Mystical Kingdoms: The Postromantic Self in Early Ashbery

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Something
Ought to be written about how this affects
You when you write poetry:
The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind
Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to communicate
Something between breaths, if only for the sake
Of others and their desire to understand you and desert you
For other centers of communication, so that understanding
May begin, and in doing so be undone.

—John Ashbery, "And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name" (*Houseboat Days* 45–46)

Against readers of John Ashbery's poetry who argue that his work spells out only the heterogeneous significations of language or the postmodern indeterminacy of meaning, another school of critics, led by Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom, have insisted that although he is postmodern in the mode of his writing, Ashbery is romantic or transcendental in his themes. Bloom, a longtime and influential advocate for the canonicity of Ashbery's poetry, reads him as a transcendentalist in the romantic tradition, a "ruminative poet" whose heirs in the American tradition are Stevens, Emerson, and Whitman and who, like them, "know[s] always that what counts is the mythology of self, blotched out beyond unblotching" (30). Vendler positions Ashbery within a wider lineage that originates outside the United States; concurring with his assessment that "[a]ll my stuff is romantic poetry," she links him to a "Western lyric tradition" that includes "Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, Stevens, Eliot"—not only the romantic poets but their principal interlocutors (Vendler, *The Music* 231).

Bloom's association of Ashbery with transcendentalism and Vendler's reluctance to link him to a defined group of predecessors still

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leaves the question of Ashbery's precise relation to romanticism unanswered. Laura Quinney declares Ashbery a romantic, but qualifies this assessment by specifying that Ashbery's is a "bleak version of romanticism" in which "there is no restored contact with the transcendent, nor any true accommodation to its loss" (137). Quinney's analysis hinges on the contrast between present and past in Ashbery: the poet's disappointment is generated by his sense of the self's wholeness in the unreachable past and (by contrast) its inevitable dissolution in the precarious present. "The freedom Ashbery craves," Quinney writes, "is the touch of the transcendent, that which makes the self feel autonomous and bold. Of course, he never possesses this freedom in the present, but he is always recalling it with an ambivalent nostalgia" (136). It is this juxtaposition between past and present selves that I will focus on in this essay. Arguing that Ashbery is best described as a postromantic poet, I will examine his poetry in connection with an important literary precursor consistently overlooked in previous attempts to identify his poetic lineage: the French philosopher and writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In analogizing the desire to communicate with others as "Rousseau-like foliage," Ashbery's poem "And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name" (an excerpt from which serves as the epigraph to this essay) refers primarily to the French Postimpressionist painter Henri Rousseau, famed for his paintings of vivid jungle scenes. But Ashbery's invocation of the "desire to communicate" might also bring to mind the other Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, who attempts a full verbal expression of the self in his *Confessions*. Ashbery's exploration of this same idea—the possibility of structuring what Bloom calls a "mythology of self"—constitutes one of the great themes of his poetry (30).

In order to explore this mythology in more specific terms, it's instructive to recall Vendler's contention that the overarching themes in Ashbery are love and time (*The Music* 231; *Invisible Listeners* 59). Considering these concerns in the context of selfhood, we might say that the story of a typical human life is the story of a consciousness present to itself in time (that is, through memory) and to others, to whom it might express love (or more elementally still, sympathy). Sympathy and memory are therefore two significant categories through which human subjectivity is experienced and understood. In this essay, then, I propose to build on the observations of Bloom and Vendler to show how both love and time—or, to invoke the corresponding terms I will use, sympathy and memory—are marshalled in Ashbery as topics through which to begin to deconstruct and assess the nature of selfhood.

As concepts, sympathy and memory stand in notable contrast to one another. A function of the self's awareness of itself over time, memory is a contained, inward-looking process.[1] Sympathy, on the other hand, is a

function of the self's consciousness of, and connection to, other selves, and is thus an outward-looking process. Attuned to this dialectic, Ashbery's poems search out the proper balance between its two sides. Is the self's attention to its own vicissitudes through time limited by its debt to the relational, to the bonds between self and other? Can these two forms of attention—to self and to other—cohere perfectly? While Ashbery uses sympathy to establish the conditional, dependent nature of selfhood, memory in Ashbery's poetry plays a much more fraught and ambiguous role; scenes from the past are often presented as symbolizing a lost ideal that lies beyond our reach, one to which we endlessly seek to return. This ideal is often connoted by a self-conscious nostalgia for moments and places rendered irretrievable by the flow of time. It signals, on the one hand, a desire for something in the self that is by definition impervious to time's effects: a discoverable unifying principle within which or through which the self might be read as coherent and internally consistent. On the other hand, in its process-oriented resistance to traditional narrative structures, Ashbery's poetry evinces a tacit acknowledgment of postmodernity's claim that the coherence of subjectivity is one of our grandest and longest-standing illusions. Thus, wherever it is concerned with selfhood, Ashbery's poetry embodies a paradox. In his emphasis on the performative quality of language and his sympathy with his reader, Ashbery demonstrates the unfinished, socially dependent nature of the self. Simultaneously, in his evocations of an unattainable past that still impinges upon the present, he both strives to locate and laments the absence of what might be considered the romantic self—a self that remains constant over time and through space, borne up by some indivisible and essential quality uniquely proper to it.[2] In anticipating and problematizing the poststructuralist account of the self, Ashbery undertakes a revision, but not a flat repudiation, of the Rousseauian or romantic self, and his poetry thereby assumes a stance I call postromantic.[3]

Romantic Subjectivity: Rousseau's *Confessions*

While it might seem unorthodox to consider Ashbery's poetry in light of the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the move is warranted precisely because Rousseau is the central progenitor of the model of the self considered and reworked in Ashbery's poems. The connection between Rousseau and romanticism has been undisputed at least since Irving Babbitt's 1919 study *Rousseau and Romanticism*, in which Babbitt declares that Rousseau's "sense of his own otherwiseness . . . set the tone for a whole epoch" (50). It's arguable that no single book instantiates the romantic self more boldly and thoroughly than Rousseau's *Confessions*, in which Rousseau positions himself as the inheritor of a literary tradition

begun by Augustine. As Patrick Coleman notes in his introduction to a recent translation of the *Confessions*, Rousseau's work presents the reader with "two revolutionary ideas about the self. One is the uniqueness of the individual personality, an irreducible sense of self which can be distinguished from all social, cultural, and religious identities . . . . The other is the mobility of that self, a capacity . . . to play a wide variety of roles" (Rousseau vii).

For Rousseau, the importance of achieving the first of these objectives can hardly be overstated. Seeming almost too assured in his confidence that the task can be completed, he claims that the "particular object of my confessions is to make known my inner self, exactly as it was in every circumstance of my life" (270). Or again, "I should like to make my mind, as it were, transparent to the reader" (170). It can at least be said that the task takes up a great many pages, and the book's very length stands as evidence that for Rousseau the self is only explicable in often haphazard increments and anecdotes. In book 7, Rousseau presages a comical story involving an emotional breakdown during an encounter with a prostitute by promising, in typically overwrought fashion, that the anecdote will finally render his character fully transparent to the reader: "Whoever you are, who aspire to know a fellow-man, read, if you dare, the two or three pages that follow; you are about to know in full J.-J. Rousseau" (311). The repetition of such claims signals the book's tendency to defer rather than provide a full illumination of Rousseau's character. Rousseau occasionally betrays his awareness that language cannot perform the task he has assigned to it; as Coleman suggests, some of the book's most moving moments occur when Rousseau voices his dismay at "the inadequacy of words to express his feeling" (vii). But this is a realization Rousseau actively resists; the central conceit of his *Confessions* is to affirm the full disclosure of the self through language. Even if the very nature of the book attests to the fact that, as Ann Hartle observes and as Rousseau himself surely intuited, "the self is an imaginative construction," in *Confessions* Rousseau consistently and repeatedly urges the reader to accept the authenticity of the portrait he offers (10).

The fostering of sympathy between writer and reader plays a crucial role in *Confessions*. As Anne Vila notes, sympathy was a common trope in Enlightenment-era literature: "[T]he period's esthetics, moral philosophy, and sentimental literature . . . abounded in representations of the human being as naturally drawn to others through some kind of fellow-feeling—most typically, a sentiment of pity or empathetic participation in the suffering of another" (88). In *Confessions*, literary invocations of sympathy constitute one of the central means by which the textual self is shaped. In part, this is because Rousseau regards the self as inhering in feeling and

emotion rather than in imagination or intellect: he avers that he is "left with only one faithful guide upon which I can rely: and that is the chain of feelings that have marked the successive stages of my being" (270). While sympathy is thus integral both for Rousseau and for Ashbery, an important distinction can be made with respect to its function in their respective texts. In his poems, Ashbery typically extends sympathy toward the reader, recognizing, as he has expressed it, that "[w]hat the poem *is* is going to be determined by the reader" (Poulin 246). Perhaps also aware that the success of his text is conditional upon the sympathy with which the reader views him, Rousseau's strategy is very different, because he must maintain the fiction of a coherent, fully articulated self even while incrementally and haphazardly constructing that self. Rather than offer sympathy *to* the reader, Rousseau demands it *from* the reader. "Pity me in my affliction, gentle reader," he begs, immediately after relating the story of his unsuccessful attempt, as a child, to purloin an apple from his neighbor's storehouse (33). These moments, in which Rousseau pauses in his narration and reaches out of the text to instruct the reader what to feel (without self-consciousness or irony!), evoke the writer's desperation to render himself fully consistent.

Not content to demand that the reader sympathize with him, Rousseau also acquits himself of any inconsistencies in his self-presentation, bestowing all responsibility for his text's coherence onto his audience: "It is for the reader to assemble all these elements and to determine the being that they constitute; the result must be his own work, so that if he is mistaken, all the error is on his side" (170). He adroitly makes demands on the sensibility of his readership even while appearing to downplay them: "My task is to be truthful, it is the reader's to be fair. That is all I will ever ask of him" (349). The statement captures both Rousseau's seeming confidence in the perfect coherence and legibility of his textual (and, one presumes, actual) self and his continual appeals to the reader to verify the reality of that self.[4] In this sense, Rousseau is unsuccessful in producing a literary romantic self: as in Ashbery's poetry, the textual self in Rousseau is only realizable in others—that is, in its readership. What makes the Rousseauian subject romantic, then, is less its autonomy or wholeness than Rousseau's single-minded pursuit of, and belief in, that wholeness. The romantic self is defined not by any intrinsic qualities it might possess, but by the audaciousness of the attempt to uncover such qualities—even if the very nature of the attempt proves the reason for its failure. It is for this reason that Rousseau's *Confessions* maintains a certain kinship with postmodern texts, lacking only (though significantly) their self-awareness and irony; and it is because of this elusive mix of romantic and postmodern *avant la lettre* tensions in Rousseau's work that Ashbery stands as one of his major contemporary heirs.

Sympathy in Ashbery's Poetry

The distinction between this romantic version of the self and (what I am calling) the postromantic self of John Ashbery's poems turns on the latter writer's awareness of the conditionality and dependence of the self he posits. Ashbery's engagement with his reader is a function of his conviction that selfhood can only be produced in relation, that the development of the individual depends on the flourishing of community. As Kacper Bartczak puts it, the Ashbery poem functions "as a simulated ground on which to watch the vicissitudes of our coming to realize the inescapable fact of sharing—that is the fact that others participate in what we once thought to be distinctly and exclusively *us*" (206). Through this participatory quality, his poems not only draw the reader in, they assert what Lee Edelman, discussing Ashbery's great poem "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," calls "the fictionality of any autonomous self" (101). Rousseau also hints at the impossibility of such autonomy in his *Confessions*, though he does not pursue his statement's implications: "If I am to be known properly," he writes, "I must be known as I was in all my relations with others, good or bad. My own confessions are necessarily linked with those of other people" (390). The postromantic self is thus already visible in Rousseau. But in Ashbery such links between self and other are not merely confessional; they are constitutive. That is, whereas in Rousseau relationships with others are required to explain the history of the self, in Ashbery they are required in order to define it in the future. This is reflected by the degree to which the figure of the other takes precedence in Ashbery's poems. Consider "As You Know," a poem from his first collection, in which the speaker promises his beloved a future of romance, filled with travel to exotic places:

> We are pointing to England, to Africa, to Nigeria;
> And we shall visit these places, you and I, and other places,
> Including heavenly Naples, queen of the sea, where I shall be king
> and you will be queen,
> And all the places around Naples. (*Some Trees* 57)

Or this excerpt from Ashbery's third book, *Rivers and Mountains*:

> I miss the human truth of your smile,
> The halfhearted gaze of your palms,
> And all things together, but there is no comic reign
> Only the facts you put to me. You must not, then,
> Be very surprised if I am alone: it is all for you,
> The night, and the stars, and the way we used to be.
> (*Rivers and Mountains* 14)

The tone of manifest generosity, of the willingness to include the other, exhibited in the above passages is matched and even exceeded in the opening lines of "Years of Indiscretion," from *The Double Dream of Spring*:

> Whatever your eye alights on this morning is yours:
> Dotted rhythms of colors as they fade to the color,
> A gray agate, translucent and firm, with nothing
> Beyond its purifying reach. It's all there.
> These are things offered to your participation. (*Double Dream* 46)

Many similar passages could be culled from Ashbery's early poems, and taken together, they impel us to consider the status of the "you" addressed by Ashbery with such intimacy and regularity. While Bonnie Costello's argument that the pronoun's "importance lies in its ambiguity" (494) is not without merit, in this instance one interpretive possibility seems preeminent among all the others: the "you" instantiated in Ashbery's poetry is the poem's future reader. So argues Helen Vendler, who calls the imagined reader in Ashbery the "invisible listener . . . of whom many of his poems are acutely conscious" (*Invisible Listeners* 57). John Emil Vincent remarks, similarly, that while

> "[y]ou" is a supremely elastic pronoun within the books and the lyrics they contain . . . the largest sense in which later Ashbery takes "you," in this case the reader, into account is by patterning his books such that each one provides a distinct point of entry. Each single poem doesn't necessarily seem attentive to the reader, but each book has the reader's listening firmly in mind. (5)

Ultimately, Costello takes the same approach to Ashbery's poetry, noting that "[w]e are inscribed as readers everywhere in his pages" (495). Given their postmodern self-awareness and self-referentiality—"the subject of any one of my poems," Ashbery has said, is "the poem creating itself"—it seems almost inevitable that the Ashbery poem be dialogical, engaging and addressing the reader, speaking not so much about a subject as to one (Poulin 251).

One reason for Ashbery's careful attention to audience is his belief that the reader's experience comprises the whole point of writing the poem. As he has remarked in an interview, "[w]hat the poem *is* is going to be determined by the reader. I guess my poems are a kind of simplification of this problem, one which has always affected poets. The poem is not really in their hands: it's in someone else's" (246). Ashbery is aware that while he is the one who writes the poem, he has no control over how it is received. In large part, this provokes the sympathy Ashbery maintains with the reader.

To critics who have argued that he seeks to maintain a distance between himself and his reader,[5] Ashbery's words in an interview with *The Paris Review* provide some measure of response: he means, he explains,

> to aim at as wide an audience as I can so that as many people as possible will read my poetry. Therefore I depersonalize it, but in the same way personalize it, so that a person who is going to be different from me but is also going to resemble me just because he is different from me, since we are all different from each other, can see something in it. (Stitt)

The elliptical nature of his statement should not obscure the point Ashbery is after. His poetry seeks to universalize without flattening individuality into sameness. That is, his attempts to forge connection in his poetry—to communicate—are not attempts to elide difference, but to find the point where differences intersect with one another in a productive fashion. The reader, Ashbery says, "is also going to resemble me just because he is different from me": in this way our very separation from one another becomes, counterintuitively, a point of similitude.[6] Rather than trying to minimize the distance between separate selves, Ashbery argues for the power of language to span such distances. As Ashbery puts it in his poem "Parergon," "We need the tether / Of entering each other's lives, eyes wide apart, crying" (*Double Dream* 55). The phrase "eyes wide apart" exemplifies a phenomenon in Ashbery's work that John Shoptaw has identified as "misrepresentation," noting that such terms "renovate" meaning rather than ruling it out altogether (2–3). "Eyes wide apart" revises the more conventional phrase "eyes wide open," attributing to it instead a quality more often used to describe hands or feet. This revision suggests, it seems to me, the messiness and unpredictability, even the potential pain, of "entering each other's lives," even if it is a "tether" that we need. It thus posits both the divergence of individual human selves and the requirement that these selves intersect one another in mutual support.

Poststructuralism and the Performative Self

It needs to be granted here that even to use a phrase such as "the human self" is to make an ontological assumption many theorists have called into question. One such theorist is Rei Terada, whose book *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the "Death of the Subject"* proceeds from the premise that the human self in its traditional guises is an untenable category. For Terada, emotion is both cause and evidence of dissociation within the self, since it "demands virtual self-difference" (31). In fact, Terada claims, "we would have no emotions if we were subjects": it is exactly emotion that has pro-

duced the death of the subject (4). So far from inhering in a subject, emotion constitutes "the difference between subjective ideality and the external world" and is thus a strictly phenomenological occurrence—the filling of the gap between the way we expect to see the world and the way it in fact presents itself to us (44). In the very production of emotion, the category of personhood dissolves. "When I interpret my own mental representations," Terada asks, "whose is the subjectivity to whom the emotion finally belongs? No one but a string of Humean 'whos' who are all the I's I have" (46).

Terada's reference to Hume is an apt one, since Hume was perhaps the first modern thinker to effectively disturb notions of the self extant since Aristotle. More recently, the work of psychoanalysts such as Freud and Lacan as well as that of Marxist theorists such as Theodor Adorno and Frederic Jameson has shifted the debate over human subjectivity away from an emphasis on individual agency and toward the material and social processes within which and through which subjects are produced.[7] But in contemporary thought, Friedrich Nietzsche's shadow still looms longest: the ideas of Derrida, of Foucault, and of Butler find their roots in his radical recontextualization of the human self. Writes Nietzsche in *The Will to Power*: "The 'subject' is nothing given, but something superimposed by fancy, something introduced behind" (12–13). In fact, he adds, "[w]here our ignorance really begins, at that point from which we can see no further, we set a word; for instance, the word 'I'" (13). Nietzsche's resolute skepticism concerning all our categories of thought, moral and ontological, leads him to critique the work of Descartes, whose writings on individual identity offer a kind of philosophical analogue to the literary version of the self produced in Rousseau's *Confessions*. Nietzsche seeks out the unjustified assumption that animates (and undoes) Descartes's famous *cogito*:

> "Something is thought, therefore there is something that thinks": this is what Descartes' argument amounts to. But this is tantamount to considering our belief in the notion '*substance*' as an *a priori* truth:—that there must be something 'that thinks' when we think, is merely a formulation of a grammatical custom which sets an agent to every action. In short, a metaphysico-logical postulate is already put forward here. (14)

This "metaphysico-logical postulate" is an unjustified assertion of some essentiality or inherent feature through which the self attains a unifying definition. The rejection of this assumption is arguably one of the defining characteristics of the poststructuralist tradition, from its predecessors Nietzsche and Hume to its recent apex in the writings of Deleuze and Guattari.

One important poststructuralist reframing of subjectivity has occurred through the development of the concept of performativity—a term that is now inextricably linked to queer theory but originated in linguistic philosophy. Theories of performativity are premised on the notion that the self is socioculturally and linguistically engendered. Judith Butler, the leading figure in the field, draws on the theories of J. L. Austin and Jacques Derrida to argue that—in the summarizing words of Sedgwick and Parker—"identities are constructed iteratively through complex citational processes" (2). (J. L. Austin, a philosopher of language, first introduced and defined the performative speech act as an utterance that carries the force of an action within reality rather than being merely a description of that reality. The paradigmatic example: a pronouncement of marriage by a justice of the peace.) Such forms of discourse, Butler argues, are more culturally prevalent and more insidiously effective than we have till now realized, and it is through the force of these verbal iterations that identities are constructed and, gradually, come to be performed. This shaping current of discourse inevitably precedes any subject and precludes the possibility of its agency. Hence, Butler writes, "[w]here there is an 'I' who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that 'I' and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will. Thus there is no 'I' who stands behind discourse and executes its volition or will *through* discourse" (225).

Critics of poststructuralism have pointed out that theories of performativity generally appear to defer or postpone, rather than to refute, insistent questions regarding whatever aspect of the self might continue from moment to moment.[8] To label something "performative" is to take a verb and make it an adjective, which does not necessarily lessen the conundrum of just how to consider the noun it modifies—the subject, that is, who is doing the performing. Is subjectivity thoroughly theatrical, something assumed the way one might a series of masks? In fact, the notion of performance does anything but negate the possibility of some entity beneath the performer's garb, some actor who, consciously or otherwise, inhabits the role of his or her sociohistorical moment. What I am calling the postromantic verges on just this slippage between performativity, performance, and the performer. In what form does agency or continuity lurk behind the ever-accumulating iterations of word and action by which we are said to be defined? Is such agency self-consistent?

In considering how Ashbery's poetry interacts with such questions, we might recall the critical adage that avant-garde poets such as those in the New York School emphasize the poem as a process that unfolds in the act of being read rather than as a static, finished product. The typical Ashbery poem, for example, "proliferates meaning instead of locating it" (Vincent 14). The discursive effect of an Ashbery poem is that it

is not about a particular experience so much as it is about what Ashbery has called "the experience of experience" (Poulin 245). This means that, as Mark Silverberg explains, "an Ashbery poem is less an object than a linguistic event: it is 'about' its own coming into being" (115). But here we might take note of a convergence between self and poem, given the fact that—as Andrew Epstein has remarked—Ashbery's postmodern ethic entails "an aversion to fixity, a belief in the self as less an entity than an ongoing process" (68). As I have noted above, these qualities are also referenced in descriptions of Ashbery's *poetry*. If Ashbery's poems seem sometimes to ramble on indiscriminately, it is because the human mind has the same tendencies; and in this way the poem becomes a vehicle for interrogating the properties and limits of the human self. This is evident in Ashbery's explanation of the state of mind needed to write good poetry: "I guess it amounts to not planning the poem in advance but in letting it take its own way; of living in a state of alert and being ready to change your mind if the occasion seems to require it" (quoted in Epstein 78). His statement begins by restricting itself to the scene of planning and writing the poem, but easily and naturally shifts to include planning and living one's life (good poetry requires "living in a state of alert"). A more subtly knit connection between poem and self can hardly be imagined.

Positioning the poem as a metaphor for the self has certain unique advantages. For one thing, it enables these poets to use style and voice (and not only content) in their poems to represent and envision subjectivity. But perhaps we can go a step further still. The very writing of poetry becomes, for Ashbery, the construction of selfhood. Even within the poem, every word denotes a choice made by a human subject within a grammatical field—a choice that will either alienate or encourage the other, and will thus shape (if indirectly) the boundaries of the self. In writing, then, the poet does not merely explore what subjectivity means; he produces himself *as* a subject. That is to say, Ashbery's poems amount to a *verbal performance* of selfhood. While such textual self-production might seem to oppose Roland Barthes's argument for the death of the author in his famous 1967 essay, Ashbery's performative poetry does in fact share affinities with Barthes's claims. If Barthes's argument entails a rejection of the figure of the author as it has traditionally been conceived, Ashbery's poetry proposes in turn that literary language not only disrupts outmoded models of selfhood but inaugurates a new, provisional, rhetorical one. If his poetry cannot be said to be performative in quite the manner that term has recently come to designate, it nonetheless emphasizes and enacts the role played by textual practices in the construction of identity. That is, if performativity denotes the process by which speaking (or writing) produces a self encoded within and determined by language, the postmodern poem, itself written and (ideally) spoken, takes up a position with respect

to the world of the poet that is not merely denotative but constitutive. The work of Ashbery exemplifies, in other words, the notion that poetry not only describes but determines identity: that the poem forms selfhood as well as informing it.[9] Such a connection between poem and self is also ethically salient: just as the poem depends on its reader for the actualization of its meaning, so the self requires the other for its development and actualization to become possible. The politics of community that accrues from this notion amounts to a rejection of Emersonian self-reliance and the American individualist ethos in favor of a conception of selfhood as constantly in process and resistant to claims of essentiality.

In this manner Ashbery performs a literary self within his poetry while simultaneously questioning the extent to which such a performance can produce or represent authentic selfhood. His poems are productively ambivalent in their treatment of the problem of subjectivity, demonstrating the same wariness of being too firmly attached to a single program or methodology that Ashbery has often expressed in interviews. Especially in his early poems, we can read in Ashbery's treatment of the theme of memory his reluctance to relinquish the romanticism with which his postmodernity remains in tension. Narrating the precarious balancing act between romantic and postmodern ideologies of subjectivity, Ashbery's early work demands that we keep in mind the fragility and indeterminacy of selfhood even as the pull of memory urges us to perceive of personhood as somehow unchanging. In the readings that follow I will show how Ashbery's poetry, in navigating between these two tendencies, comprises a remarkable philosophical attempt to trace the contours of both our interactions with each other and our understanding of ourselves.

"The Picture of Little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers"

We are afforded an early glimpse into the themes of memory, sympathy, and the self so prevalent in Ashbery's later work in a poem from his first collection, *Some Trees*, entitled "The Picture of Little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers." The first part of the poem is an example of what John Shoptaw calls "narrative collage" (26–27): a seemingly disparate set of incidents and characters that—as David Herd perceptively demonstrates—actually allude to various literary forebears: not only Andrew Marvell, whose poem "The Picture of Little T. C. in a Prospect of Flowers" Ashbery's title paraphrases, and Boris Pasternak, from whose novel *Doctor Zhivago* the poem's epigraph is taken, but also William Wordsworth and James Joyce (Herd 45–46). In so doing, Ashbery situates his own literary ambitions within an array of writers whose work has influenced his own. Not simply the outflow of the poet's inspiration, words find their form and meaning within the frame of historical influence and intertextuality. This idea is reinforced

in the poem's second section, which suggests that besides words and poems, some of our most dearly held concepts take shape in a similarly arbitrary and richly unstable fashion. Morality itself is less an eternal norm than a necessary illusion, since "goodness [is] a mere memory / Or naming of recent scenes of badness," and as a result, our lives require the constant rediscovery of what it is we choose to deem good: "So fair does each invent his virtue" (*Some Trees* 28). The first two sections of the poem thus invite the conclusion that aesthetic and ethical advances come about through conscious choices made within a social context, and that these choices enable us to communally negotiate the fraught process of self-invention.

In contrast, the poem's third section draws us back to its title—back to the early stages of the poem and, by association, of the speaker's life:

> Yet I cannot escape the picture
> Of my small self in that bank of flowers:
> My head among the blazing phlox
> Seemed a gigantic and pale fungus. (28)

As Herd notes, the speaker's comparison of his young head to a fungus is not without significance: since "a fungus is a parasite, feeding off its environment," the metaphor revisits and fortifies the idea that the self is socially constituted (47). But the first lines of the section invoke an immobilizing return to the past, giving the impression that the "small self" in the "bank of flowers" is in some ways still present today. Where sympathy provokes the speaker to move uncertainly forward, memory allows him to look nostalgically back, superimposing a reductive (and romanticized) image of the self onto an identity that otherwise remains difficult to define.

In its concluding lines, the poem appears to waver, caught between its depictions of a socially engendered future and an imperfectly captured past:

> as the loveliest feelings
>
> Must soon find words, and these, yes,
> Displace them, so I am not wrong
> In calling this comic version of myself
> The true one. (29)

Looking at the old photograph, the speaker appears to commit to the Rousseauian notion that the "comic version" of himself represented on it is the "true one." This is not simply a rejection of an ontology of indeterminacy in favor of the comforting notion of a "true," complete (albeit fleeting) self. The poem's message is more wry and conflicted. Eventually, the

speaker posits, the feelings we have about the past take the shape of words which slowly displace them. Whatever true self he might possess therefore emanates not from the past, but from his *feelings* about that past, as well as the words to which these feelings give rise. From the vantage point of the present, the historical self can only be imperfectly reconstructed at best. But since the historical self provides the only narrative of selfhood to which we can safely turn, we must rely on it.[10] "For," as the poem concludes,

> as change is horror,
> Virtue is really stubbornness
>
> And only in the light of lost words
> Can we imagine our rewards. (29)

These memorable lines comprise a kind of self-conscious defense of the speaker's mock-elegy for his past self. Stubbornness is a virtue because it embodies resistance to the horror of change, the hidden and real fear lurking at the poem's heart. There is no way to "pause" the self, no real way to stop and take stock of life while it is being lived; change is constant and relentless, and ends in death, which is why it is horrifying. "The Picture of Little J. A." holds out the myth of a realized past self as an antidote to that horror, even if the poem problematizes the very myth it clings to: our myths are doomed to turn into the words we use to describe them, and even those words will one day be lost. The poem is almost Kafkaesque in its consciousness of the ultimate futility of resisting change, but finds reassurance in the constructive power of individual memory. And in its final line it returns to the shared promise of social creativity; as James McCorkle argues, the poem's "closing lines mark the shift from the personal statement on artistic development centered on the 'I' . . . to a generalized 'we'—our rewards as writers or as readers or as ethical beings" (83). Its closing image is not of a solitary self focused on the past, but a community of individuals bent on envisioning—aesthetically and ethically—the possible rewards of the future. Balanced between memory and sympathy, the poem ends by stressing the latter, yet does not deny the crucial importance of the former.

"Together at last, though far apart": "The Ecclesiast"

If the theme of clinging to stability in the face of transience appears obliquely in "The Picture of Little J. A. in the Prospect of Flowers," it assumes a much more overt role in "The Ecclesiast," the opening lines of which depict the erosion of a long-held but decaying belief system. New facts have come to light—"the new dimension of truth had only recently / Burst in on us"—and as a result old assumptions must be discarded—"her mothball truth is

eaten" (*Rivers and Mountains* 21). What is the origin of the "mothball truth" being replaced? The poem answers:

> Tired housewives begat it some decades ago,
> A small piece of truth that if it was honey to the lips
> Was also millions of miles from filling the place reserved for it.
> (*Rivers and Mountains* 21)

As Mark Silverberg writes, this is "truth as gossip more than gospel," and its erasure seems a necessary event (123). But if old forms of truth were insufficient to the role expected of them, in its newly acquired dimensions the truth appears equally provisional and unsatisfying. The poem's second stanza elaborates on this problem, and the quandaries it ponders are reminiscent of those observed in "The Picture of Little J. A.":

> There was no life you could live out to its end
> And no attitude which, in the end, would save you.
> The monkish and the frivolous alike were to be trapped in death's capacious claw. (*Rivers and Mountains* 21)

No version of the truth, however produced, seems adequate to the task of living unless it can answer the problem of life's brevity, that is, of our fleeting and solitary grasp on conscious existence. (It's not without reason that the poem's title refers to *Ecclesiastes*, a book that makes much the same point.) In the same vein, Silverberg is right to suggest that one of the poem's basic preoccupations has to do with the nature of knowledge. What claims to knowing truth can we make, and how are we justified in making them? The answer Silverberg provides is the straightforwardly postmodern one: "We cannot *know* with certainty in Ashbery's world since new dimensions of truth are always bursting in on us, preferably when we least expect them" (121).

This is a useful starting point, but some corollary points are in order. First, the poem's philosophical concerns are not only epistemological, they are also ontological. The observation that "there was no . . . *attitude* which, in the end, would save you" implies a way of being, an active decision about how to perceive the world (*Rivers and Mountains* 21, emphasis mine). It therefore stages for the reader the concept of selfhood and its possible permutations. The poem's speaker both affirms the malleability of the self, which emanates from the attitudes we adopt, and laments the insufficiency of any pose we might adopt to save ourselves in the end. Through the use of the second-person pronoun, the reader is forcefully included in this equation; this is a problem that is, or needs to be, universally felt.

Second, no analysis of the poem can be complete that does not pay close attention to the lines immediately following the threatening phrase "death's capacious claw":

> But listen while I tell you about the wallpaper—
> There was a key to everything in that oak forest
> But a sad one. Ever since childhood there
> Has been this special meaning to everything.
> You smile at your friend's joke, but only later, through tears. (21)

Faced with the uncompromising fact of death, the speaker turns again—just as he does in "The Picture of Little J. A."—to the realm of memory. Even in the context of a community of others, such as might provide a "friend's joke," the prospect of inhabiting a knowable self adequate to the demands of a changing present and unknown future seems unpromising. In such a situation, the past might seem our only anchor. But while it is clear that the speaker has turned to reflect on the past, the specifics of what he is saying remain cloudy. What can be gleaned from the sad "key to everything in that oak forest"? It's well known that Ashbery resists placing his biographical self within his poems, but weighty moments from a poet's life are always apt to become fodder for poetry. And Ashbery has spoken more than once in interviews about a certain memory from childhood that may be applicable to "The Ecclesiast." He recalls in an interview that

> [w]e had a mythical kingdom in the woods; various of our friends had castles in trees, and I was always trying to get plays that we could produce spontaneously. Then my younger brother died just around the beginning of World War II. The group dispersed for various reasons, and things were never as happy or romantic as they'd been, and my brother was no longer there. I think I've always been trying to get back to this mystical kingdom that [we] inhabited. (Rehak 15)

Commenting on this quotation, Epstein notes that "many of Ashbery's best and most famous poems chronicle this sense of loss, this dispersal, and this desire to return to a mythical realm of idealized fraternity, a desire that continuously slams into the impossibility of that illusory dream" (277). "The Ecclesiast" manifests exactly this desire: the "special meaning" extant since childhood connotes the realization that the most idyllic and romantic time of one's life is already past, and only its facsimile can be retrieved in memory. As a child, the speaker seemed to have a presentiment of this idea; scenes from his past seem tinged by melancholy even as they occur, though they have now become unlikely sources of consolation.

It's clear that the speaker in "The Ecclesiast" does not really believe that he can find in the past a means of true reprieve from the worries of the present and future. After all, the juxtaposed emotions in the (wonderful) line "You smile at your friend's joke, but only later, through tears" suggests that in recollection even sweet moments are somehow made bittersweet. But the speaker's instinctual reliance on memory nevertheless betrays Ashbery's romantic predilections, his vision of a past self that might again cohere in some happy unknown future. The confluence of past and present selves in Ashbery is reminiscent of Rousseau, whose *Confessions* narrates the struggle to unite them and so to resolve the puzzle of selfhood. Rousseau presents himself as a child possessing adult-like sagacity who grows up to be an adult of childlike innocence; "although in some respects," he writes,

> I was already a man when I was born, in many others I remained for a long time, and still remain, a child. I never promised to offer the public a grand personage; what I did promise was to portray myself as I am; and if the reader is to know me as I am in my later years, he must have known me well in my youth. (170)

Rousseau's identification of his present with his past self is meant to assure the reader of the coherence (and therefore the validity) of his treatise. In "The Ecclesiast," Ashbery makes no such claims. In fact, the poem's second half rejects the idea of simplistic dependence on a past version of the self, attempting instead to breathe life into the tired proverb that there's "no time like the present" (*Rivers and Mountains* 21).

Indeed, the latter half of the poem is littered with clichés and catchphrases: "the shoe pinches," "giving in to . . . temptation," "time enough" (21). But as Shoptaw argues, these lines exemplify Ashbery's strategy of misrepresentation: familiar, comfortable sayings such as "If the shoe fits, wear it" and "Rules were made to be broken" are reshaped into augmented versions that combine the flavor of the original idiom with an unexpected twist (79). The effect is that, in Lynn Keller's words, "[b]y slightly modifying hackneyed phrases or by mixing clichés with less banal diction, Ashbery infuses fresh energy into time-worn expressions" (244).[11] Furthermore, if the cliché can be said to embody a version of the past that has been dulled by our very reliance on it, Ashbery's modification of cliché conveys the required balance between remembering the past (individually and collectively) and memorializing it. Ashbery's resistance to cliché even as he makes use of it signifies the self's contested relationship to its own past.

In its closing section, the poem's focus moves away from memory and the past and back toward sympathy, which for Ashbery is the vital ingredient in the ongoing development of self and society. Sympathy is

required partly because of the unreliability of memory. Even Rousseau recognizes his own unreliability as a narrator, admitting that the "first part [of the *Confessions*] was written entirely from memory and is no doubt full of mistakes" (269). Along similar lines, in the last part of "The Ecclesiast" the speaker hints at the inadequacy of memory as a sole repository of selfhood while simultaneously reaching out to the other in unambiguously intimate terms, as if to posit human sympathy as a natural response to the fallacy of human memory: "My dearest I am as a galleon on salt billows. / Perfume my head with forgetting all about me" (*Rivers and Mountains* 21). The verb "to forget" establishes the insufficiency of the past as a locus for the self, and in case the reader needs (as it were) reminding, the human propensity to forget or to rewrite history is dramatized again almost immediately: "You wake up forgetting. Already / Daylight shakes you in the yard" (21).

In keeping with the turn toward connection to others and away from the past, the reader is addressed in terms that convey a sense of possibility and of the uncertain future: "You shall never have seen it just this way / And that is to be your one reward" (22). These lines offer, among other things, an encapsulation of one of the benefits of reading poetry: the poet promises the reader that his words contain something new, a previously unconsidered perspective from which to see the world. Shared between poet and reader, this perspective represents the unity of feeling such a poetics seeks to produce. In its enigmatic final stanza, the poem reflects again, momentarily, on the violence and discomfort inherent in existence—envisioning a "cold and delicate" night, one "full of angels / Pounding down the living"—but it ends with a resounding affirmation of the identificatory unity that language, and more specifically poetic communication, can create even between persons separated by the exigencies of time and space and history:

> The night is cold and delicate and full of angels
> Pounding down the living. The factories are all lit up,
> The chime goes unheard.
> We are together at last, though far apart. (22)

"Borne on Shoulders, at Last": "Soonest Mended"

John Ashbery's fourth book, *The Double Dream of Spring*, continues the trajectory he initiates in *Rivers and Mountains*, moving away from the experimental, nearly inaccessible language poetry of *The Tennis Court Oath* toward a more dynamic and reader-friendly style. Where *The Tennis Court Oath* presents itself as a hermetic, closed system that seems to communicate less with the reader than with itself, *The Double Dream of Spring* is assertively other-centered, positing the self as "radically porous, dependent

for its sense of identity on the things and people it has around it," to quote David Herd (118). Collectively, its poems produce "an image of a self which appreciates its lack of sovereignty, and knows itself to be the subject of forces beyond its control" (118). They would seem, then, to dismiss the Rousseauian or proto-romantic picture of the self that flits through so much of Ashbery's earlier poetry. The picture, however, is not quite so simple. In what follows I will consider one of the most highly regarded poems in *The Double Dream of Spring*, "Soonest Mended," which figures as a paradigmatic example of how Ashbery navigates dilemmas surrounding selfhood in his work. Arguing against—and longing for—a historical self that might provide a sense of certitude, "Soonest Mended" defines the self as radically unmade and indeed as essentially indefinable—and yet suggests that the basic task given to us in human experience is that of continuing to attempt to define it. In so doing, and in its careful balancing of memory and sympathy, "Soonest Mended" takes its place as perhaps the quintessential postromantic poem.

Justly praised as one of Ashbery's most important poems, "Soonest Mended" intimates, in its opening lines, a mood of doubt and regret. In fact, this feeling is established in the poem's title, which is drawn from the colloquialism "Least said, soonest mended," a phrase that asserts the incapacity of words to rectify past mistakes.[12] The clear implication is that the same is true of the poem itself, and numerous critics have commented on this aura of self-deprecatory uncertainty. Silverberg calls the poem one of "instability and imbalance" (173); for Bartczak, it sounds a "note of troubled acceptance of our diminished selves" (88); Shoptaw sees it as disconnected from reality and "indulg[ing] in the fantasy of passive resistance" (107). These readings, while accurate in part, seem to me to miss the gathering—if guarded—optimism that characterizes the poem. By the time the speaker proposes, at the poem's conclusion, that "this is action, this not being sure," we have reached a sense of resolution and affirmation that belies that very statement's hesitancy. In its meandering movement from past to present and from self to other, "Soonest Mended" enacts the very thing it proposes: a provisional ethic, a map for the road ahead.

The first-person plural is used throughout the poem, and the premise that its "we" refers not only to Ashbery and his friends but to an entire subculture is supported by Ashbery's own comments: he has called "Soonest Mended" his "one-size-fits-all confessional poem which is about my youth and maturing but also about anybody else's" (quoted in Shoptaw 105). The speaker begins by looking back through his personal and social history: his implicit (and Rousseauian) hypothesis seems to be that he will be able to find in the past an answer for the dilemmas of the present. But if the impetus of this search is romantic, its fruition is markedly otherwise. The speaker sees himself as carrying out a

supporting role, at best, in his society, and certainly not a leading one: he and his companions are "barely tolerated, living on the margin" of their culture (*Double Dream* 17). And to add insult to injury, they "were always having to be rescued" (17). This concession not only underlines the need for connection and community, it turns the mantra of Emersonian self-reliance on its head. In short, in reflecting on his own history in the poem's first lines, the speaker discovers himself to be the precise opposite of a romantic figure, traditionally conceived. Furthermore, his recourse to memory does him little good, since the changing present constantly invalidates the disappearing past: "Only by that time we were in another chapter and confused / About how to receive this latest piece of information" (17).

This existential confusion provides the poem with its central task, that of building "a sense of self equal to its moment" (Herd 119). The poem represents the project of selfhood as both intensely important and profoundly difficult, even when embarked on communally. The difficulty of the task owes partly to the pressures and constrictions of modernity, of the way life in a "technological society" seems to revolve less around self-betterment than around the everyday banalities of "food and the rent and bills to be paid" (*Double Dream* 17). Amid such distractions, the goal remains the same—"our ambition," Ashbery writes, "was to be small and clear and free" (17). By choosing adjectives that are themselves small and clear, the speaker depicts his wants as stark, simple, and universal. But the universality of these wants does not make their accession easy: the main concern becomes that of survival, of "holding on to the hard earth so as not to get thrown off" (17).

This line, appearing relatively early in the poem, constitutes what might be considered its emotional low point. The romantic conceit arguably first propagated by Rousseau—that of thoroughly legible, self-reliant, internally consistent personhood—has been dismantled in the poem's first twenty-five lines to such an extent that the speaker wonders whether autonomy is an entire delusion, whether he and his friends were merely "acting this out / For someone else's benefit" (17). But here the mood of the piece begins to turn. The next line considers the possibility of "an occasional dream, a vision," and the speaker begins to chart out the hazardous path to something approaching hopefulness (18). In fact, the last half of "Soonest Mended" reminds us that for all his negations of romantic constructs, Ashbery remains, as Lehman argues, "at heart a Romantic poet" who seeks in art a "redemptive enchantment" he is unwilling to refuse belief in (30). Or rather Ashbery is, as I have been calling him, a post-romantic poet, because even his dismissal of traditional forms of romantic thought leaves behind something of the visionary, the unifying, and the transcendent.

Consider one of the most quoted passages from "Soonest Mended":

> We are all talkers
> It is true, but underneath the talk lies
> The moving and not wanting to be moved, the loose
> Meaning, untidy and simple like a threshing floor. (*Double Dream* 18)

In their avowal of "the loose meaning" inhering "underneath the talk," these lines might be taken as a sort of poetic rejoinder to poststructuralist theory (which would posit the talk as necessarily prior to any meaning it generates). But besides expressing a brief sketch of Ashberyan semiotics, they suggest a reason for the poet's pursuit of beauty in poetry: it forms his attempt to discover and lay bare the tension between "moving and not wanting to be moved," between the competing desires for definition and closure on the one hand and escape and borderlessness on the other. The goal of the postromantic poet is to establish a version of selfhood that achieves both.

To do so requires fostering communal engagement in overcoming the "hazards of the course"—the unofficial "rules" of life within the confines of modernity. Suggesting that the reader, too, has a stake in this game, Ashbery invites us into the poem, recalling the moment of shock

> when, almost a quarter of a century later,
> The clarity of the rules dawned on you for the first time.
> *They* were the players, and we who had struggled at the game
> Were merely spectators, though subject to its vicissitudes
> And moving with it out of the tearful stadium, borne on shoulders,
> at last. (18)

In recognizing his failure to become the person he once imagined he would be, the speaker again deflates the myth of the romantic individual. To imagine yourself a player, even to the point of "struggling at the game," only to realize your own marginality, to realize that all along, you were on the sidelines and unaware of it: this is the slightly ludicrous, belated sense of self-recognition that Ashbery wants to capture. In this reading, the game to which Ashbery refers—and from which he finds himself removed—is that of conformity to the norms of American culture and its signifiers of success, such as material wealth, fame, and political power.

This marks a further dissociation from the Rousseauian self; and yet, despite the marginalized status of the poem's speaker, he is not without resources or direction. He "move[s] . . . out of the tearful stadium, borne on shoulders, at last." Typically, of course, it is the star athlete who exits the stadium on others' shoulders, and he does so only to return for the

following match. Here, though, in a pointedly nonsensical image, it is the *spectators* who are carried out of the stadium. These lines thus offer a radical new vision of the self as necessarily dependent on and supported by others, both distributing and receiving the sympathy so essential for personal growth. The image of the hero "borne on shoulders, at last" also instigates an ironic turn back toward romantic typology, since the romantic hero is usually assumed to be self-assured, self-aware, and confident—all qualities the speaker in Ashbery's poem lacks.

The reappearance of romantic themes signals that Ashbery's vision of a coherent subjectivity has not been vanquished, and it is buoyed by the poem's return to memory, that romantic archive of the mythic "true" self. As Berger argues, "Soonest Mended" carries out the search for this true self, "mov[ing] back through personal memory to an event *in illo tempore*, or sacred time, when the poet's true chronology began" (182). Of course, given Ashbery's awareness of such tropes, the process immediately reads as self-defeating:

> These were moments, years,
> Solid with reality, faces, namable events, kisses, heroic acts,
> But like the friendly beginning of a geometrical progression
> Not too reassuring, as though meaning could be cast aside some day
> When it had been outgrown. (*Double Dream* 18)

These lines conjure up the worrying specter that troubles the poem's speaker so deeply: if the past cannot provide a fixed guide for the present, and if the future remains unknown, from where should our sense of self and purpose derive? The poem's conclusion is both ambivalent and freeing: if the randomness of experience dictates that "thinking not to grow up / Is the brightest kind of maturity for us, right now at any rate" (19), it also demands an active, conscious, and communal attitude toward the self and the other, one that involves

> learning to accept
> The charity of the hard moments as they are doled out,
> For this is action, this not being sure, this careless
> Preparing, sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow,
> Making ready to forget, and always coming back
> To the mooring of starting out, that day so long ago. (19)

These lines juxtapose images of the future ("the seeds crooked in the furrow") with images of the past ("the mooring of starting out"), offering a poignant reminder of the self's constant and perplexing position in the present. For while we cannot depend on the past for our conceptions of

selfhood, neither can we simply reject it. Instead we must "mak[e] ready to forget," preparing for the dispersal of the constructed selves to which we cling—selves whose paths emanate from "the mooring of starting out," a past that both constricts identity and makes it possible. The model of human relations underpinning such a practice can only be one of reciprocal sympathy. If the stirring last lines of "Soonest Mended" stress the ultimate indeterminacy of the self, the necessary and never-ending growth that its realization requires, it is through reliance on others that life remains vital and promising. For this reason the poem never relinquishes its use of the first-person plural, a communal "we" that embraces the environment both of the poem proper and of its audience.

Toward an Ethic of Selfhood

The path to selfhood in Ashbery is thus winding, at times barely navigable. His poetry dismisses the romantic trope of the "atomized, independent, and isolated" individual in favor of the notion that "human selves . . . are inextricably bound to one another" and must therefore rely on each other in the pursuit of their shared and separate identities (Epstein 128). For the same reason the poet must rely on his reader, whose presence enables the poem to be communicative rather than solipsistic, relational rather than inward-focused. At the same time, a sense of romantic individuality energizes Ashbery's poetry, and much of it derives from his attitude toward the past. The power of memory hinges on an intangible, unfulfilled dream for the restoration of the lost past in a future that will make sense of its ambitions and failures. "Much of my poetry," Ashbery has said, "comes out of memories of childhood, the feeling of some lost world that can't be recovered" (Poulin 253). If that lost world produces Ashbery's romanticism, his inability to recover that world produces the limit and endpoint of his romanticism. The past is irretrievable, and the selves we create out of it are not inviolable. Sympathy, which unifies human feeling, is therefore required if individuality is to be more than a fiction.

In his more recent poem "And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name" Ashbery posits the longing for such sympathy as the reason the poet begins to write. This longing to be more than simply a separate self prompts the human mind to face the "foliage of its desire to communicate"—its desire, that is, to be understood as a human person, notwithstanding all the quirks and complications such an understanding entails (*Houseboat Days* 46). Rousseau writes his *Confessions* out of the desire for that same understanding; but Ashbery, in contrast, realizes that communication must ultimately be other-directed and other-focused, must be offered "for the sake / Of others and their desire to understand you" and not merely for self-affirmation (46).

This entails that the making of the self is a paradoxically unselfish process, an affirmation of the existence and value of the other. Such a process might appear to promote a "backward way of becoming," as Ashbery phrases it in his poem "The Bungalows" (*Double Dream* 72). But it cannot fail to meet another of Ashbery's standards: it is invariably "in favor of life" (quoted in Lehman 309).

To note a final instance of how Ashbery's poetry affirms both the value of memory and the primacy of sympathy in the construction of selfhood, I quote at length from the final section of "The Bungalows," which appears in *The Double Dream of Spring*:

> Each detail was startlingly clear, as though seen through a
> magnifying glass,
> Or would have been to an ideal observer, namely yourself—
> For only you could watch yourself so patiently from afar
> The way God watches a sinner on the path to redemption,
> Sometimes disappearing into valleys, but always *on the way,*
> For it all builds up into something, meaningless or meaningful
> As architecture, because planned and then abandoned when
> completed,
> To live afterwards, in sunlight and shadow, a certain amount of years.
> Who cares about what was there before? There is no going back,
> For standing still means death, and life is moving on,
> Moving on towards death. But sometimes standing still is also life.
> (*Double Dream* 72)

All of Ashbery's trademarks are displayed here to heightened effect: the positioning of the reader at the forefront of the poem, the thoughtful rumination on how past moments conjure up a sense of self ("it all builds up into something, meaningless or meaningful"), and the implied universality and shared feeling that resonate in each line. The poem's final two lines brilliantly summarize the tension in Ashbery between "moving on" in concert with others and "standing still" in order to grasp, if only fleetingly, an (immediately flawed) image of oneself and one's world. The fact that these desires compete in productive tension with one another suggests that while Ashbery does leaven his romantic tendencies with a healthy dose of postmodern skepticism, he is not so devoted to the pragmatist ideals of indeterminacy and transience that he wishes to reject, out of hand, the very concept of the self.

Ashbery's assertion in "The Bungalows" that "it all builds up into something" reflects how his poems suggest a politics despite the fact that his poetry avoids anything like direct political commentary. The political bent of his poetry finds expression not so much in his own "mode

of 'belonging'" (Diggory 15) to a particular social group as in his effort make the *reader* belong. As Vendler argues, by "fostering within the lyric poem a climate of mutual trust between poet and reader," Ashbery requires us to "engage in the imagined ethical modeling of an ideal mutuality" (*Invisible Listeners* 77). If the project of self-definition is necessarily a shared one, all actions must be considered in light of the community and not only the self. In its attention to its reader, Ashbery's poetry is defined by such consideration. It is why his poems are in the last analysis methods of communication that refuse isolation in favor of sympathy and commiseration. In his Charles Eliot Norton lecture on the poetry of David Schubert, Ashbery asserts that "the poem consists of speaking what cannot be said to the person I want to say it. In other words, the ideal situation for the poet is to have the reader speak the poem, and how nice it would be for everybody if that could be the case" (quoted in Herd 67). That, for Ashbery, is the perfect form of communication: the poem emerging fully formed from the reader's mouth rather than from the poet's.

Of course, as Ashbery's use of the conditional tense indicates, such communication is ultimately unachievable, since the indeterminacy that governs the poet's subjectivity must also govern that of the reader. The note of wistful resignation Ashbery's "ideal situation" evokes is sometimes belied in his later poems, which come near, on occasion, to idealizing the reader as a stabilizing presence lending perfect coherence to the moment of aesthetic communication. In his best poems, and in most of his early poems, Ashbery averts this danger, insisting on the tenuousness of our readerly and writerly selves and on poetry as an act of communication with the power to augment these selves in unpredictable ways. His poems suggest the possibility that our experiential notions of identity—especially those gathered through memory—run counter in some way to the contemporary picture of the self fomented in and by postmodernity. At the same time, however, they constitute a literary performance of that very self. In this way, Ashbery's work involves a basic and paradoxical tension between the fixed and the unmoored, between identity and dissipation, between the dream of closure and the endlessness of signification—a tension in which can be discerned Ashbery's vision of the role of art: to lend us a means of addressing the ruptured and fleeting mode of our being in the world from within that mode. If his poems serve to remind us that art can never mend this rupture, they also spark our engagement—with the poems and with the world—by inciting us to feel the fact of it more keenly.

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NOTES

1. This definition of memory only functions at the level of the individual, of course; I do not mean to deny, here, the power or effects of forms of cultural and social memory. But since these forms of memory themselves often function through public manifestations or iterations of sympathy, it seems clear that memory at its most basic is not only a looking backward but a looking inward, and in this sense can be contrasted with sympathy.

2. I am aware that this definition of the romantic self is in some sense rather limiting, and has been put into question almost since its inception not only by numerous theorists of romanticism but by writers of the era itself. (One of these writers, as this essay will demonstrate, was Rousseau himself, within whose *Confessions* the self is destabilized while it is being narrated.) While the term "the romantic self" may in fact be too contested to reside comfortably within the limits of a single definition, I define it in this manner within the context of this paper as a shorthand means of referring to the mode of subjectivity Rousseau attempted to personify and articulate, even if he did not manage to do so.

3. The term "postromantic" is more often applied to writers in the time period immediately following romanticism—among them Melville, Flaubert, and Carlyle. I use it in reference to Ashbery because I believe that something in his work affirms romantic values even while rejecting them. I have discovered two other instances in which the term has been discussed in relation to Ashbery: Kacper Bartczak argues that Ashbery's poetry, because it values contingency rather than organicism, is postromantic, but he defines the term differently than I do, figuring it as essentially the opposite of "romantic" (58). Laura Quinney, meanwhile, suggests that while Ashbery "would seem to be a distinctly postmodern or postromantic poet. . . . [he] is in his themes a romantic" (137). However, what Quinney reads as a romanticism of disappointment in Ashbery's poetry in fact comes very near to what I call his postromanticism, which refigures rather than totally repudiates romantic values. I wish to thank the anonymous reviewer at *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* for directing me to Laura Quinney's work on Ashbery.

4. These continual appeals are required not only because Rousseau is not always confident about which version of himself he wishes to present, but also because (as he willingly admits to the reader) his narrative is beset by moments of inaccuracy and uncertainty. For more on how the faultiness of memory and the unreliability of its narration complicates the *Confessions*, see Hartle 13–21.

5. See for example Costello, who suggests that Ashbery's poems reveal his recognition of "his distance from the reader, his isolation in the act of writing, the lonesomeness of words" (507). Hence his poems are replete with images "redundant in meaning but infinite in texture" (506). Thomas Lisk goes further still, claiming that Ashbery's penchant for unspecific pronouns "keeps attention fixed on the poet's consciousness . . . rather than on details about people around him in space and time outside the poem," and that he "uses unclear pronoun references for artistic control" and as "a means of . . . keeping the poet's distance" (40).

6. This striving for similitude is a very important concern in Ashbery's work. His own words often seem to express the point best:

> What I am trying to get at is a general, all-purpose experience—like those stretch socks that fit all sizes. Something which a reader could dip into and maybe get something out of without knowing anything about me, my history, or sex life, or whatever. The reputation that my poetry has as being something terribly private and difficult to get at is not at all what I hoped for. (Poulin 251)

The metaphor Ashbery uses here is a telling one. Just as anyone at all can wear a stretch sock and find that it fits, Ashbery wants anyone at all to be able to read his poetry and find in it something with which to relate. This desire explains the shifting nebulousness of Ashbery's pronoun usage: whether he uses "you" or "I" is not the point, because the poem means to re-create verbally the consciousness of anyone at all. Similarly, while Ashbery's poems would frustrate a journalist by their consistent refusal to provide the most basic details of setting (who? where? what? when?), the ambiguity is meant to be productive. For Ashbery, such details delimit the reach of the poem, confining its impact only to those connected to the specifics of the situation. Rather than write a poem about a certain event, Ashbery means to write about the way we experience events in general, thereby making the poem accessible to everyone. That his attempt to do so has left some readers feeling disconnected and distanced from his work can only be considered an irony.

There is a strong sense, then, in which Ashbery's technique stands in stark contrast to that of his friend Frank O'Hara. Where O'Hara places the reader within a particular, richly realized context, Ashbery does the reverse: generalizing the context, he works to place it within the mind of the reader. Like O'Hara, he wants the reader to experience the emotional truth of a scene or moment, but his language attempts to represent the experience itself, and not (as in O'Hara) the visible scene. One might say that Ashbery skips a step in the process of acclimatizing the reader to the poem, which is why his poems are—at least for many readers—more difficult to enter.

7. For a summary of theories of subjectivity in the twentieth century, see Reynolds 4–10.

8. A more pressing ethical concern in poststructuralist accounts of the self is that absolutist readings of theories of performativity would seem to render the very idea of political exigency redundant. If the subject is an entire social construction, then by extension, the subject's *self-conception* is equally societally generated: that is, not only who we are, but who we think we are, is produced by determining powers whose origins lie well beyond our awareness. On this level our most private thoughts, our desires for autonomy, even our very awareness of our historical situatedness, all read only as so much data in the statistical field produced by and as the cultural moment in which we subsist. Thus a strict application of the premise that the self is socially engendered renders human agency a basic illusion fostered by an overwhelming determinism, all of which invites, in turn, an ethos in which political action can be described only as naïve. To respond that the knowledge of how we have been shaped by our own cultural and historical episteme provides us with a means of combating its most egregious flaws—that while we are products of past cultural forms, we have the power to shape future ones—is still no safeguard against a certain ineradicable fatalism. For if, after all, there is *nothing* to us but the press of sociocultural forces, even the desire to reshape culture in more fitting, just, and equitable ways is itself merely a condition—perhaps an inevitable outcome—of that very culture. Human beings might be said to be little

more than a culture's means of self-adjustment, a complex autostabilizing pattern whose slight anomalies will, on a long enough time scale, balance out.

9. In a provocative argument, Terence Diggory links the work of the New York School to Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of the inoperative community, suggesting that the poem emblematizes not the self but "the *between* as such"—that is, the relationship between two persons, which for Nancy is logically prior to personhood (25). While compelling in some ways, this position has the disadvantage of deemphasizing the role of the self in Ashbery's poems more than the poems themselves seem to do.

10. The idea that the coherence of the self depends on the legibility of its past is also affirmed by Rousseau in *Confessions*. While Rousseau treats the past as an absolutely distant entity, never to be regained, he also believes the past to be powerfully formative of the present self. Thus his lament that "I had come in search of a past that was no more and could not be reborn" is balanced by his confidence that he is "as full of grandiose schemes as ever, and still the same person I ha[ve] always been" (264–66). This confidence is strengthened when Rousseau looks to the past, but weakened by his uncertainty about his future, which was to be beset by disputes with others (some of which were ongoing during the writing of the *Confessions*). If Ashbery uses memory to stabilize notions of a romantic self that he simultaneously destabilizes through sympathy, Rousseau's acknowledgment of this tension between stability and disarray is both more visceral and more pathetic in its suggestion of Rousseau's lack of agency and control. "My memory," he writes, "which will only retrace agreeable objects, is the blessed counterweight to my terrified imagination, which foresees nothing for me but a cruel future" (270). More than painting a contrast between a happy past and an unhappy future, this statement reflects an avowal of memory (because it provides room to conceive of a distinct, coherent self) and a disavowal of the imaginative faculties (because they threaten to dissolve it).

11. On the use of cliché in Ashbery, see Monroe.

12. I owe thanks to the reviewer at *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* who reminded me of this saying and its connection to the poem's title—a link first pointed out by Shoptaw (105).

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