes internalised as a mental terrain, thereby aligning the forest with an expression of the unconscious.[81] Integral to the surrealist appeal of the 'forest' metaphor was, like the modes of meaning it came to suggest, its interpretive mobility: the 'forest' could be the unconscious, the imagination, the text or language itself. All of these concepts were teeming, in various stages of transformation, at the foundation of Breton's Surrealism. Correspondence could be both within language and the mind and *between* language and the mind, not in neat transactions of metaphor, but in a more playful plurality of connections. In the work of Max Ernst from the late twenties, the forest was a constant point of fascination, often depicted with a murky ambivalence between mystic enchantment and anxiety. Having aspired to be a Surrealist painter at an early age, Ashbery would have been familiar with its visual permutations in the art of Surrealism.[82] For Ernst the forest was profoundly related to remembering and the unconscious, as he associated it with his own childhood experiences and memory. Yet it also became appropriately tangled in the medium of his expression when he developed the technique of 'frottage': a process whereby a textured surface (for Ernst, the bark and grain of wood) could be rubbed over by a drawing or painting to create and imprint of its patterns. Therefore for Ernst, the forest arguably became both his subject and its

---

[80] *Illuminations*, trans. by John Ashbery, p. 23.

[81] The female body in the forest was meanwhile an all too familiar demonstration of sexist politics in early Surrealism, her allure as an object of desire placed as a remote unknown to be seen and not to see. For a comprehensive and fascinating dissection of Bretonian Surrealism and its attitudes towards the female form see: Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990).

[82] 'Well, I wanted to paint Surrealist pictures but they didn't really come out the way I meant, and I was told I had to be a realist painter first…', from 'John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford', *Seven American Poets in conversation* (Surrey: Between the Lines, 2008), p.22.

medium with a simultaneity that perfectly encapsulates how the forest frequently merged ideas for the surrealists.

As a conflation of subject and medium, Ernst's forest paintings recall Ashbery's praise for Cornell's collages that, although heavily influenced by Ernst, Ashbery thought superior due to a 'plastic' quality that broadens beyond the "poetic". Ashbery suggested that this combination of the poetic and the more tangibly 'plastic' enabled 'a delicately adjusted dialogue between the narrative and the visual qualities of the work in which neither is allowed to dominate.'[83] Just as Cornell's 'dialogue' presented an instance in which the subject and medium could converse and compete, the forest provided an innately reflexive model that offered its symbol-for-symbolism as, in turn, symbolic of the surrealist preoccupation with language. Breton continually emphasised the centrality of language to surrealist investigation. In addition to the early emphasis on 'automatic writing', the manifestoes are full of references to language and its pivotal role for Surrealism. However it fell to those that strayed from, or were beyond, Breton's centripetal influence, to best realise the implications that Surrealism stirred. Without adhering to the trends of its supposedly pure or correct practice and outside of Bretonian jurisdiction, an artist like Cornell could move closer to fulfilling the heart of surrealist rhetoric than the practitioners of such rhetoric ever managed.

This is primarily because Cornell's boxes operated within a system of their own language and in so doing communicate as language can: through absence, ambiguity and inter-dependant allusions. Ashbery not only admired the 'poetic' dimension to Cornell's 'plastic' materiality but also, with comparable emphasis, in his article on Cornell (alongside the Rimbaud quote) included this epigraph from Giorgio De Chirico's *The Engineer's Son* with the same sentiment:

> *... The painter lodged near the station in a modest apartment on the sixth floor; he lived there in two rooms which he had papered from floor to ceiling with very bizarre and disconcerting drawings which made certain highly esteemed critics repeat for the thousandth time the celebrated refrain:* It's literature. *At the end of the discussion whose subject was a recent vernissage, these same critics had in fact laid down the law that that* painting must be painting and not literature*, but he seemed to attach very little importance to all that, either because he understood nothing of it, or because he understood it all too well and therefore pretended not to understand.*[84]

While Cornell was consciously working under the influence of Symbolist poetry, what he was also doing, perhaps at times less consciously, was developing a poetics that, like his other poetic love Emily Dickinson and her elliptical dash, advanced the gaps between symbols –

[83] *Reported Sightings,* p.16.
[84] *Reported Sightings*, p.14

what was not there and what could not be said – as fertile spaces for symbolic interaction. In the first quatrain of 'Some Trees' (the eponymous forest of Ashbery's debut collection) an echo of the inter-dependent symbolism of Cornell's objects emerge:

> These are amazing: each
> Joining a neighbour, as though speech
> Were a still performance.
>
> (ST, 26)

The trees are described 'Joining a neighbour' and, like the objects in Cornell's *Pharmacy* (1943), significance arises through syntagmatic interplay, voiced as interacting symbols between the objects. Each object stowed away like a child's treasure in its jar, receives its enigma through a relationship with those around it. In *Pharmacy* we can see a shell, an illustration on coiled paper, coloured sand, fluids and bright foil, a butterfly and much more, but each jar taken on its own could not exert the same fascination as when arranged together. Ashbery characterises this process of symbolism 'as though speech/Were a still performance.' Imagining semiotic nature as analogous with a kind of crystallised embodiment of speech, recalls Cornell's comment, 'Who knows,' he remarked, considering the arrangements in his boxes, 'what those objects will say to one another.'[85] It is the space between objects or the play of allusions between words that constitutes this 'speech' which, far from being the apparent gap or emptiness is, in 'Some Trees', 'A silence already filled with noises' (ST, 26). This is then a symbolism, for which, like Perloff's observation of certain indeterminate forms: '[t]he axis of contiguity thus replaces the axis of substitution'.[86] Or, as 'Some Trees' celebrates, meaning, or its significance, becomes immersive ('we are surrounded') and without singular or simple correspondence: 'A chorus of smiles, a winter morning./Placed in puzzling light, and moving'.

The forest surfaces elsewhere in *Some Trees*, most interestingly in 'The Mythological Poet' and 'The Young Son'. In 'The Mythological poet', to describe the inauguration of a new poetic style, a forest is referenced as an integral foundation to this new activity: 'dust, candy, perverts; inserted in/ The panting forest' (ST 17). With the subversive challenge of 'pervert', incongruously 'inserted in/The panting forest' as though it were a virtue, it is as if Ashbery is imagining a new, more anarchic, force of renewal with which to revive the 'panting' forest. On one hand this could be read as suggested, that 'panting' connotes the weary and established codes of conventional symbolism, or alternatively that 'the panting forest' is itself

[85] Joseph Cornell, quoted by Caws, *The Theater of the Mind*, p. 29.
[86] Perloff, p.119.

part of the new poetics: panting through a sense of kinetic vitality. Either way, the forest is the chosen symbol for a poetic process and it was evidently through this model ('We all live in his enchanted forest') that Ashbery valued Cornell. In the prose poetry of 'The Young Son', Ashbery conjures the arboreal conception of symbolism with an energetic and a patently surreal tone:

> Surely the trees/ are hinged to no definite purpose or surface. Yet now a wonder/ would shoot up, all one color, and virtues would jostle each/ other to get a view of nothing – the crowded house, two faces/ glued fast to the mirror, corners and the bustling forest ever, ever menacing its own shape
>
> (ST, 20)

This extract hints at the semantic freedom, which Ashbery realised through the symbol of the forest. A conception of meaning in which there is 'no definite purpose or surface', thus outmoding the explication of reference or pursuit of certainties. However, this shift would not be at the expense of meaning: 'now a wonder/would shoot up, all one color, and virtues would jostle'. Without 'definite purpose' meaning and symbolic potential exists through a plurality of allusion.

This surge of undefined meaning reveals 'a view of nothing' which, as we know from Cornell's *Deserted Perch*, can be an indirect representation of almost endless capability. As the poem goes on to suggest, what that 'nothing' consists of is: 'the crowded house, two faces/glued fast to the mirror, corners and the bustling forest'. The 'crowded house' indicates a universal 'One Size Fits All' ambition inherent in Ashbery's inclusive poetry, 'two faces/glued fast to the mirror' resonates with the existential division of Rimbaud's 'Je est un autre' and the 'corners' recalls the opening of 'Two Scenes': 'From every corner comes a distinctive offering', expressing the luminous obscurity of the found object.[87] Therefore, rather than a desolation of meaning, the 'nothing' communicates a more intangible and enigmatic meaning that both Ashbery and Cornell sought to evoke. The poetic range that 'The Young Son' discovers in the 'bustling forest' and its view of 'nothing', surfaces with a clarity worth quoting in his later poem 'The Ecclesiast' (from *Rivers and Mountains*):

> The monkish and the frivolous alike were to be trapped in
> death's capacious claw

[87] Arthur Rimbaud, a letter to Georges Izambard (Charleville, 13 May 1871), in *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters, a Bilingual Edition*, trans. by Wallace Fowlie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp.370-2.

But listen while I tell you about the wallpaper-
There was a key to everything in that oak forest

(RM, 135)

Again we have the diversity of 'monkish and frivolous' brought together (in this case, through mortality) and then characterised through the banality of 'the wallpaper'. An unexpected and seemingly trivial observation is lent illumination, the overlooked found object embraced, magnified and conveyed through the 'forest' model of symbolism: 'a key to everything in that oak forest'. A line which inclusively opens its arms to meaning which has no hierarchy of symbols, no privileged 'Snow-capped mountains and heart shaped/Cathedral windows' (ST 16), but maintains, like 'Two Scenes', that 'Everything has a schedule, if you can find out what it is' (ST 3). Finding the elusive 'key to everything': in the wallpaper, in the marbles, the clay pipes and old newspaper cuttings, in the ephemerae of everyday and the debris of half remembered moments. This was what inspired Cornell to make the 'enchanted forest' of each box, and in *Some Trees*, what Ashbery was beginning to dream his poetry could achieve.

Chapter 2

Dreams of the Subject Dreaming the Subject: *Three Poems* and the Surrealism of Phenomenology

'The space of dreams – deep, shallow, open, bent, a point which has no physical dimensions or a universal breadth – is the space in which we now live.'

— John Ashbery

In 1924, Breton famously introduced Surrealism as existing 'in the omnipotence of dream and in the disinterested play of thought' (FM, 26). Starting from the acknowledged influence of Freud, Breton later steered his surrealist conception of dreaming through the metaphor of 'communicating vessels' (first used in *Le Surréalism et la peinture* in 1928, before his later book on the topic, *Les Vases communicants* in 1932), as a way to visualize the inter-dependence and connection between internal vision and an external world. Founded on the pursuit of 'a future resolution of these two states, dream and reality' (FM, 14), Surrealism characterized its main objectives through this axiom. Yet, for all its efforts to imagine or experience integrations between dream and reality, whether in the findings of 'objective chance' or notions of the 'marvelous', the texts themselves seemed to illustrate a disjunction between the revolutionary vehemence of theory and the often disappointing uncertainty of its practice. For Mary Ann Caws, in her book, *A Metapoetics of the Passage*, it is precisely this tension, between the positive manifesto rhetoric of declaration and a more sombre ambiguity, which ensures the appeal of Surrealism to contemporary poetry.[1] Even in the consideration of the texts themselves, never primarily intended as literary products, the writing instead often becomes an exercise in documenting its own inability to record or enact the surrealist purpose behind its creation.

It is in this uncertainty, no longer encountered as an uneasy counter-current to transformative claims or rhetorical posturing – a means that disrupts the intended ends – but vivified as an expressive mode *as its own ends,* that Ashbery re-inhabits Surrealism. Through a prioritized ambiguity of motion, Ashbery's poetics evolve to express reality experienced as a dream. In his changing and varying incorporations of *dreams* and *dreaming*, Ashbery consequently advances, without being limited to, a surrealist preoccupation with joining dreams with waking reality. In this chapter, I will outline a development in the poetic

[1] Mary Ann Caws, *A Metapoetics of Passage* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 1981), pp. 27-35.

expressions of dreaming that arches from the poetry of *Some Trees* (1956) through to a suggested apogee in *Three Poems* (1972). I will trace the early and formative developments across his first four books in order to inform a comprehensive sense of how Ashbery's approach to the dream has changed. These changes range from: an association between distraction and dreaming; early influences of painting and the crafting of 'surprise' that Auden was so wary of (when awarding *Some Trees* 'The Yale Younger Poets Prize'); to dreaming America and Dadaist film in *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962); imitations of consciousness in 'The Skaters' (*Rivers and Mountains*, 1966); and the oneiric explorations of time in *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970).

Some Trees: Dreams of Distraction, Painting and Strange Position

In its consciously hokey tones of travelogue description 'The Instruction Manual' might seem like an unexpected poem with which to begin the analysis of dreams. Significantly however, it adopts the simplified narrative of what Perloff terms, the 'reality-dream-reality structure'.[2] The poem is an extended daydream about the Mexican city of Guadalajara, narrated with inane enthusiasm in the form of a commentary of prosaic and amiably bland observations, all playfully sparked by the narrator's boredom at 'getting out this manual/on schedule' (ST, 6). Although this structurally blocked approach seems to lack sophistication, the early poem is evidently less concerned with dreams than with adopting a bumbling ventriloquism of a certain type of clunky voiceover – as if rescued from an early instance of public broadcasting, or recalling the contrived documentary exclamations of Dwain Esper's films (*Reefer Madness*, 1936, *Sex Madness*, 1938, etc.) – of which Ashbery has expressed a fondness.[3] Despite that, the poem still indirectly offers some helpfully instructive details in considering Ashbery's treatment of the dream.

Firstly, the entire narrative arises out of a distraction and so aligns the meandering of this particular dream with an interruptive train of thought; interruption, like a more internalised and eccentric companion to Frank O'Hara's sense of the 'occasional' becomes increasingly central to Ashbery's later writing.[4] Dreaming immediately coincides with a

[2] Marjorie Perloff, '"Mysteries of Construction": The Dream Songs of John Ashbery', in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* Marjorie Perloff (Illinois: NorthWestern University Press, 1999) p.264.
[3] Ashbery cited both films in *Details*, March 1988. A collaborative project with Guy Maddin, which culminated in contributing the words to a short film *How to take a Bath* (later appearing in the feature length, *The Forbidden Room*, 2015) also took its title from a 1937 Esper film of the same name.
[4] O'Hara's sense of an 'occasional' poetics would often, even if performatively postured as such, prioritise improvisational spontaneity arising from the everyday, departing from more consciously crafted traditions of form (as typified, at the time, by Robert Lowell). This impulse in his work (the breezy, lunch hour inspiration

defining and recurrent aspect of Ashbery's interruptive poetics, a trait that often becomes characteristically inter-changeable and intimately related to ideas of the dream. Secondly, the long prosaic lines and amassing of details evoke the idiosyncrasies of Raymond Roussel – a writer championed by the surrealists (mainly to his distaste). Although Ashbery's writing is here suffused with a differently mischievous faux-naivety, there is still a resounding similarity in its listing of almost banal and flattened observations:

> There is the rich quarter, with its houses of pink and white,
> and its crumbling, leafy terraces.
> There is the poorer quarter, its homes a deep blue.
> There is the market, where men are selling hats and swatting
> flies
> And there is the public library, painted several shades of pale
> green and beige.
>
> (ST, 8)

Ashbery has cited the influence of Roussel's long poem *La Vue* (1904) as the inspiration on which 'The Instruction Manual' was modelled. Roussel's poem (later published alongside *Le Concert* and *La Source* – long poems which also meticulously describe miniature scenes) focused with obsessive scrutiny over the description of a tiny beach scene – inlaid in the miniature lens of a pen holder. It was Roussel's ornately calculated attention to detail, drained of recognisably human emotions that made his writing so unexpectedly dream-like.[5] The cold

---

that characterised *Lunch Poems*, 1964) aligned itself with the 'action painting' of Jackson Pollock, the dynamics of jazz, and an affinity with European tropes of the flâneur.

[5] In his essay 'Wave of Dreams' (1924) Louis Aragon referred to Raymond Roussel as one of the 'presidents of the Republic of Dreams'. Roussel was celebrated throughout the Parisian surrealists as an honorary surrealist (or as with Comte de Lautréamont, a seminal predecessor) and though Roussel persistently voiced his distance from the movement it was (to his dismay) often his only bastion of contemporary support. Ashbery was introduced to Raymond Roussel by his friend Kennth Koch, Koch returned from France in 1951 newly inspired and with a copy of *La Vue.* During his time in Paris, a time initially given over to the project of researching a (later abandoned) thesis on Roussel, Ashbery began collaboratively producing a magazine with Harry Matthews. The magazine was edited by himself, Kenneth Koch and James Schuyler, it ran for four issues (between 1961 and 1962 – with one double issue) and was named after Roussel's novel, *Locus Solus* (1914). This thesis does not attempt to account for or expand upon the influence of Roussel in relation to Ashbery's poetry for a variety of reasons. To do so, with sufficient critical material to extend upon what has already been said, would require at least an entire chapter. Therefore, in order to more productively cover areas that resonate with my central thesis of the 'experience of Surrealism' in movements of *relation*, I have prioritised those artists and topics that for now speak more directly to my argument. For more on Ashbery's relation to Roussel, see: Jenni Quilter, 'We even imagined the posters': collaborations between John Ashbery, Harry Mathews and Trevor Winkfield', *Word & Image*, 25:2 (2009), pp. 192-209; Charles M. Cooney, 'Intellectualist Poetry in Eccentric Form: John Ashbery, French Critical Debate and an American Raymond Roussel', *Contemporary Literature* 48.1 (2007)pp. 61-92; Mark Ford, *Raymond Roussel and the Republic of Dreams* , with a forward by John Ashbery (London: Faber and Faber, 2000); and Ashbery himself has written further on Roussel in his essay, 'On Raymond Roussel', originally published as 'Re-establishing Raymond Roussel', in *Portfolio and ARTnews*, Annual no. 6 (Autumn 1962), now collected in *Selected Prose*, ed. by Eugene Richie (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

conviction, so removed from any character or pathos, made Roussel's texts seem apart from reality and yet, in its absence, presenting an entirely self-sufficient alternative with its own autonomous logic. Even though 'The Instruction Manual' has an arguably more knowing and whimsical humour than evident in Roussel's *La Vue*, imparting its catalogue of observations with a travel-guide shtick, Roussel's style and detachment are still unmistakably perceptible.

Elsewhere in his first collection, the suggestion of dreams and dreaming moves beyond the comparatively structured conceit of the 'reality-dream-reality structure' in 'The Instruction Manual' and into a more fluent indication of how his representation of dreams and dreaming would develop. In 'Hotel Dauphin' we encounter the self-dissolving observation: 'I lose myself /in others' dreams' (ST 27), a prescient note for the expression of subjectivity that later preoccupies *Three Poems* and an early reverberation of Rimbaud's 'Je est un autre'.[6] Meanwhile in the poems 'Grand Abacus', 'Chaos', 'The Young Son', 'The Painter', 'Errors', 'Meditations of a Parrot', 'The Pied Piper' and 'Le livre est sur la table', Ashbery's cracked imagery suggested the imaginative palette of early surrealist painting. This is perhaps unsurprising as, being Ashbery's first collection (drawing from his 1953 pamphlet, *Turandot and other Poems*, of which there were only 300 copies printed) they were subsequently the poems composed nearest to his earlier and first enthusiasm, as a painter:

> Painting has always been an influence on my poetry, though. The year after I wrote "The Battle," *Life* magazine did an article on Alfred Barr's celebrated show "Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism" at the Museum of Modern Art. I think it was at that moment I realized I wanted to be a Surrealist, or rather that I already was one.[7]

The influence of surrealist painting can be discerned in the paranoid and disturbingly corporeal landscapes of 'Grand Abacus' and 'The Pied Piper', both of which are redolent of Dalí. 'Grand Abacus' describes an unhinged vision where a disembodied head is visited, its form shifts from 'pretending to be a town' into suffering 'A ghastly change' whereby 'The ears fall off' (ST, 15) and 'The skin is perhaps children' (ST, 16). 'The Pied Piper', similarly unsettling in its imagery, begins: 'Under the day's crust a half-eaten child/ And further sores which eyesight shall reveal' (ST, 35). 'The Young Son', Ashbery's first published prose poem (the earlier, and until recently, unpublished 'A Dream' was written ca. 1950), recalls the doubling and optical mischief of Magritte: 'Yet now a wonder would shoot up, all one color, and virtues would jostle each other to get a view of nothing' (ST, 20). This restlessly

[6] Arthur Rimbaud, a letter to Georges Izambard (Charleville, 13 May 1871), in *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters, a Bilingual Edition*, trans. by Wallace Fowlie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp.370-2.

[7] John Ashbery, from the 'Robert Frost Medal' Address (delivered at the National Arts Club, New York, 1995), in *John Ashbery, Selected Prose,* ed. Eugene Richie (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004), p.246.

elongated sentence, which runs on until the end of the poem, hurries past the image of 'two faces glued fast to the mirror' (ST, 20), an image suggestive of Magritte's eerie painting, 'Not to Be Reproduced (Portrait of Edward James)' (1937), later recreated by the Czech surrealist Jan Svankmajer, in his film *The Flat* (1968).[8] It is an isolated image encountered as abruptly as it is then abandoned, left behind in the last line's breathless descent into further abstraction. The 'two faces' are submerged with only a comma to indicate change, disappearing into 'corners and the bustling forest ever preparing, ever menacing its own shape' (ST, 20), a transformation that steers the imagery from Magritte into a territory more akin to Max Ernst's tangled landscapes. It is a landscape that cannot help but be inhabited by the influence of Rimbaud's bewildering of the senses and the sometimes anxious, and sometimes liberating, self-estrangement.

There is even, in the sestina 'The Painter', an early gesture towards Ashbery's interests in Giorgio de Chirico. The poem accumulates a haunted and existentially charged sense of narrative, in which the sestina's repeated end words ('buildings', 'portrait', 'prayer', 'subject', 'brush' and 'canvas') occupy a tense atmosphere, poised, like de Chirico's work, between solid architecture and the suspended shadow of a melancholy or anxious mood. The poem alternates between a painter's crisis, self-consciously baring the methods of his medium, and the presence or image of anonymous 'buildings': two of the most characteristic motifs within de Chirico's early painting. Moving between the material and spatial apprehension of 'buildings' as an external reality, and the intangible 'prayer' and the artist's 'subject' as an internal reality, the poem imagines an act of creative expression in the uncanny blurring of such distinctions.

The final poem of *Some Trees*, 'Le livre est sur la tablé', offers in its first stanza an observation on a nascent poetics, or the acknowledgement of an objective behind the early stages of finding a poetic style:

> All beauty, resonance, integrity,
> Exist by deprivation or logic
> Of strange position.
>
> (ST, 38)

It is a realization that aligns a certain lyricism ('beauty, resonance') with what is a recognizably surrealist perspective ('deprivation or logic/Of strange position'). Breton defined the poetic image as that which '*cannot be born from comparison but from a juxtaposition of*

[8] *The Flat* (1968), dir. by Jan Švankmajer, in *The Complete Short Films* (BFI, 2007) [DVD].

two more or less distant realities', going on to suggest that '*[t]he more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be'* (FM, 20). It is a conception of poetic beauty that, through arresting juxtaposition, confounds the expectations of our everyday perception of waking reality; it is a beauty that therefore, in its confounding or evasion of waking reality, seems to constitute, or gesture towards, a dream. As the second stanza elaborates:

> We can only imagine a world in which a woman
> Walks and wears her hair and knows
> All that she does not know. Yet we know […].
>
> (ST, 38)

Linked to the declaration of the first stanza by the conjunctive 'This being so', the poem implies that if 'beauty' relies on a 'deprivation or logic/Of strange position', it is a turn inward that is required: 'We can only imagine'. The imagery, a woman and her hair, even begins to mimic the presiding hetero-fantasies of much of early surrealist poetry. The fetishized imagining of hair appears throughout much of Breton's early poetry and also, in a more theatrical manner in Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant* (1926).[9]

At this early stage Ashbery was providing a conscious positioning of himself in relation to Surrealism that, as his poetics matured would become increasingly complex and more consciously nuanced. In *Some Trees*, the unexpected contexts of instability alongside an awareness of 'deprivation', expressed in the first stanza, presented an explicit admission of poetic principles in line with Surrealism. Yet, even at this point, there still seemed to be signs of a need to wrong-foot any labelling, or absolutist affinity with Surrealism. This arrives in an implicit critique of Surrealism's crass and overbearingly heterosexual veneration of the male fantasy: 'Yet we know//What her breasts are. And we give fullness/To the dream' (ST, 38). Using the wry line break to pair 'fullness' with 'breasts' before revealing the 'fullness' to be an elaboration of the 'dream', the poem parodies the predictable, and prevailingly male and heterosexual, role of libidinous imagery obsessively central to the early surrealist imagination. However, despite this incisive rebuke simmering beneath the poem, there is still an undeniable enjoyment of the aesthetics outlined in its first stanza.

The ambivalence derives (aside from the sexual politics) from sharing the surrealist desire to address dreaming and playfully celebrate its contradictions while remaining distrustful of the possibility for unmediated contact with dreams:

[9] Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, trans. by Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Exact Change, 1994). On coming across a ladies' hairdresser, Aragon entertains envious fantasies of the male hairdresser: 'uncoiling the rainbow of women's modesty' (p.39). His speculations of wistful eroticism quickly spiral into a frenzied paean to the quality of 'blondness' (pp.39-40).

Are there
Collisions, communications on the shore

Or did all secrets vanish when
The woman left? Is the bird mentioned
In the waves' minutes, or did the land advance?

(ST, 39)

The dream in 'Le livre est sur la table' is balanced by a questioning of its existence, the foggy aftermath of its happening woken into writing. The poem does not seek to mine the unconscious through any belief in automatic writing but instead begins what would later become a more developed exploration of how dreams might appear to us through, and as, representations in language.

The Tennis Court Oath: Dreams of America

The surrealist 'strange position' touted by 'Le livre est sur la tablé' is pursued with radical experimentation in Ashbery's next collection: *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962). After returning from a trip to Mexico with Jane Freilicher and Joe Hazan in 1955, Ashbery arrived to discover he had been granted a Fulbright fellowship allowing him to study in France – in addition to which, *Some Trees* had been awarded the Yale Younger Poets prize.[10] After spending a particularly harsh winter in Montpelier, witnessing some of the coldest temperatures on record there, Ashbery then spent the next ten years living in Paris. The majority of *The Tennis Court Oath* and his following collection, *Rivers and Mountains* (1966) were written while in France. The formative influence of this period is clarified by Daniel Kane, specifically in relation to surrealist film:

[10] Whilst in Mexico Ashbery did not in fact visit the city of Guadalajara, described with such cheery detail in 'The Instruction Manual', mischievously evoked in much the same way as the eponymous Vermont in the *The Vermont Notebook* – a state apparently left out of the bus tour around New England which gave rise to the book. These places, chosen in their absence from Ashbery's experience, recall his observation of Cornell's poetic eloquence when it came to Paris; an ability to 'not re-create the country itself but the impression we have of it before going there' (*Reported Sightings*, p.15).

> his repeated viewings of surrealist films; his work translating and writing about surrealist writers and artists; and most importantly his own mediation in *The Tennis Court Oath* between an assault on linguistic conventions and his surrealist-style application of allusive, dreamy discursiveness as a way into the infinitely mysterious world of what we can gingerly call the unconscious.[11]

As Kane illustrates, Ashbery had been watching surrealist films since the early 50s in New York, where he had attended several screenings at the Museum of Modern Art.[12] The move to Paris was an extensive chance to experience the city from which Surrealism and its explorations in film originated; it was also an opportunity to inhabit the creative duality of an expatriate writer, to take Proustian excursions punctuated by cinema visits, to further dig around into the obscure history of Raymond Roussel (the subject of his, eventually abandoned, doctoral thesis), to pursue translations (for both income and pleasure), start the magazine *Locus Solus* (with Harry Matthews, Kenneth Koch and James Schuyler) and find regular work as an art critic (first for the *Herald Tribune* and later *ArtNews*).

On a more personal level, the experience of living with Pierre Martory (a poet who Ashbery later translated) would have improved Ashbery's French and an understanding of French culture while also, perhaps more significantly for his poetry, renewing a notion of America as mediated through another culture. Acquiring such a perspective could likely help reconfigure his own conception of America: from a lived reality of home and the tacit, day to day experiences of what it might mean to be American, into a reinvigorated and stranger distance. Talking with Mark Ford about Martory, Ashbery described him as 'very American orientated':

> I think he had spent his entire childhood at the movies. He also knew lots of American popular songs – he'd been in the war fighting with the American army in North Africa and had learnt all these songs like 'Chattanooga Choo Choo' and 'Kalamazoo'.[13]

This is an America refracted through popular culture, an understanding that constellates whatever debris of representation (be it newspaper articles, film, music or literature) happens to fall into circulation. In another interview, Ashbery commented: 'I return to Pierre—most of my knowledge of France and things French comes from him. He is a sort of walking

[11] Daniel Kane, 'Reading John Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath* through Man Ray's Eye', *Textual Practice*, (2007) 21:3, pp. 551-575.
[12] In the 'Notes' to Kane's essay, a list of relevant film programmes showing throughout the 1950s and 1960s is reproduced: ' 'Why Experimental Films' (15 January 1952), 'Sixty Years of French Film' (29 May to 2 October1957), 'Robert Frank' (1–3 February 1962), 'The New American Cinema' (3 May 1962), 'The Independent Film: Animation and Abstraction, Surrealism and Poetry, Symbolism and the Unconscious' (11 April, 2 May, 13 June, 1963) and 'The Independent Film: Selections from the Filmmakers' Co-operative'.'
[13] 'John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford' (2003), *Seven American Poets in Conversation* (Surrey: BTL Press, 2008), p.38.

encyclopedia of French culture but at the same time views it all from a perspective that is somewhat American'[14]. Living with Martory, Ashbery would have no doubt enjoyed the allusive play of his changing sense of national identity - as an American rediscovering America through a French perception of America. The mediacy and disparate plurality through which Martory would have known America must have woken in Ashbery a newness in his perception, or, perhaps reconciled him with the very Ashberian realisation that it was only ever in such unexpected and scattered ways that a country and its culture *can* be known. Through its distortion, displacement and representation, this was surely then a 'dream' of America, or to use Louis Aragon's rhetoric (from *Paris Peasant*), a modern mythology:

> New myths spring up beneath each step we take. Legend begins where man has lived, where he lives. All that I intend to think about from now on is these despised transformations. Each day the modern sense of existence becomes subtly altered. A mythology ravels and unravels.[15]

This sense of attempting to assimilate or process culture, encountered as a foreign experience, is what characterises most of the extreme collage in *The Tennis Court Oath*. In the poem 'America', fractured short lines tumble 'Piling upward' (TCO, 46) in a disjunctive scree of competing non-sequiturs, a dream that refuses to be recollected in its entirety:

> Though I had never come here
> This country, its laws of glass
> And night majesty
> Through the football
> Lured far away
> Wave helplessly
> The country
> lined with snow
> only mush was served
> piling up
>
> (TCO, 49)

The 'I had never come here' doubling between Ashbery's new experiences in France and, perhaps more fittingly, channelling an imagined America of the title (via Martory) as a figment that exists 'Through the football', or whatever representation wheels into view. We get an echo, like 'pillars of grass' in 'They Dream Only of America', of the iconic figure of

[14] John Ashbery, interviewed by Peter A. Stitt, in the *Paris Review* (Winter, 1983, No.90) The Art of Poetry, No. 33. < http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3014/the-art-of-poetry-no-33-john-ashbery>[accessed September 2014]
[15] Louis Aragon, 'Preface to a Modern Mythology', in *Paris Peasant*, trans. by Simon Watson Taylor (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1994), p.10.

American poetry, Walt Whitman, appearing in the phonetic shadowing of *Leaves of Grass* with 'laws of glass'. As the poem often notes, all that arrives and that gathers, 'piling up', is in some way a distortion: 'only mush was served'; 'misguided' (TCO, 48); 'His face hidden by the shelf/thought intangible'; 'Only perforation' (TCO, 50); 'The fake/ones' (TCO, 50). References are peppered throughout the poem to 'stars' as though the flag was erratically swinging into view: 'these stars in our flag we don't want/the flag of film/waving over the sky' (TCO, 50). America becomes an insistent, and at times uncontrollable or unwanted presence – like a repeating dream. The 'flag of film' also evokes the influence of cinema, yet another interposing cultural screen or representation that both masks and separates as it constitutes. The end of the poem seems to encapsulate the fraught oscillation between a rejection of representation, 'the undesired stars' (TCO, 49) and the inability to resist this inexorable stream ('Lured far away'):

> falling his embrace he strangles
> in his storage but in
> this meant
> one instance
> A feather not snow blew against the window.
> A signal from the great outside. (TCO, 51)

Unlike *Some Trees,* in which the dream is primarily encountered as a structural conceit for distraction or digression (as in 'The Instruction Manual'), a visual vocabulary influenced by surrealist painting ('Grand Abacus, 'Pied Piper', 'The Young Son') or a way through which to imagine the promise of new poetics ('Le livre est sur la table'), *The Tennis Court Oath* begins to more confrontationally bring the dream into a syntax of disorientation. While 'Le livre est sur la table' imagines the 'logic/of strange position' *The Tennis Court Oath* seems to be written under that principle and enacting its challenging 'beauty, resonance, integrity'. As a result, perhaps one of the defining shifts in the poetry is toward a more radical parataxis. The cinematic cutting that hovers over much of the 'dream logic' of Ashbery's extreme collaging, is a paratactic tool that leaves the reader clutching for a dreamt America, or for that matter, any interpretation amidst the 'heap of detritus' (TCO, 53). There are two main outcomes to this paratactic style that relate to the dream: unexpected and heightened visual juxtaposition, and a sense of speed that begins to gesture towards the spatial and temporal disorientation of 'dream logic'.[16]

[16] A third outcome, of which there is not space to thoroughly articulate here, is the tension between what Kane explains as an 'allegorical language [used] for the purposes of exploring sexual identity' and a more 'self-reflexive disjunction' (Kane, p. 560). I would extend this analysis to take account of the transitory feeling of TCO as a book in which Ashbery seems to use collage as a cathartic but often frustrated attempt to advance his

As an example of vivid juxtaposition, the poem 'Rain' practices that 'deprivation or logic/of strange position' to map a wildly feverish dream:

> The spoon of your head
> crossed by livid stems
>
> The chestnut's large clovers wiped
>
> You see only the white paint its faint frame of red
> You hear the viola's death sound
> A woman sits in black and white tile

(TCO, 59)

Similar to the bizarre imagery that Kane notes in 'How Much Longer Shall I be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher', the wild and visual incongruities of 'Rain' could slot effortlessly into the hallucinatory sequences from Buñuel and Dalí's influential film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929).[17] In 'Our Youth' we again encounter images comparable to the uneasy and macabre absurdity of *Un Chien Andalou*:

> And the wonder of hands, and the wonder of the day
> When the child discovers her first dead hand
>
> […]
>
> He is dead. Green and yellow handkerchiefs cover him.
> Perhaps he will never rot, I see
> That my clothes are dry.

(TCO, 71-2)

Unlike the quick-cutting, manic parataxis of 'Leaving Atocha Station' ('murdering quintent. Air pollution terminal/the clean fart genital enthusiastic toe prick album serious/evening flames/ the lake over your hold', TCO, 65), in 'Rain' and 'How Much Longer…', Ashbery uses a visual palette similar to the painterly surrealism of *Some Trees*. The rest of *The Tennis Court Oath* seethes and crackles around its images in a more radically disjointed and less visually digestible language.

---

poetics. The tangible sense of frustration between text and creativity and sexual identity (and its acceptance) seem to be metaphors that sublimate and expose each other. This dynamic between desire and the text (and the disappointments in both) is one that further fuels the charged dream intensity of some of the poems.

[17] *Un Chien Andalou,* dir. by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, in *Un Chien Andalou/ L'Age D'Or* (BFI, 2004) [DVD].

The diversely varied line lengths in *The Tennis Court Oath* are often short and jagged (as in 'America', 'Rain', 'A Life Drama', 'Europe', 'The Passive Preacher', 'Idaho') or scattered with halting breaks and unexpected spaces (as in 'Night','Rain', 'Leaving Atocha Station', 'Our Youth', 'The New Realism', 'Europe', 'Idaho'). The shorter lines, that spider unevenly in 'Rain' or form narrow columns, as in 'America', are uncharacteristic of Ashbery and stand out as definite exceptions when looking more broadly at his work. While the physical cut and paste nature of collage that dominated a lot of its composition would have been instrumental in creating this style, there is also a further cinematic resonance in its breathless imitation of filmic editing. As Ashbery himself suggests, this was clearly a large and important influence at that point in his life:

> You know, cross-cutting, jump-cutting, are certainly things I can recognize in my poetry that come from cinema. And also, when I went to Paris I used to go to the Cinematheque all of the time and there I could assuage my taste for all the movies I missed, sometimes three times a day.[18]

Kane cites Man Ray's *L'Étoile de Mer* (1928) as the central comparison for *The Tennis Court Oath*, yet in the conspicuous cutting and spiralling into shorter lines there is also a case for detecting a more Dadaist sense of cinema.[19] In specifically identifying shorter lines as contributing to an oneiric atmosphere, the unintentionally or hypocritically evocative aesthetics of Dadaism provide an insightful parallel. Ashbery has pointed out the inescapable irony of Dada's supposedly anti-art impulse: 'as Dada has proved – once you've destroyed art you've actually created it. It just has to be changed and chopped up a bit to take on a new beauty'.[20] It therefore seems natural that he would be sensitive to the aesthetic possibilities of Dadaist film, possibilities that, contrary to the absolutism of labelling, certainly edge into surrealist territory.

Initially premiered as an introduction and intermission for the ballet production of *Relâche*, and with cameos from Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia and Eric Satie (who composed the music for both the film and the ballet), Rene Clair's *Entr'acte* (1924) delights in technical play.[21] The film utilizes quick cuts, slow motion, cross fades, the reversal of movements, stop motion animation, unexpected angles, inversions, superimposition, abstract use of focus, double exposure for ghosting effects, and the edited illusion of 'disappearing' people. What is most striking, amidst the array of new cinematographic tricks,

---

[18] Quoted by Kane, cited as from a personal interview with Ashbery.
[19] *L'Étoile de Mer* (1928), dir. by Robert Desnos, in *Avant-Garde: Experimental Cinema of the 1920s and 1930s* (Kino International, 2005) [DVD].
[20] 'John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford', p.42.
[21] *Entr'acte* (1924), a DVD extra on *À Nous La Liberté*, dir. by Rene Clair (Criterion, 2002) [DVD].

is the cumulative and giddy speed, reaching a comedic narrative climax in parallel sequences that move between an out of control hearse pursued by its mourners and a fairground rollercoaster. Both sequences use versions of the 'phantom ride' effect to emphasise the thrill and disorientation of motion: trees, telegraph poles and hedgerows blur past the camera, streaked against the sky.[22] Similar shots are also used in Man Ray's optically ambitious *Emak Bakia* (1926) in the motorcar sequence.[23] They are visceral sequences that seem to celebrate the moving image at its most literal. Through propulsion the viewer is emphatically moved onward and onward into the screen; here the cinema is easily understood in its surrealist status as a transformative enactment of dreaming, drawing the audience into a dynamic *other* place.

It is this inexorable dynamism, akin to a cinematic passage of dream that characterises many of the shorter lined poems in *The Tennis Court Oath*. For instance the skittish changing of perspective in 'Rain':

Train
hand holding watch
silver vase
against the plaid

Comfort me
The hedge coming up to meet me that way in
the dried red sun
The meadows down I mean
At night
Curious – I'd seen this tall girl

(TCO, 61)

Or in the abstracted train journey behind the stuttered panorama of 'Leaving Atocha Station':

Leaving the Atocha Station steel
infected bumps the screws
everywhere wells
abolished top ill-lit

[22] The 'phantom ride' technique in cinema is generally believed to have been pioneered by the 1897 film, *The Harverstraw Tunnel,* released by 'The American Mutoscope Company'. Films that utilized this 'phantom ride' technique were some of the first to ever be publically screened. It involved mounting a camera to the front of a vehicle from which the subsequent recorded footage gave a filmed impression of immediate motion. When watched back it created a first person impression of movement, as if sight were gliding through space as a 'phantom ride'.
[23] *Emak Bakia* (1926), dir. by Man Ray, in *Avant-Garde: Experimental Cinema of the 1920s and 1930s* (Kino International, 2005) [DVD].

scarecrow falls Time, progress and good sense

(TCO, 64)

In Ferdinand Léger's far more confrontationally Dadaist film, *Ballet Mecanique* (1924), the kaleidoscopic intensity, geometric abstraction and use of repetition diverge from Man Ray (although his influence is present, as he did contribute to the film) and Clair's use of the 'phantom ride' into more trance-like rhythms of image.[24] It seems that this more radical splicing and contortion finds its syntactic and linguistic equivalent in 'A Life Drama':

Yellow curtains
Are in fashion,
Murk plectrum,
Fatigue and smoke of nights
And recording of piano in factory.
Of the hedge
The woods
Stained by water running over
Factory is near
Workers near the warmth of their nights
And plectrum. Factory
Of cigar. The helium burned
All but the man. And the
Chile. The heart. Moron.
Headed slum
Woods coming back

(TCO, 69)

There is the strange repetition of 'plectrum' which seems contextually anomalous in its meaning and so provides a sort of referential block like the returning shapes of Léger's film, or, again in Léger's film, a jarring scene in which a woman is perpetually re-ascending the same stairs through a repeated jump-cut. The 'hedge', 'woods' and 'Woods coming back' give the impression of Man Ray and Clair's 'phantom ride', but as confusingly interrupted and fractured. In these jarring poems *The Tennis Court Oath* seems to be less about entering a surrealist synthesis of dream and reality or disjunction and allegory (as posed by Kane), and more compelled by its agitated struggle to innovate representation, in which, like Dadaism,

[24] *Ballet Mecanique* (1924), dir. by Ferdinand Léger in *Avant-Garde: Experimental Cinema of the 1920s and 1930s* (Kino International, 2005) [DVD].

surrealist evocations are only the by-product or condition of something else, as opposed to an ends in themselves.

Ashbery has remarked that after writing 'They Dream Only of America', 'How Much Longer…', 'Last World' and 'Rain', all written between 1957 and 1958, 'a very difficult period set in, when I began doing extreme collage, a lot of which I didn't publish, and a lot of which I felt I shouldn't have put into *The Tennis Court Oath*'.[25] Similarly, in another interview, he recalls: ' I did write them [*the later poems in TCO*] during a period when I didn't know what I wanted to do, when I began living in France and I was unused to the foreign environment and language and everything. They were really experiments which I didn't think would ever be published - '.[26] Not unlike the Dadaist films, some of the poems in *The Tennis Court Oath* seem to be itching at the possibilities of formal innovation, as if straining to expand Ashbery's conception of poetics and yet, at times almost desperately, unsure of how to proceed. In amidst the collaging there often seem to be admissions of disappointment. In 'The New Realism', rather than following the title's declarative spirit, the poem seems to document a frustrated pursuit:

> I have lost the beautiful dreams
> That enlist on waking,
> Cold and waiting.
>
> (TCO, 86)

The fact that the titular 'New Realism' (reminiscent of Barbara Guest's own slant on Surrealism, entitled 'Fair Realism' for her 1989 collection) is immediately aligned with elusive dreams, re-establishes a creative dialogue with Surrealism as a re-visited source for poetics. However, what follows does not establish itself as comfortably exploratory or demonstrative of a new poetics, but instead feels nervously exhaustive.

The stream of (often derivatively surrealist) images comes punctuated by asides like 'you do not trust me anymore' (TCO, 88) and 'If we must go on' (TCO, 90). There is even the sense that Ashbery is losing patience with the method of collage when we encounter the concession that, 'The arboretum is bursting with jasmine and lilac/And all I can smell here is newsprint' (TCO, 88). The divorce between the arboretum (a collection of trees) as an olfactory stimulus, 'bursting with jasmine and lilac', and the disappointing smell of newsprint, suggests an irreconcilable tension between the textual (that smells only of itself) and a desire to appeal to a more sensory experience. In a struggle between the pursuit of

[25] 'John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford', p. 42
[26] John Ashbery interviewed by John Tranter, *Jacket*, No. 2 (1985).

experimentation and evaluations of that experimentation as disappointing or limiting, *The Tennis Court Oath* seemed locked into a frustrated dream of what poetry *could* be. In later collections there would certainly be moments in which this frustration of pursuit would be re-imagined as a productive wandering, a lack of arrival or stasis that sparked with surrealist connotations. However, at this early stage of poetic development, 'The New Realism' so ardently desired in *The Tennis Court Oath* remained an exhausting promise. The next book, *Rivers and Mountains* (1966), was to carry Ashbery's poetry into that new phase, delivering the development toward which *The Tennis Court Oath* seemed so feverishly driven. Central to this change was the long poem 'The Skaters', and what has been referred to in Ashbery's poetry as 'imitations of consciousness'. [27]

'The Skaters': Dreaming a Surrealist Passage

To clarify the way in which Ashbery's poetry works as an 'imitation of consciousness' requires an emphasis upon the actively experiential nature of a poem like 'The Skaters'. The playful fluctuation of topics and its own reflexive contemplation occasionally makes for a disorientating process, but, importantly, it encourages an awareness of that process, defined as 'the rhythm of repeated jumps' (RM, 153). The poem prioritizes interpretive flux, in which 'The passage sustains' (RM, 148) but does not appease what Ashbery dismisses as 'this madness to explain…' (RM, 153). In his brilliant review of the *Collected Poems 1956-1987*, entitled 'The Future Continuance: Ashbery's Lyric Mediacy', Ben Lerner deftly articulates the distinction between a readerly meaning that, once consumed and tied to reference is consigned to a static past, and conversely, meaning which remains referentially suspended to draw attention to its own process: 'dissolved into the flow of language, enabling a kind of presence'.[28] It is the latter type of meaning which Lerner attributes to Ashbery's 'lyric mediacy' and which moves his poetry towards an imitation of consciousness. This aspect to Ashbery's poetry instigates a mode of reading that attends to the experience of thinking and not the rooted specificity of what is thought or the finished thought itself; the poem therefore becomes an opportunity to experience our own experience of reading and more actively

[27] In '"Mysteries of Construction": The Dream Songs of John Ashbery', (from *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, p.261), Perloff attributes this phrase most notably to Alfred Corn in his description of the much later poem 'The Other Tradition', from *Houseboat Days* (1977).
[28] Ben Lerner, 'The Future Continuous: Ashbery's Lyric Mediacy', *boundary 2*, Volume 37 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

inhabit the ways in which we interpret and perceive. Or as Ashbery famously put it in an interview: 'Most of my poems are about the experience of experience. As I said before, the particular occasion is of lesser interest to me than the way a happening or experience filters through to me.'[29]

Therefore, in 'The Skaters' a substantial amount of the poem's content becomes the continual sensation of our own assimilation of content, encouraging a renewed sensitivity to our own cognitive passage of understanding: a process of mediacy experienced immediately. Perloff asserts this emerging phenomenological model as poetry in which '[n]ot *what* one dreams but *how*' takes precedence.[30] To privilege a mimesis of the movement and happening of thought, with *thinking* as an active continuous and present process and not the crystallised stasis of what *has been thought*, could be traced to numerous sources of inspiration and influence. There are visual correlatives in the painting of Abstract Expressionism, sonic equivalents with the experimentation of John Cage and modernist antecedents in the pursuit of a 'stream of consciousness' and, more specifically for Ashbery, the tension between tedium and rhythms of understanding in Gertrude Stein. However, it is the surrealist implications of facilitating a restless sense of movement, experienced as a *passage* of interiority, which allows Ashbery's 'imitation of consciousness' to become so dream-like.

The 'passage' is a concept and motif that becomes central to Surrealism, forming the basis of Mary Ann Caws' study, *A Metapoetics of The Passage,* in which she provides the following definition:

> The term "passage" may be taken as the corridor between moments, situations, states, at once spatial, temporal, psychological, sociological, and anthropological, its rites openly acknowledged. It is the place of ritual and psychological transformation, the moment of shift and displacement of sentiment, the consciousness of a textual turn.[31]

Signifying a state or experience of traversal, the most obvious representation of the passage in Surrealism, as Caws notes, is the wandering of Louis Aragon in his surrealist novel, *Paris Peasant* (1926). The novel follows Aragon as he savours the chance observations and anecdotes that embellish his digressive appreciation of the arcades in Paris, specifically the Passage de l'Opéra (which was soon to be demolished and thus had a further ephemeral poignancy), which he renames: Passage de l'Opéra Onirique. Aragon's depiction of 'the equivocal atmosphere of passages' celebrates the arcade as a labyrinthine stimulus for

[29] A. Poulin Jr., "The Experience of Experience: A Conversation with John Ashbery," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 20, no. 3 (Summer 1981): pp. 242–55.
[30] Marjorie Perloff, '"Mysteries of Construction": The Dream Songs of John Ashbery', p.252.
[31] Mary Ann Caws, *The Metapoetics of The Passage, Architextures in Surrealism and after*, p.11.

surrealist reverie.[32] Its text includes collaged signs, newspaper extracts, adverts and menus, while also drifting into song and script, subsequently enacting the metaphor of arcade as text/text as arcade: both able to facilitate a playful wandering of attention. In his *Preface to a Modern Mythology*, Aragon states that: '[i]t is the mingled opposites that people our life, which make it pungent, intoxicating. We only exist in terms of this conflict, in the zone where black and white clash.'[33] Continuing in this vein, the passage is conceived as emphatically in-between and without certainty; the arcade is neither public nor private, with its glass panels – seemingly both inside and outside. It becomes a space of suspended contradiction that defies 'a one or the other' polarity, in favour of a surrealist 'one *in* the other' ambiguity.[34]

It is from the ambiguity of the passage, for which dialectics are reversible and logic is subservient to paradox, that the arcades were able to become an inherently surrealist dream space. Although wary to avoid surrealist connotations, Walter Benjamin's epic and unfinished *Passagenewerk*, or *Arcades Project* (written between 1927 and 1940), still attests to the arcades as a dream space:

> Ambiguity is the manifest imaging of dialectic, the law of dialectics at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image, therefore, dream image. Such […] an image is presented by the arcades, which are house no less than street.[35]

The 'dream image' of the passage (as proffered by the arcade) becomes the presiding spirit of Ashbery's poetry in its 'imitation of consciousness'. It is the archi*text*ure of a certain reading experience that induces in 'The Skaters' (and, to a lesser extent, in 'Clepsydra') a comparable in-between space.

At this point, it would be misleading to quote a conveniently apposite line or passage from 'The Skaters' as the emphasis is on a cumulative experience, generating a type of meaning actively at play in the duration of reading as itself a passage. This emphasis to avoid erroneously misrepresenting Ashbery's poetry, in either isolating constituent 'parts' or generalizing a non-existent 'whole', is often reflexively incorporated into the poem. For instance, in 'The Skaters' we are told, 'neither the importance of the individual flake, /Nor the importance of the whole impression of the storm, if/it has any, is what it is' (RM, 153). One particularly striking and later expression of this can be found in Ashbery's Pulitzer Prize winning (awarded in addition to the National Book award and National Books Critics Circle

[32] Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant* (1926), trans. by Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Exact Change, 1994), p.74.
[33] Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, p.10.
[34] Mary Ann Caws, *A Metapoetics of Passage,* pp.36-47.
[35] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Harvard: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p.10.

Award) collection, *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), voiced in the poem 'Grand Galop':

> It's a bit mad. Too bad, I mean, that getting to know each
> just for a fleeting second
> Must be replaced by imperfect knowledge of the featureless
> whole,
> Like some pocket history of the world, so general
> As to constitute a sob or wail unrelated
> To any attempt at definition. And the minor eras
> Take on an importance out of all proportion to the story
> For it can no longer unwind, but must be kept on hand
> Indefinitely, like a first aid kit no one ever uses
> Or a word in the dictionary no one will ever look up.
>
> (SP, 438)

The notion that 'The Skaters' begins to explore an emerging in-between space, one that evokes a sense of dreaming in the passage of its being read, can be further developed in reference to Charles Bernstein's characteristically inventive essay, 'The Meandering Yangtze'. Taking its title from a line in the exhaustive river-listing of 'Into the Dusk-Charged Air', Bernstein characterises 'The Skaters' as an influential transition in Ashbery's poetics, as he 'introduces a nonlinear associative logic that averts both exposition and disjunction.'[36] Neither parataxis nor hypotaxis, what 'The Skaters' provides is an in-between, which Bernstein terms 'associative parataxis' or 'The continuous flow of discontinuous perceptions'.[37] With an abundance of transitional, linking phrases (which Bernstein lists: *but, ever, since, meanwhile, and so* etc.), images and thoughts are bound persuasively into a linguistic flow that carries the reader along with a sense of logic that can simultaneously confound comprehension. In this conjunctive smoothing between elements that might otherwise seem discontinuous, the incongruous can be incorporated as syntactically natural. Consequently, without grasping what is specifically meant, the reader is drawn into a relationship with meaning that can feel both mysterious (in its disparate imagery and tone) and inevitable (through its momentum of hinge phrases). This begins to contribute to a kind of 'dream logic' in which reading the poem intimates *a happening* while evading any transferrable articulation of *what happened*. It is a reading sensation that Ashbery recognizes in Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation*: 'the feeling of time passing, of things happening, of a "plot,"

[36] Charles Bernstein, 'The Meandering Yangtze', *Conjunctions*: 49 (Fall 2007). Available online: http://www.conjunctions.com/archives/c49-cb.htm [accessed September 2012]
[37] Bernstein, 'The Meandering Yangtze'.

though it would be difficult to say precisely what is going on. Sometimes the story has the logic of a dream.'[38]

In the process of reading 'The Skaters', the cultivated in-between space of interpretation – as a passage experienced under the meandering logic of a dream – asserts itself again and again as primarily (un)situated in continual motion: 'The passage sustains, does not give. And you have come far indeed' (RM, 148). The cinematic 'phantom ride' imitated in the agitated disjunction of *The Tennis Court Oath* is developed into a more continual sense of journeying. No longer violently paratactic, hurrying snatches of observation into a flitting and jagged rendering of perception, 'The Skaters' replaces nervous energy with a more drifting and cumulatively dream-like acceptance, and even celebration, of movement. In part II Ashbery repeatedly turns to a motif of 'the voyage' and the imagery of trains and the train station that then (with dream logic) morphs into ships and docks:

> I am prepared for this voyage, and for anything else you
> may care to mention
> Not that I am not afraid, but there is very little time left.
> You have probably made travel arrangements, and know the
> feeling.
> Suddenly, one morning, the little train arrives at the station,
> but oh, so big […]
>
> (RM, 157)

> No more dullness, only movies and love and laughter, sex and
> fun.
> The ticket seller is blowing his little horn – hurry before the
> window slams down.
> The train we are getting onto is a boat train, and the boats
> are really boats this time.
>
> (RM, 158)

> No, it's happened! The storm is over. Again the weather is
> fine and clear
> And the voyage? It's on! Listen everybody, the ship is
> starting,
> I can hear the whistle's roar! We have time enough to make
> it to the dock!
>
> (RM, 160)

Recalling the arcades, where for Aragon and Benjamin wandering becomes a passage of continual flux between public and private, interior and exterior, and waking and dreaming, in

[38] John Ashbery, 'The Impossible' (first published in *Poetry* magazine July 1957, pp. 250-54), *Selected Prose*, p.12.

'The Skaters' movement is also necessarily continual: 'And, as into a tunnel the voyage starts/ Only as I said, to be continued' (RM, 160). It is a traversal that, like one of Aragon's observations in the arcade, suggests 'the whole magic paraphernalia of voyages', and yet can exist without any literal, external journey, as it pertains to our own interiority.[39] Conceived as an imitation of consciousness, 'The Skaters' consequently provides a writerly mode of reading that demonstrates a phenomenological model for understanding our own movements of understanding in a way that extends beyond the text, revealing the surrealist 'one in the other' dream of everyday waking thought.

Our own systems of conscious thought, as exposed by Ashbery, are revealed to be far closer to the surrealist state of a waking dream than any of the original surrealist efforts to convey or materialise this sensation in automatic writing. In interviews and elsewhere, Ashbery has frequently voiced his opinions on the presumptions and methodology of automatic writing:

> I don't believe in automatic writing as the Surrealists were supposed to have practiced it, simply because it is not a reflection of the whole mind, which is partly logical and reasonable, and that part should have its say too.[40]

From the acceptance that our modes of thinking are never wholly singular, in 'The Skaters' he crafts a way to accommodate and imitate an in-between traversal between conscious and unconscious that more representatively captures a pattern of thinking. Under Breton's declamatory leadership, the surrealists recognized certain divisions to be socially invented: 'the splitting of human life into *action* and *dream*, which people try equally to make us consider as antagonistic, is similarly a purely formal division, a fiction' and yet they still recreated a fiction of distinction in automatic writing.[41] Romanticising a hypnogogic state of transcription to mine the unconscious, as if transformed into conduits for dream séance, the poetry of automatic writing reinforced the conventions Surrealism purported (so loudly) to decry: that the unconscious *is separate* and that dream is reached through a *division*, staged in automatic writing as a vaguely mystical surrender. What Ashbery points toward is the more truly and inherently surreal understanding that dreaming and fluctuations of the unconscious are inseparably part of, and merged with, otherwise conscious thought.

---

[39] Aragon, p.91.
[40] John Ashbery, interviewed by Peter A. Stitt, 'The Art of Poetry No. 33', *The Paris Review* (Winter 1983) <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3014/the-art-of-poetry-no-33-john-ashbery > [accessed August 2014]
[41] André Breton, *Communicating Vessels*, trans. by Mary Ann Caws and Geoffrey T. Harris (Nebraska: Bison Books, 1997), p. 115.

The Double Dream of Spring: Dream Time

With *The Tennis Court Oath, Rivers and Mountains* and *Three Poems*, Ashbery's poetry kept leaping in stylistic and formal departures, changing from collection to collection; *The Tennis Court Oath* processed an influx of European influences through a radically disjunctive and cinematic experimentation, *Rivers and Mountains* contained the milestone poem 'The Skaters', and *Three Poems* would later reimagine the possibilities and nature of prose poetry. Meanwhile, *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970), Ashbery's fourth collection, was comparatively less of a departure, or exploration, in poetic change and more of a controlled and artful consolidation.[42] Written during the mid to late sixties, Ashbery had returned to America in what was to become a difficult period: personally, with the loss of his father, the death of Frank O'Hara, and a decline in the health of Ashbery's mother. More publically, there were pressures to address the realities of Vietnam.[43] Herd contextualizes *The Double Dream of Spring* as a conscious negotiation between where Ashbery's experimentation had led him thus far, and the need to consider the appropriateness of that aesthetic in light of the time he was writing in.[44] Protest poetry and the increasingly public, declarative influence of the Beats had stirred expectations for a more immediate, directly politicised and explicit register in American poetry – a mode conspicuously at odds with Ashbery's poetry. At their best, the poems in *The Double Dream of Spring* manage to respond to these pressures without ever capitulating in terms of poetics, as Herd observes, 'Soonest Mended' was: 'An experimental poem with a public dimension, indicating its protest without having to declare, communicating intimacy while managing distance'.[45] For a collection in which the period of writing was such a publically historicized and heavily mediated concern, the correlating expectations for a timely response were unavoidable. However, in *The Double Dream of*

[42] Ron Silliman has made a similar observation (posted on Friday, August 10, 2007) on his blog: '*The Double Dream of Spring* had been a confusing work, extending what Ashbery had been doing in the juvenilia of *Turandot* and *Some Trees,* but really more consolidating [his] style of the pop-art surreal lyric that resists going anywhere.' Silliman goes on to suggest that Ashbery's output could be broadly divided between the 'One-Offs, unrepeated, potentially even unrepeatable projects' and volumes that blend into one another in a flow of poetry that draws its composition from the '*Double Dream* schema'. Available: ronsilliman.blogspot.co.uk.

[43] It was in 1963 that Ashbery returned to America for the first time in five years; at a party held in honour of his homecoming by Frank O'Hara he was reintroduced to the New York milieu, meeting a new collection of young, contemporary poets and painters (David Shapiro, Tony Towle and Joe Brainard). It was in this year he started work on the 'The Skaters', unfortunately the following year brought him back to America under less positive circumstances. In the December of 1964 his return was due to his father's funeral (a loss that came, in part, to inform 'Fragment', the long poem in dizains that ends *Double Dream*) and in 1965 Ashbery was prompted to base himself once more in New York, out of concern for the deterioration of his mother's health. In 1966, the same year that saw the publication of *Rivers and Mountains*, Frank O'Hara tragically died after being involved in a vehicular accident on Fire Island beach.

[44] David Herd, 'Forms of action: experiment and declaration in *Rivers and Mountains* and *The Double Dream of Spring*', *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, pp.93-124.

[45] David Herd, p.121.

Spring rather than overtly engage in any didactic posturing or explicit and temporal references, the poems instead become overwhelmingly preoccupied with the notion of time itself.

In Breton's *Communicating Vessels* (1932) he asked, '*what happens to time, space, and the causality principle in the dream*', a question which also fascinated the Italian artist and writer, Giorgio de Chirico, a figure of significant influence for both Surrealism and Ashbery. *The Double Dream of Spring* takes its name from one of de Chirico's paintings and later, with the publication of *Three Poems*, Ashbery referred to de Chirico's novel, *Hebdomeros* (1929), citing it alongside Auden's 'The Sea and the Mirror' (1944), as a key influence on the style of his prose-poetry. Ashbery also translated a long section of *Hebdomeros* in 1965, in addition to further fragments, short stories and poems (the translations dating from 1967 to 1975). In the paintings of his early metaphysical period (1909-1919) and in the uniquely drifting disorientation of his novel *Hebdomeros*, de Chirico had also crafted an in-between, often uncanny space that unsettled the expectations of perspective. Many of his most famous paintings seemed to be poised between nostalgia for the past and an eerie anticipation of what is yet to happen, as if each scene were suspended in the temporal equivalent of a held breath. Open squares, distant locomotives and looming architecture – at once classical, modern and irrational; de Chirico's depictions exist within the same paradoxical dream logic of the arcades.[46] The oneiric flux of perspective induces, as Herd acknowledged, 'a language of space in which movement, not belonging, is the principle of articulation.'[47]

What *The Double Dream of Spring* explores, in relation to de Chirico's rendering of spatial displacement, is a simultaneous application of that dream logic of movement to an understanding of time. Ernesto Suárez-Toste begins to note this connection in his essay, '"The Tension Is in the Concept": John Ashbery's Surrealism':

> Traveling and the passing of time have become major preoccupations for both [Ashbery and de Chirico], and they have associated these in a very similar way. Spatial and temporal movement are thus intrinsically connected, the traveling impulse having a cathartic function against the burden of passing time.[48]

[46] Giorgio de Chirico, 'Eluard Manuscript', trans. By Louis Bourgeois and Robert Goldwater, in *Hebdomeros* (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1992). De Chirico articulates his preference for Roman arcades over the Parisian Arcades: 'There is nothing like the enigma of the *Arcade* – invented by the Romans, with all that could be Roman. A street, an arch: the sun looks different when it bathes a Roman wall in light. In all this there is something more mysteriously plaintive than in French architecture', p.189.
[47] David Herd, 'John Ashbery's Humane Abstractions' (awaiting publication), read via personal correspondence.
[48] Ernesto Suarez-Toste, '"The Tension Is in the Concept": John Ashbery's Surrealism', *Style*, 38 (2004).

The first poem in *The Double Dream of Spring*, 'The Task', begins to articulate an intimacy between spatial and temporal displacement and, as its title suggests, presents this as a new poetic challenge – the book's 'task'. Its first line, 'They are preparing to begin again' (DDS, 181) has, in its positioning of the pronoun to refer to an unspecified plurality and the cryptic blankness of its statement, an echo of the first line of Ashbery's first book: 'We see us as we truly behave' (ST, 3). Both lines, consciously and productively prey to their own ambiguity, set up important themes for the poetry to follow. Here, in 'The Task', the use of 'they' potentially gestures towards an uneasy acknowledgement of reception: an audience, a public, and the external forces that seem, at first, incompatible with Ashbery's experimental modes of representation. Yet, 'preparing to begin again' introduces, in its odd anticipation (looking forward) of a return (looking backward) a preoccupation with time at play. Its play of tenses is evoked with slight and casual, verbal economy: 'preparing' is to anticipate a future within the present, to 'begin again' is to project from the present a future objective to return to a past source. In one line, the complexity of any articulation in and of the present, scored through as it is with a mingling of past and future, is registered while also masterfully condensing one of the book's prevalent themes.

Early in de Chirico's *Hebdomeros*, the delineations of time, like the spatial rules of perspective are reimagined. The eponymous hero recalls a distinctly classical town ('Parthenonized, pedagogized and ephebogogized') where he observed youths and children practising athletics.[49] He comments that, for them, 'the sense of north, south, east and west – all sense of direction, in fact – was lost' and then, significantly, also notes, they were 'living in a *never-ending present*.' [50] It is this correspondence between spatial displacement and temporal confusion that is found in Ashbery's 'The Task':

> For these are moments only, moments of insight,
> And there are reaches to be attained,
> A last level of anxiety that melts
> In becoming, like miles under the pilgrim's feet.
>
> (DDS, 181)

Although de Chirico's insight is framed differently, through a Hellenic nostalgia tinged with its homoerotics of youth, the fascination is the same: a sensation that suspends definition in favour of a constant movement. In another instance, taken from the formally eclectic 'Variations, Calypso and Fugue On a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox', we encounter de

[49] De Chirico,*Hebdomeros,* p.12.
[50] De Chirico, *Hebdomeros*, p.12; pp.13-14.

Chirico's '*never-ending present*' followed by an extension into an appropriately de Chirico-esque space: 'the present is clearly here to/ stay: the big brass band of its particular moment's conscious-/ness invades the plazas and the narrow alleys' (DDS, 192). A '*never-ending present*' is all anyone *can* experience, whereas it is in representation that Ashbery and de Chirico, both reflexively astute, find the misrepresentative possibility to order tense. In a resistance to simplifying absolutisms of tense (de Chirico's work seeming both antiquated, present and oddly futuristic) both configure the everyday experience of present-ness in a way that conveys the mundane as oneiric.

In an article on de Chirico (1982), Ashbery argues that, like Kafka's fiction, de Chrico's 'dreamlike spaces have been paradigms […] of twentieth century anxiety.'[51] This claim is then followed by a description of de Chirico as 'a displaced person', after which Ashbery summarises his background: 'born in 1888 to Italian parents in Greece, where his father worked as a civil engineer designing railroads in the province of Thessaly', in the aftermath of his father's death in 1905 his family moved to Munich.[52] De Chirico himself would later live in Milan, Florence and Paris, finally settling to live out the rest of his life in Rome.[53] Significantly Ashbery's brief description of geographical displacement is followed by a note that suggests a parallel temporal experience: '[c]hildhood memories of the Greek landscape and of the tools of his father's profession were to haunt the painter's canvases throughout his life.'[54] If it is an experience of displacement that characterises 'twentieth century anxiety', then for Ashbery, the success of de Chirico lies in his ability to reflect or express that experience. Consequently the oneiric atmosphere of de Chirico is not *divided* from the mundane happening and living of every day but is, for Ashbery at least, a new and unfamiliar mode with which to better express its destabilised reality: 'The space of dreams – deep, shallow, open, bent, a point which has no physical dimensions or a universal breadth – is the space in which we now live.'[55]

In *Hebdomeros* de Chirico's narrative takes on a meandering ambience, the drifting impression of its central voyage is without direction and free from the dynamics of a dramatic plot:

> Like the characters, the reader becomes without memory, drifting through the fiction, barely rippling its surface. Questions of physical place within the book become meaningless, as the plot is essentially non-hierarchical, coterminous, tending towards a simultaneous apprehension of its entire meaning at all points. It is ghostly, uncanny,

[51] John Ashbery, 'A de Chirico Retrospective' (1982), *Reported Sightings*, p.402.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] *Reported Sightings*, p.12.

> with interruptions of the past on the present, the future on the past, and the present on the past. A dynamic moving space […].[56]

Consequently, temporal and spatial perceptions are subject to continual and permeable change, as Ashbery puts it, 'time is an emulsion' (DDS, 186). When this 'dynamic moving space' is taken from its reflexive consideration of the textual and into a fraught ontology of 'twentieth century anxiety', Ashbery begins to intimate the problem of living in such a sensation. The present becomes a constant temporal displacement, for which, like 'The Task, there is a sense of 'preparing to begin again' that either leads to an uncanny return, 'coming back to the mooring of starting out' (DDS, 186) or a bewildering feeling that 'we have rolled into another dream' (DDS, 183). In this rendering of the present we experience a bewilderment of past and future, returning and preparing and subsequently never settling in any one element but remaining suspended, as in an 'emulsion': 'So that the present seems like yesterday/And yesterday the place where we left off a little while ago' (DDS, 206).

In this articulation of the present as a protean meeting of all tenses, it is perhaps unsurprising that de Chirico at one point refers to 'that minotaur men call time', as our experience of time is, like the part-man, part-bull simultaneity the Minotaur embodies, a merged form.[57] *Minotaure* was also, significantly, the title given to the surrealist magazine that ran between 1933 and 1939, edited by Pierre Mabilie and Breton. The composite creature became a potent and complex figure for Surrealism (especially significant as a point of contact between Picasso and Surrealism); its merged and troubling form was also intrinsically linked to the Surrealism of the labyrinth (explored further in the next chapter). In Ashbery's much later epic, *Flow Chart* (1991), a staggering achievement that offers a kind of sprawling culmination of his preceding twelve books, we also encounter the Minotaur. Here the Minotaur surfaces a page after (which, in its 216 pages, is a positioning of close proximity) a remark that ponderously reflects, 'was that part of the dream, or did it really exist in a past/one can focus on', which then leads the poem to a meeting, at a 'locus of many diagonals/without beginning or end except for the sense of them a place of confluence'.[58] These thoughts tumble into a lament about both the individual and collective struggling to cope with change through time, arriving finally at a:

---

[56] Ed Sugden, 'Time, Space, and Ghosts of Form: Giorgio de Chirico's Hebdomeros' in *Wave Composition*, Issue 1 (June 5, 2011). < http://www.wavecomposition.com/article/issue-1/ > [accessed November 2014]
[57] Giorgio de Chirico, *Hebdomeros*, p.112. It is interesting to note that in the same sentence in which de Chirico refers to that 'minotaur men call Time' he goes on to mention a 'clepsydra' (the Greek word for a water-clock, which Ashbery used in *Rivers and Mountains* as a poem's title).
[58] John Ashbery, *Flow Chart* (New York: Knopf, 1992), p.70. All further references will be to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

new climate
of sharpened political awareness that hungers always for new victims
like a minotaur, and whose mad thirst for the blood of innocent bystanders can never
be slaked, least of all by tepid gestures toward understanding
seen in a mirror and wrongly interpreted.

(FC, 80)

The Minotaur, although linked to a 'political awareness' is still rearing its head on behalf of time, like the pressure to be 'timely' that Herd observes surrounding *The Double Dream of Spring*, any (mis)understanding of time can become, or be caused by, the sharply political. With its 'mad thirst for the blood of innocent bystanders', the Minotaur is also, at this point, reminiscent of the 'darkness fiend' in 'The Skaters' that, 'up the swollen sands/Staggers', pursued by the 'storm fiend' (RM, 148). Both present mythical incarnations for the predation of time, subject to which our mortality becomes its own tragicomic character – attempting to appease the inevitable with 'tepid gestures' and an 'understanding/seen in the mirror and wrongly interpreted.'[59] Time becomes dream-like in *The Double Dream of Spring* not as an evasion of reality but, like de Chirico, through a twentieth century anxiety that acknowledges our 'tepid gestures' in expressing that reality. Therefore both unsettle the 'Fables time invents/To explain its passing' (DDS, 206) and instead forge new attempts at its representation.

Three Poems: Shaped in the New Merging

Written between 1969 and 1971, Ashbery's *Three Poems* is a stunning and unique achievement, not only in Ashbery's poetic ambition but, more widely, as a milestone of post-war American poetry.[60] Separated into three sections ('The New Spirit', 'The System', 'The Recital') and presented in long blocks of largely unbroken prose, each composed of vertiginously extending sentences, *Three Poems* sustains its amorphous contemplation over 79 pages (in the Carcanet *Collected Poems*). As leading influences for *Three Poems*, Ashbery

[59] Yet, when contemplated and conceptualised in the nature of the present and our experiences, the Minotaur can also be a symbol detached from its elements of fear and dread as a creature that encapsulates the 'locus of diagonals' as a 'place of confluence'. In this sense the minotaur is both the fear of time and the experience of time, one dimension apprehended as an unstoppable and unknowable force, while the other fascinates in its approximation of what we experientially comprehend – expressed in 'Soonest Mended' as 'The moving and not wanting to be moved' (DDS, 185).

[60] *Three Poems* brought together 'The New Spirit' (started in November 1969 and completed by April 1970 - published in *The Paris Review,* Fall, 1970), 'The System' (written between January and March 1971 and published in *The Paris Review*, Winter, 1972) and 'The Recital' (written in April 1971, published in *The Poetry Review*, Winter 1971-2, and in *Fiction*), published together by Viking Press in 1972 (Shoptaw, p.362).

most regularly cites Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror* (1944) and de Chirico's *Hebdomeros* (1929), while critics have subsequently gone on to extensively map other helpful points of reference: Stein, Rilke, Roussel and the later prose of Henry James (Stephen Fredman); Thomas Traherne's *Centuries of Meditations* (John Pilling and Ben Hickman); inspiration from the journal writing of John Clare, also drawing from Rimbaud and Baudelaire (John Shoptaw); a response that inhabits the essay style of Ralph Waldo Emerson to respond to the knotted challenge of Blaise Pascal's *The Pensées* (David Herd); and even an exploration of consciousness and history in light of Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (Jeff Staiger).The tone of its poetic/prosaic voice draws together a palpably vast range of influences and allusions while never definably resting in one. Every tone or mode remains in suspension, as if always and vaguely on the brink of detection, balancing the development of an essay, the calming strategies of self-help, the demotic and avuncular, spiritual guidance, philosophical argument, meditative transcendence and banal observation. They are all at once nascent and the text consequently becomes (and is always becoming) a space serenely haunted by the therapeutic, mystical, astrological, mythical, romantic, glib and profound. Although it incubates the suggestion of varying modes of address, *Three Poems* still manages to absorb these echoes within its own consistent style. Being at once coherent as entirely itself and fogged in the expanding mobility of what it could be, the tone of *Three Poems* enacts the same paradoxical blurring that characterises much of its content, in the fluctuations that deform and inform subjectivity. This unique prose poetry, ruminating on everyday waking perception in a way that becomes powerfully dreamlike, induces the poetics of phenomenology to become an experiential model for Surrealism.

Despite Ashbery's earlier experimentation with boundaries between prose and poetry, *Three Poems* embodies a discernible first (and potentially last, judging by the stylistic persuasion of Ashbery's later and contemporary poetry) in achieving an accomplished merging of poetry and prose that successfully transcends both.[61] Previously his prose poetry had either existed in comparative definition as an exception within a collection (which can be traced back to the early prose poem, unambiguously entitled 'A Dream', ca. 1950) or, as in *The Tennis Court Oath*, through collaged incorporation.[62] However *Rivers and Mountains*

[61] Herd ascertains that previously the distinction between prose and poetry in Ashbery's work had always been clear and that a prose poem was either the exception, as in *Some Trees* with 'The Young Son'; a result of incorporating 'gobbets of popular fiction' (Herd, p.126) in *The Tennis Court Oath*; or *The Double Dream of Spring* in which, 'For John Clare' adopted a prose poem form and 'Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox' began in poetry and then ended in prose (pp.124-143).

[62] For a description of conveying dreams in relation to prose poetry and a detailed analysis of the early failings of Ashbery's 'A Dream', traced through to a more successful culmination in *Three Poems*, see Andrew DuBois' 'Poetry-Prose and Dreams and Things', in *Ashbery's Forms of Attention* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2006), pp.57-94.

certainly contributes towards the later and developed merging of form, specifically anticipated in the long lined and contemplative 'Clepsydra', and of course, 'The Skaters'. Ashbery's own description of the prose used in *Three Poems* proves to be helpfully insightful:

> The prose is something quite new….suddenly the idea of it occurred to me as something new in which the arbitrary divisions of poetry into lines would get abolished. One wouldn't have to have these interfering and scanning the processes of one's thought as one was writing; the poetic form would be dissolved, in solution, and therefore create more of a surrounding thing like the way one's consciousness is surrounded by one's thoughts.[63]

To be 'dissolved, in solution' calls upon the same language of merged forms that relates to so much of Ashbery's mercurial subject matter. The phrase recalls the description of time in 'Soonest Mended', identified as an 'emulsion' (DDS, 186). Once envisaged as an 'emulsion' of prose and poetry, its significance as a merged form is made more apparent; a form that is vital to what 'The New Spirit' terms, 'the forms of this our present waking life, the manners of the unreachable' (TP, 249).

'The New Spirit' introduces the notion of a 'new merging' as a matter of phenomenology that, in reaching for 'the forms of this our present waking life' simultaneously begs the more surrealist (by way of Keats' final line in 'Ode to a Nightingale') question: 'Have I awakened? Or is this sleep again?' (TP, 247.) Just a page into 'The New Spirit', the notion of 'merging' is first intimated and this striking passage occurs:

> It needs pronouncing. To formulate oneself around this hol - low, empty sphere . . . To be your breath as it is taken in and shoved out. Then, quietly, it would be as objects placed along the top of a wall: a battery jar, a rusted pulley, shapeless wooden boxes, an open can of axle grease, two lengths of pipe. . . . We see this movement outside as within. There is no need to offer proof. It's funny. . . . The cold external factors are inside us at last, growing in us for our improvement, asking nothing, not even a commemorative thought. And what about what was there before?
>
> This is shaped in the *new merging*, like ancestral smiles, com- mon memories, remembering just how the light stood on the water that time. But it is also something new.
>
> (TP, 248)

[63] John Ashbery, 'Craft Interview', *New York Quarterly* (1972), cited by Marjorie Perloff, *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1990), p.267.

This extract arrives at the very beginning of *Three Poems*, following the famous opening: 'I thought that if I could put it all down that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another truer way' (TP, 247), which then slips from its apparent reflexive poetics into a more purely philosophical discussion. A discussion that swiftly strings together a contemplation of time ('impersonal as mountains', TP, 247), 'old photographs', the compulsion to think envisaged as a law, and a movement – albeit malleably vague – into understanding 'the meaning of the tomb' (TP, 248). Immediately the poem drifts from poetics on to a more expressively human ontology, while also posing poetics as the ontology of the poem and ontology conceived as poetics, playfully generating a slippage of understanding representative of much in *Three Poems*.

The 'new merging' becomes explicitly phenomenological when, working from the quoted extract, the 'act' that 'needs pronouncing' seems to be our own processes of perception and how, within those processes, the subject and object are blurred. This act is 'To formulate oneself around [a] hollow empty sphere . . . To be your breath as it is taken in and shoved out.' It is a description of subjectivity that takes a fundamental sign of life, in breath, and uncomfortably reifies it as an object 'shoved out'. This is then followed by 'objects placed along the top of the wall', seamlessly blending the directed breath into a list of perceived objects: 'a battery jar, a rusted pulley, shapeless wooden boxes, an open can of axle grease, two lengths of pipe', all of which continue the 'shoved' labour of breath into a mechanical inventory, before arriving at the conclusion that, 'We see this moment outside as within.' This 'moment outside' configures the array of confrontationally physical and workman-like objects as now internalised: 'The cold, external factors are inside us at last, growing in us'. Drawing attention to the movement between subject-as-observation and object-as-outside-world, Ashbery complicates these distinctions of binary opposition into a blurred incorporation of one within the other. The notion of an objective outside world can only ever exist through our perception of it, thus it is never simply or purely outside but instead a *perceived outside*, incorporated within, and constructed from, a subjective inside. It is in the meditation on, and recreation of this flux that, *Three Poems* draws phenomenology towards Surrealism.

Three Poems and Maurice Merleau-Ponty

When *Three Poems* is understood in relation to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology *in addition* to Surrealism, the dream-like expression of a surrealist state is, as 'The Skaters' first implied, found residing in the very mechanics of its supposed opposite – our waking and

everyday perception.[64] By considering a primacy of perception that disables absolute borders between subject and object, or being and the world, waking consciousness becomes an oneiric space of play. In his incomplete manuscript, *The Visible and the Invisible* (written in 1964, first translated into English in 1968), Merleau-Ponty builds upon Heidegger's being-in-the-world, and describes a notion of *embodied perception*:

> caught up in the tissue of the things, it draws it entirely into itself, incorporates it, and, with the same movement, communicates to the things upon which it closes over that identity without superposition, that difference without contradiction, that divergence between the within and the without that constitutes its natal secret.[65]

It is the same 'outside as within' that preoccupies Ashbery's portrait of perception and that also appears, with startling similarity, in Breton's conception of a surrealist state of perception:

> if you go beyond the extraordinary and surface ebullition, it is possible to bring forth to the light of day a *capillary tissue* without which it would be useless to try to imagine any mental circulation. The role of the tissue is, as we have seen, to guarantee the constant exchange in thought that must exist between the exterior and interior worlds, an exchange that requires the continuous interpretation of the activity of waking and that of sleeping.[66]

As if in response to this surrealist assessment, the opening of 'The New Spirit' poses the question, 'Have I awakened? Or is this sleep again?', in testament to a need for 'continuous interpretation'. Later, in 'The System', a relationship between truth and life recalls the collapsed opposition of object and subject, as we encounter the observation that 'It seemed as though innumerable transparent tissues hovered between these two entities and joined them in some way' (TP, 281).

This sensation of a fluent connection that permeates borders between subject and object, resisting any separation between things and our perception of them, occurs

---

[64] There have been a handful of critical instances in which Ashbery's poetics have been previously read through Merleau-Ponty. Geoff Ward's *Statues of Liberty: The New York School of Poets* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993) discusses aspects of presence specifically in relation to time, contemplating perception as never arriving and drawn ever forward. Ward is also cited by William Kherbeck, in *Chinese whispers Chinese rooms: the poetry of John Ashbery and cognitive studies* (Thesis, Birkbeck, University of London, 2014), who positions Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology alongside Ashbery as a way to elucidate differences and further a concept of cognition and perception in poetry more widely. Ariane Mildenberg, most relevantly to this thesis, interprets Joseph Cornell's boxes and Ashbery's poetry as comparably phenomenological models, understood through Merleau-Ponty: 'Through the Wrong End of the Telescope: Thresholds of Perception in Joseph Cornell, John Ashbery and Maurice Merleau-Ponty', in *Joseph Cornell: Opening the Box*, eds. Jason Edwards and Stephanie L. Taylor (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 137-159.

[65] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Visible and the Invisible' (1968), *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*, ed. by Thomas Baldwin (London: Routledge, 2004), p.253.

[66] Breton, *Communicating Vessels*, p. 139.

consistently throughout *Three Poems*. We are told it is 'the eyes directing out, living into their material' (TP, 251) which, just like the 'breath […] shoved out' as it moves toward and incorporates 'a battery jar, a rusted pulley [and] shapeless wooden boxes', later constitutes a mysterious control in 'strings or emanations that connect everything' (TP, 310). 'The System' assures its reader that our pursuit of meaning, an evasive slippage in the poem between truth, subjectivity and a sense of purpose, is that 'toward which we have been straining all our lives':

> We are to read this in outward things: the spoons and greasy tables in this room, the wooden shelves, the flyspecked ceiling merging into gloom – good and happy things, nevertheless, that tell us little of themselves and more about ourselves than we had ever imagined it was possible to know. They have become the fabric of life.
>
> (TP, 310)

This phenomenological attention is further explored through an awareness of the poem's form that, in the uniquely dense prose poetry, becomes its own 'outward thing'. The form of *Three Poems* finds a way of enacting both ideas and their experience through a mode of reading that - at times - approaches a kind of waking dream. As is the nature of Ashbery's 'lyric mediacy', *Three Poems* encourages a hermeneutic rhythm of attention and inattention that, in its continual sliding between thinking the subject and thinking *as* subject, invites a mimetic correlation in reading: where reading for content and reading *as* content also merge and slip in constant play. This could be said to be true of many of Ashbery's poems, as he has said, 'My poems are frequently commenting on themselves as they're getting written and therefore the methodology occasionally coincides with the subject. They are the record of a thought process – the process and the thought reflect back and forth on each other'.[67] Though, in the monolithic density of Ashbery's passages, blocked for pages without paragraph breaks, the prose poetry takes on a conspicuously solid appearance that is (in its sustained length) unique within his oeuvre.

As with the 'eyes directing out, living into their material', at points in *Three Poems*, due to its length and density, it can takes on a spatial heaviness that moves reading experientially closer to a sensation of 'living into [its] material'. At its very start, having provided examples of 'leaving out' literally demarcated by gaps in the text, it is then asserted that, 'something soon comes to stand in their place. Not the truth, perhaps, but – yourself.' Later, the moments of 'leaving out' become not literal absences in the text but lapses in attention, moments in which the extending sentences still retain their semblance of logic but

[67] John Ashbery, in *The Poet's Craft: Interviews from the New York Quarterly* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1987), p.88.

the meaning of which has become a vague background feeling.[68] It is in these moments that the reading I, as with the seeing 'eyes […] living into their material', enters into the text as a distracted subjective overlay. In a kind of daydream, it is possible to keep reading *Three Poems*, allowing your own thoughts to drift in and out, in response to what 'The Skaters' defines as 'jumps, from abstract into positive and back to a slightly less diluted abstract' (RM, 153). As the reader enters the poem, 'living into' its 'material', the 'material' or poem becomes ghosted by, and composed of, a daydreaming version of the reader: 'yourself'.

It sets up a relationship of perception, like Merleau-Ponty's conception of the chiasmic body and his notion of 'flesh', for which what is seen cannot be separated from that which is doing the seeing – just as whoever is reading enters into and cannot be separated from what is read. Like Breton's '*capillary tissue*', Merleau-Ponty's 'flesh' is neither mind nor substance but 'midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being.'[69] Consequently, Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology introduces 'flesh' to be a space of exchange that, as a movement of relation, facilitates perception. As for Ashbery, it is the comparable phasing in and out of the poem as a movement between subject and object, reader and poem, and reading and *what is read*, that comes to constitute a mimesis of perception. In *Three Poems*, that rendering of perception is experienced as a form of dreaming, from which the reader even encounters a knowing wake-up call:

> there always comes a time when the spectator needs reas-
> surance, to be touched on the arm so he can be sure he is not
> dreaming.
>
> (TP, 255)

Contradiction: 'The Harmonious Sceptic' Dreaming Reality

For most of Ashbery's poetry the subject is a site to be dreamt and that is itself dreaming, reached paradoxically and communicated through contradiction. As he has noted in an

[68] See Andrew DuBois, *Ashbery's Forms of Attention* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2006), in which he explores methods of attention and inattention and the prose poetry form, discussing the subsequent meditative and therapeutic nature of *Three Poems* as a form of dreaming. As Dubois notes, there is an influence of Marcel Proust upon the dream-like dynamics of expansive density and inattention in *Three Poems*. Dubois quotes Ashbery from an interview, describing Proust's 'surreal passages' as having mastered a way of 'droning on in a sort of dreamlike space' (p.87).

[69] Merleau-Ponty, p.256

interview, he envisaged *Three Poems* as "a series of contradictions, one after the other".[70] These contradictions can be found throughout, reliably tempering each passage with its own scattering of reversals: 'I can never have any of it, even though I have it all as I in fact do' (TP, 254); 'some kind of unexplained activity […] concealing yet revealing […] the state of present affairs' (TP, 258); 'the happy ending was an artifice and that […] happiness would be artificial, though real' (TP, 256); 'it all works itself out into a map, placed over the other real like a sheet of tracing paper, and these two simultaneously become what is going on. They can join, but never touch' (TP, 256). As Ben Hickman notes, *Three Poems* employs 'a kind of dialectics gone wrong', and it is this that compels the text forward through contradiction, a kind of dynamism without resolution.[71] It is also as a 'dialectics gone wrong' that Bruce Baugh understands the surrealist absorption and distortion of Hegel. Baugh argues that, despite Breton's call for an 'extreme conciliation' of opposites and their 'future resolution' – pursued as an 'absolute reality, a *surreality*' (FM, 14), its promised synthesis never arrives.[72] Instead, Baugh identifies an oscillation of 'negations and surpassings that extends ad infinitum', thus, he suggests, pairing Surrealism with Hegel's "spurious infinite".[73] This dilation and retraction, erasing and expanding paradoxically and without limits, becomes the dream experience that, for Ashbery, posits the closest approximation of his *experience of experience*.

Understood in the parochial and historicised rigidity of Breton's orthodox Surrealism (or as Ashbery has referred to it, 'hard-core surrealism'), there has always been an unavoidable and inherent contradiction. This occurred, at its most fundamental and founding level, between the structured dogma of Breton's manifesto rhetoric, suggesting a certainty that sought in many ways to become its own ideology, and the therefore hypocritical spirit that looked to dissolve ideological structure in prioritising necessarily vague terms of 'beauty', 'freedom', the 'unconscious', and the axiom that 'Existence is elsewhere' (FM, 47). The surrealist desire 'of the man who […] sets off from whatever point he chooses, along any other path save a reasonable one, and arrives wherever he can' (FM, 46) is completely undermined by its delivery in the form of a manifesto. One of many proclamations that were insidiously problematized by the hierarchical organisation and heavy-handed absolutism with which *what* and *was not* surrealist was insistently defined (leading to Breton's own trigger-happy infamy for excommunication). This hypocrisy infected many of its core principles

[70] A Warsaw Interview (304) quoted in Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 134.
[71] Ben Hickman, *John Ashbery and English Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012) p.75.
[72] André Breton, *Communicating Vessels*, trans. by Mary Ann Caws and Geoffrey T. Harris (Nebraska: Bison Books, 1997), p. 4.
[73] Bruce Baugh, *French Hegel: From Surrealism to Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 56.

(explored psychoanalytically in terms of repressed material in Hal Foster's *Compulsive Beauty*) and, unsurprisingly, the relationship with dreams. As mentioned earlier, Surrealism perpetuated the very distinctions it sought to overcome: automatic writing treated the unconscious as entirely *separate* from conscious thought, to be channelled and transcribed as if recovered, in its purity, from beyond the waking world. Additionally the idea of '*surreality*' was posed as a kind of utopian point of convergence, adhering to a dialectics it otherwise seemed to discredit: the antipodes of dreaming and waking, implicitly maintained in opposition, collide to form a mysteriously surreal experience.

Meanwhile, in 'The System' Ashbery completely disavows the possibility to accept such stasis in any form of resolution in definitive arrival:

> not […] this rigidity, with the eye and the mind focused on a non-existent center, a fixed point, when the common sense of even an idiot would be enough to make him realize that nothing has stopped, that we and everything around us are moving forward continually, and that we are being modified constantly by the speed at which we travel and the regions through which we pass, so that merely to think of ourselves as having arrived at some final resting place is a contradiction of fundamental logic […].
>
> (TP, 295)

It is an expression that despite entirely resisting Breton's rhetoric in the manifestoes could be aligned with many other moments, outside of the manifestoes, of corresponding sentiment. For example, the train continually departing Gare de Lyon in *Nadja* that paradoxically never leaves, reminds one of 'The Skaters' where the journey is 'continuing but ever beginning' (RM, 158) only to later reveal: 'The train is still in the station./You only dreamed it was in motion' (RM, 175). Or like the wandering structure of Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant* (1926) where the arcades become an always moving, never arriving transitivity, resonating with the title of his collection of poetry also published in that year: *Le Mouvement perpetual* (*Perpetual Movement*). Ashbery absorbs and accepts this irresolvable motion in his poetry, whereas the 'hard-core' Surrealism, as preached in the manifestoes, is continually pushed by Breton toward a utopian synthesis or point of resolution.

Returning to an understanding of Surrealism through Hegel, Baugh argues: 'the consciousness encountering the [surrealist] object is driven from affirmation to negation and back so that, as Hegel says of scepticism: "consciousness truly experiences itself as

consciousness contradicting itself within itself"'.[74] This meta-experience of consciousness attending to its own contradictions, perfectly encapsulates Ashbery's prose poetry in *Three Poems*. It is a scepticism that unlike its latent existence in Breton's writing is not continually and anxiously diverted as a hypocritical tension. In framing *Three Poems* as a tangled response to Pascal's 'Man Without God', Herd describes Ashbery's writing as a redemptive scepticism in which Ashbery becomes 'a harmonious sceptic' for which the 'tangles do not preclude poetic order but are, in fact, its precondition.'[75] In his 'harmonious scepticism' Ashbery harnesses the surrealist play and passage of an irresolvable in-between, found in the phenomenology of everyday and incorporated as part of a serene ambiguity: that cherished 'fence-sitting/Raised to the level of an esthetic ideal' (DDS, 185). It is no coincidence that this stance, (un)founded on the avoidance of a singular stance, came out of friendships with James Schuyler, Kenneth Koch and Frank O'Hara where poetic seriousness was most focused in its serious commitment to play and where manifestoes were only to be parodied (O'Hara's 'Personism: a Manifesto', 1960).

In Ashbery's 'harmonius scepticism' the warped dialectics of Surrealism are without any structured contradiction given over to existing as contradiction; with its genial acceptance *Three Poems* seems closer to accepting and expressing the irresolvable nature of Surrealism than Surrealism itself. The potent ambiguity that in 'The New Spirit' is 'shaped in a new merging' seems like a way of making peace with the restless 'dialectics gone wrong' that condition its articulation of the subject. There is, in its reading sensation, the feeling that *Three Poems* enacts, unlike any officially surrealist text, Breton's desire to reach 'the continuous interpenetration of the activity of waking and that of sleeping' (CV, 139). However, it only successfully engineers this reading experience through understanding that it is an activity that must remain *active*. It does not aspire to synthesize and so arrive or resolve, and for this reason remains an exploration of perception without imposed partitions between conscious and unconscious. In contrast to automatic writing that perpetuated divisions it sought to dissolve, *Three Poems* retains what Ashbery called 'a reflection of the whole mind, which is partly logical and reasonable, and that part should have its say too'.[76]

In opening the 'whole mind' to its own contradictory experiences, Surrealism is a dream-like and inescapable dimension to the everyday. In his 1979 collection, *As We Know*, Ashbery included a two-column poem, 'Litany', which perhaps best illustrates in its simple visual opposition a contradiction of voice and thought that remains, to the end, resolutely unresolved. It is in 'Litany' that this insightful description appears: '*All life/Is a tale told to*

[74] Bruce Baugh, *French Hegel: From Surrealism to Postmodernism*, p.59
[75] Herd, p.137.
[76] John Ashbery, interviewed by Peter A. Stitt, 'The Art of Poetry No. 33'.

one in a dream/In tones never totally audible/Or understandable' (AWK, 607). A moment redolent of a characteristic statement in 'The New Spirit' that:

> It's just beginning. Now it's started to work again. The visitation, was it more or less over. No, it had not yet begun, except as a preparatory dream which seemed to have the rough texture of life, but which dwindled into starshine like all the unwanted memories. There was no holding on to it.
>
> (TP, 249)

The 'rough texture of life' or 'our present waking life' (TP, 249) expressed by Ashbery, takes on the appearance, the feel, of a dream. In its meditative evaluation of perception, *Three Poems* evokes Surrealism as an emergent condition of experience. In its 'harmonious scepticism', the poetry comes closest to capturing this experience precisely by 'not holding on to it'; it is never reducibly measured or unified but exists in the poem's reading, 'to be proposed but never formulated' (TP, 280). It is not an impassioned call or manifesto to change life but a dream of the everyday that pays attention to living.

Chapter 3

Noise and the Labyrinth in *Flow Chart*: Guy Maddin and Remembering through the Radio of Surrealism

Everything is a matrix of cross-referenced data and ages – a massive flowchart. I can't believe other people don't think that way, but evidently they don't, or at least not everyone does. Some people just don't think of that past at all.

– Guy Maddin

Through an examination of the restlessly interruptive poetry that sustains Ashbery's enormous poem, *Flow Chart* (1991), this chapter will consider the implications of reading the poem as a form of noise and how, in turn, that noise demonstrates the Surrealism inherent to experiences of memory. To do this I will introduce the recent films of Guy Maddin, an artist that, like Ashbery, is frequently – and often without any developed critical thought – associated with Surrealism. Through some of the themes and obsessions that characterise Maddin's films, in addition to the director's interests in radio interference and forms of listening, I will consider the role of radio in the history of Surrealism and how, through Ashbery and a consideration of noise, the movement of memory leads us into the labyrinth of Georges Bataille.

Several critics have referred to versions of 'noise' in Ashbery's poetry and especially in relation to *Flow Chart.* For instance, as it was put in an early review: '[t]he natural noise of the present hypnotizes the reader and takes him over, or is taken over by him'.[1] In her review of *Flow Chart*, Susan Schultz was similarly compelled to assert that Ashbery's poetry 'seemed to argue for the value of language as a fruitful noise--a field of possibility rather than a fixed matrix.'[2] Elsewhere in essays, Fred Moramarco describes the poem as a 'cacophony of sentences' and Martin Kervokian explores the poem's 'noise' through the etymology and implications of parasitism.[3] As these varying critical references to Ashbery's noise will attest,

[1] John Bayley, 'Richley Flows Contingency', *New York Review of Books* (August 15,1991) < http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1991/08/15/richly-flows-contingency/ > [accessed 13/2/16]
[2] Susan Shultz, 'Impossible Music', *Postmodern Culture* (2.2), 1992 <http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/postmodern_culture/v002/2.2r_schultz.html> [accessed 5/2/16]
[3] Fred Moramarco, 'Coming Full Circle, John Ashbery's Later Poetry', *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and*

noise and suggestions of dissonance should not to be mistaken as pejorative accusations. Such concepts, within the the context of *Flow Chart* and as I take them, do not imply inscrutable abstraction, confusion, or content that remains beyond comprehension, but that instead *utilize* aspects of confusion and ways to *interrupt* comprehension – in service of evoking experiences significant to Surrealism. These experiences blur the thresholds between conscious and unconscious, past and present, and real and imaginary; they are experiences that, as in *Three Poems*, can be found in a sense of dreaming, or as in *Flow Chart*, reside in the passage of memory.

As this is a thesis specifically concerned with the *experience* of Surrealism, as gestured to in the previous chapter –where quotidian phenomenology becomes an experience of dreaming – my analysis will not take a contextually political slant. In a notably different tact of interpretation, Stephen Paul Miller asserts that 'Ashbery himself cited Oliver North's Iran-Contra arms-and-money flow chart placards as inspiration'.[4] Miller's analysis moves from Ashbery's *Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975) and the self-surveillance of Richard Nixon and the Watergate Scandal in the 1970s, into surveying a cultural shift in 1980s America. However, as this thesis is not directed at a cultural examination of America, I will focus my discussion of *Flow Chart* to the experiential Surrealism that arises through noise, understood as an expression of memory. Encountered through an internalized passage of change, interacting with the unconscious and disrupting perceptions of time, it is perhaps unsurprising that the experiences of memory should be receptive to Surrealism. The experiential relationship memory shares with Surrealism becomes for Ashbery, comparable to his relationship with dreaming. The movement of memory is immediately open to Surrealism through Ashbery's suggestion of an 'embarrassing/ tendency not to be able to distinguish things that happened to me years ago/ from recent dreams' (FC, 203). Just as Maddin's films often seem to be asking a question that arises in *Flow Chart*: 'was that part of a dream, or did it really exist in a past/ one can focus on' (FC, 79), both Ashbery and Maddin ultimately express memory within, and as, the noise and labyrinth of Surrealism.

Contemporary Poetry, ed. by Susan M. Shultz (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1995), p.44; 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), pp. 459-476.

[4] Stephen Paul Miller, *The Seventies Now: Culture as Surveillance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p.110.

Ashbery and Maddin

Film has remained a constant source of joy and interest in Ashbery's life and poetry: from fond recollections of seeing his first film (the Walt Disney cartoon, *Three Little Pigs*, referred to in his poem 'The Lonedale Operator', in the 1984 collection *A Wave)*; catching a Busby Berkeley season at the London BFI in 1956 (on his first visit to London) and the formative experiences of cinema visits in Paris; it is a continued interest that has since led him to collaborate with Guy Maddin.[5] In the spring of 2009 a series of programmes were organised by Haden Guest, Director of the Harvard Film Archive, to celebrate Ashbery's passion for cinema. In addition to Ashbery's poetry, it was also the existence of his critical essays (most of which are collected in *Selected Prose*) that prompted Guest to coordinate 'John Ashbery at the Movies'.[6] The programme screened films by filmmakers who have acknowledged Ashbery as an influence (Phil Solomon, Abigail Child and Nathaniel Dorsky) in addition to four films of Ashbery's choice: *Footlight Parade* (dir. Lloyd Bacon, 1933), *Adieu Léonard* (dir. Pierre Prévert, 1943)*, The Seventh Victim* (dir. Mark Robson, 1943), and significant to this chapter, Guy Maddin's short, *The Heart of the World* (2000). In Maddin's filmography there exists an intuitive bridge between his playful sensibility and Ashbery's poetry that has formed the basis of an on-going friendship, correspondence and collaboration. However, long before this relationship, both were first and foremost fans of each other's work.

---

5 In his correspondence with the film historian Scott Macdonald (September 25, 2007, quoted in 'John Ashbery's Cinema Paradiso: Domestic Elements as Poetry', as part of Micaela Morrissette's online symposium 'Created Spaces' < http://www.raintaxi.com/literary-features/john-ashbery-created-spaces/ > [accessed December 2014]), David Kermani provides a useful biographical summary of Ashbery's interaction with film, beginning with Ashbery's grandfather: 'Henry Lawrence, who was an important figure in the development of x-rays (a form of imaging) and was a friend and neighbour [sic] of George Eastman', a man who was himself heavily involved in the film industry, as is later elaborated by Kermani. Kermani goes on to explain that 'John spent much of his childhood with his grandparents, and started going to movies at an early age (and he remembers them vividly)', adding that: 'growing up in an atmosphere of cutting-edge technological breakthroughs in imaging, with film an integral part of everyday life, must have had a significant effect on a curious, precocious child'. Significantly, Kermani also feels the need to contextualise Ashbery's passion in light of the formative influence of Surrealism:

> Add to that JA's early fascination with Surrealism (sparked in particular by [Alfred Barr's] 1936 show at MoMA ["Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism"]), and strong interests from childhood in music, theater, and poetry, and he's a walking case history of someone thoroughly shaped by cinematic process and culture.

[6] Essays on Jacques Rivette's *Out One* (1971), Val Lewton's *The Seventh Victim* (1943), Louis Feuillade's silent film adaptations of *Fantômas* (1913-14), and Rudy Burckhardt are all collected in *Selected Prose* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004). There is also an essay on Edgar G. Ulmer's *Detour* (1945), included in Robert Polito's symposium in *LIT* 13 (Fall 2007).

Following the completion of Maddin's first short film, *The Dead Father* (1985), and the cult success of his debut feature *Tales from Gimli Hospital* (1988), his filmography has subsequently come to include eleven feature films and around fifty short films (including *The Heart of the World*: Winner of a 2001 Genie Award for Best Short and the U.S. National Society of Film Critics Award for Best Experimental Film). Ashbery frequently cites Maddin's *The Saddest Music in the World* (2003) amongst his favourite films, while Maddin recalls his own discovery of Ashbery with vivid and emotive distinction: 'Ashbery lines […] just made their way straight to my heart, faster even than music ever has.'[7] Corresponding interests and comparable elements of their practice have encouraged Maddin and Ashbery to a shared point of understanding, and often admiration, of each other's work.

Both were invigorated by Surrealism at formative moments. After seeing the early surrealist films of Man ray and Luis Buñuel, enthralled by their 'primitive intensity', Maddin's creative urge suddenly found itself galvanized by an attainable 'amateurish charm and raw power.'[8] Ashbery was inspired at an earlier age through his glimpse of the MoMA exhibition, *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism,* later moving on, like Maddin, to relish various surrealist films. Interestingly one of the surrealist films Ashbery has recalled as a particular favourite, George Hugnet's *La Perle* (1929, available on Youtube), has one of its scenes – in which two women sit in a bath together – recreated in Ashbery and Maddin's collaborative short film *How to Take a Bath* (2012).[9] This short film was later threaded through Maddin's densely layered film, *The Forbidden Room* (2015), acting as its outer-frame of continuity. The short collaboration (*How to Take a Bath*) was intended as a re-imagining of a lost Dwain Esper sexploitation film of the same title and, whilst the resonance of Hugnet's film is likely an unconscious similarity, it does demonstrate the productive nature of Maddin and Ashbery's overlapping areas of enthusiasm. Not dissimilar from the Surrealism of Cornell, Maddin also shares with Ashbery a collecting impulse. An impulse that enshrines odd objects within his films and that has influenced the cluttered and eclectic mise-en-scene that typifies much of his cinematography.[10] It is a collecting spirit that also seems to instruct many of his casting

[7] Guy Maddin, interviewed by Jessica Winter, 'Plenty of Sublimated Rin Tin Tin' (May 11, 2007), *Poetry Foundation* < http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/179637 > [accessed December 2014]
[8] Caelum Vatnsdal, *Kino Delirium: the films of Guy Maddin* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring, 2000) p.30.
[9] Personal correspondence (email: 20/05/2013).
[10] An exhaustive Rimbaudian list could be made of the strange objects in Maddin's films: an ice breast, a tin acrobat, a stuffed wolverine, telescopes, metronomes, aerophones, gramaphones and even the actors themselves. Many of Maddin's, often reapearing, coterie of actors draws from an obsessive and collecting spirit: Ann Savage, Kyle McCullock, Isabella Rosselini, Shelley Duvval, Frank Gorshin, Udo Kier (to name a few), chosen often in response to a place in cinema's history, their past, family or revered cult roles. Then there is the consistent use of Louis Negin, an actor whose weathered mischief and acting style seems to embody, as Ashbery observed [personal correspondence], a kind of '*objet trouve*' for Maddin. In addition to which, the soundtracks in Maddin's earlier films all use publically available 'found' music, and in *My Winnipeg* he uses found viusal material from film archives.

decisions and that presides over the eccentric discernment of his own, highly personal cinephilia.

Both Maddin and Ashbery also demonstrate a continuing interest in collage, whilst often very different in appearance (Ashbery's collages tend to playfully exalt in a whimsical and childlike mixture of board games, quaint postcards and cartoons, whereas Maddin's – before his collaborative projects with Ashbery – tend to evoke darker, psychosexual melodramas) they both explain collage as a natural extension or development of poetic/filmic inspiration, as opposed to a distraction or separate venture.[11] This in itself is an area that deserves greater attention and that could also reference similarities in humour. Humour that, in turn, draws upon veins of black comedy (a concept of significance to Surrealism, following Breton's 1940 *Anthologie de l'humour noir* [*Anthology of Black Humour*]) and delights in linguistic polyphony, mannered speech and the incongruous. In relation to much of the eclecticism in Maddin's films, their nudity, homoeroticism, resourcefully hand-made aesthetic and absurdist humour, he could also be linked with the phantasmagoria of the New York underground filmmaker, Jack Smith, or the occult camp of Kenneth Anger.

As Maddin has mentioned in interviews, Jim Hoberman has described him as the 'most experimental mainstream filmmaker, or the most mainstream experimental filmmaker,' an ambiguity that could equally characterise Ashbery's reputation in poetry.[12] With *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1976) garnering the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, Ashbery was propelled into the celebrated foreground of American poetry. It is from this position of critical and popular acclaim, and through the diverse range of poets now indebted to his style, that Ashbery's work could be considered to occupy an unlikely space in the poetic mainstream. In an interview with Grzergorz Jankowicz, Marjorie Perloff discusses the changing position of Ashbery's poetry in relation to public and prestigious literary institutions:

> Ashbery, after all, has himself become something of an institution. He is praised by all the various camps of the critics in the U.S. and abroad. In fact, one could argue that he

[11] For a discussion of Maddin's 'collage parties' around the filming of *Keyhole* see: Andrew Pulver's article, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/aug/30/guy-maddin-keyhole > [accessed October 2014]. Ashbery has had two solo exhibitions of his collages at the Tibor De Nagy Gallery (2008 and 2011). For a discussion of the first exhibition see John Yau, 'The Knew What They Wanted' for *The Brooklyn Rail*, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2008/10/artseen/john-ashberry-collages-they-knew-what-they-wanted > [accessed February 2015]. In July 2015 Maddin and Ashbery had a joint exhibition of their collages at the Tibor de Nagy gallery. Ashbery's collages will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

[12] Guy Maddin interviewed by William Beard, 'Conversations with Guy Maddin, August 9-11, 2005' <www.artsrn.ualberta.ca/William_beard/Maddin%2005%20interview.html > [accessed June 2013]

> has been too unquestioningly accepted and it's not quite clear why some of the conservative critics like him.[13]

However, rather than a reluctant or hypocritical transition from marginalised experimentation to popular acclaim, that familiar trajectory through which radicalism is disarmed and artistic challenges come to constitute the very institutions they were once challenging, Ashbery's poetry has always privileged the ideal of a popular and inclusive medium. Susan Schultz quotes from *Flow Chart* to attest to Ashbery's continuing dedication to an inclusive poetics: 'I see I am as ever/ a terminus of sorts, that is, lots of people arrive in me'.[14] A link could also be made with Kane's observation on the formal resonance between Burckhardt's filmmaking and the New York School:

> As Ashbery, Koch, Padgett, Berrigan, and others experimented with the possibilities inherent in the sonnet, pantoum, canzone and sestina, so Burckhardt produced diary and collage films, screwball comedies, parodic adventure films, parodic monster films and so on.[15]

Burckhardt, like the poets, shared a playful understanding of the experimentation that could be enjoyed within the parameters of tradition and genre, to discover subversion and renewal in otherwise popular or established conventions.

Therefore, despite Ashbery wanting to break from an American poetic tradition engendered by Robert Lowell and the performative emoting associated with Confessional poetry, there has never been a disregard for *reaching* the reader. To make the poem as mutably receptive to as many readers as possible can be, in part, explained through his nuanced appreciation for the 'traditional' in poetry:

> I've always enjoyed more traditional art and poetry. I think there was a false division between abstract art and figurative art for instance. To like one and not the other was ridiculous. As Schoenberg said sometime in the 1930s 'there is still a lot of music to be written in the key of C major' and a lot of contemporary composers seem to be trying to write a new kind of music which can also sound traditional. This is kind of what I'd like to do myself. I'd like to write like Tennyson but make it new.[16]

---

[13] Grzergorz Jankowicz, 'Internet Interview with Marjorie Perloff ' *Odra*, (Warsaw), nr. 10 (2008) < http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/perloff/articles/Perloff-Marjorie_Interview-Jankowicz.pdf > [accessed on July 2013]
[14] John Ashbery, cited by Susan Schultz, 'Impossible Music', *Postmodern Culture,* 2 (January 1992).
[15] Daniel Kane, *We Saw the Light* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2009) p.169.
[16] John Ashbery, quoted in Nicholas Wroe, 'Parallel Lines' (Saturday 23, April 2005) < http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/apr/23/featuresreviews > [accessed July 2013]

It is this founding need for the poem to be widely communicative as a priority that, when combined with re-imagining the *ways* in which a poem can communicate, allows for Ashbery's equivalent of Maddin's 'most experimental mainstream/most mainstream experimental' oscillation. It is an experimentation that, in its avoidance of any absolutist avant-garde allegiance, harks back to surrealist film. Integral to the development of automatic writing and the formative years of Surrealism in Paris, Robert Desnos (poet, novelist, journalist and radio-broadcaster) wrote an article that clarifies a surrealist perspective, concerning avant-garde or 'pure' cinema:

> [a]n exaggerated respect for art and a mystique of expression has led a whole group of producers, actors and spectators to the creation of a so-called avant-garde cinema, remarkable for the rapidity with which its productions become obsolete, for its absence of human emotion, and for the risks it obliges all cinema to run.[17]

Maddin describes an enthusiasm for popular film that seems furtively compatible with this surrealist taste:

> I'm strangely a populist. My favourite movies are movies that aren't that accessible to everybody, but that's because they're not interested in watching old pictures. They're movies that were nominated for Academy awards in the 30s. I'm kind of a hoi polloi fella.[18]

Emboldened by the 'weepies' of Douglas Sirk, the melodrama of Josef Von Sternberg, and sharing Ashbery's taste for the spectacle of Busby Berkely's musicals, Maddin's films owe very little, if anything, to filmmakers associated with the avant-garde.[19] It was this same fascination with popular and populist communication that would have contributed, for Desnos, to a fascination with the technology of radio as a new site for Surrealism.

The Radio, Surrealism and Maddin

Between Desnos and the French radio pioneer Paul Deharme, emerged a series of concepts that characterise the relevance of radio as a medium open to Surrealism; through a discussion of their work it becomes possible to similarly substantiate Ashbery and Maddin's relationship

[17] Robert Desnos, 'Avant-garde Cinema' (originally appeared in *Documents*, no.7, 1929), included in *The Shadow and its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, p.36.
[18] Guy Maddin interviewed by William Beard, 'Conversations with Guy Maddin, August 9-11, 2005,' <www.artsrn.ualberta.ca/William_beard/Maddin%2005%20interview.html > [accessed June 2013]
[19] Exceptions to this would be, as previously stated, Maddin's interest in Kenneth Anger and Jack Smith.

with radio as also in dialogue with Surrealism. Combining the knowledge and techniques of public advertising with theoretical and artistic ambitions, Deharme recognised radio broadcasting as 'a surrealist medium par excellence'.[20] Both as a businessman and as an idealistic thinker of the auditory imagination, Deharme sought to engage with and attract artistic figures that would support and further the beliefs mapped out in his short book, *Pour un art radiophonique* (1930). This was a process consolidated by the support of his wife, Lise Anne-Marie Hirtz, who was herself a journal editor and a surrealist poet (immortalised in *Nadja*, as the lady with the blue glove). It was through this artistic orbit that the poet Robert Desnos, after the fall-out from Breton's second manifesto (1929) and his contribution to *Un Cadavre* (published January 15th 1930, as a collective hostile response to the manifesto's attacks), was hired by Deharme and began working in radio regularly alongside the Cuban writer and musicologist Alejo Carpentier. At the basis of this transformative phase in broadcasting history were these three men and, specifically from Desnos, a reinvigorated spirit of Surrealism.

Although both Deharme and Desnos worked together, a clear distinction can be made between their approaches to the medium. Deharme constructed a theoretical attitude that privileged notions of framed clarity in broadcasting and its stimulation of imagery. For Deharme, the radio also shifted the onus of image creation onto the audience and thus transposed the creative sensation, analogous to dreaming, from a process of authorial expression into a process of audience interaction. Through appealing to an interactive and experiential dynamic, Deharme's theories – although not as radical – related to Antonin Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty' and thus makes further sense of Artaud's subsequent involvements in broadcasting projects. Deharme also firmly upheld the possibility for broadcasting to provide a therapeutic service in which listening could facilitate a cathartic experience. Meanwhile, departing from Deharme's structured approach to the clarity of transmission, Desnos intuited significance in interference and the experience of competing signals. Although Desnos did not exact his views on broadcasting with the explicit and researched investment of Deharme, he provides clues in his journalism (during the French resistance) and in his poetry, of the influence of Surrealism as an evolving presence in more public spheres. This was also developed in relation to an increasingly nuanced appreciation of the recorded voice in music and as a poetic concept. Unlike Deharme, Desnos seemed more astutely sensitive to acoustic experiences as often inherently haunting and haunted through the intimation of presence in absence and vice versa. This is an awareness, as I will suggest, that

[20] Paul Deharme, quoted by Anke Birkenmaier, 'From Surrealism to Popular Art: Paul Deharme's Radio Theory,' *Modernism/Modernity*, Volume 16, Number 2 (April 2009), p.357.

has its correlative in recognizably surrealist obsessions.

At the centre of Deharme's 'radiophonic art', as proposed in *Pour un art radiophonique*, was a belief in the medium as a therapeutic communication. Anke Birkenmaier helpfully explains this in her essay on Deharme:

> To Deharme, the radio's promise lies in its independence from vision and everything associated with it, particularly analytic reason. In his theory, the transmission of words through radio is more evocative to the listener than the written work. Radio-speech can even take on the role of a psychoanalytic dialogue, in the sense that the anonymity of the radio voice makes it an ideal way to elicit individual fantasies and traumas from each listener. […] In this way, radio was to become not so much a new aesthetic experience as a therapeutic medium, that is, a way of analysing and stabilizing the collective unconscious.[21]

The ability of a radio broadcast to assume the role of psychoanalytical therapy certainly resonates with Maddin's films, populated, as they are, by all kinds of bizarre listening and communicating contraptions. These have ranged from the recognisable, such as the gramophone in the trenches of *Archangel* (1990) and the music box in *The Saddest Music in the World* (2003), to more wayward and invented oddities: the family walkie-talkie device, vaguely referred to as the 'aerophone' in *Brand upon the Brain!* (2006); the repeated use of a large horn used to beckon members of a family (used in several of his films); the 'telemelodium' in *Night Mayor* (2009) which translates the static crackle of the aurora borealis into televisual images; or the 'Desk-top Family Organiser' that sends messages in *Keyhole* (2011) and appears to be fashioned from parts of an antiquated telephone.[22] Significantly all of the variations of radio/listening/communicating technology appear enmeshed with details of family or the past.

In *My Winnipeg* (2007), old radio transmissions accompany the film's perpetual snow as a fitting auditory equivalent, one that evokes the same oneiric sense of covering, drifting and revealing: moving the film towards its near-cathartic conclusion.[23] Maddin's film creates a soporific 'docu-fantasia' that weaves between mythologizing his hometown, excavating (and inventing) its eccentric history and recreating moments of his own memory and family life. Its aesthetics and editing rhythms draw upon a nostalgic homage to the 1920s cinema of the 'City Symphony' genre (recalling Walter Ruttman's *Berlin*, 1927 and Dziga Vertov's

[21] Anke Birkenmaier, 'From Surrealism to Popular Art: Paul Deharme's Radio Theory' *Modernism/Modernity*, 16 (April 2009), p.363.
[22] *Archangel* (1990), dir. by Guy Maddin, in *The Quintessetial Guy Maddin* (Zeitgeist Films, 2010) [DVD]; *The Saddest Music in the World* (2003), dir. by Guy Maddin (Soda Pictures, 2005) [DVD]; *Brand upon the Brain!* (2006), dir. by Guy Maddin (Criterion, 2008) [DVD]; *Night Mayor* (2009), dir. by Guy Maddin (National Board of Canada) [available on Vimeo - Maddin's other short films are available on Youtube or as DVD extras on the various releases]; *Keyhole* (2011), dir. by Guy Maddin (Soda Pictures, 2013) [DVD].
[23] *My Winnipeg* (2007), dir. by Guy Maddin (Soda Pictures, 2008) [DVD].

Man with a Movie Camera, 1929). Darren Wershler notes that the 'romance' and 'mystery' attributed to radio in its formative years, during the early 1920s, characterises the same enthrallment that anachronistically enthused Maddin.[24] Wershler goes on to suggest this as a natural connection: 'it is somehow appropriate that [Maddin] adopted radio-listening patterns characteristic of the decade he would come to fetishize as a filmmaker.'[25]

The film is narrated by Maddin in a voiceover that, at times, is almost incantatory in its cadence, becoming a hypnotic and intimate enactment of Deharme's belief in the therapeutic voice. In a section of the film that explores Winnipeg's back alleys, Maddin's voice confides that 'strange wavelengths dominate' in hidden parts of the city. The 'strange wavelengths' actually used at this moment in the film's audio track utilize old recordings made by his brother. Maddin was only seven when his older brother, Cameron, died. In his room, Cameron left behind, a vacuum tube radio and his reel to reel tape recorder; much later, in 2005, Maddin discovered a collection of tapes his brother had made as a child:

> I discovered that he was making these recordings of these same acoustic landscapes. Trying to find little stations talking about interesting things of 1959 or 1961 – Marilyn Monroe's suicide or American Air Force talk radio from 1961 of UFO sightings and conspiracy theories. Not much different from late night talk radio now, but sounding so much better because it was filtered through all sorts of distant crackles. [26]

In *My Winnipeg*, the radio recordings of Maddin's dead brother Cameron, occupy the *Dark Charms* (one of the film's intertitles) of the city's hidden alleyways. These streets become a dumping ground, illicit and repressed in 'narrow, unspoken-of by-ways', to emerge as the unmapped unconscious of the city. It is only there, in the 'black arteries' of Winnipeg's unconscious that 'memories most plausibly come alive'. The voiceover describes the existence of these wavelengths, as encountered with the sense that 'the dispatcher seems to speak directly to you'. This impression of a personal communion with memory or the secrets of something hidden, when combined with Maddin's calming voiceover and the sound of radio wavelengths, elaborates a filmic version of Deharme's therapeutic radio.

The final sequence of *My Winnipeg* shuttles through a reflective montage of black and white photographs, intercut with blurred shots of snow and Maddin's gently melancholic narration. This final section of voiceover further reveals a poeticised 'talking cure' impression of Maddin's film as catharsis (intertitle in italics):

---

[24] Darren Wershler, *Guy Maddin's My Winnipeg* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), p. 19.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Guy Maddin, quoted by Darren Wershler, in *Guy Maddin's My Winnipeg*, p.110.

> Who's alive? Who *is* alive? Who's alive anymore? So hard to remember. Sometimes…sometimes I forget. I forget my brother Cameron has gone. I forget my father's been gone since I was 21. At some point, when you miss a place enough, the backgrounds in photos become more important than the people in them. *Dreaming on Couches.* The old living room where we spent almost every waking hour, lying on couches in front of the TV set, my parents and I…lying on couches. Lying on couches. Lying on couches. A chunk of home. White… block… house.

The intertitle, *Dreaming on Couches*, knowingly connotes Freud and oneiric free association while also playing on Maddin's own cultivated slacker imagery – a persona of sofa-bound amateurism and lo-fi enthusiasm, fondly crafted in many of his earlier interviews. It is a phrase that encapsulates nostalgia for a youthful ambition (a topic he admired in Fellini's 1953 film, *I Vitelloni)* while also evoking the psychoanalytical fervour of the 20s and a nod to the sources of his surrealist inspiration. In cutting between old family photographs and a repeated image of falling snow on black, this last sequence pulses in and out of clarity, tuning between Maddin's memories as if drifting in and out of signal. The repetition of certain lines in voiceover was also used in an earlier film, *Brand upon the Brain!*, where the actor playing 'Guy' is told to 'cover it up, cover it up', a mantra that refers to him painting the walls of his childhood home – a lulling invitation to forget, to repress, and to hedonistically invert the teaching of therapy but exploitatively through its own methods of expression. This repetitive technique is also later revisited in *Keyhole* with the persistent repetition of: 'Remember Ulysses, remember'; unlike the escape of memory in *Brand upon the Brain!*, *Keyhole* is a film that actively seeks out memory, haunting the spaces of a house where memories and dreams are now ghosts. In patterns of haunted therapy, voiceover and the audio inclusion of a tuning radio and its transmissions, Maddin twists Deharme's therapeutic dimension back into a position of authorial origin. Therefore the films indulge a version of Maddin's own autobiographical psychoanalysis, as opposed to presenting the audience with a field for their own therapeutic reception.[27]

In Ashbery's *Flow Chart*, what was autobiographical in Maddin's radio listening interacts with Deharme's emphasis on experiential reception, creating a poem that does draw from personal therapy but that then opens its expression to a broader experiential mimesis of listening. Helen Vendler describes *Flow Chart* as being, amongst other things, 'a ham-radio station; an old trunk full of memories', a description that would no doubt appeal to Maddin. Just as Maddin's films contain diegetic references to radio contraptions, *Flow Chart* gestures to itself as a mixed transmission: 'It's the lunatic frequency this time' (FC, 36). As readers, we are in a space where 'Everybody's vote must be accepted/into the/tilting radio tower that is

[27] This self-mythologizing and delirious psychoanalysis most prominently concerns *Cowards bend the Knee* (2003), *Brand Upon the Brain!* (2006), and *My Winnipeg* (2007), three films he refers to as the 'Me Trilogy'.

collapsing in one's own best interest' (FC, 38). In the preliminary pages of part two, we encounter the advice: 'Pick a channel, explore, document it' (FC, 43). Further into the garrulous expanse of the poem, one of the many voices that float in and out of its ragged broadcast considers that 'maybe a noise/will remind me' to then conclude that, 'Tonight all the old ghosts are back on the radio' (FC, 121-2).[28] Yet it is beyond explicit references that *Flow Chart* most innovatively relates to radio.

Unlike the Californian poet, Jack Spicer, and his orphic analogy of the poet *as* a radio (*Language*,1965) and unlike Allen Ginsberg's collaged inclusion of radio broadcasts in 'Wichita Vortex Sutra' (1966), radio in *Flow Chart* is instead present as an experiential model of listening – in tuning between stations and of interrupting signals – that becomes comparable to the process of reading. Just as *Three Poems* was able to manipulate and explore attention to offer an experiential mimesis of dreaming, *Flow Chart* cultivates an experiential model through a sense of textual static. It is this sensation of reading through a kind of textual static, which I will explore in detail in the following section, that draws the Surrealism of *Flow Chart* toward Maddin's appreciation of the 'acoustic landscapes' and 'distant crackles' of radio. Therefore, to read *Flow Chart* in conjunction with Maddin and its connection with Surrealism, reconfigures Vendler's description of 'a ham-radio station' into the plural: as the movement that tunes *between stations* in a scanning back and forth. Consequently, reading the poem induces interpretive experiences that resemble those felt on listening to types of noise.

Interruption as Interference in Flow Chart

Central to reading *Flow Chart* in relation to noise is the role of interruption; this sense of interruption influences a reader's interpretation in ways that evoke a listener's relationship with audio interference. It is in this analogy with audio interference that *Flow Chart* corresponds with radio static in Maddin's films, while also drawing upon Desnos' distinction and departure from Deharme's theories. Deharme was adamant that each broadcast should be structured with a 'controlling frame' to ensure that any dream-like state was securely

[28] Relevant to the suggestion, 'the old ghosts are back on the radio' is Ashbery's enthusiasm for Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée* (1950). In the *Bard Observer,* 17th May 1991 (the year *Flow Chart* was published) *Ashbery commented*: "I've often been struck by a line from the Cocteau movie *Orphée.* He was being examined by these three sinister judges, and one of them says, 'what do you do,' and [Orpheus] says, 'I am a poet,' and the judge says, 'what does that mean,' to which Orpheus replies, 'It's to write and not be a writer.'" Though Cocteau and his films were often a point of contention for many surrealists, the link with the radio should be noted: Orpheus (played by Jean Marias) is portrayed as a poet, he listens to cryptic messages through the static of a car radio that serve as poetic inspiration.

compartmentalised: 'so that the threshold between real and imagined may be ultimately preserved.'[29] For instance, before the start of a radio programme, Deharme would have an introductory narrator or choir. Forms of introductory and sporadic commentary were designed, as markers of structure, to provide and manage the radio space of catharsis (be it a play, poem or programme), defining the perimeters of real and imagined without confusion. These are delineations that for *Flow Chart* dissolve in the poetic equivalent of 'a painting / that would never ache for a frame but dream on' (FC, 8). This use of interruption-as-interference chimes with Caws' definition of interruption as 'something positive: it works towards openness and struggles against the system of closure, undoing categories.'[30] It is a definition that allows *Flow Chart* to continue what Ashbery referred to (in his preceding collection *April Galleons*, 1987) as: 'the desire to get lost in everything' (AG, p.859). Similarly, it was Deharme's 'threshold' that Desnos himself would begin to complicate in a sensitivity to radio interference conceived as creative opportunity.

Charles Nunley describes Desnos' poem, 'Le veilleur du Pont-Au-Change' ('The watchman of Pont-Au-Change', 1942), as a demonstration of 'radio as a medium on which to model his emancipatory message,' while comparing it to Charles de Gaulle's 'Appel du 18 juin,' as the 'quintessential radio transmission of French Resistance memory'.[31] From this, Nunley concludes:

> The most important difference between the two is the presence in Desnos's poem of acoustic "interference" (or, as known in French, "parasites"): Desnos resolutely insists on imbedding his voice within a Parisian context comprised of competing sounds whose disharmony and conflictual character combine to create a sense of contingency nowhere apparent in de Gaulle's text.[32]

Nunley argues that Desnos' poem, in which a man stands on a bridge speaking and listening as messages collide and merge, depicts interference to convey the difficulty in assimilating a singular or reliable voice. This is a perspective Desnos would have arrived at through his active role in the French Resistance and the journalistic commitments to *Aujourd'hui*, which he wrote for during a period of censorship and tight information control. Messages were interrupted and so subsequently the signal (or message) was no longer a singular or 'pure' communication but a plurality that embodied interference. Martin Kevorkian expands upon

[29] Birkenmaier, 'Paul Deharme's Radio Theory,' p.368.
[30] Mary Ann Caws, *The Art of Interference: Stressed Readings in Verbal and Visual Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p.6.
[31] Charles Nunley, 'For the Record: Desnos, Music and Wartime Memory', *Substance: A Review of Theory & Literary Criticism*, 38 (2009), pp. 113-135 (p.119).
[32] Charles Nunley, 'For the Record: Desnos, Music and Wartime Memory', p.120.

the French significance of interference as 'parasites', in an essay on *Flow Chart*: 'Ashbery acts as a parasite – his poetry derives informational complexity by parasiting, adding bits of noise to, the messages of ordinary language'.[33] Kevorkian also cites Lawrence Schehr, translator of Michel Serres' book of essays, *The Parasite* (1982): 'the parasite is noise as well, the static in a system or the interference in a channel'.[34] As much as Kevorkian brilliantly explicates the linguistic suggestions of parasitism in relation to Serres and Ashbery, building on a specific mention of the parasite (FC 19) in *Flow Chart*, he does little to then explore the impact this has on reading the poem. To do this requires the re-examination of interruption, leading to a cumulative effect where 'slippery harmonies abound' (FC, 126) and the poem's form of noise or 'textual interference' can be said to exist.

Ashbery had always demonstrated an interest in interruption as a poetic possibility, from his admiration of Roussel's digressive narratives and the early interruptive structure of 'The Instruction Manual' to the two columned reading dilemmas of 'Litany' (*As We Know*, 1979). As David Herd has noted, Ashbery was

> happy to be interrupted – a visitor or a telephone call diverting the course of a poem – by the late 1980s Ashbery had for some time been increasingly aware of the interruption that would end all interruptions. It was a preoccupation that became central in *Flow Chart*.[35]

Herd contextualises the concept of interruption alongside biographical details as increasingly expressive of its own more ultimate articulation in death, the final interruption that lends *Flow Chart* its own spectral *memento mori*. At the time of revising *Flow Chart*, Ashbery was also writing his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures (entitled *Other Traditions*, ruminating on the writers that Ashbery turns to for inspiration: Clare, Beddoes, Roussel, Wheelwright, Riding and Schubert), which encouraged a form of 'creative reading' that would stray from canonized maps of literary history and tradition. The shadow of this discussion on literary neglect, as Herd asserts, is an anxious concern for endurance. Written only a few years after Ashbery had almost died following a sudden spine-infection, and, through Winkfield's suggestion, responding to his own mother's death, *Flow Chart* was written during a period in which time and mortality became intrusive influences. All this contributes to a pre-emptively posthumous contemplation of what his poetry had or had not attained and how, more broadly,

[33] Martin Kevorkian, 'JOHN ASHBERY'S FLOW CHART: JOHN ASHBERY and THE THEORISTS on JOHN ASHBERY against THE CRITICS against JOHN ASHBERY', p.471.
[34] Lawrence Schehr, cited by Kevorkian, p.469.
[35] Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, p.209.

this related to a sense of life and time. This melancholy apprehension filters through into much of *Flow Chart*: 'Now there's not/ a trace to indicate anything ever existed here. Kind of makes you wonder how/ *this* place will look when you're gone (FC, 45); and soon after, 'It's what you *can* do that/ matters / more than the whole picture, but the older we grow, the more unused to the/ idea of dying – / and I'm sorry I brought the subject up – we become' (FC, 49).

The earlier poem 'Litany' (*As We Know*, 1979), in its demanding extension of the two-column form, first used in the poem 'To the Same Degree' (TCO, 114-5), initially seems the most concrete example of interruption in Ashbery's oeuvre. Faced with two columns of text, the reader literally has to interrupt the reading of one to consider the other – as if flicking between two stations. In *Flow Chart* there is no such formal differentiation; all of the colliding stations are submerged in the continuous flow of Ashbery's long lines. Therefore the reading of *Flow Chart* diverges from what was a dichotomy of attention staged in 'Litany' and its mischievous '*simultaneous but independent monologues*' (AWK, 553), escalating to create a vast, ambient babble: 'the chatter/never subsides/but like the tide of dust of the oceans, returns and retreats' (FC, 73). In trying to navigate this 'chatter' and its artistic worth (both in its writing and in speculative anticipation of how it will read), Ashbery posits the choice between a rooted focus and a more drifting interaction with the text. Framed in terms of a 'moral dilemma' (FC, 100), the reader's choice of *how* to proceed in reading *Flow Chart* seems a nascent metaphor in the contemplation of relationships:

> is it better to remain single, conscious of the many
> overlapping half-lives that with luck add up to one, or should
> we be planted at many listening posts ready to radio vital information back to
> whoever […].
>
> (FC, 100-101)

The singular concentration suggests, perhaps, a more linear and controlled attempt at traditionally moving through the text, while still sensing the 'overlapping half-lives', as meaning that accrues in peripheral distraction. To 'be planted at many listening posts' conversely implies a more roving reception to the poem's 'information'. How, therefore, do we 'radio' *Flow Chart*, can it be tuned for 'vital information' and what can 'overlapping' signals convey?

The proposed choice between two types of reading, illustrated through the metaphor of social or amorous relationships, slides into a series of consecutive questions. These questions

('And will my genuine if respectful indifference militate/against the neutrality of my performance? Is a conflict of interest shaping up, or/ what?', FC, 101) build on the semi-veiled contemplation of reading, exercising a typically Ashberian trope of coinciding content with its communication:

> My poems are frequently comments on themselves as they're getting written and therefore the methodology occasionally coincides with the subject. They are the record of a thought process – the process and the thought reflect back and forth on each other.[36]

It is this 'back and forth' we have long become accustomed to in Ashbery's poetry. From 'The Skaters' and its rhythm of snowflakes ('into positive and back to a slightly diluted abstract' RM, 153) allowing a dance of distracted thought to become the flurry of content, to *Three Poems*, in which the only way to experience subjectivity – as personal content in and of itself – is in the *process* of looking for it. Again, in the poem 'Vaucanson', from *April Galleons:* 'It hurts, this wanting to give a dimension/ to life, when life is precisely that dimension' (AG, 831). Therefore, as Ashbery notes in *Flow Chart*, this inherently interruptive play is not a new development: 'I know I explained this once but/ […] It's only a re-working, a scissors-/and paste/ job' (FC, 129), yet despite this concession, it is arguably exercised with a new ambition.

To demonstrate the extent and influence of interruption within *Flow Chart* merits the inclusion of a large excerpt:

> Or will these woolly, ball-like constituents of my flock teeter
> permanently on the edge of forgiveness, of having something to say
> even when I'm down the fire stairs preparing to exit into the alley, before losing
> myself in the turbid flood of passersby that wearily
> accosts one in the major thoroughfare it empties into? People that look like the
> Gov and Min
> in a more strained version: the colors are soiled even when the long coats are clean,
> and move swiftly past to tea or some such tropical rendezvous.
> They've had it with us, seems to be the universal psalm emanating from some
> debris' psaltery:
> and anyway, who dat man wid de fish? Is he the one who must drive death's
> wagon for a year
> until somebody else dies and has to take over his job? (And how spidery the *attelage,*
> the incomplete wheels.) Oh we must be ever saying and sighing
> until what's-its-name gets you up there again, to turn the ever-accomplished phrases

[36] John Ashbery, cited in Andrew DuBois, *Ashbery's Forms of Attention* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2006), pp. 62-3.

> once more and file out having been paid; then there's an argument, a stout middle-aged woman accuses a
> weasley person of trying to grab her handbag and all hell breaks loose:
> fat Irish policemen in outdated uniforms frantically blow on tin whistles until
> a phantom paddy wagon drawn by six slavering horses careens down the narrow, muddied street.
>
> (FC, 101)

Poetry is here characterised as a precarious flock of sheep wandering near the precipice of sense and communication; meanwhile the poet feels removed ('down the fire stairs preparing to exit'), before again returning to Ashbery's default stance of being lost 'in the turbid flow'. The comical sheep metaphor, with its 'woolly, ball-like constituents' evokes the visual illusion of a coherent mass, composed of varying independent factors: the flock and its individual sheep. It is an image that indirectly suggests its own acoustic equivalent, the muffled 'teeter' of wavelengths, that when experienced together assemble in their own composite ambience of interruptions and jostling static. This image subtly re-positions its focus on the tail end of its own description: 'the turbid flow,' in which the poet disappears, diverts our memory of the original image. This switch plays with and elongates expectations of the metaphor, subverting assumptions with which we greet such literary techniques. Instead of the metaphor retaining an enclosed instance of visualized evocation with which to serve its subject, the evocation usurps the subject and thus what was previously a literary mechanism inhabits the privileged position as a new subject. This play between the tenor and vehicle of descriptions can be found in the inventively extended metaphors of Lautréamont's *Maldoror* and the shifting frames of narrative in Roussel's novel *Locus Solus*. The accumulative effect recalls Bernstein's observation of 'The Skaters' as finding a 'third way' between parataxis and hypotaxis in *associative parataxis*. While the lines of the poem appear to pulse in and out of reception, the changes in direction do not sever but merge, maintaining the reader's impression of an organizing consistency – the image of the flock.[37]

The ovine metaphor is then further convoluted in a magnified inspection of what had originally seemed a subordinate detail of its image. The people who constitute the 'turbid flow' are described as 'look[ing] like the/Gov and Min'. The line plays with the potential tension that can exist between phonetics and appearance, inviting a disturbance between two linguistic 'signals' to interfere with readerly reception. On the page and visually, 'Gov and

[37] If this is the case then interruption and its potential for parataxis is softened, unlike the line by line interruption in the cut and paste of 'Europe', a long poem of violent experimentation from *The Tennis Court Oath*'s: 'Have you encouraged judge/ inked commentary/approaching obvious battle/summer night less ecstatic/ train over scream . . . mountain/into woods' (TCO, 96); 'Wild margins are possible/The gold a "call"/Options his life . . . flea' (TCO, 105) etc.

Min' look like cartoon names or unknown abbreviations, however when repeated phonetically merge to sound out 'Government.' Is this to be taken as the encroaching authority under which our, always fragile, 'something to say,' is lost or threatened? Are 'Gov' and 'Min' emblematic of the abbreviations and acronyms that so often bolster and codify systems of power, distracting from intentions as 'Government'? Our attention is commanded to follow a direction that leaves the original metaphor even further behind.

After 'Gov and Min' we have the cryptic, 'in a more strained version: the colours are soiled even when the long coats are clean', a line in which any sense pertaining to the original metaphor is almost entirely clouded, ushering in a change of direction. The signal is lost, the next line seems to continue the interference with 'and move swiftly past to tea or some such tropical rendezvous,' which vaguely sways the mind towards a moving away or break, humorously juxtaposing the banality of 'tea' with a 'tropical rendezvous'. Here a new interruption or emergent wavelength seems to return us more clearly to the reflexive discussion of the poem and its poetics: 'They've had it with us, seems to be the universal psalm emanating from some/debris' psaltery'. It seems Ashbery is here pre-empting a reader's exasperation, 'They've had it with us', in which perhaps 'they' indicates not only the Ashberian slipperiness of pronoun ambiguity and an imagined readership, but also the busy collectivism which enters into *Flow Chart*'s poetic *Flow*. The 'universal psalm' then immediately problematizes or reconfigures this negative doubt as a song of praise. *Flow Chart* becomes 'debris' psaltery,' a phrase that recalls the preoccupation of *Three Poems*, with its realisation: 'It is so much debris of living' (TP, 249). If *Three Poems* was fascinated with the 'debris of living' then *Flow Chart* becomes the musical instrument forged from that debris (a 'psaltery' is an Ancient Greek instrument akin to a harp).

This rumination is cut short with the dismissive aside of 'and anyway,' a vernacular shrug which deflates the classical music and poetic theorizing which precedes it. This interruption then leads to what appears to be a clumsy imitation of African American dialect: 'who dat man wid de fish?' It is a line that seems to blurt out from its surroundings, announced with the oblivious disregard of an elderly relative awkwardly airing his or her racism at a family gathering. Despite neatly adhering to its contextual syntax, the line delights in finding another way in which to smuggle in new wavelengths, new signals with which, despite superficial sense and positioning, break through and interrupt the reader's relation to the text.

This is then followed, significantly without any acknowledgement (just as crowds will often deal with an embarrassing outburst) into an obscure personification of death driving a wagon, an image supplemented by the parenthetical afterthought '(And how spidery the

attelage, the incomplete wheels.)'. The unexpected appearance of the French noun '*attelage*' not only allows for the linguistic interruption of French, but also, is further playfully disrupted in its meaning. 'Attelage' is defined as a yoke between two animals or the connecting mechanism that allows separate things to work together, Ashbery interrupts this definition with the vulnerability suggested by 'spidery'. The consequent image, one of weak or tangled connections and 'incomplete wheels,' further develops the intimation of a space in which mixed signals strain against each other. This sense of a mounting commotion or crossing of voices is again echoed when we are informed that 'there's an argument'. Suddenly the poem transports its imagery into the visual tropes of early silent comedy in cinema. A woman has her handbag stolen, 'policemen in outdated uniforms frantically blow on tin whistles', and a 'phantom paddy wagon' arrives on the scene, drawn by 'six slavering horses.'

In only 21 lines (relative to its 216-page bulk), the passage analysed above steers its current through: metaphorical sheep and the act of reading; a linguistic dissection of 'government'; an ironically ornate expression of poetic doubt; an odd impersonating outburst of dialect; death; failing connections and, finally, into the fray of a scene redolent of a Buster Keaton sketch. The eclecticism of topics, tone and lexical reference, is faithfully demonstrative of *Flow Chart* as a landscape of heterogeneity. In one panoramic observation that could be reflexively emblematic of the poem itself, a vast spectrum is relayed in which:

> Breakfasts were consumed; houses were put up for sale; and the whole sad, bad
> shimmer of it
> charmed viewers the way a cobra is mesmerized and waves deliciously to and fro
> in the temperate breeze, the while sink-holes open up, and K-Marts fall into them,
> as icebergs are delivered up to the whims of oceans.
>
> (FC, 116)

In short, a poem that seems to wildly siphon everything and anything into its eccentric collation and yet is still sustained with the momentum and outward semblance of coherence – the *Chart* to its *Flow* : 'the drone that submerges grace-notes in the conviction/ of its being' (FC, 142). One is given the impression of a busy, disparate and amorphous flow that still manages to find itself knitted together, and that 'To listen only for a moment is to bathe/in it as in a possibility' (FC, 142).

Finding peaks of clarity within 'the whole sad, bad, /shimmer' of *Flow Chart* begins to closely resemble Maddin's nostalgic description of listening to radio static:

> I'm kind of an obsessive, and as a kid I became obsessed with baseball broadcasts from very distant American AM radio stations for a while. Listening to them is like listening to secret CIA short-wave 'casts – they're very layered with interferences from other stations, or percussive signals from satellites or something. It's like listening to a sound sculpture, and every now and then a pitch count, or a play-by-play announcer's voice would weave in throughout all the static and crackle and give a little bit of desperately needed information before weaving off into the distance again. Since the reinforcement was so intermittent I really got hooked to listening to this stuff in my loneliest, most virginal, deepest darkest adolescent days.[38]

Finding a 'sound sculpture' in amidst 'percussive signals' and 'interferences from other stations', gathered in fleeting moments of connection 'before weaving off into the distance' seems a near perfect evocation of reading *Flow Chart*. A process the poem itself appears to describe as 'sifting a mountain of detritus/indefinitely in search of tiny yellow blades of grass' (FC, 83). The question is then, what does this relentlessly interruptive kind of poetry (experienced as a kind of textual interference) communicate? To answer this comprehensively requires a return to a much earlier point in the development of Ashbery's poetry.

One of the very formative experiences that came to influence Ashbery's writing occurred in 1952, when he and Frank O'Hara attended John Cage's New Year's Day concert. On hearing Cage's 'Music of Changes', an atonal piano piece of seemingly random notes (in fact calculated in correlation to a reading of *I Ching*, an ancient Chinese text of divination) and extended pauses, Ashbery has commented:

> It was just arbitrary bangs on the piano over quite a long period of time. And long pauses. I had been in a drought with my writing. I felt I hadn't written anything good in almost a year. It really gave me ideas about how to write poetry again.[39]

Not unlike Maddin's encounter with an emerging 'sound sculpture' in the 'percussive signals' and interference of his brother's recordings, Ashbery found inspiration in what he perceived to be 'arbitrary bangs'; both were responding to the act of listening as a creative process. Just as Ashbery will often cite Henri Michaux's observation on Surrealism as *le grande*

[38] Guy Maddin, quoted by Darren Wershler, in *Guy Maddin's My Winnipeg* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), p.19.
[39] John Ashbery, in conversation with Michael H. Miller, 'The Meaning of All This: Talking to John Ashbery about his Past, Present and Future,' *New York Observer*. < http://observer.com/2013/01/the-meaning-of-all-this-talking-to-john-ashbery-about-his-past-present-and-future/ >[accessed September 2013]

permission, it seems fitting in this discussion of Surrealism and noise, to note that Cage's concert also similarly provided a kind of permission for a new found poetic inspiration.[40]

Shared by many New York painters and poets working at the time, the influence of Cage is felt far earlier than *Flow Chart* in the commitment to the methods and meaning of play and chance in art. Delivered as part of a lecture in Seattle, 1937, Cage exclaimed:

> Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of a truck at fifty miles per hour. Static between stations. Rain. We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but musical instruments.[41]

It is no wonder this sentiment, exemplified in the concert Ashbery and O'Hara attended in 1952, would appeal to the young poets who would later go on to help characterise elements of the 'New York School' spirit. Despite the poets (John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler and Barbara Guest) sharing a discomfort with John Bernard Myers' homogenising 'New York School' tag, the collaborative friendships that circled the Tibor De Nagy Gallery undeniably became integral to shared and challenged principles across painting and poetry.

Providing a hub for collaboration, the gallery and its publications brought poets and painters into an encouraged and supported dialogue. These collaborations had no interest in what Jenni Quilter denotes as 'illustrative *ekphrasis* – namely, that a poem might "describe" a painting, or a painting "illustrate" a poem.'[42] Instead, Quilter discerns a '*dissonance* between word and image'(italics mine) in the collaborations.[43] When asked about the influence of poetry on her work, Jane Freilicher, the New York painter and lifelong friend to Ashbery, referred to the indirect relationship between word and image as 'a sympathetic vibration, a natural syntax'; a creativity that playfully, and in play, explores a rhythm of difference and intuition between each medium and each person.[44] The creative 'dissonance' of this 'sympathetic vibration' can be observed in an abundance of collaborative works that spans the

[40] Henri Michaux cited by John Ashbery, 'An Interview with Henri Michaux' (1982), in *Reported Sightings*,pp.396-404.
[41] John Cage, 'The Future of Music: Credo' (originally delivered as a talk and later printed in the brochure to accompany Cage's twenty-five-year retrospective at Town Hall, New York, 1958) in *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (London: Marion Boyars, 2009), p.3.
[42] Jenni Quilter, 'The Love of Looking: Collaborations Between Artists and Writers', in Douglas Crase and Jenni Quilter, *Painters & Poets - Tibor De Nagy Gallery* (New York: Tibor De Nagy Gallery, 2011) p. 75.
[43] Quilter, p.77.
[44] Jane Freilicher, quoted by Jenni Quilter, in 'The Love of Looking: Collaborations Between Artists and Writers', p.77.

so-called *first* and *second* generations of the New York School, with its main artistic counterparts in Grace Hartigan, Jane Freilicher, Larry Rivers, Nell Blaine, Joe Brainard, Joan Mitchell, Trevor Winkfield, and George Schneeman.[45] Throughout all of the collaborative partnerships, a background debt to Cage's welcoming cultivation of noise is present. Appropriately encapsulated in the sentiment of his own words, his influence imparted

> […] the form of a paradox: a purposeful purposelessness or a purposeless play. This play, however, is an affirmation of life – not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living.[46]

This embrace of play may have animated elements of what could be called a New York School spirit, but it is not until *Flow Chart* that Ashbery really develops from theorising to uncompromisingly, and on a larger scale, enacting.

Aftter the disjunctive collage techniques of *The Tennis Court Oath,* in which the play of language fragments with often confrontational opacity (making it so popular with the Language poets), in *Rivers and Mountains*, 'The Skaters' also hints at a desire for the play of noisy inclusion, but in a way that moves toward its significance for *Flow Chart*:

> Some paroxysms are dinning of tambourine, others suggest
> piano room or organ loft
> For the most dissonant night charms us, even after death.
> This, after all may be happiness: tuba notes awash on
> the great flood, ruptures of xylophone, violins, limpets,
> grace-notes, the musical instrument called serpent, viola
> da gambas, aeolian harps, clavicles, pinball machines,
> electric drills, que sais-je encore!
> The performance has rapidly reached your ear; silent and tear-
> stained, in the post-mortem shock, you stand listening,
> awash
> With memories of hair in particular, part of the welling that is
> you
>
> (RM, 148)

In keeping with the 'flagellation' of the poem's opening 'decibels' (RM, 147), sound is here characterised in 'paroxysms,' 'dinning' and 'shock,' and yet this 'dissonant' cacophony

[45] Although more commonly associated with the Beat poets, the painter and filmmaker Alfred Leslie could also be considered as an important collaborator and friend to Frank O'Hara.
[46] John Cage, 'Experimental Music' (originally an address to the convention of the Musical Teachers Association in Chicago in 1957, reprinted for the twenty-five-year retrospective in 1958), in *Silence*, p.12.

'charms us'. The eclecticism of this playfully abrasive catalogue implies a challenge to 'music' as a reified definition, and like Cage (and before him the Futurists, with Luigi Russolo's manifesto, 'The Art of Noises', 1913) it questions the exclusions of that tradition.[47] Ashbery's *Flow Chart* no longer intimates or describes the 'dissonant night' encountered in 'The Skaters', but instead becomes a version of that dissonance. As if in an allusive glance over the shoulder, *Flow Chart* mischievously remembers this presentation of 'noise' in 'The Skaters', harking back to its catalogue of instruments: 'Here, take my viola/ de gamba, that dump again, it had a…Sipping ouzo is something' (FC, 129). Even in this reference to noise as a poetic subject, communication is demonstrably interrupted in the enactment of its own subject; the details of the 'viola de gamba', anticipated by, 'it had a', is replaced by blank suspense ('…') and a divergent observation, 'Sipping ouzo is something', which suggests a competing transmission.

Interference as Memory

Read as a building disturbance of signals, *Flow Chart* stages a haunting play of presence and absence that mimics the experience of memory. It is here that Ashbery's explanation of his poetry, as 'the *record* of a thought process' (italics mine) in which 'the process and the thought reflect back and forth on each other', again becomes relevant. Writing is the method of recording and continual interruption embodies its trace as a kind of linguistic noise, attached to, distorting and interacting with the thought process that writing/language seeks to express. Using interruption to dramatize the poem's own recording noise produces a mode through which the sensation of remembering – or trying to remember – is newly articulated. Therefore, like Deharme's need to transfer creative agency to the listenership, Ashbery does not simply describe his own memories in *Flow Chart* but finds, through a poetics of interruption-as-interference, a way to induce its sensations in the reader: 'it was a tangle and will never be anything / more than a diagram pointing you in a senseless direction toward yourself' (FC, 109). What occurs on one level as an apparently 'senseless' flow of interruptions is in fact the very same 'tangle' that brings the reader ('yourself') into a more

[47] This passage also recalls George Antheil's radical score, *Ballet Méchanique*, originally composed to accompany Ferdinand Léger's Dadaist, experimental film of the same name. The first orchestration of this piece (later amended to a more practical size and realisation) ambitiously called for 16 pianolas, 2 pianos, 3 xylophones, at least 7 electric bells, a siren, 4 bass drums, 1 tam tam and 3 propellers. It was never performed with the full and intended orchestration until 1999, further information can be found at Paul. D. Lehrman's site, devoted to *Ballet Méchanique*. <http://www.antheil.org/> [accessed September 2013]

immediate awareness of their own experience: in the case of *Flow Chart*, primarily the experience of memory.

Understanding the movement of interruption, specifically that of a recording process, in light of memory, is addressed in Stan Link's essay entitled, 'The Work of Reproduction in the Mechanical Aging of an Art: Listening to Noise'. Link seeks to 're-evaluate the phenomenal state preserved by recording: signal interference, impurity, degradation, static.'[48] This is a trend in recorded contemporary music (documented as a trend in the early 90s –as Ashbery was writing *Flow Chart* – and growing in proliferation) for the purposeful inclusion of recording 'noise', be it the sound of a stylus being dropped on a record, the crackle of static, or the hum of wires. Link goes on to examine the nature of this audio production in its emulation of out-dated accidents of recording, expanding upon nostalgia for analogue and why it might be attached to a vague sense of 'authenticity'. It is in this search for a nebulously sensed authenticity that a digital age, for which recording no longer leaves a trace but is a process capable of exact replication, finds new value in listening to noise. A fetishized conception of the *original* source of music, as a *pure* object has traditionally led recording trends to eliminate 'noise,' in an attempt to repress any residual, audible distractions left by the process of recording. The growing interest in music to include acoustic traces of its own recording (even if simulated) engenders far more than a novelty appreciation of process. In contrast to simply being a 'behind the scenes' sense of contact, Link presents the inclusion of recording 'noise' in terms of its experiential significance. In contrast to prioritising the musical object received through 'technological transparency', to encounter acoustic evidence of the recording process within the recorded document conveys mediation. [49]

When this 'noise' of mediation is consciously incorporated as part of the content it recalls the circumstances of recording as a temporal and even spatial incident, thus as Link attests: 'it asserts experience.'[50] Link goes on to argue:

> regarding noise as interference with, or degradation of, a signal inherently implies a sentience perceiving it as such. As a barrier to the signal, noise engenders interference with transmission as well as embodying an effort to receive. Thus, if applied noise is the reconstruction of a listening environment, then the environment is occupied. Noise occasions presence.[51]

[48] Stan Link, 'The Work of Reproduction in the Mechanical Aging of an Art: Listening to Noise,' *Computer Music Journal*, 25:1 (Spring 2001), 34- 47 (p. 35).
[49] Stan Link, p.37.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.

The purposefully interruptive presence of process indicates a further and empirical presence *behind* that process, just as '[r]adio static engenders someone tuning in or trying to listen.'[52] However, in tension with this realisation of a presence behind process (whether of recording, filming, or writing), there is also an antithetical absence (experienced by the listener, viewer, or reader) emanating from an attention to process, at *not having been there* at its making. This leads Link to conclude that 'noise' 'can thus trigger an experience of both presence and absence: '"Navigating" among scenes and identifications means the listener encounters oscillations between them.'[53] In this instance play is not simply a methodology as a basis for collaboration, chance and accident, but a condition of reception and hermeneutics sensitively attuned to experiences of memory. If we recall the end of the previously quoted passage on noise from 'The Skaters':

> The performance has rapidly reached your ear; silent and tear-
> stained, in the post-mortem shock, you stand listening,
> awash
> With memories of hair in particular, part of the welling that is
> you,
>
> (RM, 148)

A personal reflection on the past is prompted in the internalised sensation ('post mortem shock') of Ashbery's listed cacophony. This reaction follows Link's argument: that to hear the noise of recording *on* a recording heightens the listener's awareness of the document above the event, and thus a passage of change. This mediated change, communicated in the noise of recording (a process of documentation), 'engenders not only the erosion of the source – the diminishing effect of documentation – but the deprecation and loss of event that characterizes time's passage.'[54] Time's passage is internalized as an experience of memory, 'awash/With memories of hair'. Link remarks that it is 'listening through noise' which can offer a 'tangible experience of time.'

These connections (a flux of presence and absence, memory and time) have enshrouded the history of communication technology and developments in recording equipment, providing a more melancholy dimension to the equally prevalent associations with

[52] Ibid.
[53] Stan Link, p.38.
[54] Stan Link, p.39.

paranormal activity.[55] For Desnos, in an early collection, *Prospectus* (1919), the phonograph became a potent symbol of recorded noise in the poem 'Mon tombeau', where he imagines that 'on my grave a phonograph/will sing night and day'.[56] It finishes with the lines: 'On my grave a record player/will recite this epitaph/ LIBERTY EQUALITY FRATERNITY'.[57] The revolutionary slogan ends the poem in a flourish that, despite attempting a reach towards triumphant immortality, cannot shift from its root in the phonograph's haunted image. For Desnos, a machine that animates a recorded voice from the past materializes in the present an unsettling play of absence and presence that, in memorializing time, belongs to the melancholy of the grave. Katherine Conley, in her study on Desnos, additionally suggests that his poetry offers an anticipation of 'the way that Breton would describe the automatic experience as an act of listening', referencing an apposite moment in the first manifesto in which Breton declares, 'we, who […] in our works have made ourselves into simple receptacles of so many echoes, modest *recording instruments*' (FM, 27-8). Drawn through the unconscious and into conscious recollection, memories are only ever distorted, condensed or disappearing versions of the event that produced them, recovered in forms encountered through our own recording noise. *Flow Chart* concocts a type of poetry that combines the sadness of Desnos' 'Mon Tombeau' with the possibilities of Breton's '*recording instruments'*; the noise of recording prompts and mingles with the reflective sense of memory and time, to create poetry in which 'A blast of gramophone music veers into the shutters from time to time. In those/ days and/ in that time' (FC, 179).

Through its interruptive style, and as Link's theories suggest, *Flow Chart* heightens the reader's contact with 'document' above the (never clearly disclosed) 'event' and consequently, like so much of Ashbery's poetry, the act of a recording – the writing and reading of a 'document' – becomes the 'event'. However, what distinguishes *Flow Chart* from other Ashbery poems is how, through its duration, this active emphasis on the passage of change comes to be acutely felt and understood as the movement of memory. One of the ways in which Ashbery frequently refers to a sense of the poem's recording noise is through repeated allusions to his own trace within the poem. Through the poem's reflexive contemplation of its own place among Ashbery's other works, its autobiographical interests, and a pre-emptive awareness of critical and academic reception, it consistently questions and exposes the conditions and expectations of its own making. Yet while Ashbery is aware of these reflexive methods as familiar to many of his other poems (as *Flow Chart* often makes

[55] See Jeff Sconce, *Haunted Media.*
[56] Robert Desnos, 'Mon tombeau', cited by Katharine Conley, *Robert Desnos, Surrealism and the Marvelous of Everyday Life* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), p.101.
[57] Ibid.

clear through its allusions to repetition), there is also an escalation of this trait which imbues *Flow Chart* with a more invested trace of Ashbery's own 'recording' presence. Ashbery seems to note this increased assertion of his own trace through frequent nods to the nickname O'Hara had given him: 'ashes'. The 'ashes' of his nickname, drift through the poem, at one point even underlining their own significance in articulating – as Link suggests in the trace of 'document' – a passage of change: 'the pattern lost, and who is to say if I made it up/ or someone who was here before and departed, leaving no trace/of his passing, no flicker of ashes in the grate' (FC, 119). At one point there is a call for 'Somebody [to] dust these ashes off, open/ the curtains, get a little light on the subject', punning on the 'subject' of Ashbery's persona as 'ashes', and the poem's interrupted subject as content. There is a nod to the connection between 'ashes' as a trace that connects to time, and as the document of change rooted in the past: 'The mound of cold ashes that we call/for want of a better word the past' (FC, 27). Elsewhere in the poem's flow we are informed, 'the ashes have been left/ far behind' (FC, 71), and later: 'We aren't even sure/ we saw him. It could have been wildflowers in the wallpaper/ or stray ashes in the grate' (FC, 106).

Whilst the trace of 'ashes', as the presence of a kind of recording noise, connotes the past and a sense of memory, the poem significantly prevents the specifics of event or detail to structure that sense of memory, beyond its presence as a passage. This inability to recall or locate what it is that leaves its trace throughout the poem, is fundamental to the experience of reading the poem: 'by losing it one can have it: it nourishes other asides/it knows nothing of' (FC, 116). As the importance of a vague past haunts the poem (its specifics beyond that ghostly awareness never readily or clearly available), it is also possible to double that intimation and read pages and pages of *Flow Chart* without being able to recall any reducible details. This becomes a reading experience consistently aware of its own rapidly receding memory – the memory of any of the text before the current and present point of attention. For this specifically temporal sensation, understanding becomes circumscribed to a limited span of lines around which the text drops away. Reading attention becomes less like the gentle undulation of focus behind *Three Poems* and its daydreaming philosophy and instead closer to a precarious awareness of our limited capacity to remember:

> *It seems I was reading something;*
> I have forgotten the sense of it or what the small
> role of the central poem made me want to feel. No matter.
>
> (FC, 3)

The densely detailed nature of *Flow Chart* subjects the reader to what can feel like a deluge of overwhelming text, referred to in an essay by Fred Moramarco as both 'exhausting and exhaustive'.[58] In Andrew DuBois' account of Ashbery's poetry he centralises the concept of attention, yet his account skips over *Flow Chart*, referring briefly to its 'rough elegiac coherence' at the beginning of what DuBois portrays as a kind of performed senility in Ashbery's later work.[59] It seems a strange omission of analysis when *Flow Chart,* through its 'exhausting and exhaustive' expanse, poses the reader with a troubled and troubling appeal to *notice* our own attention and, perhaps more tellingly, to notice its limitations.

There are constant reminders, threaded throughout *Flow Chart*, to listen, which as listening becomes metaphorically entwined with remembering could also be read as an urge to recall. These scattered references to listening appear like tentative checkpoints, scanning the multifarious flow of the poem in an effort to evaluate:

> It's better though to listen to the strange chirps of the furniture.
> Listening is a patented device whose manifold uses have scarcely begun to be
> explored
> that one should practice on as many occasions as are deemed profitable.
>
> (FC, 25)
>
> But though reams of work do get done
> not much listens.
>
> (FC, 81)
>
> mix them with others; try to get the most out of
> the variety, as it sifts down to you: the great speckled hen
> on the lookout, or the hyena I dreamed of last night, or salmon leaping in their beds:
> all are abrupt elements in the sum listening leads to […].
>
> (FC, 137)
>
> letting the various settling sounds we hear now
> rest and record the effort any creature has to put forth to summon its spirits
> for a moment and then
> fall silent, hoping that enough has happened?
>
> (FC, 145)

Regardless of how inane, or cryptic they may seem, the details in *Flow Chart* are persistently valued as scraps ('chirps of furniture') carried in the '*Flow*' from which its mapped

[58] Fred Moramarco, 'Coming Full Circle, John Ashbery's Later Poetry', in *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. by Susan M. Schultz (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1995), p. 39.
[59] Andrew DuBois, *Ashbery's Forms of Attention* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), p112.

composite, the *'Chart'*, emerges: 'appealing nonsense would seem to/have/had the last word again', and yet 'from a great distance', the poem assures us, 'it forms a/ pattern' (FC, 128).

It feels likely that these details, when accounted for in their motley aggregate, prompt Ashbery to reflexively ponder at the start of Part II, 'But how trivial the music' (FC, 41). It is a line that recalls his deprecating observation in 'The Skaters' that, 'Mild effects are the result', and yet it becomes progressively nuanced on re-reading the text. Later on we are told: 'Music had gotten caught in the chinks of their argument, /that is history' (FC, 96). It is a potentially abstract line that resonates with an earlier description: 'all the plain/folk of history foundered in their subjective reading of their lives/as expendable. The stuff of ordinary heresy, shards of common crockery' (FC, 11). Imagining a dormant 'music' to reside in the cracks and corners of worn objects also interests Maddin, in his film treatment, 'The Child Without Qualities'.[60] He describes the worn and broken toys of his childhood as 'artefacts' which '[b]ecause of all their years' experience […] knew a better quality of play'. Maddin then goes on to elaborate a relationship with objects comparable to Ashbery's attention to the 'common crockery' of 'history': '[t]he house held a dormancy, a potential to divulge what it held for his family before. Every object in it was full and ready to discharge its payload of history.'[61]Ashbery's 'music' found residing in ignored 'chinks,' is thought to be 'expendable' and 'ordinary,' and yet, it is precisely these ephemerae which *Flow Chart* urges us to notice. What we might have previously perceived as noise, or incoherence, is the music of *Flow Chart* embracing 'the other tradition'. The accumulative gravitas given to what might seem obsolete, unexpected or mundane, for Ashbery, collectively embodies the weight of 'history.' There is a tension between the magnitude of time and the curious banality of objects and moments that constitute its span, a tension implied by the echo of 'hearsay' in 'ordinary heresy'. The small talk and rumours of idle, day-to-day conversation are here transformed to carry the weight of a modern theology, vacuous chitchat re-imagined on a scale of judgement and betrayal. The grandeur lent to the accidental and ordinary is captured memorably by Herd's description of *Flow Chart* as 'a monument to the everyday'.[62] Beneath *Flow Chart'*s convoluted vista of detail lies the nervous concern that *it* cannot be remembered, not *all* of this – the poem, or our day to day experiences – neither can be kept from dissolving back into an obscurity beyond our register. The sensitivity to inclusion is therefore not simply tied to conceiving the parameters of what poetry should and shouldn't portray, but exists as an anxious tribute to what the mind struggles to hold on to.

---

[60] Guy Maddin, 'The Child Without Qualities,' *From The Atelier Tovar: Selected Writings* (Ontario: Coach House Books, 2003), pp.176-208.
[61] Guy Maddin, 'The Child Without Qualities,' p.187.
[62] David Herd, p.212.

There is a connection to make at this point between the autobiographical nature of *Flow Chart* and Maddin's films, as testaments to *holding on*, to the role of remembering. Ashbery summarises *Flow Chart* as:

> a kind of continuum, a diary, even though it's not in the form of a diary. It's the result of what I had to say over a period of six months, during the course of thinking about my past, the weather outside. I free-associate and come up with all kinds of extra material that doesn't belong – but does.[63]

This summary is elaborated upon in *Flow Chart* itself:

> Besides, I had begun working on something like
> my autobiography, I was going to distill whatever happened to me, not taking
> into account
> the terrific things that didn't, which were the vast majority, and maybe if I reduced it
> all sufficiently, somebody would find it worth his while, i.e., exemplary. And
> then in the rush
> to evacuate I left the precious notebook behind; there simply wasn't time to look
> for it;
> but I could have reconstructed it, drop by drop, from what I remembered […].
>
> (FC, 135)

Significantly, in this process of writing 'something like' an autobiography, it is the 'drop by drop' reconstruction of 'what I remembered' that concludes the description. It is through a process of memory, and only as memory, that the past can be encountered. This recognition is accompanied by the knowledge of remembering as necessarily an act of interrupting the present and that is, in turn, open to further interruption: 'I put my youth and middle/age into it, /and what else? Whatever happened to be around' (FC, 96). This explanation is then shortly followed by Ashbery's connection of this process (that of interruptive autobiography) to listening: 'it is like a kind of music that comes in sideways […] You must always keep/listening though, / otherwise you might miss out on something. And there is something lovely/ about haunting voices filling the high vaults of the basilica' (FC, 97).

Although far more explicitly than *Flow Chart*'s approximation of the 'diary,' Maddin has always included autobiographical slants within his filmmaking. From his first short *The Dead Father* (1985), set in 'The Dominion of Forgetfulness,' to his comically, self-proclaimed 'Me Trilogy' (*Cowards Bend the Knee, Brand upon the Brain!, My Winnipeg*), in

[63] Ashbery, quoted in Shoptaw, p. 308.

which each film has a protagonist unambiguously named 'Guy Maddin'.[64] For Maddin, forgetting has consistently been a point of fascination. George Toles (Maddin's regular writer) has commented that, '[t]o Guy Maddin, every contemporary story that feels true is at bottom an amnesia story.'[65] Autobiography is not only subjected to Maddin's delirious twists of melodrama and mythologizing, but to the sensations of forgetting. This is emphasised in an idiosyncratic essay by Steven Shaviro:

> these films [*Tales from Gimli Hospital, Archangel, Careful*] are not about remembering, or bringing the past back to life in the present. Rather, they are about forgetting: watching the present slip away into the past, consigning that past to oblivion, and yet remaining enthralled by that oblivion.[66]

Conversely, I would argue that remembering *does* come to enthral Maddin's films alongside forgetting but, as Shaviro states it is the dynamic 'watching' which attracts Maddin – not the memory itself. It is the process whereby a memory changes, in the movement – like Link's oscillation between presence and absence – of a memory out of obscurity and into a consciously savoured recreation, or, alternatively its ghostly drift from that conscious clarity back into the 'oblivion'.

In Maddin's film, *Keyhole* (2011) the first word uttered is 'remember', delivered in voiceover by Louis Negin, a regular and reliably eccentric actor in Maddin's films. Later Negin's voiceover reveals to us that the radio is 'tuned between stations, the way he always liked it', thus comparable to the favoured (dis)location of *Flow Chart* – existing in the flux between. *Keyhole* is a disorientating exploration of a family house, returned to by a long absent father; in the course of the film the house becomes a site for troubled memories realised in a shifting and disturbed cast, at once spectral and real, absent and present. Maddin's inspiration for the film drew upon the durable narrative of Homer's *The Odyssey* (in his words: 'the ultimate deadbeat dad story'), the idiosyncratic, architectural phenomenology of Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958) and his own recollection of a series of personal dreams (in which his dead father would return).[67] Shot digitally (as opposed to revelling entirely in shaky Super-8 or sixteen millimetre) in uncharacteristically crisp black and white, the film echoes some of Man Ray's most iconic photography. The film's frequent

---

[64] *Cowards Bend the Knee* (2003), included as a DVD extra on *The Saddest Music in the World* (Soda Pictures, 2004) [DVD].
[65] George Toles, 'From Archangel To Mandragora In Your Own Backyard: Collaborating With Guy Maddin,' in *Playing with Memories: Essays on Guy Maddin*, ed. David Church (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2009) p.156.
[66] Steven Shaviro, 'Fire and Ice: The Films of Guy Maddin,' in *Playing with Memories: Essays on Guy Maddin*, ed. David Church (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2009) p.75.
[67] Guy Maddin, interviewed by Sam Adams *A.V. Club*, < http://www.avclub.com/articles/guy-maddin-talks-about-keyhole-and-the-haunted-hou,72033/ > [accessed March 2013]

nudity is draped with shadows in a lighting that evokes Man Ray's nudes of Lee Miller from the 1930s or, with the tied up and naked torso of Ulysses' son, the stark bondage of *Venus Restored* (1936). The film seems to circle the imagery of Man Ray, like an embedded visual memory of Surrealism. Throughout *Keyhole* a spotlight reflection of a circular window swings across the wall and into multiple frames, as if illuminated by flashes of lightening. The distinctive shadow mimics the opening shot of Man Ray's surrealist *L'Étoile de Mer* (1928). Based on a script by Desnos, *L'Étoile de Mer* begins with a dizzying hallucination of a starfish silhouetted in a disc of light, then, after a handwritten title, a window in almost exactly the same shape and design as that reflected in *Keyhole*, is shown slowly opening. Maddin conflates the giddy motion of the wheeling starfish with the window in a film that roves around the corners of a house, and thus, in its spatial imagination of a home and its rooms, also recalls Man Ray's film, *Les Mystères du château de Dé* (1929).[68] Maddin's film, through allusion, draws upon Man Ray's Surrealism as its own cinematic memory, haunting the images without ever over-determining them.

In one particular sequence, Ulysses Pick (Maddin's returning father as protagonist) carefully examines the features of a room, savouring textures and scents like consecrated stimulants of memory; he then turns to an old radio and moves the dials. Out of the crackle of static we hear the disembodied voice of a child, the camera then cuts from the radio to follow Ulysses' continued inspection of the room. However, the unnerving fragments of a child's voice, quivering in and out of the radio's static, continues to be heard – merging perfectly with Jason Staczek's eerie, ambient soundtrack. The emergence of this child's voice in the cracked transmission of an old radio links back to the tapes used in *My Winnipeg*. Once again, Maddin uses radio static as an acoustic prompt to interact with the past, or as itself to embody an expression of the past. In the scene described, Ulysses moves around the room, picking up objects and examining textures, his own restless motion accompanying the restless passage conveyed through radio static. During the filming of *Cowards Bend the Knee* (2003), Maddin and John Gurdebeke happened upon an editing technique in which motion and memory could be tied to a visual effect. Referred to by Maddin as 'scrolling,' the technique, using Apple's Final Cut Pro Video-editing software, flickers a sequence back and forth like a visual stutter skipping back and re-emphasising details. Maddin has described it as a parallel to interacting with memories:

[68] *Les Mystères du château de Dé* (1929), dir. by Man Ray, in *Avant-Garde: Experimental Cinema of the 1920s and 1930s* (Kino International, 2005) [DVD].

> I just sort of thought maybe I'll try presenting, for a change, a different facsimile of memory, using this kind of neurological skittish editing system. […] You know when you remember – let's say your favourite date ever. Y'know you're going to skeet, skip ahead quickly to the best part and then go, 'Wait a minute, I've got to back up and slow up into it. And then here it comes again. I'm going too fast.' Back up and approach it a third time. And then you finally get to the good part, and you slow it up, and suck all the flavour out of it, and then go skipping off into the next memory, wherever your reveries take you.[69]

Maddin's exultant tone, in which remembering becomes a narcotic indulgence to luxuriate in, reverberates with the continual voyage of Ashbery's 'The Skaters,' itself an internalised journeying that leaves the train 'still sitting in the station' (RM, 175). Soon after contemplating a 'continual changing back and forth' (RM, 158) the restless poem offers an *anticipation* of remembering that, through our temporal reading process, we similarly come to inhabit in a heightened sensitivity to the present passing:

> My perennial voyage, into new memories, new hope and
> flowers
> The way the coast glides past you. I shall never forget this
> moment.
> Because it consists of purest ecstasy. I am happier now than I
> Ever dared believe
> Anyone could be. And we finger down the dog-eared
> Coasts. . . .
> It is all passing! It is past!
>
> (RM, 159)

It is in the same pleasure savoured in the kinetic nature of memory that Ashbery's language, like Maddin's, draws on the sensory thrill associated with memory. In *Flow Chart* a reflection on the past emerges with similar enchantment: 'As we kindle an interest in that old/ past, what/astonishing trills one hears, what blistering swamp flowers thrust open' (FC, 58); it is a description that imbues the romance of 'flower' with a near venereal texture ('blistering,' 'swamp,' 'thrust open'), transforming the sensory thrill into a darkly comic and corporeal intrusion. It is a humour that would no doubt appeal to Maddin's feverishly Euripidean imagination in which surrealist comedy, twitching between death and desire, is always close to hand. Elsewhere, *Flow Chart* also reverberates with comparable gestures to the dynamic 'Chains of memories!' that animate Maddin's intertitles[70]:

---

[69] Guy Maddin, quoted in Derren Wershler, *Guy Maddin's My Winnipeg* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p.105.

[70] In *Brand upon the Brain!* , a string of exclamatory intertitles accompanies a sequence of remembering: The memories! /Heir to the island! /His island! /The island always seems/on the verge/of telling Guy something…/If only he can make sense/of what it is trying to say. /Oh! The past! The Past! /One memory leads/to the

> Then when somebody comes to ask you if you have freshened up, or would like to,
> the whole freight train of associations is set in motion, lumbers gracelessly
> along the clacking tracks, and it isn't so much as if you *had* made up your mind,
> indeed
> had done so quite some time ago, thank you, but as if it's all off
> and running
>
> (FC, 196)

Without the busy narrative of Maddin's films, on which 'the whole freight train' of memory's rush can be harnessed, *Flow Chart* is left to autonomously exist for, and as, that restless vacillation.

The further into the poem's density Ashbery gets, the more entangled it seems to become. While it is fair to say that neither direction nor clarity – in the conventional senses – ever trouble the poem's radar, adopting instead an ambience 'deeper and deeper into the dream of everyday life that was our/ beginning, and where we still live' (FC, 167), it does grow increasingly lost in its own disarray. Despite imagining a 'dream of everyday life', unlike *Three Poems* the experience is not one of 'harmonious scepticism'. *Three Poems* explores in its paradoxical rhetoric, what Ben Hickman calls a 'dialectics gone wrong' and yet does so with a sense of contemplative calm. In the noise of *Flow Chart*, while the experience of memory is evoked it leaves us without the comfort of knowing the memory: it is the movement of remembering and forgetting without the basis of a memory to be remembered or forgotten. In one way this is exactly the same as what Ashbery has always prioritised – the experience of experience, the way of saying and not what is said etc. However, when linked, as it is, to the *movement* of memory – absence of the memory itself as content begins to poignantly and frighteningly enact a kind of self-erasure. References to noise as a form of stimulus still appear but the nearer we get to *Flow Chart's* end, the more mired in confusion and anxiety it becomes:

> Something had been said. You're right about that. But no two people
> can agree on what it means, as though we were sounding boards
> for each childish attempt at wireless communication the gods can invent […].
>
> (FC, 164-5)

> It was as though I had gone through a bout of amnesia.
> Now I was ready to put the gloves on again, but wasn't it to late?

---

next…/Chains of memories! /And all memories lead to his beloved home. /Memories well tasted! /Always buttertarts! /Always sweets! /Chains of memories! /Finding the right combination. From this the poem springs!

(FC, 165)

> While outside hives exploded and buzzing insects dashed the air and we thought we knew
> the year we graduated from high school, yet everything was suspended in an agitated trance.

(FC, 175)

It is as if in nearing the poem's end, and the impossibility of that ending as not only too absolute and certain but also uncomfortably reified as a juncture that forces reflection on the poem's achievement, in nearing this end Ashbery suddenly turns to an ambitious flourish of form. As if to calm or distract the spectre of the poem's end, Ashbery composes what is often referred to as the *sunflower* double sestina ('sunflower' being one of the twelve repeated line endings). John Emil Vincent highlights the use of form, submerged in the dynamism of *Flow Chart*'s dominant refusal of such form, as an instance of doing 'the expected' in a context that renders it entirely unexpected. It is as though the strictures of form present a distraction from the directionless anxiety that accompany nearing the poem's end. But even with the dramatic formal achievement – and length – of a double sestina, Ashbery returns to the textual static to reflect such exercises in form represent 'a currency/no one had any use for' (FC, 194). It was over a hundred pages earlier that we were told 'the structure stands, without any apparent support' (FC, 81) and so it continues, a movement without foundation, beginning or end.

As the poem's final interruption draws closer, the impossibility of its ending begins to echo the absence of 'any apparent support'. Both ending and support would suggest the existence of a core or organizing principle – a definitive, demarcated and unthinkable event or being without mediacy. Predicated on the absence of organizing principles it is nevertheless bound to them: to starting, to ending, and to being readable and thus with a sense of coherence and structure, however turbulent or disorientating. Where the 'wrenched narrative drips on, decays' (FC, 211) into a 'riddle that proposes us' (FC, 212), the impossible and (un)structured state of *Flow Chart* can be understood through Georges Bataille's concept of 'the labyrinth'.

The Labyrinth

Ashbery has translated Bataille (an excerpt from Bataille's first novella, *L'Abbé C*) and though Bataille's academic brooding and obsessions with sacrificial violence, transgression and deathly eroticism are far from tonally apposite to Ashbery's poetry, he does provide an invaluable insight into much of the Surrealism that Breton neglected to articulate.[71]Bataille's theories on transgression, experiencing extreme art, and sacrifice in relation to the sacred are often used as theoretical ways through which to configure a philosophy of noise.[72] However, in linking Bataille to Ashbery and Maddin's noise (as a form that does not embrace or produce the violent or transgressive dimensions associated with noise, but instead – understood via Link's essay – uses aspects of recording interference), I will instead draw from his essay on 'The Labyrinth' (1930). Despite its more theorised formulation and darker inflection, Bataille's relationship with Surrealism – here crystallised in the labyrinth – takes up ideas that will be familiar to readers of Ashbery.

The concept of the labyrinth begins from Bataille's assertion that '[a]t the basis of human life there exists a principle of insufficiency' and from this inability to be complete, existence is consequently only ever assimilated *in relation*.[73] Just as in Maddin's film *Keyhole*, where the central haunted house is explored through unknown corridors, hidden passages and forgotten rooms, only understandable *in relation* to shifting memories, Ashbery's *Flow Chart* also exists as a space in and of disorientating contingency:

> 'We cannot move. The fullness in the house at night
> is only a diagram (but clings to it, anyway) of where things were, and though
> we can remember what things, they are gone now; only their relation
> to one another subsists […].'
>
> (FC, 136)

[71] Ashbery's translation of Bataille's *L'Abbé C* can be found in the *Collected French Translations: Prose,* ed. by Rosanne Wasserman and Eugene Richie (Manchester: Carcanet, 2014), pp.263-275.

[72] See Eugene Thacker, 'Bataille/Body/Noise: Notes Towards a Techno-Erotics,' in Merzbook, ed. By Roger Richards (Melbourne: Extreme, 1987); Paul Hegarty, *Noise/Music* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007); and Paul Hegarty, 'Violent Silence: Noise and Bataille's "Method of Meditation"', in *Negative Ecstasies: Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), pp.95-106.

[73] Georges Bataille, 'The Labyrinth', *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p.172.

Like *Flow Chart* and like the house in *Keyhole*, Bataille's labyrinth is a model ascribed to the indeterminate space of being; a lost existence disorientated and constituted through endless and irresolvable play which, unlike a maze with a centre, offers no redemptive solution or ending.[74] Bataille supports his conception of the labyrinth with an elaboration of its most powerful and symptomatic construct: language. He explains:

> The individual being is, therefore, only something mediated by words that can present a being only arbitrarily as an "autonomous being," though very profoundly as a "related being." It is only necessary to track for a little while the routes repeatedly taken by words to discover the disconcerting sight of a human being's labyrinthine structure.[75]

As a result, just as poststructuralism would come to demonstrate meaning within language as infinitely deferred, Denis Hollier is able to identify Bataille's Labyrinth as 'not described as an object but as a traversal'.[76]

In *My Winnipeg,* Maddin seems attuned to this connection between the labyrinth and language as, after describing sleepwalkers as 'always lost' in Winnipeg's 'snowy labyrinth' the film's following sequence begins with the blurred intertitle: 'Signs'. Maddin then describes Winnipeg as 'a city of palimpsests' in which citizens are forbidden from destroying 'old signage'. The city becomes the labyrinth; lost between signs, built between signs and, in a Lacanian sense of the subject in the symbolic, inseparable from those signs as an existence of shifting traces and association. The entire somnambulant drift of Maddin's narrative intertwines the city's memory and his own, both become labyrinthine spaces as the central, and perpetual, train journey (on which the actor playing Maddin appears to dream the entire film) tries to find 'Ways out' of Winnipeg.[77] Ways out of the city that are, by extension,

---

[74] For an expanded discussion of Bataille's 'Le Labyrinthe' see Denis Hollier, 'The Labyrinth, the Pyramid, and the Labyrinth' in *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (Massachusetts: October books, 1992), pp.57-73.

[75] Georges Bataille, 'The Labyrinth', p.173.

[76] Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (Massachusetts: October books, 1992), p.58.

[77] Considering the labyrinthine potential of narrative, Maddin and Ashbery could be further linked through their mutual appreciation of Roussel's narratives-within-narratives. The attraction of this escalation of narrative frames also manifests in Ashbery's film tastes: he has often mentioned *The Saragossa Manuscript* (dir. Wojciech Has, 1965) and *Out 1* (dir. Jacques Rivette, 1971) as among his favourite films. *The Saragossa Manuscript* nests tales within tales to create a film that frames its endless, sometimes inter-weaving, concertina of stories with a bizarre blend of absurdist humour, playful eroticism, journeying, dreams and haunted recollections. Whilst on the other hand, over its infamously expansive running time of 773 minutes, *Out 1* explores a range of characters, sub-plots, and parallel narratives, all fraying around the members of two theatre groups – each rehearsing a different Aeschylus play. Along with the influence of Roussel, the labyrinthine spirit common to both of these films, evidently both so important to Ashbery, came to profoundly influence and inflect Maddin's film, *The Forbidden Room* (2015).

attempts to find ways out of personal history ('the city is just four years older than my grandmother, sometimes so young seeming, sometimes so ancient'), of memory and whatever confused composition resembles Maddin's sense of self. Through an imaginative documentation of the city's growth, decline and change, Maddin invites the parallel cartography of his own self-construction. It was a model that Bataille himself chose to elaborate the labyrinth: 'The city that little by little empties itself of life, in favour of a more brilliant and attractive city, is the expressive image of the play of existence engaged in composition.' [78]

Behind the conception of being, as only ever being through a labyrinthine condition of infinite play, is 'a *principle of insufficency*' as the basis of existence. The familiar assertion of presence in absence is, like the sense of experience in recorded noise, a temporal and spatial presence accomplished through its simultaneous absence. Returning to the snowy Winnipeg labyrinth, before we reach the 'signage graveyard' and the evocation of language and the labyrinth, Maddin observes the curiosity of what he calls, in voiceover: 'the snow fossils'. The 'snow fossil' is the compacted snow rendering of a footstep left behind as 'a positive record of a negative space' as the surrounding loose snow leaves it in relief. Maddin finds a 'trace through these snow fossils' of what he refers to as 'your own passage' that, although referring to a literalised movement, is then elaborated upon as 'a way of walking backward and forward through winter's time' (taken from Maddin's voiceover). As an image of Bataille's 'insufficiency', the snow fossil's 'positive record of a negative space', when tied to the city and its labyrinth of signs and offering the 'trace' of a 'passage', perfectly encapsulates this particular reverberation of surrealist being.

This frequent fading and seizing of associations and allusions to memories, to time changing and finding one's disorientated place amidst the flux, is accompanied in *Flow Chart* by several structural observations in the poem. In a section that expertly skirts through ambiguity and the sensation of a soon to emerge understanding, Ashbery skips between 'part of a dream', 'a past one can focus on', and 'peripheral times', to end at what feels like an address to the reader:

> I was appointed to meet you
> and bring you to this place, locus of many diagonals
> without beginning or end except for the sense of them a place of confluence
> provides. So, as is the custom here, I pulled the hood down to cover most of my face.
>
> (FC, 79)

[78] Bataille, 'The Labyrinth', pp.175-6.

Flow Chart, like Bataille's labyrinth, is a place without the structural resolution of beginning or end, such absolutes only ever existing 'as a place of confluence', a *being-in-relation* that finds fleeting and illusory presence through the trace of other also lacking beings.[79] Whilst there are many extended examples of this in *Flow Chart*, most derive cumulatively from reading in its duration and finding the impression of form or cohesion in the constant interruptive denial of such qualities. However, as a transferrable example, it is instructive to look at the poem, 'The Whole is Admirably Composed', from *Hotel Lautréamont* (1992). Although *Hotel Lautréamont* was published the year after *Flow Chart*, the collection should be understood alongside *Flow Chart* as its contents came to fruition during the long poem's composition and, unsurprisingly, bear frequent similarities and marks of influence.

'The Whole is Admirably Composed' suggests in its title the formation of a structure that the poem then proceeds to convolute and complicate. Importantly the title insinuates an ambivalence characteristic of Bataille's Surrealism, an ambivalence that troubles the idealism of Breton. In the poem's title, the sense of 'Admirably' is split between its positive connotations: a thrill when faced with the possibilities of language and ontology in creative composition and *as* creative composition; and the more distrustful distance of 'Admirably' that implies any 'Whole' (be it linguistic, ontological or both) is only ever 'composed' and subsequently exists through contingent inter-relations. In the latter's implication, 'Admirably Composed' becomes a latent deficiency, a suggestion of wholeness that is only ever a suggestion and can never be entirely in and of itself. The poem begins in disorientation: 'In rainy night all the faces look like telephones. /Help me! I am in the street because I was/going someplace, and now, not to be there is here.'[80] The familiarity of identification implicit in 'faces' is encountered, through a conspicuously surrealist image, as the effort to communicate in 'telephones'. What transpires is a lost voice ('Help me!') whose only recourse to location ('going someplace'), like Maddin's snow fossil, is in a 'positive record of a negative space': 'and now, not to be there is here.' The poem goes on to suggest that 'There is more to inconstancy than you will/want to hear'. Just as interruption builds a noise of memory in *Flow*

[79] Soon after this section Ashbery provides another structural reference that, although ostensibly relating to the 'mousy fragrance' of 'the expanding afternoon', suggests another reflexive description: 'and so the structure stands, without any apparent support' (FC, 81). The paradox of this 'structure', which stands without support, teases a latently Derridean nature from Bataille's labyrinth. In his seminal 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', (*Writing and Difference* (1966), trans. by Alan Bass, pp.278-95, in *Modern Literary Theory,* eds. Philip Rice & Patricia Waugh [London: Arnold, 2001], pp.195-6) Derrida considers the 'coherence in contradiction' that arises in a decentred conception of structure. This deconstructive implication also appears in Maddin's *Keyhole* where the courtyard at the centre of the house's labyrinth is described as an 'inside/outside': a centre which is not the centre.

[80] John Ashbery, 'The Whole Is Admirably Composed', *Hotel Lautréamont* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992), p.29.

Chart, play of difference constitutes an illusion of wholeness.[81] Perhaps it is due to its illusory nature that Ashbery suggests the role of 'inconstancy' as something 'more' than we would 'want to hear', enacting as it does the *lack* of our own constancy. As the experience of being lost presides over a poem entitled 'The Whole is Admirably Composed', Bataille's labyrinth, with its less than optimistic 'impotent flight of all life towards an indefinable summit' becomes a dark precedent for Ashbery's structures of 'inconstancy'.[82] In the last stanza, the poem moves even closer to Bataille's bleakly precarious conception, as it describes 'the same blind investigation/that leads you from trap to trap before bargaining/to forget you.' [83]

For Bataille, '[a] particular being not only acts as an element of a shapeless and structureless whole (a part of the world of unimportant "acquaintances" and chatter), but also as a peripheral element orbiting around a nucleus where being hardens.'[84] In this continual motion, 'man is only a particle inserted in unstable and entangled wholes', lost in the labyrinth and condemned to an absent existence made present through relation; it is a 'particle' that coheres only as an 'unstable and entangled' whole, and is only experienced in its interaction with other 'unstable and entangled wholes'.[85] In *Flow Chart*, this inability to be anything other than a temporal composite generates a self without agency or control of its own contours: 'if something wants to improve on us, that's fine, but we are always the last/to find out' (FC, 216). Bataille envisages '[b]eing in the world [as] so uncertain that I can project it where I want – outside of me.'[86] Conceived as a 'being in the world', and part of a 'structureless whole', the 'uncertain' fluidity that composes our own 'whole' can only exist as the *passage* through the labyrinth.

Flow Chart, in its own words, urges us to 'conceive a new architecture that would be nowhere, a hunger for nothing/desire/desiring itself/play organized […]' (FC, 200). In another poem from *Hotel Lautréamont*, 'Baked Alaska', the traversal of memory is, as in *Flow Chart*, offered as a form of analogous and labyrinthine play:

> Listen, memory:
> do this one thing for me
> and I'll never ask you again for anything else:
> just tell me how it began! What
> were the weeds that got caught in spokes
> as it was starting up, the time the brakeshaft split
> and about all the little monsters that were willing to sit

[81] Ibid.
[82] Bataille, 'The Labyrinth', p 172.
[83] Ashbery, 'The Whole Is Admirably Composed', *Hotel Lautréamont* , p.29
[84] Ibid, p.175.
[85] Ibid, p.174
[86] Ibid, p.173.

on the top of your tit, or index finger.
How in the end sunshine prevailed –
but what was that welling in between?
those bubbles
that proceeded from nowhere – surely there must be a source?[87]

Ashbery has noted in interviews, with mild annoyance, that on finishing *Flow Chart* it doesn't feel like an ending.[88] Yet it is this aversion to an ending and revealing the 'source' that also characterises the nature of Bataille's labyrinth, as Hollier states, 'he denounces the wish that it lead somewhere, have a solution'.[89] The closest Bataille comes to accounting for an origin of the labyrinth, is as '[s]tarting from an extreme complexity', from where 'being imposes on reflection more than the precariousness of a fugitive appearance', going on to suggest that it is 'this complexity – displaced little by little – [that] becomes in turn the labyrinth where what had suddenly come forward strangely loses its way.'[90] Not exactly forthcoming, it is the paradoxical creation of a space that relies on our own attempt to comprehend its possibility to construct its existence; it has no way out, as to desire a way out is to build the labyrinth. Both *My Winnipeg* and *Keyhole* also significantly finish on questions, similarly refuting a 'way out'. The last segment of Maddin's voiceover in *My Winnipeg* questions 'who's alive?' leaving the film's sleepwalking narrative of association appropriately suspended, any potential resolution postponed and '*dreaming on couches'*. *Keyhole* ends with time being re-set (a montage of clocks whirring hands) and a name being called out, to be left as an unanswered question uttered in the dark. As though in Bataille's labyrinth, in which the self can partake of a 'whole' and appear composed but never be wholly located, and where the noise of memory constitutes unending play, *Flow Chart* finds its last lines, but not an end:

that image of ourselves as it gets
projected on the trees and vine-coated walls and vapors in the night sky: a distant
noise of celebration, forever off limits. By evening the traffic has begun
again in earnest, color-coded. It's open: the bridge, that way.

(FC, 216)

Here, in a condensed array, Ashbery provides a showcase of the poem's labyrinthine Surrealism: the floating 'image of ourselves' as an ontological instability 'projected on the trees' and

[87] John Ashbery, 'Baked Alaska' *Hotel Lautréamont*, p.56.
[88] In his long interview with Mark Ford (2003) Ashbery comments: 'I wasn't pleased with the way it ended.I think I've found this true on a number of occasions […] it's very difficult to put on the brakes when you get to the end' from *Seven American Poets in Conversation* (London: BTL, 2008),pp.62-3.
[89] Hollier, p.60.
[90] Bataille, 'The Labyrinth', p.173.

characterised as ‘vapors in the night sky’; the mention of ‘noise’ heard but ‘forever off limits’ like an experience of memory that occasions its own absence; and the ending, ‘It’s open: the bridge, that way’. There is no final or delineated being, no accountable beginning or end and, like the last line of ‘The Whole is Admirably Composed’ where ‘the map is again wiped clean’, whatever pertains to structure resists structuring. To return to the plea in ‘Baked Alaska’ that questions origins of memory as ‘those bubbles/that proceeded from nowhere’, Ashbery’s *Flow Chart* is a surrealist being: conceived in the labyrinth, (dis)composed in infinite play and understood like memory in the ‘welling in between’.[91]

[91] John Ashbery, ‘Baked Alaska’, *Hotel Lautréamont*, p.56.

Chapter 4

Perspective and Play: Using the Surrealist Child to See 'The Skaters' Anew

'But a weathered child's alphabet is my only reading material.'

— John Ashbery

Between labyrinthine angles of string that cut across the gallery, distancing the exhibition's paintings from its viewers and bisecting space with an endless crossing of lines, children could be seen playing games. Held in a large Italianate mansion in the centre of Manhattan, the *First Papers of New Surrealism* exhibition opened in 1942 and was designed by Marcel Duchamp – whose ambitious installation, 'His Twine', obfuscated and confused the gallery space with string. The exhibition staged its opening to be accompanied (on the order of Duchamp) by the play of children, so that through the perilous maze of string these children could be glimpsed bouncing balls, skipping and immersed in games of jacks and hopscotch. Combining a vast cat's cradle with the children's games introduced Surrealism as literally tied to the complications of perspective and its relationship with the child, both interconnected preoccupations that moved around the notion of 'play'. This chapter will explore how the surrealist fascination with the child connects with an ability to see anew, and how, in its relationship with play, a comparable desire can be traced in Ashbery's poetry, specifically rooted in 'The Skaters'.

It is the surrealist application of play that connects a conception of the child with an imaginative re-consideration of perspective, not as the coordinates of a nostalgic Romanticism, but as a challenge to the imposition of received structures of perceiving and meaning. Play becomes a principle that replaces priorities of sense, order and structured completion with a purposeless mobility. For Surrealism, this play embodied a politicised resistance to the logic and structures of instrumentalised labour. Such purposeless play could exist in and of itself as a self-serving liberty, through which meaning *means* in ways that exceed and evade rationalising systems of production and containment. Understood in these terms, the troubling and complex surrealist relationship with sexuality and the child (which can be followed from Marquis de Sade and Lautréamont, through to Lewis Carroll,

Apollinaire and the pervasive influence of Freud, and later on into the disturbing dolls of Hans Bellmer) can be understood not as an erotics *of* the child – but in the erotics of play with which the child was associated.[1] If adult rationality, its purposeful commitments to work and the responsibilities and routines of its experience, can be interrupted, surrealist play offers a prolonged indulgence of its wilful suspension. Whether it exists in watching a film, making a collage or writing poetry, Ashbery opens a space for play which, like Surrealism, can dissolve the distinctions of clock-time, question the formulated grids of Renaissance perspective and invigorate the adult conception of sense. Realised through the metaphor of skating and with the surrealist spirit of the child, his poetry is without completion or a singular acceptance of perspective inscribing its own motion: 'As skaters/elaborate their distances' (RM, 151), to be mapped across a changing surface.

First Films and Tripping the Childhood Levers

Allowing for a wilful suspension of *how* and *what* we are used to seeing, the cinema provided a form through which to literally see anew. In addition to its capacity to suggest a space for dreams and dreaming, the cinema and film were also at several points (as will be made clear) historically connected with the figure of the child. Ashbery is clearly sensitive to this connection and addressees it in his poem 'The Lonedale Operator' (*A Wave*, 1984), with a simple, matter-of-fact recollection:

> The first movie I ever saw was the Walt Disney cartoon *The Three Little Pigs*. My grandmother took me to it. It was back in the days when you went "downtown." There was a second feature, with live actors, called *Bring 'Em Back Alive*, a documentary about the explorer Frank Buck. In this film you saw a python swallow a live pig. This wasn't scary. In fact, it seemed quite normal, the sort of thing you *would* see in a movie – "reality."
>
> (AW, 771-772)

[1]This understanding would perhaps more helpfully advance Andrew Dubois' reading of Ashbery's later poetry, in which he argues that allusions to pederasty and paedophilia act as provocations responding to homophobic conflations of child molestation and homosexuality. A more nuanced engagement with the surrealist precedent for this provocation could elucidate the role of play and its historical, literary and conceptual implications for Ashbery's poetry. However, this chapter does not intend to address this sexualised dimension to the child and Surrealism. This chapter also does not attempt to cover the equally pertinent relevance of the child as an example of early surrealist 'othering'. From its naïve exoticisms of mental illness and distanced objectifications of the female body, to ethnographic obsessions that thinly veiled the dynamics of colonial appropriation, Surrealism used and invoked the 'other' with frequent and oppressive naivety. The surrealist child, envisaged as a foreign body for inspiration and otherworldly perception, could certainly be contextualized as also following this trend of 'othering'.

The prosaic style, evoking the simplicity of a *what-I-did-this-summer* school assignment, appropriately exchanges poetic maturity for naïve exposition. A similar style can be observed in a later poem, 'The Tower of London' (*Planisphere*, 2009) also, significantly, about films.[2] In 'The Lonedale Operator', we are walked into Ashbery's childhood as if being led by the enthused voice of his child self, innocently absorbed by the task of relaying detail: 'In this film you saw a python swallow a live pig.' The voice in the poem then assures us that this is not 'scary' but instead a logical demonstration of what passes for normality in cinema; this is "reality", the inverted commas implying its re-imagined quality. It is the re-imagined newness of this "reality" which brings cinema into contact with a surrealist conception of the child, and the perception of childhood as revelatory. In the early development of cinema, Surrealism found an exciting medium with which to express the unconscious and depict or simulate dreaming. More significant to this chapter is that it also presented a fascination with how the child intimately related to a *new way of seeing.* Ashbery's decision to write a poem so transparently *about* a first experience of cinema – his poems usually so inventively avoiding the referential impulse to *be about* – seems compelled by the same historical interests in childhood that accompanied the early evolution of film.

One of the earliest Lumière films, *Repas de bébé* (1895), focuses on the behaviour of a young child being fed at the table.[3] This fascination can be traced back to even earlier Victorian obsessions re-ignited in photography, as Vicky Lebeau suggests in her book *Cinema and Childhood*.[4] While Lumière observes the child, Pasquale Iannone presents the comparison of Georges Méliès who, Iannone argues, actually attempts to inhabit the imagination of the child.[5] The Lumière film is a distanced representation of the child as seen by the adult, whereas *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) by Méliès is a giddy sense of representation itself, as codified by the adult's intimation of the child's imagination: 'a sort of childhood from the inside out, as opposed to childhood from the outside in *Baby's Breakfast*.'[6] Much later, in 1933, the surrealist favourite Jean Vigo directed *Zéro de conduite,* in which a

---

[2] John Ashbery, 'The Tower of London', *Planisphere* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2009), p.121. It is a poem that maintains the same unusually direct, almost flat, account of films: 'In the thirties they made a movie of it starring Boris Karloff/as Mord the executioner, who dabbled in torture'. Although the style is comparably simple, it seems more preoccupied with parodying a synoptic style of film journalism. However it still retains the uncharacteristic expositional style, linking it to a child-like report, tripped up temporarily by the doubts of memory: 'That's the way I remember it. Wait, she was/actually Edward's wife' (p.122).

[3] *Repas de bébé* (1895), dir. by the Lumière Brothers, in *The Lumière Brothers' First Films* (Kino International, 1999) [DVD].

[4] Vicky Lebeau,'Introduction', in *Cinema and Childhood* (London: Reakton Books, 2008). Lebeau contests the relationship, between the child and cinema, is prefigured by a popular series of photographs taken by Oscar Gustave Rejlander to accompany Charles Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). One particular photo, entitled 'Ginx's Baby', depicted an infant crying and sold 300,000 copies.

[5] Pasquale Iannone, 'Age of Innocence', in *Sight & Sound*, 24.4 (April 2014), pp.33-37.

[6] Iannone, p.33; *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), dir. by George Méliès (Park Circus, 2012) [DVD].

rebellion is staged in an all-boys boarding school (a later inspiration for Lindsay Anderson's 1968 film, *If*....).[7] Vigo's direction mingled scenes of oneiric slow-motion with an anarchic spirit of play, challenging the structures of school as a bourgeois institution. Consequently, the film applied a dream aesthetic to a provocative narrative of institutional resistance that appealed to Surrealism's political aspirations and, significantly, then focused these elements through the figure of the child. Therefore, it is possible to observe several different incarnations of the child figure appearing: in *Repas de bébé*, the child observed by the adult as a figure of fascination; in Méliès, the enchantment of the child recreated by the adult; and in Vigo's *Zéro de conduite*, the child as a figure around which political agency and surrealist play can be explored. The proximity of Ashbery's 'The Lonedale Operator' to this conversation between the child and cinema, is encouraged further into a surrealist perspective when the poem reveals: 'A little later we went downtown again to see a movie of *Alice in Wonderland*' (AW, 772).

Published in 1865 by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson and written under the pseudonym of Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* famously introduced the perception of a little girl to a world of imaginatively uprooted logic. Playfully subverted notions of time and space, religious symbolism, the humour of nonsense literature and childhood, all elaborately housed in a child's dream; it was, unsurprisingly, thematically irresistible to the surrealist imagination. In *Surrealism and Painting* (1928), Picasso's painting, *Man with a Clarinet* (1911-12), prompts Breton to position 'the future continent' of a surrealist re-encounter with childhood as the opportunity 'to accompany an ever more beautiful Alice into Wonderland.'[8] Later, in *Artistic Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism* (1941), Breton depicts the renewed path of art as one which diverges from imitations of the external: '[a]t the end of this road strewn with ambushes that may or may not be real there is Alice *passing through the looking glass*.'[9] The figure of Alice and the related motif of the *femme-enfant* entered Surrealism in various guises and with varying implications. Alice becomes a cipher for curiosity and the pursuit of knowledge, embodying discovery as a gendered drive resonant with Laura Mulvey's argument that curiosity has been traditionally structured as feminine: from the

[7] *Zéro de conduit* (1933), dir. by Jean Vigo, in *L'Atalante and the films of Jean* Vigo (Artificial Eye, 2012) [DVD]. Guy Maddin named *Zéro de conduit* in his 'Top Ten' for *Sight & Sound*, 22. 9 (September 2012).
[8] André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. by Simon Watson Taylor (Boston, MFA Publications, 2002), p.6.
[9] In addition to which, Louis Aragon translated Carroll's 'The Hunting of the Snark' (1874) poem, which was then shortly followed by the publication of his article 'Lewis Carroll – En 1931' (in *Le Surréalisme au service de la revolution*). Elsewhere David Gascoyne, the English surrealist, was claiming Carroll to fortify evidence of an English surrealist heritage, while Herbert Read and Julian Levy in their seminal studies of surrealism both cited Carroll as an important antecedent to surrealism.

Pandora myth through to the biblical fall of Eve and the story of Bluebeard.[10] Max Ernst artistically configures his own relationship with Leonara Carrington through Carroll's looking glass, identifying her as Alice in two portraits in 1939 and 1941.[11] For Ernst, Alice was reimagined from the literalism of a curious child into an evocation of curiosity projected onto sites of desire.[12] The link between Alice and a desire for knowledge is also played upon in the paintings of Dorothea Tanning (herself later married to Ernst), who attaches the inquisitive energy to anxieties of pubescence and sexual discovery in works like *Jeux d'enfants* (1942), *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (1946) and *The Guest Room* (1951).[13]

The curiosity of Alice returns through its surrealist legacy into Ashbery's recollection of cinema, to evoke the mischievous fluidity of a new perspective. In ways evidently significant to Surrealism and the poetry of Ashbery, Alice also encapsulated the sense of a linguistic journey where the quaint rationality of her early schooling cannot prepare her for the slippery encounters with language in Wonderland; people do not say what they mean or mean what they say and, more often than not, language is characterised as a bewildering game of contradiction. The emergence of *Alice in Wonderland* (as Ashbery mentions W.C Fields and Gary Cooper, it was the 1933 version, directed by Norman Z. Mcleod) in 'The Lonedale Operator' prompts a reflection on the discordance between his childhood and adult perception:

---

[10] Laura Mulvey, 'Pandora's Box: Topographies of Curiosity', in *Fetishism and Curiosity,* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp.53-118.

[11] See Catriona McAra, 'Surrealism's Curiosity: Lewis Caroll and the *Femme-Enfant*' *Papers of Surrealism*, 9 (Summer 2009). Ernst's fascination with Carroll was a lifelong affair. Throughout his work Ernst cultivated a visual mythology surrounding the imagery of birds (not unlike Cornell and his 'Aviary series'), a mythology that revolved around his own avian alter ego: 'Lop -Lop'. 'Lop-Lop' first appeared in Ernst's wildly innovative, collaged novels: *La femme 100 têtes* (1929) and *Une Semaine de Bonté* (1934). Significantly, as Ernst's chosen visual avatar, 'Lop-Lop' is a name which, as McAra notes, recalls Carroll's 'Do-do', most often interpreted as a representation of Dodgson's himself. Lewis Carroll was even listed, in large font, as one of Ernst's favourite writers in the April, 1942 edition of *View*. From his early collages, throughout his painting and culminating in thirty six lithographs for *Lewis Carroll's Wunderhorn* in 1970 (a year after Dali had illustrated *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*), the returning spectre of Alice if not present was an always imminent component of Ernst's Surrealism.

[12] See: Catriona McAra, 'Surrealism's Curiosity: Lewis Carroll and the Femme Enfant', *Papers of Surrealism*, 9 (Summer 2009). McAra asserts the 'epistomophilic dynamics of curiosity' (1), in which the 'little Alice figure' (1) is twinned with a compulsion for new understanding(s). Ernst therefore draws upon Alice as symbolic of a more abstract yearning (for new sensations and knowledge), consequently not seduced by the literalism of her fictional identity but the erotics of what Surrealism identified in her open curiosity.

[13]Surrealism's most infamous exploration of the darkly sexual in relation to the child is encountered in the work of Hans Bellmer. Bellmer's *Die Puppe* consisted of ten photographs of his first life-sized doll (1933-1934); it was constructed with wood, plaster and metal, and found publication as *La Poupèe* in the surrealist journal *Minotaure* (December 1934). In Bellmer's photographs his mannequins are primarily characterised as pubescent girls, subjected to nightmarish contortions. Limbs and various body parts are arranged in violently eroticized states of dismemberment, elaborating a desublimated expression of sadomasochism. Hal Foster suggests that Bellmer's work has frequently been critically approached as peripheral to Surrealism, or in some sense marginal, not because it is thematically tangential but because it is perhaps all too unnervingly central. Bellmer created a horrific locus where Freudian notions of polymorphous perversity and the violent literature of Marquis de Sade could articulate sexuality as intrinsically infantile and desire as deathly.

> '[Y]ears later I saw it when I was grown up and thought it was awful. How could I have been wrong the first time? I knew it wasn't inexperience, because somehow I was experienced the first time I saw a movie. It was as though my taste had changed, though I had not, and I still can't help thinking I was right the first time, when I was still relatively unencumbered by my experience.'
>
> (AW, 772)

This odd state of being, in which childhood is neither subject to inexperience nor encumbered by experience, seems to attribute to his childhood judgement a vision approaching the paradoxical. The memory of his child self's perspective presents a way of seeing in which experience is neither wholly absent nor intrusively present, allowing for an idealised enjoyment of the film.

This contradictory suspension articulates the child – but only as the adult's representation of the child, a perspective for which the child is absent and yet made present through adult invocation. The travelling back to recapture or represent the child is not a melancholy Romanticism for what is lost, but a surrealist effort to transform the adult consciousness. It is through an attempt to mobilize childhood perception and its imagination that Surrealism seeks to suspend or disrupt adult structures of rationality. Having moved on from his memory of *Alice in Wonderland*, the poem deliberates over a D.W. Griffith short seen later in Ashbery's twenties. Unsure of whether it was the titular *The Lonedale Operator* (1911) that he saw, or *The Lonely Villa* (1909), the flow of recollection is brought to an abrupt halt: 'At that moment the memories stop'. It is as if the reverie of recounting *Alice in Wonderland* and the D.W. Griffith film ('as remote from me in time as my first viewing of *Alice in Wonderland* ') brings Ashbery into a brief communion with an unclouded 'first time', immediately replaced after the memories stop by 'terror, or tedium' (AW, 772).

Once the joy of finding, and fleetingly re-living, a memory is over it seems the more adult perception adjusts the initial enthusiasm into something more complex, and ultimately, more upsetting:

> At that moment the memories stop, and terror, or tedium, sets in. It's hard to tell which is which in this memory, because the boredom of living in a lonely place or having a lonely job, and even of being so far in the past and having to wear those funny uncomfortable clothes and hairstyles is terrifying, more so than the intentional scariness of the plot, the criminals, whoever they were.
>
> Imagine that innocence (Lilian Harvey) encounters romance (Willy Fritsch) in the home of experience (Albert Basserman). From there it is only a step to terror, under the dripping boughs outside.

(AW, 772)

Now detached from the viewing experience of the film, encountered in memory primarily as a positive sensation, Ashbery's mind wanders into a more unsettling meditation on temporal deracination. The characters in the film become anachronistic counters, made strange by time ('of being so far in the past') and, while the film was not originally seen in Ashbery's childhood ('in my twenties'), it had before this point in the poem seemed buoyed by the memory of *Alice in Wonderland* and included in that simplistic joy. The contrast is further developed in the more abstract mapping of 'innocence', 'romance' and 'experience', all parenthetically encapsulated by actors that, to further complicate this contemplative shift, are not related to or appearing in the films the poem mentions. Lilian Harvey (1906-1968), Willy Fritsch (1901-1973) and Albert Basserman (1867-1952) were German actors most famous for their work in silent film; each being recognizable signifiers of 'innocence', 'romance' and 'experience' through an association with their most remembered roles. Therefore the names open a confusing disjunction between the films discussed within the poem's context and actors belonging to films outside of that context. The names also precipitate a turn from the uncomplicated, anecdotal simplicity to a more troubled tone of symbolism. It is a transition from the wide-eyed vibrancy of a child-like account into the *tedium* and *terror* of adult consideration. This change redirects attention from memory's content to a more melancholy attention to the displacement of time, in addition to which the notion of film progresses from face-value narrative to a more troubled and symbolic sense of connotation and instability. Whatever is 'under the dripping boughs outside' is not readily clear, nor should it be, as the cheery 'downtown' of Ashbery's recollection has been replaced by a portentous indication of more adult terrain, 'slipping always beyond our control.'

Before the percolating disquiet of maturity begins to wrong foot 'The Lonedale Operator', it is Ashbery's younger self and a simple enjoyment of cinema that drives the poem into existence. It is this same 'unencumbered experience', enthralled and stimulated by film, which often characterises creativity for Surrealism. With this connection in mind, the Canadian filmmaker Guy Maddin offers a revealing observation on what he values in Ashbery's poetry:

> Most of my filmmaking is infantile and primitive. I've been obsessed with recreating the feelings of childhood. I don't know why. Therefore I love those great castrati, those great mythologisers of the dawn of awareness: Kafka, Bruno Schulz, Rilke. I

> love Tatyana Tolstoya's first book very much. And I love Vigo's films. All these things, including John Ashbery's poetry, trip the childhood levers for me. These are works made by people who don't just remember childhood and all its wonders, but are capable of snapping me back into a world I'd yet to make sense of. When I'm with these artists I'm drunk on the mysteries the world once concealed from me.[14]

Whilst Maddin's uniquely recognizable films find inspiration in the practicalities of an achievable aesthetic primitivism, as this quote suggests there is also a conceptual dimension through which the 'infantile and primitive' resonates with his appreciation of Ashbery. The return to childhood as a 'dawn of awareness', similarly praised in Maddin's other literary idols, is not a referential contention of narrative to be embodied in the description of a return, but a transformative capacity to induce its sensation in the reader. It is an experiential enthusiasm that unsurprisingly finds a natural ally in the phenomenological nature of Ashbery's poetics. The return to childhood that Maddin finds in Ashbery's poetry is like the 'unencumbered experience' Ashbery recollects in 'The Lonedale Operator'; in both instances the child is associated with a distinctly surrealist access to a 'world once concealed'.

Surrealist Perspectives

Just as the surrealist conception of the forest (in Chapter 1) can be traced back to Baudelaire's poem 'Correspondences', so too can his influence be recognised in a specific relationship that grew around the child and Surrealism. In 'The Painter of Modern Life' (1863), Baudelaire positioned the flâneur's genius as 'nothing more nor less than *childhood recovered* at will – a childhood now equipped for self- expression'.[15] It is in that space of wonder where Breton recognises the possibility of Surrealism as the impulse and enchantment of a child's perception. In search of visual enactments of this perception, perspective is challenged and treated as a variable for play rather than a structure to adhere to. It is through this uncertainty and lack of familiarity that Baudelaire compares the flâneur to how '[t]he child sees everything in a state of newness; he is always *drunk*. Nothing more resembles what we call inspiration than the delight with which a child absorbs form and colour.'[16] By cultivating the spatially unexpected, daunting or awe-inspiring, surrealist art found ways to recreate the

[14] Guy Maddin, interviewed by Craig Burnett in 'Maddin's World', *Contemporary,* 63 (June 2004) < http://www.contemporary-magazines.com/issue63.htm> [accessed June 2014]
[15] Charles Baudelaire, 'The Artist, Man of the World, Man of the Crowd, and Child', *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), p.8.
[16] Baudelaire, p.9.

curiosity and surprise of the child flâneur.[17] An effort was made to move from vision construed as the complacent sense of an *adult seeing*, to the more vibrant impression of a *child discovering*.

Baudelaire's description of the flâneur's perception, as a return to childhood, was echoed in the first 'Manifesto of Surrealism', where Breton declared: '[t]he mind which plunges into Surrealism relives with glowing excitement the best part of its childhood' (FM, 39). In the first manifesto, ideals of surrealist pursuit or virtue are continually accompanied by references to childhood. Breton refers to childhood as 'the absence of any known restrictions', granting a space and sensibility conducive to plurality as 'the perspective of several lives lived at once' (FM, 3). This disparate and mobile perspective coincides with the stories available in childhood that allow an illuminated sense of the marvellous: '[a]t an early age children are weaned on the marvellous' and yet in adulthood, if such sensations are not reproduced (as consciously sought by the surrealists) 'they fail to retain a sufficient virginity of mind to thoroughly enjoy fairy tales' (FM, 15). Before the interpolated and structured perception of adulthood, its codes and logic and the rules of its perspective, Surrealism saw a play of possibilities in childhood:

> From childhood memories, and from a few others, there emanates a sentiment of being unintegrated, and then later of *having gone astray,* which I hold to be the most fertile that exists. It is perhaps childhood that comes closest to one's "real life"; childhood beyond which man has at his disposal, aside from his laissez-passer, only a few complimentary tickets; childhood where everything nevertheless conspires to bring about the effective, risk-free possession of oneself. Thanks to Surrealism, it seems that opportunity knocks a second time.
>
> (FM, 40)

Just as Breton romanticised 'the absence of any known restrictions', surrealist art began to playfully subvert and dismiss the imitative logic of spatial perspective.

In drawing attention to perspective and challenging conventions of perspectival illusionism, surrealist art not only probed the 'learnt' sense of a naturalised perception and its representation but then also opened that challenge into a space of play. It was a space of play that was often evoked in correlation with the child's imagination and way of seeing. Between the nihilistic fragmentation of Dadaism and the radically reinterpreted forms of Cubism, Surrealism was contextually predisposed to harbouring obsessions with perspective. With just a cursory glance over the most prominent surrealist painters this becomes obvious: Dalí's

[17] For a more sustained analysis, see: Eric L. Tribunella,'Children's Literature and the Child Flâneur', *Children's Literature*, 38 (2010).

mercurial figures or objects, looming like giants in arid landscapes; the geometric severity of de'Chirico's colonnades; Magritte's planetary spheres, mutant apples and cramped rooms; Ernst's receding, disembodied eyes and hands in *Une semaine de bonté* (1933); Yves Tanguy's alien vistas that, like astral shorelines or primordial worlds, are populated by shapes that confuse the organic with the inorganic, and infinite space with intricate detail; Roberto Matta's seething tempests of colour and abstract planes of space; the austere and eerie architectural visions of Kay Sage; and the primal lines and shapes of Joan Miró, painted with a flat refusal of perspective.

It would also be possible at this point to consider the significance of Cornell: his enthusiasm to emulate an imagined version of a child's perspective; the attempts to preserve an airless version of childhood perception in each box; the continual references to games (hoops, marbles, soap bubbles, slot machines etc.) to invite a childish play; and the very personal impulse to enchant that was tied to a relationship with his brother – whose disability kept him mentally confined to a level of permanent infancy. All of these aspects were lovingly and meticulously attached to engagements with perspective. His boxes demonstrated a process whereby one did not simply look but was instead induced to try out and play with *types of looking* (through windows, behind objects, from different angles), thus of course drawing attention to perspective. However, as I have already explored Cornell in Chapter 1, this chapter will instead turn to the work of Giorgio de Chirico.

Giorgio de Chirico

Although in different ways, Giorgio de Chirico, like Cornell, remained apart from Surrealism while being undeniably *part of* Surrealism. Though his work inspired, and was adopted by, Surrealism, at no point was de Chirico himself a surrealist, as Ashbery has observed: '[i]t is a world that is *sui generis*, unrelated to any "isms" '.[18] While this assertion helpfully sidesteps the erroneous labelling of de Chirico's work as 'surrealist', it should not be ignored that much of what excited the surrealists in his work is similarly what comes to animate Ashbery's own admiration for de Chirico. In this sense, de Chirico was an artist outside of self-proclaimed Surrealism producing art that unconsciously adheres to (or in this case, anticipates) the aesthetic desires or principles of Surrealism – with arguably greater success than any artist 'officially' within the movement. As Ashbery notes, de Chirico's *Hebdomeros* (1929), a

[18] John Ashbery, 'A De Chirico Retrospective', originally in *Newsweek*, April 12, 1982, included in *Reported Sightings*, *Art Chronicles, 1957-1987* (New York: Knopf, 1989), p.403.

novel from which Ashbery translated a long section in 1965, is, in his opinion, the finest surrealist novel. It is a work that Ashbery reasoned should be placed above Breton's *Nadja* and Louis Aragon's *The Peasant of Paris*, or his lesser known *The Adventures of Telemachus*, arguing that: '[i]t scarcely matters that de Chirico, both as a painter and a writer, was "not really" a surrealist.'[19] An ability to speak to the philosophical and aesthetic concerns of Surrealism without the absolutist stamp of *belonging* to Surrealism as *surrealist* (as explained in the introduction) enacts the fluidity of perspective that, paradoxically, is arguably more truly surrealist in its freedom than a Bretonian allegiance to proclaiming – and emphasising – one's status *as a surrealist*.

In his metaphysical paintings (1909-19) de Chirico had unveiled a new landscape, or a new way of seeing landscape. His paintings depicted colonnades and empty squares cut through with jarring shadows, peopled only by mannequins and statues abandoned in desolate geometries. Occasionally a scene would feature distant trains, neither discernibly arriving nor departing, but puffing along with disquieting naivety, appearing like lost toys. In most of the paintings from this period, the presiding impression is of a stillness that, whether through melancholy, nostalgia, or anxiety, seems temporally suspended. All of these 'metaphysical' visual tropes, in the held breath of their empty plazas, anticipate a host of surrealist obsessions. Throughout these works perspective is intimately bound to a uniquely obtained atmosphere, the subsequent originality of which, by way of Apollinaire's promotion, enthralled many of the surrealists.

In paintings such as 'Nostalgia of the Infinite' (1911-13), 'Piazza d'Italia' (1913) and 'Mystery and Melancholy of the Street' (1914) sharp contrasts of white and black slice between imposing buildings with blocked shadows, elsewhere colonnades emphasise harsh plains of perspective that, as in 'the Anxious Journey' (1913), articulate competing vanishing points or a confounding disorientation of logic. The painting after which Ashbery's 1970 collection was named, 'The Double Dream of Spring' (1915) centres around a depiction of the artist's canvas on its easel, dissected in the lined perspectives of an emerging composition; the creative process is displayed as fascinated by preliminary sketches of perspective that, viewed reflexively, constitute its own creation. Throughout these paintings, the visual language occupies an imagination between inscrutable games and mathematical design, suggesting mischievous play intermingled with a threatening unknown: child-like visions haunted by the intrusion of adulthood. In 'The Evil Genius of a King' (1914) objects of incomprehensible scale evoke unknown tools of measurement or abstract toys, in 'Mystery and Melancholy of

[19] John Ashbery, 'The Decline of the Verbs', included as the introduction to *Hebdomeros* (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1992).

the Street' (1914) a girl plays with a hoop between ominous shadows and in 'The Disquieting Muses' (1916-18) panels of receding lines suggest a space half way between a child's board game and the austere delineations of a place of worship.

Following this intersection of the child and perspective (be it the articulation of an adult perspective recreating a child's impression or the fascination with perspective itself as a visual logic) Ashbery's poem 'The Skaters' (from *Rivers and Mountains*, 1966) can itself be *seen anew* through de Chirico's vision. This analysis of de Chirico will take its cue from Ashbery's own art criticism, adopting clarity and in some respects an approach of simplicity (understood positively) through which to approach his work. It is necessary to state this critical position as a conscious departure from either a more theoretically indebted approach or a more historicist account, both of which already exist elsewhere.[20] In a retrospective on de Chirico (1982), Ashbery asserts that 'the complex play of weightless planes and contradictory perspectives' are 'dissolved' in the influence of 'a Nietzschean *Stimmung* or atmosphere'.[21] In an earlier piece, to accompany an exhibition entitled 'Space and Dream' (at the Knoedler Gallery in New York, 1967) he references a passage from *Hebdomeros* that further elaborates de Chirico's involvement with perspective – through its displacement: '[o]n those days of supreme happiness, the sense of north, south, east and west – all sense of direction, in fact – was lost'.[22] This same disturbance and engagement in perspective runs throughout 'The Skaters'. As the conditioning framework through which sight and seeing is constructed, perspective becomes the variable in which the poem recognises a distinctly surrealist opportunity.

The lines preceding Ashbery's first mention of perspective guides an association that develops throughout the poem, 'The Skaters', between new ways of seeing and the child:

> The evidence of the visual henceforth replaced
> By the great shadow of trees falling over life.
>
> A child's devotion
> To this normal, shapeless entity. . . .

[20] Hal Foster reads de Chirico's paintings through a speculatively Freudian analysis, in which de Chirico's 'enigma' becomes a sublimated expression of the ambivalent relation to primal fantasies. De Chirico's paintings and extracts from his writing are subjected to a psychoanalytical decoding whereby everything is linked to and understood through psychic traumas (of castration/paternal relations), repression, sublimation and its articulation in anxieties of the uncanny. Whilst Foster's analysis is never short of persuasive intelligence, or insightful flare with its material, it arguably becomes blinkered in its devotion to an overarching need to prioritize psychoanalysis as a way of diagnostically 'solving' Surrealism. Meanwhile, Roger Cardinal's 'Giorgio de Chirico and surrealist mythology', in *Papers of Surrealism* (Summer, 2004) has provided a helpful (if brief) account of de Chirico's varying interactions alongside the development of early Surrealism. His discussion is framed in reference to classical allusions and the role of mythology.

[21] John Ashbery, 'A de Chirico Retrospective', *Reported Sightings*, p.403.

[22] De Chirico, *Hebdomeros*, cited by John Ashbery in 'Space and Dream', from *Reported Sightings*, p.11.

Forgotten as the words fly briskly across, each time
Bringing down meaning as snow from a low sky, or rabbits
flushed from a wood.
How strange that the narrow perspective lines

(RM, 149)

These lines seem to hint at an almost post-lapsarian impression of maturity, as if 'the great shadow of trees falling over life' is in someway the accumulation of experience coming to obscure 'The evidence of the visual'. Just as language is learnt ('trees falling over life' connotes the mutably symbolic 'forest' of Chapter 1) and constricts the communication it enables, perspective similarly confines as it represents, suggesting the 'great shadow' could also be a perspectival grid lowering on to 'Evidence of the visual'. This evidence is only apprehended by the child, able to perceive 'this normal, *shapeless* entity' (italics mine) in which it retains a freedom contingent on the 'child's devotion', a state that since growing up has been 'Forgotten'. The task of Surrealism and here realised in 'The Skaters' is to return the quotidian or 'normal' experience of reality to the fascinated 'devotion' of the child, perceiving it anew as an unfamiliar, 'shapeless entity'.

Perspective is also consciously introduced through swift turns in contrast, highlighting Ashbery's inclusive poetics as a way to confuse, celebrate and invert a relation to scale:

But how is it that you are always indoors, peering at too
heavily cancelled stamps through a greasy magnifying
glass?
And slowly the incoherencies of the day melt in
A general wishful thinking of night
To peruse certain stars over the bay.

(RM, 156)

This meditative atmosphere, redolent of de Chirico's own meandering contemplations, slides effortlessly from domestic to cosmic: the magnified and tiny intricacy of stamps 'melt' into the 'stars over the bay'. Or similarly, later on: 'Watching the meaningless gyrations of flies above a sill' leads to 'The delta of living into everything' (RM, 177). In a similar switching of scale, a page later, individual perception is thrown into its own proportion of relief when swung into a panoramic vista of a landscape: 'I am cosily ensconced in the balcony/of my face//Looking out over the whole darn countryside' (RM, 158). These dramatic shifts in perspective recall Ashbery's description of Pierre Reverdy, a poet whose often-cited influence in Surrealism has saddled him with the retro-active 'proto-surrealist' tag. For Ashbery: '[when

r]eading a poem by Reverdy, one can have the impression one moment of contemplating a drop of water on a blade of grass; the next moment one is swimming for one's life.'[23] Elsewhere, the illusion of distance recalls the Lumiere Brothers' famous 1895 film, *Train pulling into a Station*, or the ever-present puff of de Chirico's distant locomotive: 'the little train arrives in the station,/but oh, so big//It is! Much bigger and faster than anyone told you' (RM, 157). Or in another moment, distance returns us to a more contemplative consideration of the relativity of scale:

> Of how this tossing looks harmonious from a distance,
> Like sea or the tops of trees, and how
> Only when one gets closer is its sadness small and appreciable.
> It can be held in the hand.
>
> (RM, 155)

This constant changing of perspective, the potential comedy or melancholy of its illusions and relativity and, more simply, the emphasis of its governing influence, prevents seeing from ever resting in a state of familiar acceptance.

De Chirico refers to notions of the revelatory, profound and enigmatic as the highest aspirations of art; striving to avoid the familiar, as attested in his ambition to 'understand the enigma of things considered insignificant'.[24] This approach was memorably encapsulated in an image that returns the creative act to the perception of a child:

> To live in the world as if in an immense museum of strangeness, full of curious many-coloured toys which change their appearance, which, like little children we sometimes break to see how they are made on the inside, and, disappointed, realize they are empty.[25]

Whilst this ends on the potentially bleak note of a disappointed realisation of emptiness, perhaps such a sentiment needs to be understood as dispelling the comfort of an explanation for such 'strangeness'. The revelatory, profound or enigmatic, for de Chirico, may exist within a new perception of the *normal* but, additionally, denounces any codified belonging to the language of normality: 'there is no use citing history and the cause of this or that; this describes, but it explains nothing for the eternal reason that there is nothing to explain, and yet the enigma always remains.'[26] As a concept that refuses to be conceptualised, de Chirico's

[23] John Ashbery, 'A Note on Pierre Reverdy', originally appeared in *Evergreen Review* 4, no.11 (Jan-Feb 1960), collected in *Selected Prose*, ed. Eugene Richie (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004), p.21.
[24] Giorgio de Chirico, 'Eluard Manuscript', in *Hebdomeros*, p.186.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.

example of the empty toy – not as itself a disappointment (as 'the enigma always remains') but as a disappointment to certain frameworks of expectation – reverberates with Ashbery's own refusal to supply 'phony explanations', uttering instead the exasperated line: 'It is this madness to explain' (RM, 153).

Through its recurring journeying motif, the anticipation and momentum sustained in 'The Skaters' not only resists explanation but also derives much of its thrill, like de Chirico's sentiments on art, from the possibility of an unknown. Part I ends at the threshold of a known safety, having reached the "No Skating" sign, 'Face to face with the unsmiling alternatives of his nerve-/wracking existence', the poem imagines the skater daunted and endangered by 'the lamentable spectacle of the unknown' but, despite the threat, 'it is here that he is best' (RM, 154). Part II constitutes the poem's central voyage, continually deferred and experienced without direction or destination as emphatically *continual* ('Only, as I said, to be continued', 160), declared as 'Into the unknown, the unknown that loves us, the great/unknown!' (RM, 160). Part III escapes the 'reality' of Ashbery's 'middle-class apartment' (RM, 171) for the less familiar creation of a daydreamed island that is beset by a storm, concluding – inconclusively – that the 'Weather is undecided right now', before stating 'Postpone the explanation' (RM, 174). To extend this theme, Part IV offers its own evasion of conclusion as a source of distinctly surrealist enchantment. Just six lines from the poem's end, a sense of vague wonder elicited by 'Your knotted hair/Around your shoulders/ A shawl the color of the spectrum' is followed by the comparison: 'Like that marvelous thing you haven't learned yet' (RM, 177). To use 'marvelous', in a line that stands alone, and so near to the end of the poem, brings a weight of attention to the word that cannot help but invoke Breton's use of the word as a founding principle of Surrealism: 'the marvellous is always beautiful, anything marvellous is beautiful, in fact only the marvellous is beautiful (FM, 14).[27] Breton introduces the 'marvellous' as a way for adults to revisit the enchantment of childhood, as referenced before: '[a]t an early age children are weaned on the marvellous, and later on they fail to retain a sufficient virginity of mind to thoroughly enjoy fairy tales' (FM,15). Comparable to de Chirico's notion of the enigmatic, profound or revelatory, Ashbery's use of the word 'marvelous' connects the child's perception of the unknown with its surrealist significance. At the very end of 'The Skaters' the last two lines famously jumble the zodiac: 'The constellations are rising/In perfect order: Taurus, Leo, Gemini' (RM, 178). A structure of familiarity is confused, made unfamiliar and subsequently open to Ashbery's own ambiguous

[27] There is not space to expand upon the nuanced definition and varying usages of the term here, moving from Breton's discussion of 'modern mannequins' and 'romantic ruins' to its currency in further works of Surrealism. Although approached with a psychoanalytical bias, Hal Foster's *Compulsive Beauty* (pp.19-54) provides an intelligent and sustained analysis of the term.

marvellous; not a known quantity or informed certainty but, like the surrealist child, 'The Skaters' looks toward the unknown as 'that marvelous thing you haven't learned yet'.

For de Chirico to associate the revelatory unknown with the child involved the influence, as Ernesto Suarez-Toste notes, of both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer who instilled in his painting the 'defamiliarizing presentation of ordinary events and objects' as a way 'to see things again with the freshness of the first time.'[28] In the early Eluard manuscript (1911-1915), de Chirico presents the revelatory profundity of a work of art as 'completely beyond the limits of the human', echoing Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) to declare: '[w]hen life becomes profound it stops being good or bad'.[29] De Chirico argues that art which facilitates revelation 'will come close to the dream state and also the mentality of children.'[30] This Nietzschien grounding for his revelation is again elaborated in a childhood experience:

> I remember that often having read Nietzsche's immortal work "Thus Spake Zarathustra," I derived from various passages of this book an impression I had already had as a child when I read an Italian children's book called "The Adventures of Pirouchio." Strange similarity which reveals the profundity of the work. Here there is no naïveté; there is none of the naïve grace of the primitive artist; the work possesses a strangeness that the sensation of a child sometimes has, but at the same time one feels that he who created it did so consciously. In the same way I believe that in order to be truly profound a picture must attain this ground.[31]

Reiterating the 'strangeness that the sensation of a child sometimes has' through an equivalence in adult reading not only chimes with Breton's later call for 'fairy tales to be written for adults' (FM, 16) but also with Ashbery's collaged use of the boys' annual, *Three Hundred Things a Bright Boy Can Do* (1914). The presence of the book in Ashbery's poem is clearly not a point of erudite or literary allusion but instead, like de Chirico's "The Adventures of Pirouchio", a gesture towards childish enchantment; a joy of curiosity and 'strangeness' that resists intellectual explication, being better served by de Chirico's description of the more ineffable 'sensation'.

The almost consecrated idea of the children's book seems to enter a personal mythology for de Chirico, arguably suggested within his painting 'The Child's Brain' (1914). In the painting, conspicuously devoid of child, a man faces out of what appears to be a window (a fluted drape of curtain at first appearing to be a column) with his eyes closed, on the sill (or at least the dark surface in front of him) is a closed yellow book. It is as if the

[28] Ernesto Suareez-Toste's,'"The Tension is in the Concept": John Ashbery's Surrealism', *Style*: 38, (Spring 2004), p.8.
[29] Giorgio de Chirico, 'Manuscript from the collection of Paul Eluard' (1911-1915), in *Hebdomeros*, p.182 and p.178.
[30] De Chirico, 'Eluard Manuscript', p. 182.
[31] Ibid.

‘child’s brain’ is an indication of the man’s interiority when, eyes closed, he returns to recapture that perception as a kind of dream – a dream perhaps prompted by the yellow book. Although this seems like wilful extrapolation, in the same year de Chirico painted ‘The Turin Spring’, in this picture it is as if the painting adopts the position of the man and looks from his (eyes closed) perspective out on to a hybridised landscape of dream and reality. We can see the same yellow book, now warped in size, distorting the sill or dark surface into a stretching plain and the window’s frame into an abstract slicing of shadows. There is an egg, a black hand that points down, an artichoke and the dramatic architecture of a colonnade. It is as if ‘The Turin Spring’ visually inhabits ‘The Child’s Brain’ and depicts what it is the man, after reading the yellow book, can see. The children’s book becomes a nostalgic way to prompt the child’s perception of discovery within the adult, providing both a comparison and trigger for instances of surrealist experience.

Figure I. *The Child’s Brain* (1914)

Figure II. *The Turin Spring* (1914)

Three Hundred Things: Illustrated Play

Ashbery described *Three Hundred Things a Bright Boy Can Do* as 'a book for children, about the things they can do to amuse themselves' and, though he collages from the book with restraint in 'The Skaters' (approximately twenty-five lines are used over the duration of the thirty page poem), its implications emanate throughout the poem and profoundly influence its tone.[32] As Ashbery recalls, the book was a source of fascination that evoked another book, one encountered in his childhood:

> as a child I had a similar book, an old set of *The Book of Knowledge*, published around the same time in England, and I was fascinated especially by the chapter "Things to Make and Do," although I don't think I ever did any of them. There's a lot of that in "The Skaters" – like peering at stamps through a magnifying glass.[33]

The first draft of the poem reveals the extent to which the collaged book shaped and informed the poem's earlier stages, as Ashbery attests:

> What I had originally intended to do in "The Skaters" was to use the titles of the section[s] from that book as titles – at the head of each section. I began it that way actually, with a list of titles rather like the sort of table of contents at the beginning of a Milton canto. I began this way, but then I found the poem was a lot more mysterious if I removed the scaffolding of titles.[34]

Consciously working towards an effect that privileged the 'mysterious' and conceived in reference to a book that recalled childhood, 'The Skaters' uses collage as way to introduce a child-like perception of the unknown into play. Not only does the collaged text bring the child into play through its content (as a young boy's instruction manual) but also in the act of collage itself as a form of play, one that reveals a distinctly surreal sensitivity to certain types of illustration.

Before addressing collage and illustration, another apposite instance of the aesthetic value Ashbery affords children's books should be mentioned. Elizabeth Bishop's final volume of poetry, *Geography III* (1976) has an epigraph taken from the ornately illustrated, *First*

---

[32] Interview with Bill Berkson (1969), quoted in John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p.94. Throughout this section I will refer to the first draft of 'The Skaters' which has been made available online as a 'digital critical edition', courtesy of 'TEXT/*works*'< http://www.text-works.org/Texts/Ashbery/JA-Sk_data/JA-Sk_EdN.html > [accessed September 2014]

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

Lessons in Geography (1884), a book that had been a gift from Ashbery.[35] Full of eccentric and intricate etchings, the book is structured in a series of 'Lessons' with question and answer sections; offering colonialist exoticism and antiquated prejudices through a classroom charade of illustrated Victoriana, it is undoubtedly a bizarre and fascinating book. With the early learning sermon of its 'scientific' information, suggesting a new world of knowledge for the child, it is a vision of discovery akin to *Three Hundred Things* or *The Book of Knowledge*. In the geography book's antiquated and imperialist version of the 'new world', itself a displaced artefact, it becomes as ideologically estranged and oddly fascinating as the child-world its content aims to educate.

This specific atmosphere seems familiar to what is often referred to as the 'Robinson Crusoe episode' in part III of 'The Skaters' which, along with *First Lessons in Geography*, had another marked influence on Bishop's *Geography III,* in the poem 'Crusoe in England'.[36] The Crusoe episode from 'The Skaters' depicts a daydream that transports the poem to a desert island before returning to the 'reality' of Ashbery's 'middle-class apartment' (RM, 171). The imaginative digression considers the task of survival in ways that evoke an exoticism and stranded masculinity-against-the-elements common to a certain kind of popular 'boys adventure':

> For food there is only
> Breadfruit, and berries garnered in the jungle's inner reaches,
> Wrested from the scorpion and poisonous snake. Fresh water is a
> problem.
> After a rain you may find some nestling in the hollow trunk of
> a tree, or in hollow stones.
>
> (RM, 169)

The passage, which goes on to observe 'dolphins/ at play', 'vultures', 'eagles' and the oncoming signs of a storm, combines the adventuring boy scout mentality that characterises *Three Hundred Things*, alongside the out-dated visions of *First Lessons in Geography*.

To further clarify this fascination for the child and discovery, as elicited by an old book, it helps to return to Bishop's earlier poem 'Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance' (from her 1955 collection, *A Cold Spring*) – a firm favourite of Ashbery's. On first reading the poem in the *Partisan Review*, Ashbery recalls: 'though I was barely an adult,

[35] Shoptaw quotes a postcard dated April 27, 1976 from Bishop to Ashbery: 'The geography book is *wonderful.* I can't quite believe it's real, it is so apt. I may use some of its questions & answers as a POEM or a forward to my book' (94).
[36] Elizabeth Bishop, *POEMS*, ed. by Saskia Hamilton, centenary edn. (London: Cahtto & Windus, 2011), p.182.

the poem seemed to sum up life ahead in its first line "Thus should have been our travels," and life as viewed in retrospect in the last line, "and looked and looked our infant sight away," a line which still elicits a vagrant tear after all these years.'[37] In its final stanza, Bishop imbues the far-flung travel of 'Over 22,000 Illustrations…' with a reverent and sensory connection felt towards a book: 'Open the book. (The gilt rubs off the edges/of the pages and pollinates the fingertips', before arriving at the fading 'infant sight'.[38] Similarly in the Crusoe episode, on the imagined island, Ashbery reflects that 'a weathered child's alphabet is my only reading material' (RM, 170); both poets root their intentionally exoticised landscapes, as a new and (for Ashbery) dreamt geography, with reference to childhood. Marooned on the imagined shore of his imagined island, Ashbery contemplates the profound joy of this experience:

> As steam from a wet shingle, and I am happy once
> again
> Walking among these phenomena that seem familiar to
> me from my earliest childhood.
>
> (RM, 169)

In using *Three Hundred Things* it seems that Ashbery is drawn almost as often to the illustrations as to the text. On the first page of his first draft of the poem, following an epigraph – also taken from *Three Hundred Things* (which I will return to) – Ashbery sets out a list of titles plucked from the book's various sub-divisions. Originally intended as a way to structure the subject flow or content of the poem, the list ends with this jumbled inventory:

> Leaves of the Ginko Tree. Photo. Phantom Poodles. "I have to watch Charlotte." Cremated Alive. Silkworms. The Points. The man in the hall. The Critique of Pure Resin. "Blue-bottles drive me crazy!" Good-bye. Bubble Balloons.[39]

Every phrase, excluding 'The Critique of Pure Resin' and 'Bubble Balloons', relates to a specific illustration.[40] As a primary indication of the poem's intent, a collaged relation to the book's illustrations seems to be a guiding, or at least presiding, interest for Ashbery. Although

---

[37] *Poems That Make Grown Men Cry: 100 Men on the Words That Move Them*, ed. by Anthony Holden and Ben Holden (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), p.155.
[38] Elizabeth Bishop, 'Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance', *POEMS*, p.58.
[39] 'The First Typescript': http://www.text-works.org/Texts/Ashbery/JA-Sk_data/JA-Sk_TS1-01.html
[40] The page numbers of these illustrations in *Three Hundred Things* are as follows: 'Leaves of the Ginko Tree' (p.185), 'Photo' (p.187),'Phantom Poodles' (p.203), '"I have to watch Charlotte"'(p. 203), 'Cremated Alive' (p.209), 'Silkworms' (p. 253), 'The Points' (p.189), 'The man in the hall' (p.197), '"Blue-bottles drive me crazy!"' (p. 205), 'Good-bye' (p.205). 'Bubble Balloons' is the name of a small sub-section (p.396), whereas 'The Critique of Pure Resin' provides a playful pun on Immanuel Kant's *Critique on Pure Reason* (1781).

this 'table of contents' approach was strayed from, other illustrations from *Three Hundred Things* surface in the final version of part II:

> The figure 8 is a perfect symbol
> Of the freedom to be gained from this kind of activity
> The perspective lines of the barn are another and different kind of example
> (Viz. "Rigg's Farm, Near Aysgarth, Wenslydale," or the "Sketch of Norton")

The detailed reference to 'Rigg's Farm…' and 'Sketch of Norton' are both captions taken verbatim from under illustrations in Chapter XV, 'THE BOY AS ARTIST'.[41] Neither picture is particularly arresting, like many other illustrations in the book they exude a flat anonymity that could be exchanged for any number of similar illustrations from other books. The style of illustration in *Three Hundred Things* can generally be divided between bland or austere etchings and a handful of more loosely rendered cartoon-like images. In the context of Ashbery's collaged use and relation to such images, the emphasis takes on a recognisably surrealist frame of approach.

The most obvious example of the surrealist response to etchings, illustration and the model of the children's book is to be found in the collages of Max Ernst's graphic, collaged novels: *La Femme 100 Têtes* (1929) and *Une semaine de bonté* (1934). In his forward to *La Femme 100 Têtes*, Breton wrote:

> The splendid illustrations of novels and children's books like *Rocambole* or *Costal the Indian*, intended for persons who can scarcely read, are among the few things capable of moving to tears those who can say they have read everything. This road of knowledge, which tends to substitute the most forbidding, mirage-less dessert for the most astonishing virgin-forest, is not, unhappily, of the sort that permits retreat. The most we can hope for is to peek into some old gilt-edged volume, some pages with turned down corners (as if we were only allowed to find the magician's hat), sparkling or somber pages that might reveal better than all else the special nature of our dreams, the elective nature of our love, the manner of life's incomparable unwinding.[42]

Breton's piece ends by celebrating, 'for once, to see children's eyes, filled with the ineffable […] for our amazement and their own'.[43] Although Ashbery has praised Cornell's work in

[41] Many Hands, 'THE BOY AS ARTIST', *Three Hundred Things a Bright Boy Can Do* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & co., 1914) pp.157-191.
[42] André Breton, 'Forward', in Max Ernst, *La Femme 100 Têtes*, trans. by Dorothea Tanning, (New York: George Braziller, 1981), p.7 < http://ubumexico.centro.org.mx/text/vp/ernst_la_femme_100_tetes_1929.pdf > [accessed January 2015].
[43] André Breton, 'Forward', *La Femme 100 Têtes*, p.11.

collage to be a 'superior category' to Ernst's, due to its 'plastic qualities which compete for our attention with its "poetic" meaning', Ernst provides the major surrealist precedent.[44]

The role of collage in relation to the evolution of Surrealism captivated Ashbery to such an extent that, during 1974, he sent several letters (to Julian Levy, Jay Leyda and Roland Penrose) enquiring after details of a little known English publication, *What A Life!* (1911). Created by E. V. Lucas and George Morrow (both regular contributors to *Punch* magazine), *What A Life!* used illustrations cut from *Whiteley's General Catalogue* to humorously narrate the satirical biography of a fictional, upper class gentleman. In his letter to Julian Levy (June 5th, 1974), Ashbery notes that the publication 'curiously anticipates the collages of the Dadaists and Surrealists' and, keen to further establish and understand the link, mentions a relevant article in Raymond Queneau's *Batons, Chiffres et Lettres* (1950).[45] In an earlier letter to the British artist and Surrealist, Roland Penrose, he refers to the 'Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism' exhibition at MoMA in 1936, which he recalls displayed two of its illustrations.[46] Finally, there is also a letter to the American filmmaker and film historian, Jay Leyda, which asks, '[i]f you have any information which might help establish the book as a minor underground masterpiece of proto-Surrealism, I would be enormously grateful if you could let me know'.[47] It is clear from the persistence of this correspondence that addressing the nature of illustration and collage in Surrealism, both as a legacy and in its roots, was an area of continuing personal interest for Ashbery.[48] An area of interest that has, alongside the Tibor de Nagy community of artists and Joe Brainard's friendship, evidently informed his own experimentations in visual – as well as poetic – collage. Ashbery even used one of the illustrations from *What A Life!* (a dress hanging in a cupboard, that had been paired with the caption 'no sooner did the clock strike twelve than a headless apparition was seen to move slowly across the moonlit hall') in a collage of his, entitled 'Norman's Woe' (2008). Significantly the image was taken from the first chapter of *What A Life!*, entitled 'Childhood'.

---

[44] John Ashbery, 'Joseph Cornell', *Reported Sightings*, p.15.
[45] John Ashbery, Letter to Julian Levy, June 5th 1974. John Ashbery Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University (*89M-58) AM6, carton 24 of 56.
[46] John Ashbery, Letter to Roland Penrose, May 17th 1974. Houghton Library, Harvard University (*89M-58) AM6, carton 24 of 56.
[47] John Ashbery, Letter to Jay Leyda, June 24th 1974. Houghton Library, Harvard University (*89M-58) AM6, carton 24 of 5.
[48] Ashbery's research and enthusiasm for this obscure collage publication was compiled in his 'Introduction to E.V. Lucas and George Morrows *What A Life!*', first published in *Horizon* 17, no.1 (Winter 1975) and later in Ashbery's *Selected Prose*, pp.152-158. In his 'Introduction' Ashbery compares the collage with Ernst's later work and also highlights the significance of childhood by citing Marcel Jean (author of *Surrealism and Painting*, 1967). Jean observed the generational resonance of steel-engraved illustrations as a dated form of reproduction, evocatively tied to memories of childhood. Consequently the specific style of illustration is given a historicized basis in its reception, linked with an outmoded style connected to childhood. This particular and contextual resonance was then further cultivated and capitalized upon as a continuing surrealist value.

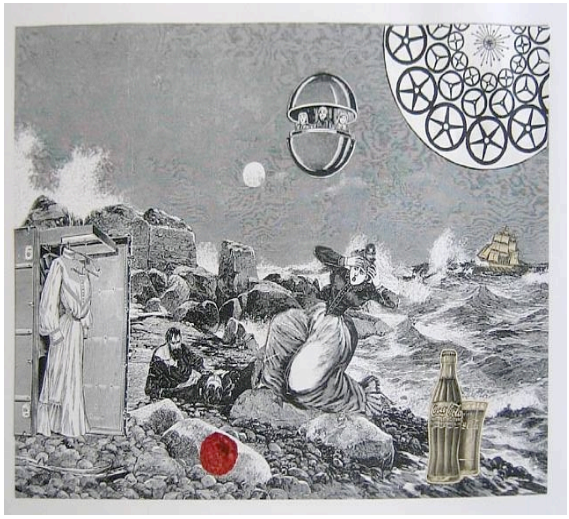

Figure III. Illustration from *What A Life!* (1911) **Figure IV**. John Ashbery, *Norman's Woe* (2008)

Before looking at Ashbery's efforts in visual collage, more and more of which continue to surface – gracing book covers and prompting exhibitions – there is another pertinent example of illustration and Surrealism that should be broached. Just as the images of de Chirico, Cornell and (more obscurely) the satirical idiosyncrasy of *What A Life!* seem to speak of and to Surrealism, without being ever wholly identifiable as surrealist, so too does the artwork that accompanied Raymond Roussel's *Nouvelles impressions d'Afrique* (1932) gain its own peripheral, surrealist significance. Roussel's insanely ambitious, laboriously meticulous and bizarre *Nouvelles impressions d'Afrique* is a poem that uses ever expanding parenthesis to signal further and further digressions in its own layering of strands and narratives. If the reader is to painstakingly read it in sequential order, the poem requires a continual turning –from the front to the back – to peel away at its brackets-within-brackets structure. Alongside this puzzling challenge to the reader is the equally puzzling tone of its oddly detached illustrations.

Comparable to the bland anonymity of many illustrations in *Three Hundred Things*, Henri Achille Zo's illustrations for Raymond Roussel garnered their own surrealist value. Zo's illustrations were commissioned in elaborate secrecy, typical of Roussel's eccentric calculation, to appear alongside the innovatively exasperating and elliptical labyrinth of *Nouvelles impressions d'Afrique*. The flat tone of Zo's illustrations, described by Ashbery as having a 'militant banality', share their oddly functional sobriety with many of the illustrations from *Three Hundred Things* (those that are not in a more comic-strip style), both evoking school textbooks.[49] When discussing the illustrations in Roussel's *Nouvelles*

[49] John Ashbery, 'On Raymond Roussel', *Selected Prose*, p.43.

impressions d'Afrique, Ashbery draws this same specific comparison in his description of an 'utterly conventional style that reminded me of illustrations in a French conversation book I'd had in school.'[50] An echo of this re-encountered children's textbook style surfaces in Joe Brainard's illustration of Ashbery's prose poetry travelogue, *The Vermont Notebook* (1975). Brainard's pictures combine their flat simplicity, redolent of Zo's 'militant banality', with a more knowing implication of the wry humour at play in Ashbery's passing landscapes of Americana. During the 1970s, Ashbery frequently made summer visits to Brainard where, as he recalls, "[a]fter dinner we got in the habit of sitting around and cutting up old magazines and making collages" , in addition to which Brainard often sent Ashbery assorted cuttings in the post, urging him to use them in collages.[51]

It is immediately clear from looking at Ashbery's collages that the majority are unified through a simple, mischievous and, above all, child-like appreciation of the process as a kind of play. The Tibor de Nagy have held two exhibitions devoted solely to Ashbery's collages, first in 2008 (presenting collages from as early as the late '40s, though mainly represented in bulk by a fecund period from the mid to late '70s) and then, with a batch of more recent collages, in 2011.[52] Many of the collages utilize quaint and innocuous images from postcards to establish the background, over which are pasted incongruous cartoons, pop-cultural allusions or more consciously high art or historical portraits. Occasionally the use of black and white etchings evoke Max Ernst's graphic novels (as in the melodrama of 'Norman's Woe', 2008) or even, as in the early collage, 'Late for School' (1948), where the bird-headed avatars of Ernst's 'Loplop' alter-ego make an appearance to disturb a chocolate-box childhood scene. These are comparatively anomalous examples however and, perhaps unsurprisingly, Ashbery's collages tend to mine a less fraught or dramatic tone in favour of a more whimsically flippant spirit: somewhere between Cornell and Brainard. In a later sequence of collages (from 2008), consisting of 'Chutes and Ladders I (for Joe Brainard)', 'Chutes and Ladders II (for David Kermani)', 'Mannerist Concern' and 'Moon Glow', Ashbery uses the cheerfully bright geometry of a board game to supply the backdrop. Each collage deploys a simple composition, similar to the squared and uncomplicated style of many

[50] John Ashbery, 'The Bachelor Machines of Raymond Roussel', *Other Traditions* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), p.45.
[51] John Ashbery, quoted in Holland Cotter, 'The Collages of John Ashbery', *The New York Times* (Sept, 2008) < http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2008/09/12/arts/0914-COTT_index.html > [accessed January 2013]. Ashbery had also collaborated with Brainard on his two-issue run of *C Comics* (in 1966), where poets (such as O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, Ted Berrigan, Ron Padgett, Kenward Elmsie, Bill Berkson and Frank Lima) contributed text to comic strips. The west coast artist Jess was also creating comparably similar re-workings of comic strips in the 1960s.
[52] A joint exhibition of Guy Maddin and Ashbery's collages were presented side by side, June 18-July 31 (2015) by the Tibor de Nagy gallery.

of Brainard's collaborations with O'Hara ('Why Are They Always Staring???', 'I'm Not Really Flying, I'm thinking' and 'I Grew This Mustache…' all from 1964).

Many of the collages also exude a smiling comfort, at ease with their own unfinished appearance: as in the simplicity of 'Reservoir Cat' (1972), the oddly sparse 'Egyptian Landscape' (2009-10), the scatter-shot over-enthusiasm of 'Northern Lights' (undated), or the scrappy disarray of 'The Leisure Class' (2011) and 'The Mail in Russia' (2011). Using board games, cartoons and an often jovial disregard for precision or subtlety, the majority of Ashbery's collages communicate a palpable joy that, as John Yau (a poet and one time student of Ashbery) observes, showcases an 'innocence [that] enables him to take a deep delight in the world, to see it with a fresh, unjaundiced eye.'[53] Combining the imagery of travel postcards (recalling the allure of *First Lessons of Geography* and the boyish innocence of *Three Hundred Things*) with Brainard's affection for the comic-strip, while also involving frequent images of young boys, the iconography of games and an almost naively home-made aesthetic, Ashbery's collages are an earnestly playful homage to surrealist play: envisaged as the joyful condition of creativity.

Skating, Impossibility and Play

From a short poem ('Eis-Lebens-Lied') by Johann von Goethe first published in 1776 to Wordsworth's 'The Prelude' (1850) and Shoptaw's later suggestion of Wallace Stevens' poem, 'Of Modern Poetry' (from *Parts of A World*, 1942), the motif of 'skating' in poetry has been critically discussed at length.[54] Beyond its possible literary history, Bernstein conceptualised skating as a symbol specific to Ashbery's poetics: 'giving the spatial sensation of overlay and the temporal sensation of meandering thought Skating is the adequate symbol

[53] John Yau, 'John Ashbery: Collages: They Knew What They Wanted', *The Brooklyn Rail* (Oct 10th, 2008) < http://www.brooklynrail.org/2008/10/artseen/john-ashberry-collages-they-knew-what-they-wanted > [accessed February 2015]. John Yau also invokes the artwork of outsider artist, Henry Darger, commenting that, ''[i]n many of the collages, particularly from the early 1970s on, innocence and tenderness mix seamlessly with the sinister in ways that seem emotionally in keeping with "Girls on the Run," Ashbery's book-length poem inspired by Henry Darger's anatomically incorrect drawings and watercolors of girls'. This is certainly relevant to Surrealism but to contextualize its significance would involve a lengthy account of the sexualized complexity of the infant in Surrealism, drawing from Marquis De Sade through to Apollinaire, Bataille, Georges Hugnet and Hans Bellmer (to name the most obvious), in addition to the influence of Freud.

[54] Shoptaw, in *On the Outside Looking Out*, also notes that 'The Skaters' takes its title from 'Les Patineurs' (a ballet arranged by Constant Lambert that uses the music of Giacomo Meyerbeer's opera, *Le Prophète*), pp.91-2. In *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, Herd has meanwhile suggested the relevance of passages from Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), p.105. For a further discussion of the literary precedence for skating and its motif in poetry, see Laurent Milesi, 'Figuring out Ashbery: 'The Skaters'', *Revue française d'études américaines,* No. 67, La poésie américaine: constructions lyriques (Jan, 1996), pp. 45-57.

of this compositional method.'[55] In his first draft of 'The Skaters', before the 'table of contents' paragraph that ends with the (previously discussed) list of illustrations, Ashbery reproduced a passage from *Three Hundred Things* as an epigraph:

> Some sounds, of course, it is almost impossible to reduce to writing, as, for example the hollow "skaw" and murmur produced by a multitude of skaters, or the roar of an excited crowd, but in listening to these sounds, it is useful to remember that we may often obtain a key tone to work upon by closing the ears - - just as a painter can often find the prevailing tint of a confused mass of objects by partly closing the eyes.[56]

This extract is taken from a section entitled 'Polyphony' which, for a poet as renowned for his evasion of the univocal as Ashbery is and to be found embedded in the eclectic text of a boy's manual, is surely a perfect demonstration of a poetics of chance, or surrealist 'objective chance' at its most rewarding. The concept of sound and the phenomenology of listening, as ways to reconfigure writing and reading (as discussed in Chapter 3), are lent a different nuance in light of this epigraph absent from the final poem.

Contrary to the opening of the poem for which 'These decibels' lend language a sonic metaphor, elaborating a communication 'Into which being enters and is apart' (RM, 147), the original epigraph situates the possibility of '[s]ome sounds' as experiences seemingly outside of language, 'almost impossible to reduce to writing'. If the sound of skating refuses to be assimilated in writing, the poem – in its original deployment of this as an epigraph – seems to assert that it has knowingly taken upon itself a subject that remains, by its definition, out of reach. In the context of the poem, the 'sounds' of skating become a synecdoche for the activity of skating itself and thus bring to mind the more dominant metaphor of 'skating' as writing. So the epigraph, when illuminated by the implications of the poem, becomes an explanation of that which escapes writing and that *is* writing: an impossibility that keeps Ashbery's poetry in its state of play. What Ashbery has said of Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* (1956) is equally applicable to the spirit suggested by his choice in epigraph: 'if […] we feel that it is still impossible to accomplish the impossible, we are also left with the conviction that it is the only thing worth trying to do.'[57] The opening evokes an awkward portrait of skating which then slides into a more abstract contemplation:

> Their colors on a warm February day

[55] Charles Bernstein, '*The Meandering Yangtze*, Rivers and Mountains (1966)', *CONJUNCTIONS*, 49 (Fall, 2007).
[56] Many Hands, *Three Hundred Things* (p.202), cited as the epigraph for 'The Skaters' ('The first typescript') <http://www.text-works.org/Texts/Ashbery/JA-Sk_data/JA-Sk_TS1-01.html > [accessed January 2014].
[57] John Ashbery, 'The Impossible: Gertrude Stein', *Selected Prose*, p.15.

Make for masses of inertia, and hips
Prod out of the violet-seeming into a new kind
Of demand that stumps the absolute because not new
But, as it were, pre-existing or pre-seeming in
Such a way as to contrast funnily with the unexpectedness
And somehow push us all into perdition.

(RM, 147)

The skaters 'Prod out of the violet-seeming' discomfort of 'hips', finding a parallel in their precarious movements and avoidance of elegance in Ashbery's own awkward phrasing ('funnily with unexpectedness'). Yet these stumbling 'masses of inertia' lead into a 'new kind/Of demand that stumps the absolute because not new', conveying a *not new new* that playfully seems to usher in a paradoxical change, retaining an ambiguity 'that stumps the absolute': an area that becomes familiar poetic territory for Ashbery.

It seems that here, in observing 'Their colors', Ashbery is transported through a sensation that, both new and not new, reverberates with the 'almost impossible' suggestion of the epigraph. Like de Chirico's revelation or sense of profundity, or Maddin's 'dawn of awareness', this represents Ashbery's own experience of the charged perception of childhood; 'not new' because 'pre-existing or pre-seeming' and thus experienced as a sense of return. It is an experience, here encapsulated in the wavering imbalance of skating, which has the convulsive 'unexpectedness' of surrealist juxtaposition while also embodying a familiarity of that which has been lost. It is a notion that rearticulates Hal Foster's psychoanalytical critique of 'objective chance' and 'convulsive beauty', from a Freudian return of the repressed, to a more positive return that comes closer to achieving Breton's desire for Surrealism as a form of second childhood. In relation to this 'new kind/Of demand' that returns perception to a more open or potently enthralled state, adulthood is what has come 'to somehow push us all into perdition'.

The epigraph ends by suggesting that a 'key' to these seemingly impossible sounds can be heard through 'closing the ears' or, more significantly, 'just as a painter can often find the prevailing tint of a confused mass of objects by partly closing the eyes'. The original epigraph to 'The Skaters' therefore ended on the image of a painter with his eyes closed: an established symbol of Surrealism. Whether in de Chirico's 'A Child's Brain', Magritte's *Je ne vois pas la . . . cache dans la forêt* (1929), or even the more brutal eyeball slice that begins Buñuel and Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou*, removing sight was a surrealist invocation of inner sight: the privilege of the interiorized image.[58] In the context of 'The Skaters', closing the

[58] For more on the surrealist emphasis on the eye (looking and not looking), see Mary Ann Caws, *The Surrealist Look*, *An Erotics of Encounter* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

painter's eyes emphasises the interiority. The 'new kind/ Of demand' that returns while seeming new, moving toward 'the profile I cannot remember' (RM, 147) and existing as a voyage always continuing and yet never taken ('It is all passing! It is past! No, I am here,' RM, 159) is the play of an emphatically *internal* process. From the travelogue of 'The Instruction Manual' to the Crusoe episode in 'The Skaters' Ashbery always reminds us, he is seated and writing, apart from the happening of the journey but staging and inhabiting it 'once again in quest of the unknown' (RM, 158).

Beyond the epigraph to 'The Skaters' and returning to the text of *Three Hundred Things* there is, in Ashbery's partially collaged description of the 'flame fountain' (occurring toward the end of Part II) another manifestation of play that, reminiscent of some of his visual collages, privileges 'the unfinished' or 'incomplete' as a creative value. This description blends two sections from *Three Hundred Things*, merging the flame fountain imagery and its instructions from 'A Well of Fire' with the section entitled 'Fire Designs'.[59] In merging the flame fountain with fire designs, Ashbery concludes:

> That flame writing might be visible right there, in the gaps in
> the smoke
> Without going through the bother of solution writing.
>
> (RM, 164)

Rather than accepting the ordered procedure of the fire design ('using a saturated/solution of nitrate of potash', 164) to reveal writing 'until the design is complete' (RM, 164), Ashbery eschews this approach in favour of a more aleatory image: 'gaps in/the smoke'. It is a line that recalls the earlier description, 'Leaving phrases unfinished, /Gestures half-sketched against the woodsmoke' (RM, 151).

Writing in 'The Skaters' is not a certain movement towards completing a design ('there is error/In so much precision', RM, 151), it is not 'solution writing'; instead it is the 'half-sketched' and 'unfinished', communicated through a restless language ('smoke') paradoxically based, without base, in its absences ('gaps'). The implication of this gaseous analogy, with writing as a kind of formless form enabled by play, also characterises the imagery for poetic composition that occupies the ending to part I of 'The Skaters'. The two comparisons Ashbery evokes are: 'As balloons to the poet, so to the ground/ Its varied assortment of trees' and 'like those bubbles/Children make with a kind of ring […] using some detergent' (RM, 153-4). Both depict poetic writing as an ungrounded activity; an airy

[59] *Three Hundred Things*, p.380 ('Fire Designs'); pp. 384-5 ('A Well of Fire').

movement that, through the balloon and the detergent bubble brings us back to an association with the child. Therefore Ashbery is not only evoking play as inherent to the dynamic of poetic writing but also in its relation to, and becoming synonymous with, the child at play.

It is this continual insistence on the dynamics of play that distinguishes the child and its perception most uniquely within a surrealist context. Without this distinction it would be tempting to question how *a return to child-like perception*, with its innocent capability for awe or the visionary, would be any different from certain aspects of Romanticism and the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Or, one might ask, how rendering the familiar and everyday *un*familiar through a new perspective, or a distortion of perspective, offers anything vastly different from its later incarnation in the aesthetics of Martianism (the minor movement in British poetry in the late 1970s and early 1980s).[60] Though there are evident points of comparison with Romanticism as part of a complex surrealist genealogy, and though the somewhat superficial debt to Surrealism that characterised the imagery of Martianism has been widely acknowledged, unlike Surrealism neither prioritised the concept of play to the same extent. For Surrealism and Ashbery the child is a catalyst for play, a metonymic invitation into lost and idealised sensations where continual discovery and the unknown replace an adult stasis of what is known and familiar. In 'The Skaters' the playful and associative nature of meaning, as encouraged by poetic manifestations of the child, compels Ashbery's poetics into a confident motion of restlessness where, to quote Perloff, the 'disclosure of some special meaning seems perpetually imminent'.[61]

Itself and Other: Language as Play

It is possible to understand play, both of and as metaphor in Ashbery's 'The Skaters' in relation to the writing of Bataille. However, what Bataille articulated as a surrealist ontology of irresolvable contradiction and absence, Ashbery is capable of recreating (as with the labyrinth) as a basis for phenomenological poetics. Ashbery's use of the metaphor in 'The Skaters' does not despair in or theorize the semiotic properties of language as itself structured as metaphor, but instead uses that distance, deferral and absence to prompt experiential

[60] Firstly it is important to stress that Surrealism *is* related to both of these suggestions. Romanticism had an undeniable influence upon Surrealism (which Breton himself acknowledges by declaring 'We are the tail of romanticism,' adding gleefully 'but how prehensile!' Cited by Mary Ann Caws, in *The Surrealist Look*, p. 23) often by way of the Gothic, drawing from the privileged role of interiority, altered mental states and principles of utopianism. Similarly Martianism *is* connected to Surrealism in its practice of defamiliarised imagery, however, unlike Surrealism, Martianism divorced the visual impetus of surprise from its more philosophical and non-literary experimental context to become instead an exercise of more conscious and literary wit.
[61] Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy,* p. 11.

sensations in the reader. In 'The Skaters', Ashbery's use of metaphor evinces the charged perception of a child's discovery by accommodating renewable levels of meaning that never settle.

Through its restless metaphor of skating, 'The Skaters' implies play to be a dominating principle behind its rhythms of content and process, continually weaving in and out of each other and for which 'The figure of 8 is a perfect symbol/Of the freedom to be gained in this kind of activity' (RM, 161). *Three Hundred Things* devotes an entire section to activities 'On the Ice' that, despite not directly quoted from by Ashbery, clearly stimulates the poem through its implications of skating as an activity tied to childhood and as a kind of play. Manifesting a linguistic unit of equally slippery play, the notion of skating as a metaphor begins to slide without singular anchorage, encompassing a host of potential subjects: language, writing, reading, perceiving, perspective as a way of perceiving, a play of perspective indicative of childhood, an activity indicative of childhood and, as the original epigraph suggested ('almost impossible to reduce to writing') the paradoxical negation of that which it also is. Consequently the metaphor subverts its commonly established function, as a contained relationship in which one thing is substituted for another, to instead invoke a restless chain of mobile metaphors.

Isolating 'skating', even in its plurality of substitution, does not entirely account for the more diffuse nature of Ashbery's indeterminacy as play in 'The Skaters'; other metaphors also operate in comparable chains and can be metonymically triggered to begin their substitutions in a kind of simultaneous overlay. In the same way in which skating moves between a linguistic metaphor and a more phenomenological value – relating to perspective, movement and a child's perception – 'The Skaters' also draws together images of sound, noise, snow, bubbles, balloons, smoke, a voyage and dreaming (to name the most prominent) with the same mobile multi-valance. Despite distinguishing between these images (either as metaphors or, introduced initially as similes, coming to occupy a metaphoric influence in the poem) they are all also related and, at times, interchangeable, therefore allowing a play between their chains of substitution to occur through metonymy. A way to approach this mobility of meaning is suggested by Roland Barthes' reading of Bataille. In his essay 'The Metaphor of the Eye', Barthes proposes a semiotic fluidity in Bataille's infamous tale of transgression, *Story of the Eye* (1928), whereby 'each term is never anything but the significant of the next term', begging the question, 'is there a bottom to the metaphor and

consequently a hierarchy of terms?'[62] Barthes suggests that metonymy exercises a 'transfer of meaning from one chain to the other *at different levels of metaphor*'.[63]

In the early and influential emphasis on automatic writing as a channelled exposure of the unconscious, Surrealism bypassed a consideration of language by reducing it to a transparent conduit for the dream image. Consequently word and image were increasingly conflated without acknowledging the more complex and contingent play of semantics in and of language as a process. John Lechte argues that '[i]f the poet is the key figure in producing Surrealist effects, this is because seeing, and the associations tied to it […], is privileged in poetry'.[64] However, in pursuit of this 'seeing', Breton prioritised the significance of the metaphor, claiming that there was 'one tool, and one tool only, capable of boring deeper and deeper, and that is the image, and among all types of images, metaphor'.[65] As Lechte points out, by promoting poetry and metaphor for surrealist ends without questioning the assumed transparency of language as its means: '[m]etaphor becomes a figure that can be objectified and used by the poet; it is not grasped as being part of the very precondition of language'.[66] Bataille defined himself as lying 'at the side of surrealism' and embodying an ambivalence that he referred to as its 'old enemy from within', this did not constitute (as many reductively suggest) a simple break from Surrealism, but instead informed a deeper engagement with its difficulties – most often, in relation to language.[67] Bataille not only asked of Surrealism, 'how have we managed to confuse the thing itself with the expression it is given by painting or poetry?' but also challenged its emancipatory spirit by declaring: 'I cannot consider someone free if they do not have the desire to sever the bonds of language within themselves.'[68] This awareness leant Bataille's writing, as Barthes suggests, an emphasis on the process of language, brought to attention and more consciously into play.

While Ashbery differs greatly from Bataille's darker tone, his transgressive obsessions, and the bleak sense of linguistic servitude and its subordination, both explore a relationship with Surrealism that acknowledges and deploys play in language. The play of language and its role in poetics acknowledged as play, provides 'The Skaters' with a more positive interaction with meaning as always shifting. To briefly map this shifting of meaning

---

[62] Roland Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye' [trans. by J.A. Underwood], in Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, trans. by Joachim Neugroschal (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 122.
[63] Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye' p.125.
[64] John Lechte, 'Surrealism and the practice of writing, or The 'case' of Bataille', *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, ed. by Carolyn Bailey Gill (London: Routledge, 2005) p.121
[65] Breton, 'Surrealist Situation of the Object' (1935), *Manifestoes of Surrealism,* p.268.
[66] Lechte, p.124
[67] Michael Richardson, 'Introduction', Georges Bataille, *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism* (London: Verso, 2006), p.1.
[68] Georges Bataille, 'On the Subject of the Slumbers' (1946), *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, p.49.

in ‘The Skaters’ it helps to start with the poem’s first line where overheard skating and, by extension language, is introduced as an ‘entity of sound/into which being enters, and is apart’ (RM, 147). This ‘sound’ builds into the ‘dissonant night’ (RM, 148) of noise where memory is invoked, itself a play of presence and absence structured like Ashbery’s conception of language – and his poetry: ‘Nothing but a bitter impression of absence, which as we/know involves presence’ (RM, 152). The emphasis of a movement *between* links to the anticipation of the central voyage, caught between never ending, ‘Only, as I said, to be continued’ (RM, 160) and never beginning, ‘The train is still sitting in the station’ (RM, 175), which in turn recalls the metaphor of snow as a ‘rhythm’ of meaning neither present in the ‘abstract’ or the ‘positive’ but in a ‘series of repeated jumps’ (RM, 152). The snow is also of course linked to skating that, despite being the titular image remains largely absent beyond a few references, ‘Here a scarf flies, there an excited call is heard’ (RM, 147), instead skating provides the poem with its guiding principle of sliding play. Snow additionally is often linked in Ashbery’s poetry with memories of his childhood home, thus again providing a metaphor for memory.[69] The presence of memory however is not of course referentially tied or specific but, like the balloon or bubble, a way to ‘Drift thoughtfully over the land, not exactly commenting/on it’ (RM, 154). The balloon follows a simile, ‘like the bubbles/Children make’ (RM, 154), for the poet’s wandering communication that soon becomes incorporated as part of a metaphoric play, pertaining to how poetry can “Idle [the poet] out of existence’ to move across ‘unknown horizons’ (RM, 154).

In the denial of a stable subject, metaphor is not negated but is instead granted a roaming mobility of substitution. Each metaphor unfolds its chain, moving between language and its relation to phenomenological existence and then in turn, just as effortlessly, into another metaphor’s chain to contribute to what Ashbery describes as ‘That mazy business/About writing’ (RM, 161). Though this ‘mazy’ sliding that slips metonymically between metaphors that beget metaphors gains a sustained and newly assured momentum in ‘The Skaters’, it can also be found elsewhere throughout *Rivers and Mountains*.

From the opening poem, ‘Lacustrine Cities’, where a voice concedes ‘your time has been occupied by creative games’ (RM, 125) and, as Perloff has noted, ‘metonymic relations converge to create a peculiar surface tension’, Ashbery continually manages to resist symbolism while endlessly accommodating its possibility.[70] In the titular poem, ‘Rivers and

[69] See: *Seven American Poets in Conversation* (London: BTL, 2008). In Mark Ford’s landmark interview with Ashbery (2003) he asks ‘*Snow features pretty often in your poetry. Does this come from your childhood?’* to which Ashbery replies, ‘No doubt. My father’s farm was about a mile from Lake Ontario, just due south, and often snowbound. Even three miles further south it would not be snowing, while we were up to our necks in it’ (p.20).

[70] Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, p. 10.

Mountains', this play between presence and absence – where symbolism as representation for what is not there and symbolism as a presence in itself – is dramatized through metaphors of cartography. Reading the map and being in the landscape depicted by the map oscillate without clear distinction, allowing a type of 'Writing through fields and swamps/Marked, on the map, with little bunches of weeds' (RM, 126). Here language is asserted as both in and of the landscape and, through the metaphor of cartography, as representation(s) of the landscape: 'To get to other places you found/It all on paper but the land/Was made of paper processed/To look like ferns' (RM, 126).

This play, which understands the sense of metaphor as a pre-condition of language, expresses an experience of perception and the world it reveals (or obscures) as inextricably bound in the same sensation of restless play. Where skating can be writing but also metonymically linked to snow and thus memory, or a bubble can be the poet's movement whilst also metonymically addressing childhood, and, where all of such images can be taken as literal references and not metaphor, Ashbery's poetry inhabits and enacts the blur of language in the present of its functioning. Everything is at once itself and other; a metaphor can be interrupted by metonymy just as it can be interrupted by the reflexive awareness of its vehicular nature *as* metaphor. Although Barthes theorized Bataille's writing with a more structurally specific relation to metaphor and metonymy, a method too calculated to allow for Ashbery's more playful embrace of chance and collage, the results are the same:

> all these associations are at the same time identical and other. For the metaphor that varies them exhibits a controlled difference between them that the metonymy that interchanges them immediately sets about abolishing. The world becomes *blurred*; properties are no longer separate […].[71]

In this contradictory play of always imminently being something other, later in the poem 'Rivers and Mountains', Ashbery observes that though a plan 'worked well on paper', something had changed and now 'their camp had grown/To be the mountains and the map' (RM, 127). The poem ends by encapsulating this restless 'identical and other' paradox by providing a line that would not be out of place in Bataille's writing: 'ride/ Slowly out into the sun-blackened landscape' (RM, 128).

In Chapter 2 the influence of unresolved contradiction in Ashbery's *Three Poems* configured everyday reality and its expression as necessarily oneiric; the other side to this *everyday-configured-as-dream* is relating such play to a child-like sensation of seeing anew. As there is no secure reconciliation between representation and the object or subject it seeks

[71] Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', p.125.

to represent but the acknowledgement of language and perception as only and always a vacillation of meanings in play, Ashbery's poetry preserves its 'newness' by always having within it the possibility of something other. Through an awareness of syntagmatic and paradigmatic ways of meaning, utilizing metonymy and metaphor in mobile crossings, 'The Skaters' reveals the play of language as it always is but as we rarely experience it. The unformed and always new potential of meaning reacquaints a reader of 'The Skaters' with understanding as a primary sensation. Meaning in 'The Skaters' is always movement, unsure but discovered as revelatory, and it is the child as a surrealist fascination that, like the dream, characterises Ashbery's assimilation of this realisation.

In *Three Poems* there is a moment where *Alice in Wonderland* indirectly appears (through Carroll's 'Red Queen' character), communicating what was learnt in 'The Skaters': like the train that never leaves the station and the associations that are at once identical and other a voice suggests, 'one must move very fast in order to stay in the same place, as the Red Queen said' (TP, 306). It is a realisation that to establish meaning, or the coherence of perception, involves a movement or contradictory impulse that negates or disturbs such formulations in the same gesture that paradoxically grants them an existence. In this sense, the contrary 'Red Queen' in *Three Poems* points out the resonance of Ashbery's skating: it is the continual slipping where 'to stay in one place' and be affirmed with any meaning or attend to any experience of perception requires that 'one must move very fast', forever contingent on a movement that denies as it attests: 'the/carnivorous/ Way of these lines is to devour their own nature' (RM, 152). Through the influence of the child and child-like, Ashbery brings a joy to this potentially disorientating concept and finds in its paradox a renewable energy that, rather than bleakly irresolute, is hopefully returned to with the 'intuition that I am that other "I" with/which we began' (RM, 149). The child emotively captures this paradox of meaning as it represents an experience that *has* been lived and *is* in a sense part of the adult self and yet, it cannot be returned to, and is therefore also Other. However, through changes of perspective and restlessness in 'The Skaters', rhythms of meaning are able to enact and explore play in and of language and perception as a charged enjoyment, comparable to, and evocative of, the surrealist pleasure of a child seeing – as Breton desired it – 'always for the first time'.[72]

It is in the flux of play, as an invigorating tactic of disruption and suspension that both Ashbery and Surrealism turn to the child. The role of optical perspective in Surrealism was renewed by the early developments of cinema and is constantly reimagined in the continuing influence of film, while painting foregrounded and confounded traditions of perspectival

[72] André Breton, 'Always for the first time', *Airwater* (1934), in *Poems of André Breton*, pp. 153-155.

logic, and collage restlessly rearranged relation and context. As a lifelong fan of the cinema, an art critic, and a practitioner of collage, Ashbery has responded to the play of perspective across mediums in a way that corresponds with the restless interests and activities of Surrealism. In addition to the exploration of perspective as a visual logic to be resisted and challenged in play, is the sense of perspective as a newly imagined consciousness to pursue and inhabit. The effort to suspend or transform adult consciousness through mobilizing the child's perspective can only ever occur through the adult imagination and memory, as always predicated on the absence of the child. Surrealism, like Ashbery, has associated child-like primacy and its freshness of awareness in recovered artefacts of childhood: the illustrations or text of a children's book, written *by* an adult *for* a child. Consequently, the act of childhood reading is a translation by the child of the adult interpretation of what constitutes childhood, and so despite being encountered as new and entirely other is in fact the child's encounter with a product of adulthood. The seeing anew, in this light, becomes a seeing of what is absent: the adult perceives the lost childhood as the foundation of newness just as the child finds that newness in the unknown of an adult interpretation. It is the absence that, like the subject in Ashbery's metaphors, can never be made entirely present but is experienced as renewably active in a play of presence.

Conclusion

"Life, our / Life anyway, is between"

– John Ashbery

Ashbery's poetry renews an understanding of Surrealism that connects its emphasis on the found object, dreaming, contradiction, interruption and play to our own quotidian modes of perception. Whether it is through acts of collecting, engaging with meaning in and as language, passages of memory, the sensation of dreaming or the intimation of a child-like perspective, Surrealism is fundamentally *active* as a condition of experience. Consequently, the phenomenological impulse that so often shapes Ashbery's playful and attentive poetics reveals Surrealism to be consistently intrinsic to the experience and articulation of experience itself. No longer confined to definitions of a historicized past, anchored in the validation of a movement, or located in a code of aesthetics, Surrealism is instead encountered in the reading of Ashbery as part of the articulation of experience and the experience of articulation: 'The being of our sentences, in the climate that fostered them' (DDS, 185). For Ashbery, any 'being' and its experience that exists in this 'climate' is 'shaped in the new merging' (TP, 248), perceived as and through a chiasmic exchange of conscious and unconscious, internal and external, absent and present, to be composed only in its motion of contingency. Therefore Surrealism in Ashbery's poetry derives from the passage of comprehending experience as only ever in the play of its own mediacy. It is in realising that the 'experience of experience' associated with Ashbery's poetics is also the experience of Surrealism. This concluding section will crystallise and reiterate the major arguments of this thesis, pointing towards the possibility of its extension and application for further work.

The act of perceiving and its experience, accompanied by (and at times analogous with) the act of expressing that experience, imbue the everyday with an attention that renders it dream-like. This dream-like fluidity is a result of the mediacy that characterises every act as one of continuing and restless movement, what Ashbery describes in 'Houseboat Days' as being 'In this passage, this movement, [it] is what the instance costs' (HD, 516). This is the passage/play/mediacy/ or process of relation (each connected and at times metaphoric without hierarchical order) that animates language, characterises dreaming and memory and, more widely, experience in general; it is the mediation of a desire to control time in the collected object, the movement between the found object and the collection, and the reversals between object and subject. As Shoptaw has stated, '[t]he emphasis in Ashbery's work is always upon

the movement or rhythm between poles rather than upon the bipolar opposites themselves'.[1] This is the '*conduction wire*' or '*capillary tissue*' of Breton's *Communicating Vessels* 'without which it would be useless to imagine any mental circulation'.[2] Mary Ann Caws elucidates this principle by asserting that '[t]his passing back and forth between two modes is shown to be the basis of Surrealist thought, of Surreality itself'.[3] It is consequently in a state of continual flux that Surrealism finds the impossibility of its definition, in the same shifting of meaning and our corresponding perception of that meaning that obsesses Ashbery's poetry.

The Surrealism of recognising 'we live/in the interstices, between a vacant stare and the ceiling' (HD, 509), or, as a poem's title from *The Tennis Court Oath* defines it – 'The Suspended Life' (TCO, 66), manifests in Ashbery's poetry through several experiential modes of reading. In 'The Skaters' we have the constant sensation of journeying, a voyage that never starts and yet is 'continuing but ever beginning' (RM, 158) as an experience underscored by the motion of skating or the flurry of snow. In *Three Poems*, Ashbery recognizes 'your landscape, the proof that you are there' (TP, 249) as a movement between internal and external, a space of reversals and crossings that experiences waking consciousness as a dream. When the embodied perception of everyday experience is 'lost/In the shadows of dreams so that the external look/ Of the nearby world had become confused with the cobwebs/inside' (DDS, 221), perception necessarily involves Surrealism. Developed in the interruptive poetics of *Flow Chart*, this mediacy in perceiving becomes a mode of textual static capable of evoking the passage of memory. The sensation of journeying, an oneiric wandering of attention, and constant interruption as a poetics of noise and memory, all embody rhythms of interpretation that foreground the play of mediacy. Once understood as the play and movement of active relation through which any experience is experienced, Surrealism emerges most powerfully when Ashbery's poetry induces correlating experiences in the process of reading.

In addition to inducing a sense of experiential awareness and enactment, Ashbery's poetics of play and mediacy often configures its meaning – or way of meaning – through paradox. Just as Surrealism is, with enough phenomenological attention, a condition of Ashbery's perception of experience, so too is paradox a condition of its meaning. Whereas Breton became mired in the hypocrisies of manifesto rhetoric and the hierarchical politics of Surrealism as a revolutionary movement, for Ashbery Surrealism is not an elected objective or an explicitly theorized purpose but rather a condition of articulating experience. In the

[1] Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out*, p.91.
[2] André Breton, *Communicating Vessels,* p.86; p.139.
[3] Mary Ann Caws, 'Introduction', *Communicating Vessels*, p. ix.

poem ‘Paradoxes and Oxymorons’ from *Shadow Train* (1981), the first stanza addresses Ashbery’s conception of poetic communication as a contradictory exchange:

> This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level.
> Look at it talking to you. You look out a window
> Or pretend to fidget. You have it but you don’t have it.
> You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other.
>
> (Sh, 698)

Meaning in the poem is what you both have and lack, it is in the text (‘You miss it’) and in the reader (‘it misses you’) without static location (‘You miss each other’). As Ashbery reminds us, the communication of that meaning (‘look at it talking to you’) is inseparable from an attention to experience and the experience of attention, as ‘You look out a window/Or pretend to fidget’.

The meaning, as with the play of experience is a crossing of reversals, and this, as is emphasised, is ‘language on a very plain level’ – an everyday condition of language and experience:

> What’s a plain level? It is that and other things,
> Bringing a system of them into play. Play?
> Well, actually, yes, but I consider play to be
>
> A deeper outside thing, a dreamed role pattern,
> As in the division of grace these long August days
> Without proof. Open-ended. And before you know it
> It gets lost in the steam and chatter of typewriters.
>
> (Sh, 698)

The paradox of meaning is inseparable from its motion as play, that which is ‘dreamed’ and ‘Without proof’ as never in and of itself but instead ‘Open-ended’. As with the metonymic slipping between metaphors in ‘The Skaters’, a semantic mobility that brings attention to language in the present of its functioning allows each meaning to be itself and other: ‘It is that and other things’. This is how ‘the forest’, ‘the dream’, ‘the labyrinth’ and ‘skating’ become inter-connected and at points inter-changeable, expressions of language and experience that actively enact the play that they both refer to and are constituted from. It is due to this movement – of mediacy, play, and the passage of relation – in language and in experience, and between language and experience, that Ashbery concludes ‘Parodoxes and Oxymorons’ with the line, ‘The poem is you’ (Sh, 698). Reading provides both an example and analogy of

the experience of subjectivity, composed without final composition from paradox and reached through Surrealism.

* * * * *

Alongside Ashbery, the other New York School poet most significantly related to Surrealism, and whose work is in need of reappraisal alongside Surrealism, is Barbara Guest. Although both O'Hara and Koch suggest and draw from elements of Surrealism, unlike Ashbery and Guest, it is easier to see its presence in their work *as an influence*, less sustainably integral to their poetics.[4] Whereas it might be possible to argue elements of Surrealism that, with less force, resonated with Koch and O'Hara came to be more fully developed and realised in Ashbery's poetic growth, Guest's poetry elaborates a distinctly separate interaction with Surrealism. Guest declared that she 'grew up under the shadow of surrealism' and at a tribute to her life and poetry held at Berkeley in 2003, she went further by stating she was 'now writing surrealist poems', followed by the assertion: 'I came to surrealism late, its better late than never.'[5] Unlike Ashbery's relationship with Surrealism, Guest had a defined and conscious alignment that, towards the end of her life, became more and more pronounced.[6]

The working title of Guest's last book, *The Red Gaze* (2005), had been *Surrealism and Other Poems*, and included a poem inspired by de Chirico, 'Nostalgia' (originally entitled 'Nostalgia of the Infinite' after de Chirico's painting of the same name). There are possible points of contact between Ashbery's dialogue with Surrealism: the role of visual art and collage; Joron mentions her use of Adorno's 'dissonance' in the poem 'Dissonance Royal Traveller', which could provide an interesting contrast for the interruptive poetics of noise in *Flow Chart*; and there is also the presence of Bataille, encountered in Guest through her continual awareness of the impossible and its role in poetry (relating to Bataille's book *The Impossible*, 1962). A study of Guest and Surrealism would also introduce a much-needed

---

[4] I have not mentioned James Schuyler, whose poetry, in contrast to the other first generation NY poets, draws less extravagantly or diversely from European sources and is comparatively far quieter in its modes of observational lyricism.

[5] Barbara Guest, quoted by Andrew Joron, 'The Gothic Guest', in *How2* Vol. 3, No. 2 (Summer 2008) <http://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_2/guest/joron.html > [accessed July 2014]

[6] Andrew Joron, a poet and critic writing in the vein of what he refers to as 'Neo-Surrealism', situates Guest's Surrealism through the uncanny: specifically between her reading of Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) and a gothic turn to the rituals and obsessions of medieval romance. Rachel Blau DuPlessis has alternatively examined the importance of gender in Guest's conception of Surrealism (suggesting *Fair Realism* to be her gendered translation of Surrealism), in which the objectified female – as a regressive surrealist ideal – is re-imagined through Guest's nuanced engagement with visual art and notions of the 'gaze', in addition to the use of multiple personae. See Rachel Blau Duplessis, 'The gendered marvelous: Barbara Guest, surrealism, and feminist reception', *How2* Vol.1 No. 1 (March 1999).

female perspective into the male-dominated traditions of Surrealism. This would present the possibility to examine the influence of H.D. on her work (Guest wrote a biography on the poet, *Herself Defined*, 1984), which in turn (through H.D.'s love of Greek literature and mythology) arguably provided a relationship between mythology and Surrealism for Guest. When the intricate and haunted arrangement of Guest's work is considered (the controlled and sequential forms of *Defensive Rapture*, 1993, or the sparse minimalism of *Quill, Solitary APPARITION*, 1996) added to her eccentric assimilation of medieval themes and outright declaration of Surrealism, it becomes clear that an understanding of her poetry would be compromised by unhelpful comparisons. It was for this reason that I decided not to include a chapter on her work in this thesis, although it is clear that such work would be valuable for its examination of comparable themes.

* * * *

The discussion of Surrealism in American poetry has found itself gradually building in momentum from the early 2000s, most explicitly advanced in the poetry and critical attention of Andrew Joron, Charles Borkhuis, Garrett Caples, Michael Skau, David Arnold and, most recently, in his 2014 doctoral thesis, Brooks B. Lampe.[7] This attention can be partly understood as the maturation of criticism surrounding Language Poetry, criticism that has become increasingly aware of the movement's tangential proponents and implications. When questioned by Mark Ford (in 2003) as to whether he followed Language poetry with any interest, Ashbery replied that 'like Surrealism it will become more fascinating as it disintegrates', adding: 'it's like there's a certain hard kernel that can stand the pressure only for so long, and then it starts to decay, giving off beneficial fumes'. [8] It is precisely this parallel with Surrealism which comes to characterise the nature of those 'fumes' and which critics have begun to pick up on. Borkhuis' essay, 'Writing from Inside Language', proposed the emerging development of a 'recent strain of parasurrealist writing'.[9] Borkhuis persuasively argues that Poststructuralism provided the basis for an emphatically *textual* poetics, or what became L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, which in turn encouraged a more language-conscious Surrealism; he identifies this 'parasurrealism' in a kind of 'critical lyric'.

[7] See Brooks B. Lampe, 'Surrealist Poetics in Contemporary American Poetry' (unpublished doctoral thesis, The Catholic University of America, 2014) and David Arnold, *Poetry and Language Writing: Objective and Surreal* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007).
[8] John Ashbery, interviewed by Mark Ford (2003), in *Seven American Poets in Conversation*, pp.63-4
[9] Charles Borkhuis, 'Writing from Inside Language: Late Surrealism and Textual Poetry in France and the United States', in *Telling it Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s*, ed. by Mark Wallace and Steven Marks (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2002).

Demonstrated in the poetry of Clark Coolidge, Michael Palmer, Bob Perelman and later, John Yau and Andrew Joron, the 'critical lyric' innovates lyricism through a deconstructive critique of lyricism.[10] In a decentred poetry for which language is process, the lyric subject consequently survives (or finds a viable way to develop) through negotiating the conditions of its own impossibility.

The lineage of this new interaction with Surrealism has been effectively mapped (by the mentioned critics) in terms of historical points of interest, influence and groups. The focus has been on establishing a – till recently – little known history: accounting for its origins in the 1940s, with Philip Lamantia, Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler; through to the Beats, the Deep Image poets, acknowledged influences in the New York School and eventually up to the off shoots of Language poetry. David Arnold added to this trajectory by integrating Williams and Zukofsky into the discussion, arguing for the relevance of Objectivist poetry in the culmination of a surrealist inflected Language poetry. In this developing critical discussion, emphasis has been primarily on establishing a narrative of influence, relating the various groups, figures and movements in order to reveal an under-studied landscape within American poetry. Ironically it is in his ever-growing popularity and increasingly ubiquitous presence in academic studies that Ashbery has been overlooked in this field, dismissed in the presumption of having already been, as Joron briefly mentions the New York School, 'well documented'.[11] This is clearly a misleading statement, Surrealism in the New York School is only 'well documented' through cursory acknowledgement, superficially understood and only in terms of an 'influence' and not as an active presence.[12]

In this thesis I have kept my analysis of Ashbery's contradiction, play, deference and semantic mobility tied specifically to poetic analysis, including aspects of phenomenology and its manifestation as Surrealism. Another angle might address the writing of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan to explore a conceptual bridge between the edges

[10] Relating Ashbery to Michael Palmer and Clark Coolidge would offer a promising approach to further understanding intersections between Surrealism and Poststructuralism. In Palmer's politically involved approach to representation and subjectivity (Arnold interprets 'Seven Poems within a Matrix for War', 1995, as a 'poetics of witness') and Coolidge's material treatment of words and their arrangement (as in *Space,* 1970), Surrealism sparks from the conscious 'writing from inside language' that Borkhuis highlights in his essay's title. Both poets connect and diverge from Ashbery's own poetics in a way that would productively approach the 'beneficial fumes' of Language poetry.

[11] Andrew Joron, *Neo-Surrealism or The Sun at Night* (California: Kolourmeim Press, 2010), p.47.

[12] The art history of the New York School and Surrealism *has* been documented in Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997). Charles Altieri addresses the influence of Surrealism on NY poetics, but again through art history, in his essay 'Surrealism as a living Modernism: What the New York Poets Learned from Two Generations of New York Painting', in *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry Since 1945*, ed. Jennifer Ashton (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 47-66.

of Surrealism and its influence and implications for Structuralism and Poststructuralism.[13] Borkhuis hints at the extent of this connection, when he briefly addresses the relationship between Poststructuralist theory, Surrealism and Language poetry:

> If surrealism's return in later textual poetry has been prepared in part by structuralist and poststructuralist theory, it is also true that the germ of the structuralist revolution was already in surrealist writings.[14]

In building upon these implications, not only would our understanding of the landscape of Surrealism in American poetry progress, but also, there would be an increasingly contemporaneous model for how scholarship might continue to further engage and learn from Surrealism.

* * * *

Renewing a way to understand Surrealism through Ashbery's poetry and in turn reinvigorating how we might interpret that poetry clearly carries implications for other poets and the broader discussion of American poetry. However, this is not to suggest that a critical grasp of Ashbery's poetry and Surrealism has been concluded with any settled finality or arrival – far from it. Not only does Ashbery's poetry preclude interpretive completion as integral to its very project, as with the restless passage of Surrealism, but also a project of this size can only hope to cover a modest contingent of what is – by any standards – a huge poetic oeuvre. Ashbery has published 26 collections of poetry, his output having significantly increased in the aftermath of where this study ends. This prolific momentum in Ashbery's writing has proved daunting, and in some cases frustrating, for critics to assimilate.

John Emil Vincent has provided the only book-length study of Ashbery's later work, though even this only reaches *Your Name Here* (2000) in the body of its analysis, leaving a further 6 books (7, if the shorter *As Umbrellas Follow Rain,* 2001, is included, much of the content of which appeared in *Chinese Whispers*, 2002) to explore. Vincent's book is an important beginning to a conversation that has remained in wary and opinionated suspension above Ashbery's later productivity. While Vincent's book fulfils the necessity of starting this

[13] In their collaborative book, *Simulating the Marvellous* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), David Lomas and Jeremy Stubbs provide a reading of simulacrum, pastiche and simulation to reconfigure Postmodernism in the context of Surrealism. Although Lomas and Stubbs begin to open up relevant areas of Postmodernism, an analysis of semiotics that can lace its threads between Poststructuralism and Surrealism – though at points related to their research – remains itself largely absent from scholarly attention.
[14] Borkhuis, p.252.

conversation it is, by its own admission, apprehensive of the 'academic apparatus' and discourse that might distract from the poetry itself.[15] Whilst this serves the book successfully in its accessible tone and clarity, it does at times betray a hesitancy to develop into a more sophisticated and challenging discussion. It is here that a mobile dialogue with Surrealism would provide invaluable ways to kick-start more probing insights into Ashbery's later work.[16]

Beyond addressing Ashbery's later work, there is also his continuing relationship and collaboration with the filmmaker Guy Maddin to consider. Since starting this thesis, not only has Ashbery provided the words for a short film of Maddin's, his reimagining of a Dwain Esper film, *How to Take A Bath*, but that film has then itself been incorporated into Maddin's feature, *The Forbidden Room* (2015). The film uses a Rousel-like labyrinth of narratives to interrupt, frame and reconcile Maddin's fevered re-imaginings of lost films. His collaborative film with Ashbery acts as the interrupted outer parenthesis with which the whole film is framed, consequently allowing Maddin's Surrealism to be encased within and framed by Ashbery's words. Patently receptive to the ideas posed in Chapter 3 (relating concepts of noise, interruption, the labyrinth and memory), *The Forbidden Room* is in some senses an ambitious culmination of all Maddin's films to date. In addition to the relevance of *The Forbidden Room*, is Maddin's joint collage exhibition shared with Ashbery at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery (July 2015).

The Tibor de Nagy Gallery seems a fitting place to conclude a study of Ashbery and Surrealism. To reach an end without ending, in a return to the gallery that published his first collection and provided the process, interruption and collaborative energy around which much of his early poetry took strength. In the attention to living and its expression, for which poetry is 'preparing to continue the dialogue into/Those mysterious and near regions that are/ Precisely the time of it being furthered' (RM, 141), Ashbery's work and the movement of Surrealism remain in restless correspondence. Yet, as Ashbery's collaged presence returns to the Tibor de Nagy and as a genial voice reminded the reader in 'The Skaters', this is a voyage that 'starts/Only, as I said, to be continued' (RM, 160).

---

[15] John Emil Vincent, *John Ashbery and You: His Later Books* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2007), p.25.

[16] Perhaps the most obvious link with this thesis would be an extension of Chapter Four into an analysis of *Girls on the Run* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), a book-length poem that takes inspiration from Henry Darger's art. As an outsider artist whose bizarre panoramas of threatened innocence invite elements of Surrealism, Darger naturally invites comparisons to Cornell and could further progress a discussion of the child in Surrealism.

Appendix

Figure 1. Joseph Cornell, *Soap Bubble Series* (1936 - 48)

Figure 2. Joseph Cornell, *Pharmacy* (1942-3)

Figure 3. Joseph Cornell**,** *Hotel Eden (1945)*

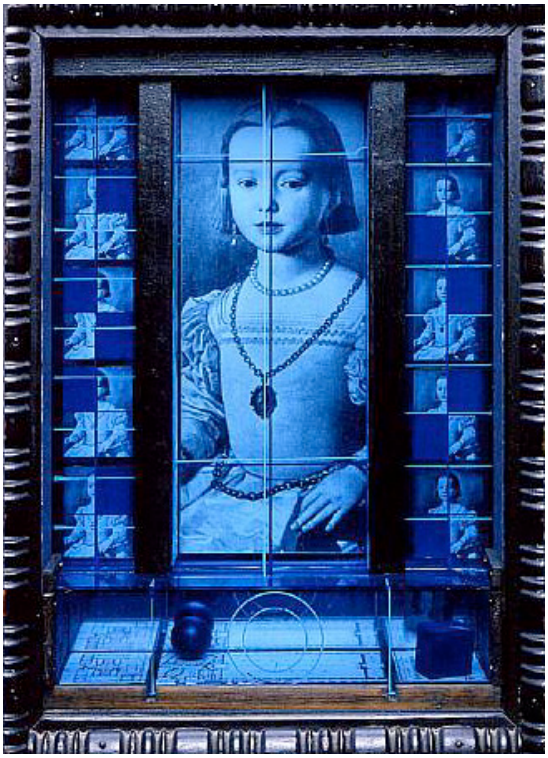

Figure 4. Joseph Cornell, *Medici Princes* (1952-4)

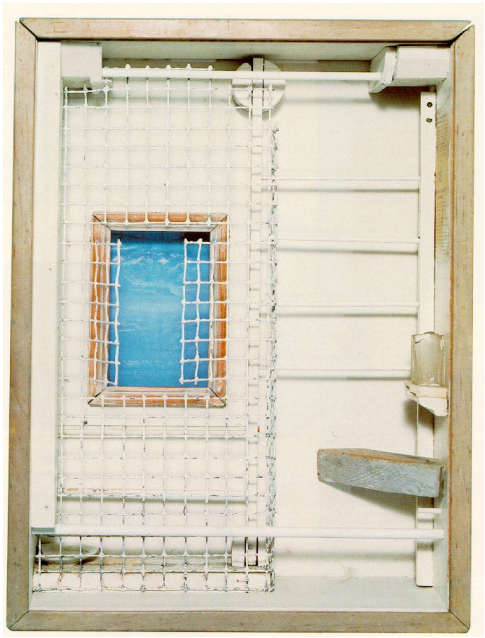

Figure 5. Joseph Cornell, *Toward the Blue Peninsula* (1953)

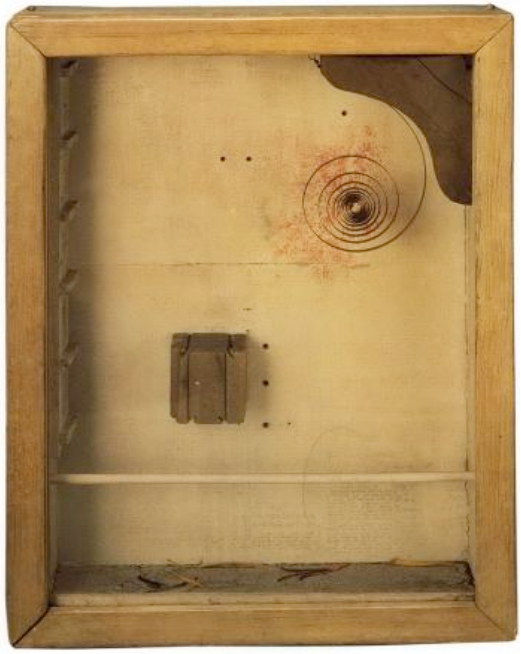

Figure 6. Joseph Cornell, *Deserted Perch* (1949)

Figure 7. René Magritte, *I Do Not See the (Woman) Hidden in the Forest (*1929)

Bibliography

Adams, Sam, 'Guy Maddin talks about *Keyhole* and "the haunted house of cinema"', *A.V. Club* (April, 2012) <http://www.avclub.com/article/guy-maddin-talks-about-ikeyhole-iand-the-haunted-h-72033 > [accessed February 2013]

Aragon, Louis, 'Preface to a Modern Mythology', *Paris Peasant*, trans. by Simon Watson Taylor (Boston:Exact Change, 1994)

——. 'On Décor' (1918), *The Shadow and its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, ed. by Paul Hammond (London: BFI, 1978)

Arnold, David, *Poetry & Language Writing* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007)

Ashbery, John and James Schuyler, *A Nest of Ninnies* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2008)

Ashbery, John, *Collected Poems 1956-1987*, ed. by Mark Ford (Manchester: Carcanet, 2010)

——. *Flow Chart* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992)

——. *Hotel Lautréamont* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992)

——. Letter to Jay Leyda, June 24th 1974, Houghton Library, Harvard University (*89M-58) AM6, carton 24 of 5

——. Letter to Julian Levy, June 5th 1974, John Ashbery Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University (*89M-58) AM6, carton 24 of 56

——. Letter to Roland Penrose, May 17th 1974, Houghton Library, Harvard University (*89M-58) AM6, carton 24 of 56

——. *Other Traditions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000)

——. 'Preface', in Arthur Rimbaud, *Illuminations*, trans. by John Ashbery (New York: Norton, 2011)

——. *Reported Sightings*, ed. by David Bergman (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989)

——. *Selected Prose*, ed. by Eugene Richie (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2005)

——. *Three Plays* (Vermont: Z Press, 1978)

Aspley, Keith, 'The Avant-Garde, Neo-Avant-Garde and Radio: Robert Desnos and Phillippe Soupault', *Neo Avant Garde*, ed. by David Hopkins (New York: Princeton Press, 2006)

Ashton, Dore, *A Joseph Cornell Album* (Massachusetts: De Capo Press, 2009)

Bataille, Georges, *Story of The Eye*, trans. by Joachim Neugroschal (London: Penguin, 2001)

——. *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, ed. and trans. by Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 2006)

Baudelaire, Charles, 'Correspondances', *Les Fleurs du Mal*, trans. by William Aggeler (Fresno, CA: Academy Library Guild, 1954). <http://fleursdumal.org/poem/103>[accessed November, 2014]

——. 'The Artist, Man of the World, Man of the Crowd, and Child', *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1995)

Baudriallard, Jean, 'The System of Collecting', *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed. by John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), pp.7-8

Barthes, Roland, 'The Metaphor of the Eye' [trans. by J. A. Underwood], in Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, trans. by Joachim Neugroschal (London: Penguin Books, 2001), pp. 119-127.

Baugh, Bruce, *French Hegel: From Surrealism to Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 2014)

Beard, William, 'Conversations with Guy Maddin, August 9-11, 2005' <www.artsrn.ualberta.ca/William_beard/Maddin%2005%20interview.html > [accessed June 2013]

Benjamin, Walter, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Harvard: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999)

——. 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' (1929), *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey (John Wiley & Sons, 2005), pp.1087-1095

Bernstein, Charles, 'The Meandering Yangtze', *Conjunctions*: 49 (Fall 2007)

Borkhuis, Charles, 'Writing from Inside Language: Late Surrealism and Textual Poetry in France and the United States', *Telling It Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s*, ed. by Mark Wallace and Steven Marks (University of Alabama Press, 2002), pp.237-255

Birkenmaier, Anke 'From Surrealism to Popular Art: Paul Deharme's Radio Theory', *Modernism/Modernity*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (April 2009), 357-374

Bishop, Elizabeth, *POEMS,* ed. by Saskia Hamilton, centenary edn (London: Chatto & Windus, 2011)

Blanchot, Maurice, 'Tomorrow at Stake', *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp.407-422

Breton, André, *Communicating Vessels*, trans. by Mary Ann Caws and Geoffrey T. Harris (Nebraska: Bison Books, 1997)

——.'Foreword', in Max Ernst, *La Femme 100 Têtes*, trans. by Dorothea Tanning, (New York: George Braziller, 1981), p.7 <

http://ubumexico.centro.org.mx/text/vp/ernst_la_femme_100_tetes_1929.pdf > [accessed January 2015]

——. *Mad Love*, trans. by Mary Ann Caws (Nebraska: Bison Books, 1988)

——. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Michigan: Ann Arbor, 2010)

——. *Nadja,* trans. by Richard Howard (London: Penguin Books, 1999)

——. *Poems of André Breton*, *A Bilingual Anthology*, trans. and ed. by Jean-Pierre Cauvin and Mary Ann Caws (Boston: Black Widow Press, 2014)

——. *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. by Simon Watson Taylor (Boston, MFA Publications, 2002)

Burnett, Craig 'Maddin's World', *Contemporary,* 63 (June 2004) < http://www.contemporary-magazines.com/issue63.htm> [accessed June 2014]

Cage, John, *Silence, Lectures and Writings* (London: Marion Boyars, 2009)

Caws, Mary Ann, *The Art of Interference: Stressed Readings in Verbal and Visual Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989)

——. *A Metapoetics of the Passage* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 1981)

——. 'Introduction', *Communicating Vessels*, trans. by Mary Ann Caws and Geoffrey T. Harris (Nebraska: Bison Books, 1997)

——. *The Surrealist Look: An Erotics of Encounter* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999)

Clifford, James 'Histories of the Tribal and the Modern', *The Predicament of Culture* (Massachusetts: Harvard University, 2002), p.189-215

Conley, Katharine, *Robert Desnos, Surrealism, and the Marvelous in Everday Life* (London: University of Nebraska Press Lincoln & London, 2003)

Cornell, Joseph, *Joseph Cornell's Theater of the Mind: Selected Diaries, Letters and Files*, ed. by Mary Ann Caws (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000)

Cotter, Holland, 'The Collages of John Ashbery', *The New York Times* (Sept, 2008) < http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2008/09/12/arts/0914-COTT_index.html > [accessed January 2013]

Crase, Douglas and Jenni Quilter, *Painters & Poets - Tibor De Nagy Gallery* (New York: Tibor De Nagy Gallery, 2011)

Dastur, François, 'World, Flesh, Vision', *Chiasms*, ed. by Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor (New York: SUNY, 2000), pp.23-51

De Chirico, Giorgio, *Hebdomeros*, trans. by John Ashbery, Louise Bourgeois, Robert Goldwater, Damon Krukowski and Mark Polizzotti (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1992)

Derrida, Jacques, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982)

Desnos, Robert, *Essential Poems and Writings of Robert Desnos*, trans and ed. by Mary Ann Caws (Boston: Black Widow Press, 2007)

Dickinson, Emily, *Selected Letters,* ed. by Thomas Herbert Johnson (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986)

D'Silva, Eliot, '"An illustration changes us": Images of Innocence in John Ashbery', *Hypocrite Reader*, Issue 12 (March 2012)

DuBois, Andrew, *Ashbery's Forms of Attention* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2006)

Dworkin,Craig, *Reading the Illegible* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2003)

Epstein, Andrew, *Beautiful Enemies* (Oxford University Press, 2006)

Foster, Hal, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995)

Foster, Hal, 'The "Primitive" Unconscious of Modern Art', *October*, Vol. 34 (Autumn 1985), 45-70

Ford, Mark, 'John Ashbery in Conversation', *Seven American Poets in conversation* (Surrey: Between the Lines, 2008)

Gangel, Sue, 'An interview with John Ashbery', *San Francisco Review of Books* (November 1977), pp. 17-18

Gilbert, Roger, 'Ludic Eloquence: On John Ashbery's Recent Poetry,' *Contemporary Literature,* Vol. 48, No.2 (Summer 2007), 198-199

Gilbert, Roger, 'On the Outside Looking In,' in 'Created Spaces: John Ashbery's Textual and Domestic Environments', *Rain Taxi* (Summer 2008) <http://www.raintaxi.com/literary-features/john-ashbery-created-spaces/on-the-inside-looking-in/ > [accessed November 2013]

Gooch, Brad, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (New York: Knopf, 1993)

Gopnick, Adam,'Sparkings: Joseph Cornell and the art of nostalgia', *The New Yorker* (February 17, 2003)

Hammond, Paul, ed. *The Shadow and its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema* (London: BFI, 1978)

Hands, Many, *Three Hundred Things a Bright Boy Can Do* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & co., 1914)

Herd, David, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (Manchester University Press, 2009)

Hickman, Ben, *John Ashbery and English Poetry* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012)

Holden, Anthony, and Ben Holden, eds. *Poems That Make Grown Men Cry: 100 Men on the Poems That Move Them* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014)

Hollier, Denis, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Bataille*, tr. Betsy Wing (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992)

Iannone, Pasquale, 'Age of Innocence', *Sight & Sound*, 24.4 (April 2014), pp.33-37

Jankowicz, Grzergorz 'Internet Interview with Marjorie Perloff ', from *Odra* (Warsaw), No. 10 (2008) < http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/perloff/articles/Perloff-Marjorie_Interview-Jankowicz.pdf > [accessed July 2013]

Joron, Andrew, *Neo-Surrealism or The Sun at Night* (California: Kolourmeim Press, 2010)

——. 'The Gothic Guest', *How2* Vol. 3, No. 2 (Summer, 2008) <http://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_2/guest/joron.html > [accessed July 2014]

Kadri, Raihan, *Reimagining Life: Philosophical Pessimism and the Revolution of Surrealism* (Plymouth: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011)

Kane, Daniel, 'Reading John Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath* through Man Ray's Eye', *Textual Practice*, (2007) 21:3, 551-575

——. *We Saw the Light: Conversations between the New American Cinema and Poetry* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2009)

Kermani, David, *John Ashbery: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1976).

——. 'John Ashbery's Cinema Paradiso: Domestic Elements as Poetry', as part of the 'Created Spaces: John Ashbery's Textual and Domestic Environments', in *Rain Taxi* (Summer, 2008)

Kevorkian, Martin, '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)

Lautréamont, Comte de, *Maldoror and Poems*, trans. by Paul Knight (London: Penguin Books, 1978)

Lawlor, Leonard,'Eliminating Some Confusion: The Relation of Being and Writing in Merleau-Ponty and Derrida', *Ecart and Difference: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on Seeing and Writing* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1997): 71-93.

——. *Phenomenology: Responses and Developments* (Routledge, 2014).

Laxton, Susan, 'The Guarantor of Chance: Surrealism's Ludic Practices', *Papers of Surrealism*, Issue 1(Winter 2003)

Lebeau, Vicky, 'Introduction', *Cinema and Childhood* (London: Reakton Books, 2008)

Lechte, John, 'Surrealism and the practice of writing, or The 'case' of Bataille', *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (London: Routledge, 1995) pp.117-133

Leddy, Michael 'Lives and Art: John Ashbery and Henry Darger', *Jacket*, 17 (June, 2002)

Lehman, David, *Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1980)

Lerner, Ben 'The Future Continuous: Ashbery's Lyric Mediacy', *boundary 2*, Volume 37 (Duke University Press, 2010)

Link, Stan, 'The Work of Reproduction in the Mechanical Aging of an Art: Listening to Noise', *Computer Music Journal*, Volume 25, Number 1, (Spring, 2001)

Maddin, Guy, *From The Atelier Tovar: Selected Writings* (Ontario: Coach House Books, 2003)

McAra,Catriona, 'Surrealism's Curiosity: Lewis Caroll and the *Femme-Enfant*' *Papers of Surrealism*, 9 (Summer 2009)

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, 'The Visible and the Invisible' (1968 trans.), in *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*, ed. by Thomas Baldwin (London: Routledge, 2004)

Mildenberg, Ariane, 'Through the Wrong End of the Telescope: Thresholds of Perception in Joseph Cornell, John Ashbery, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty', *Joseph Cornell: Opening the Box,* ed. by Jason Edwards and Stephanie L. Taylor (Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 137-156

Miller, Michael H., 'The Meaning of All This: Talking to John Ashbery about his Past, Present and Future,' *New York Observer* < http://observer.com/2013/01/the-meaning-of-all-this-talking-to-john-ashbery-about-his-past-present-and-future/ > [accessed September 2013]

Miller, Stephen Paul, *The Seventies Now: Culture as Surveillance* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1999)

Moramarco, Fred, 'Coming Full Circle, John Ashbery's Later Poetry', *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. by Susan M. Shultz (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1995)

Mulvey, Laura, 'Pandora's Box: Topographies of Curiosity', *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 53-118

Norton, Jody, '"Whispers out of time": the syntax of being in the poetry of John Ashbery', *Twentieth Century Literature,* 41:3 (Fall 1996), 281-305

Nunley, Charles, 'For the Record: Robert Desnos, Music and Wartime Memory', *Substance,* 38 (2): 113-135 (2009)

O'Hara, Frank, *Selected Poems*, ed. Donald Allen (London: Penguin Books, 1991)

Oliver, Roger, 'Interview with John Ashbery', *Performing Arts Journal* (Winter 1979), 15-37

Packard, William, ed. *The Poet's Craft: Interviews from The New York Quarterly* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1987)

Perloff, Marjorie, *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters* (New York: George Braziller, 1977)

——. *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1990)

——. *The Poetics of Indeterminacy, Rimbaud to Cage* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1999)

Poulin Jr., A, "The Experience of Experience: A Conversation with John Ashbery," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 20, No. 3 (Summer 1981), 242–55

Purcell, Greg and Fred Sasaki, 'I Guess its Romantic. If you're a Dog', *Hollywood: Lost and Found*, 32 (October 09, 2007) <*http://www.stopsmilingonline.com/story_detail.php?id=899* > [accessed November 2012]

Richardson, Michael, 'Introduction', *Surrealism and Cinema* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), pp.1-15

——. 'Introduction', in Georges Bataille, *The Absence of Myth*, ed. and trans. by Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 2006)

Rimbaud, Arthur, *Complete Works*, trans. by Paul Schmidt (New York, Harper Perennial, 2008)

Rimbaud, Arthur, *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters, a Bilingual Edition,* trans. by Wallace Fowlie (*University* of Chicago Press, 2010)

Roussel, Raymond, *New Impressions of Africa*, trans. by Mark Ford (Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2011)

Schultz, Susan, 'Impossible Music', *Postmodern Culture,* no. 2 (January 1992)

Shoptaw, John, *On the Outside Looking Out (*Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994)

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

Silliman, Ron, untitled blogpost (posted on Friday, August 10, 2007) <http://ronsilliman.blogspot.co.uk/2007_08_05_archive.html> [accessed September 2013]

Stitt, Peter, 'The art of poetry XXXIII: John Ashbery,' *Poets at Work: The Paris Interviews*, ed. by George Pimperton (New York: Penguin Books, 1989) <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3014/the-art-of-poetry-no-33-john-ashbery >[accessed September 2013]

Ed Sugden, 'Time, Space, and Ghosts of Form: Giorgio de Chirico's Hebdomeros', *Wave Composition*, Issue 1 (June 2011)

Suarez-Toste, Ernesto, '"The Tension is in the Concept": John Ashbery's Surrealism', *Style,* 38 (2004)

Tashjian, Dickran, *A Boatload of Madmen: Surrealism and the American avant-Garde 1920-1950* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995)

Thyacott, Louise,'Introduction', *Surrealism and the Exotic* (London: Routledge, 2003)

Toles, George 'From Archangel to Mandragora In Your Own Backyard: Collaborating With Guy Maddin' *Playing With Memories: Essays on Guy* Maddin, ed. by David Church (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2009), pp.144-159

Tranter, John, 'Interview with John Ashbery' (1985), *Jacket*, Issue 2 (1998) <http://jacketmagazine.com/02/jaiv1985.html> [accessed August 2013]

——. 'Interview with John Ashbery' (1988), *Jacket*, Issue 2 (1998) <http://jacketmagazine.com/02/jaiv1988.html > [accessed August 2013]

Vasterling,Veronica, 'Body and Language: Butler, Merleau-Ponty and Lyotard on the Speaking Embodied Subject', in *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* Vol. 11, Issue 2 (2003), 205-223

Vatnsdal, Caelum, *Kino Delirium: The Films of Guy Maddin* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring, 2000)

Vendler, Helen, 'A steely glitter chasing shadows', *New Yorker* (3 August 1992) 73-6

Vincent, John Emil, *John Ashbery and You: His Later Books* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2007)

Walz, Robin, *Pulp Surrealism: Insolent Popular Culture in Twentieth-century Paris* (University of California Press, 2000)

Ward, Geoff, *Statues of Liberty: The New York School of Poets* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993)

Wasserman, Roseanne 'Hudson 1993: A Tour of John Ashbery's Home', in 'Created Spaces: John Ashbery's Textual and Domestic Environments', *Rain Taxi* (Summer 2008)< http://www.raintaxi.com/literary-features/john-ashbery-created-spaces/hudson-1993-a-tour-of-john-ashberys-home/ > [accessed November 2013]

Wershler, Darren, *Guy Maddin's My Winnipeg* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010)

Winter, Jessica, ' "Plenty of Sublimated Rin Tin Tin": Guy Maddin talks about John Ashbery' (May 11, 2007), *Poetry Foundation* < http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/179637 > [accessed December 2014]

Wroe, Nicholas 'Parallel Lines', *The Guardian* (Saturday 23, April 2005) < http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/apr/23/featuresreviews > [accessed July 2013]

Yau, John, 'John Ashbery: Collages: They Knew What They Wanted', *The Brooklyn Rail* (Oct 10th, 2008) < http://www.brooklynrail.org/2008/10/artseen/john-ashberry-collages-they-knew-what-they-wanted > [accessed February 2015]

Filmography

Archangel (1990), dir. by Guy Maddin, in *The Quintessetial Guy Maddin* (Zeitgeist Films, 2010) [DVD]

A Trip to the Moon (1902), dir. by George Méliès (Park Circus, 2012) [DVD]

Ballet Mecanique (1924), dir. by Ferdinand Léger in *Avant-Garde: Experimental Cinema of the 1920s and 1930s* (Kino International, 2005) [DVD]

Brand upon the Brain! (2006), dir. by Guy Maddin (Criterion, 2008) [DVD]

Cowards Bend the Knee (2003), included as a DVD extra on *The Saddest Music in the World* (Soda Pictures, 2004) [DVD]

Emak Bakia (1926), dir. by Man Ray, in *Avant-Garde: Experimental Cinema of the 1920s and 1930s* (Kino International, 2005) [DVD]

Entr'acte (1924), a DVD extra on *À Nous La Liberté*, dir. by Rene Clair (Criterion, 2002) [DVD]

Keyhole (2011), dir. by Guy Maddin (Soda Pictures, 2013) [DVD]

Les Mystères du château de Dé (1929), dir. by Man Ray, in *Avant-Garde: Experimental Cinema of the 1920s and 1930s* (Kino International, 2005) [DVD]

L'Étoile de Mer (1928), dir. by Robert Desnos, in *Avant-Garde: Experimental Cinema of the 1920s and 1930s* (Kino International, 2005) [DVD]

Night Mayor (2009), dir. by Guy Maddin (National Board of Canada) [available on Vimeo - Maddin's other short films are available on Youtube or as DVD extras on the various releases]

Repas de bébé (1895), dir. by the Lumière Brothers, in *The Lumière Brothers' First Films* (Kino International, 1999) [DVD]

The Flat (1968), dir. by Jan Švankmajer, in *The Complete Short Films* (BFI, 2007) [DVD]

The Saddest Music in the World (2003), dir. by Guy Maddin (Soda Pictures, 2005) [DVD]

Zéro de conduit (1933), dir. by Jean Vigo, in *L'Atalante and the films of Jean* Vigo (Artificial Eye, 2012) [DVD]