"NOBODY WAS EVER LONESOME": THE LYRIC VISION OF JOHN ASHBERY'S "LITANY"

Tim DeJong

This essay proposes that the challenges presented to readers by the poetry of John Ashbery can be clarified and, to an extent, resolved by reading Ashbery as a lyric poet. Ashbery inhabits the role of lyric speaker in a unique and sometimes disorienting way, but his conception of lyric, while variously evident throughout his corpus, comes into sharper focus in his long poem "Litany," a landmark work in that it assembles so many of the thematic preoccupations that shaped Ashbery's career. "Litany" unveils lyric as an engine producing meaning at the intersection of the personal and the public; reading itself, as many Ashbery poems do, it reveals the lyric poem as a stage on which a performed version of the self encounters the as yet unknown reader. As such, the poem makes clear how Ashbery's central investment as poet is in mapping out what is shared between those two figures and what that shared meaning might augur. Through its formal strategies—most overtly but not merely its signature double columns—"Litany" dramatizes all the complications that inevitably attend the scene of the poem, the ways in which we talk past and misunderstand one another, even as it resolutely holds out hope in the value of lyric as a human expression of the fundamental desire to oppose aloneness and foment community.

The generic descriptor "lyric" is by this point a term both overused and underdetermined, so it will be necessary at the outset to explain the sense in which I use the word in this essay. As a beginning point, consider how Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins consolidate the word's valences in their introduction to *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*: whatever our disagreements about it, they write, we converge on the shared axiom that lyric is "the genre of personal expression"—to wit, the genre that gives us an "I" in a manner unlike any other.[1] Fundamental to lyric in its modern incarnation is the implication it always carries of a guiding consciousness behind the language of the poem, primarily apparent as the mysterious quality we know as

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voice. It will thus be helpful to gauge how Ashbery's poetry positions itself more generally with respect to voice. Working in what might be called a "post-Romantic" manner, Ashbery deploys a linguistic playfulness that diminishes the autobiographical (and "traditionally" lyrical) component of his poems, as though to force the reader to encounter meaning in language without any of the usual stabilizing referents we associate with lyric. Ashbery has been forthright about this tactic: his poems, he insists, "are not autobiographical poems, they're not confessional poems."[2] He wants each of his poems to be a creation "a reader could dip into and maybe get something out of without knowing anything about me, my history, or sex life, or whatever."[3]

As the above quotation suggestions, one effect of the evasive nature of lyric subjectivity in Ashbery has been to emphasize the role of the reader rather than the writer in determining the meaning of poems. Recent work on Ashbery and lyric has noted the centrality of the reader in his thought; Ben Lerner, for instance, argues that because Ashbery's poems are themselves "glosses on poems we can't access," they produce what Lerner calls "*lyric mediacy*" (as opposed to lyric immediacy): "they allow us to attend to our attention."[4] This tactic is reader oriented because it brings to the fore the moment of reading itself as much as the content being read. Similarly, in *John Ashbery and You: His Later Books*, John Emil Vincent makes an extended case that throughout Ashbery's career, "[n]o pronoun . . . has been as important to his poetry as 'you,'" since "each book has the reader's listening firmly in mind."[5] Vincent's book focuses on Ashbery's later work, but this tendency has also been noted in Ashbery's earlier poetry. In her 1982 essay "John Ashbery and the Idea of the Reader," Bonnie Costello observes the centrality of audience to Ashbery's project: "We are inscribed as readers everywhere in his pages."[6] For Costello, "Ashbery's line . . . exists for the pleasure of riding along with the reader, for the sense of communion that can be had on the way to nowhere in particular." Writing thus "becomes a way of perpetuating the writer's contact with other lives."[7] Importantly, though, for Costello this connection between poet and reader never coalesces into fulfillment or completion. This is in part because the lyric poem is the record of a missed connection. For as Ashbery well knows, his idea of the reader (the reader he inscribes) and the *actual* reader are never the same. For this reason, Costello argues, the enduring appeal of Ashbery's poetry rests in its evincing not meaning, exactly, but rather

> a sense of community, a shared nostalgia for meaning. The writer's and reader's mutual yearning for each other's presence becomes the absorbing consolation for the failure to transcend the limits of the text. If language fails to name or to command, it still has the power . . . to create social bonds through meaningless gestures. The reader must know that the poet has nothing to tell him, but know at the same time that he is communicating with him.[8]

Ashbery has "nothing to tell us," Costello argues, because he knows that lyric is the quintessential "meaningless gesture," endlessly replicating in language our failure to get to anything beyond it. Marjorie Perloff comes to a similar conclusion in her essay "'Transparent Selves': The Poetry of John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara," in which she contends that Ashbery's poetry "subverts signification" by "cutting off the referential dimension" of language.[9] The alternating pronouns, dizzying non sequiturs, and trains of thought leading nowhere in Ashbery poems are part of a "poetic mode that eliminates subject matter completely," derived from a "wholly hallucinatory" linguistic register that makes naming the *it* of any poem impossible. All is surface without depth: "An aesthetic of *presence* . . . replaces one of transcendence."[10]

Ashbery's attention to the reader is thus belied by a somewhat paradoxical sense of distance from that same reader. On this interpretation, the reader is crucial to Ashbery, because their presence makes the poem's meaning possible; and yet, because lyric communion between writer and reader can only ever be imagined, not realized, and because words can only ever inexactly capture reality, real shared meaning is finally absent. In some Ashbery scholarship, this analysis has become both a shorthand means of explaining the difficulty of some of his poems and a standard summation of the general worldview expressed in his poetry. Peter Stitt claims that if meaning even exists for Ashbery it has "a local relevance only, a temporary and uncertain relevance," since "the world that he sees around him makes so little sense that it seems never to occur to him to look for a deeper level of meaning."[11] Jody Norton concurs, writing that Ashbery "has no sense that the romantic, the spiritual, the transcendental ever has existed as an existential possibility."[12]

This way of thinking about Ashbery emerges from a seeming contradiction: while he may be a reader-focused poet, on a semantic level his poems often invite confusion or frustration. Such feelings can lead critics either to turn away from Ashbery altogether or to situate the persistent difficulty of his poems as emblematic of some kind of pessimistic grand

statement he is making in his poetry about the nature of human consciousness: all meaning is fragmentary, all is disarray, and so on. Strange, then, that Ashbery's own characterizations of his poetry tend to move in the opposite direction. Rather than envisioning poetry as devoid of meaning except via the lowered stakes of the directionless journey or the nostalgic bond, Ashbery is adamant that—as he put it in a 1976 *New York Times* feature—when writing poetry "[o]ne is saying something that one intends to be understood." He adds a generalizable assessment of his own poems: "I was communicating imperfectly, but still communicating. The inaccuracies and anomalies of common speech are particularly poignant to me. This essence of communication is what interests me in poetry."[13] Denials of the import of meaning in Ashbery are complicated by the fact that the word "meaning" itself has multiple senses, but understood simply as the transmission of ideas between writer and reader, meaning may be what matters *most* to Ashbery (and may indeed be the *it* of his poetry, what it is always about at its core).

My contention in this essay is that it is by uncovering Ashbery's vision of lyric that we can understand how his poems resist being consigned to the varieties of meaninglessness scholars have attributed to them. We can begin with a simple proviso: while lyric is about the reader, especially in Ashbery, it is also, as our initial definition has it, fundamentally about the writer, and this is true of Ashbery no less than of any other lyric poet. Ashbery has described himself as not having "a very strong sense of my own identity," and his tendency to assemble language as ephemera or clutter, rather than to make overt attempts to control and shape linguistic meaning, may be the prosodic effect of this perceived deficit.[14] But the intellectual and aesthetic force of Ashbery's poetry is such that the diminishment of the real-world "I" in his poems reframes rather than negates the implicit contract between writer and reader that every lyric poem produces. We know an Ashbery poem when we see one not just because of the extensive lexicon or the strange and swerving syntactical movements but because, especially over the course of several poems, we recognize the uniqueness of the mind that created them.[15] Perloff observes as much in her essay, noting that the poems' surface impenetrability is countered by the "astonishing self-awareness" of Ashbery's voice, "its fidelity to the mind's baffling encounter with the objects, whether real or imaginary, that it contemplates."[16] For Helen Vendler, too, the Ashbery poem "manifests, as the heard voice of lyric, an established personal presence."[17] Indeed, the common inclination, when reading Ashbery, to focus on the most readily legible parts in the corpus vindicates, in a roundabout way,

Ashbery's own ideas about poetry, since it tells us that what we seek out in the lyric poem is not merely language but the human face behind it.

Lyric, then, is for Ashbery not merely about writer *or* reader but about the relationship the poem forms between them—a relationship initiated by the poet, actualized by the reader, and justified by the poem itself. How does it do so? Part of the poet's task, Ashbery believes, is "to please the reader": but in poetry this is accomplished outside the usual limitations we apply to linguistic communication.[18] (This is one way in which the lyric poem departs from other genres rooted in the lexical representation of subjectivity, such as the memoir and the letter.) Rather than a mechanistic transmission of content from author to audience, the goal is the inducement of pleasure via surprise, among other tactics.[19] While many would suppose that such enjoyment is predicated on comprehension, for Ashbery these two categories are not automatically interlinked. Hence Ashbery's apparent impatience, in an interview in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, with the direction of the questions, which return again and again to his poems' apparent "difficulty."[20] Pressed on this point, Ashbery offers a rejoinder that doubles as an outline of his poetic aims:

> [A]s far as understanding goes, is there really anything to understand? I think that's a question that my poems are more or less asking throughout: What's there? Is there anything there? If there isn't, or if there is, the poem will be whatever it means to the reader.
>
> All poetry is written, I think, with this understanding in mind because the poet can advance only a little way out of the poem to push the reader in one direction or another toward an understanding of it. But what the poet can do really isn't very much. What 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.[21]

Ashbery insists here on the reader's participation in producing not merely the poem's meaning but its very status as a lyric poem as such. On this view, the self instantiated by the voice of the lyric poem comes into being expressly in order to find an audience and, indeed, is only ever fully constituted by the reader's presence. Ashbery intuits here how the

contemporary lyric poem is written *to*; its inexorable tendency is always to communicate with another and not merely with the self.

Seeing Ashbery's work in this light helps contextualize some of the critical reaction to Ashbery's esoteric second collection, *The Tennis Court Oath*, his first major foray into experimental poetry. In *Figures of Capable Imagination*, Harold Bloom, a self-professed "admirer" of Ashbery's first book *Some Trees*, describes *The Tennis Court Oath* as a "fearful disaster," to which his response was one of "outrage and disbelief."[22] In somewhat more measured tones, Marjorie Perloff and Bonnie Costello join Bloom in calling *The Tennis Court Oath* a failure. Perloff locates the problem with *The Tennis Court Oath* as one of hermetic privacy: "[D]isclosure is so totally blocked that the reader is all but excluded from the world of the text."[23] Costello is of a similar mind, calling *The Tennis Court Oath* "a swerve toward a primitive solipsism and disregard of the reader."[24]

Note that these analyses of *The Tennis Court Oath* and its shortcomings hinge on the notion of solipsism (a charge at which Ashbery bristles somewhat in interviews).[25] To call Ashbery's abstract poetry solipsistic implies, as frame of reference, a *mimetic* model of lyric poetry in which the goal of the poet, much like that of the novelist, is to represent an imagined world in language and thereby to draw the reader into that world. On this model, the project of Ashbery's poems is to document a shared reality from which, in his more abstract poems, the reader is excluded. But if Ashbery's lyric mode is largely uninterested in mimesis and is in fact *rhetorical*, then his poems are concerned less with the creation of worlds, private or otherwise, than with the process by which language communicates meaning to a reader. While representation naturally figures in the poems, their goal is to subvert the natural associations we tend to make between language and meaning or, put differently, to force us to come to terms with our unconscious inclination to reify language as a stable carrier of meaning between writer and reader. In fact, the claim that Ashbery's more radical poems are problematically solipsistic denotes a commitment to the very norms regarding the transmission of meaning in poetics that Ashbery seeks, in works like *The Tennis Court Oath*, to probe and demystify. For Ashbery, to read the lyric poem as an attempt to accurately represent an inner mental reality to the reader—and, concomitantly, to read the failure to do so as solipsistic—is to position the writer of the poem as a controlling agent of meaning rather than as merely the initiator, via the act of writing, of its untraceable generation. Insofar as they reveal an "I," then, Ashbery's most abstract poems exist not primarily to be understood in any conventional way, but to ask why, and in what way, such

understanding is the condition of poetry's possibility: to confront us, in other words, with our own expectation of coherence.

This expectation of coherence, whether local or universal, is in some larger sense what Ashbery's poems are always about at their core, and the brilliance of his work has to do with how he intuitively links this expectation to a lyric mode perfectly suited to problematize it. The various camps of Ashbery criticism have emerged partly as a function of how readers have understood his poems to answer the question of the possibility of coherence, whether affirmatively or negatively. But in another sense, one condition of the possibility of coherence is being met each time an Ashbery poem is read, as each poem, in being read, asks "What's there?" (to borrow Ashbery's phrasing) and invites us to do the same. Ashbery is so methodologically oriented toward the reader because it is in conjunction with the reader's interpretive cognition that the poem's meaning takes place; and what that meaning *itself* entails is the question each Ashbery poem asks, beneath all the others. In his Charles Eliot Norton lectures, later published in his book *Other Traditions*, Ashbery quotes the poem "Midston House" by David Schubert, a favorite poet of his, and pauses to consider these lines: "But the poem is just this / Speaking of what cannot be said / To the person I want to say it."[26] Ashbery calls this fragment "a magnificent definition not only of Schubert's poetry but of poetry itself." He adds a further gloss: "The actual sense of the words . . . is that the poem consists of speaking of 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."[27]

The wish that "the reader speak the poem" encodes an imagined relationship in which meaning, that which cannot be said, is nevertheless perfectly transmitted from author to audience: it is a scene, in other words, of *intimacy*, of a connection between minds impossible in lived reality. Some of Ashbery's most well-known poems, such as "Paradoxes and Oxymorons" and "And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name," directly discuss this same problem, lamenting how poem and reader inexorably "miss each other."[28] In a more comprehensive if more confusing form, "Litany" speaks to the same idea, presenting poetic meaning as impossible yet transformative, as an expression of unfulfillable desire it still helps somehow to fulfil.

"Litany" is written in two side-by-side columns, "meant to be read as simultaneous but independent monologues," as the "Author's Note" instructs us.[29] The column on the right is italicized, but no other immediate differences obtain between them. Forced into the unusual position of having to choose *how* to read the poem, the reader is reminded of the

easily overlooked agency the reading process involves. Costello goes so far as to assert that the second column in "Litany" is a means of "inscribing the reader in the text."[30] (I read the left-hand column all the way through, then went back and read the right-hand one—a decision I expect Ashbery would say is neither correct nor incorrect.) For critics already nonplussed by Ashbery's extravagances, this format was perhaps a bridge too far. Ashbery himself considered it a poem designed to frustrate any scholarly attempt to address it. In an interview with the *Paris Review* he admits, "I intended, in 'Litany,' to write something so utterly discursive that it would be beyond criticism. . . . The poem is of immense length, and there is a lack of coherence between the parts. Given all this, I don't really see how one could deal critically with the poem."[31] Later, in an interview with John Tranter, Ashbery is noncommittal about "Litany": "I had second thoughts about it. It was sort of an experiment that didn't really work. I like the idea of having these two things which people have to pay attention to at the same time, but on the other hand who's going to do it? I don't, and I can't really expect anybody else to."[32] Ashbery being Ashbery, of course, many people have; in practice, though, the attempt is somewhat vexing, partly because there is no intuitive way to connect one column to the other on each page. In this sense, they are as digressive and as resistant to criticism as Ashbery promises.

Perloff discusses "Litany" in her book *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, attempting to move between the columns on each page and finding little in which to ground a reading of the poem. She rightly concludes that "on the whole voices A and B [in 'Litany'] are generally interchangeable, both usually dealing with the same material, although from different points of view."[33] However, the points of commonality or tension Perloff finds across the columns are scattershot at best. In the end, Perloff argues, the poem reveals our shared ignorance: "[B]oth poet and reader come to see that there is no way of distinguishing the past from the present or future, or the 'real' from the fictive." For Perloff the polyphony of "Litany" attests to the multiplicity of perspectives that make truth illusory within postmodernity, and the poem as a whole serves as the transcription of "a mental space humming with signal and noise . . . a litany for the computer age."[34] Peter Stitt amplifies this synopsis of "Litany" in his reading of the poem, in which he despairs of making sense of it: "the reader feels lost in the middle of a world with isolated details but no connected landscape, a world that cannot be comprehended." Reading "Litany," he writes, "one's frustrations grow along with one's impression that nothing here connects with anything else."[35]

John Keeling offers a more positive assessment of the poem in his essay "The Moment Unravels: Reading John Ashbery's 'Litany,'" which begins by dissecting the two voices in the poem and their relationship to each other. Keeling refrains from identifying either voice "with the poet . . . or with any single subject position," but refers to both as Ashbery.[36] For Keeling, the parallel sets of lines give us "two voices which are expressed at the same moment in time, which thereby offers us a point of similar origin (temporally) and invites comparison."[37] Keeling detects in these twinned voices an opportunity for Ashbery to explore the vagaries of temporality. Ultimately, Keeling argues, the passing of time—and the impossibility of capturing or even describing such—constitutes the overarching theme of "Litany," a poem in which, above all, "Ashbery hopes to distinguish the material substance of the present moment against his own perceptions and against the 'bullet' of time passing through, in order to trace how these inform each other."[38]

Time is a major theme in Ashbery as well as a notoriously complicating factor for the lyric poet, since it interposes a delay between the poem's writing and its reading. Keeling's reading of temporality in "Litany" is valuable but can be furthered by considering the poem's two columns as indicating the temporal challenges to lyric's hoped-for meeting of minds discussed earlier. Even if there is a sense in which, as James Longenbach claims in *The Lyric Now*, "a poem creates the moment as we enter it" because "[t]he poem is happening now," time is most often conceived of as a distancing factor in poetry, an impediment to the connection the act of writing a poem attempts to initiate.[39] The greater the period of time between the writing of the lyric poem and its reading, the more obscured the possibility of communion between writer and reader. But "Litany" presents the problem of temporality differently: not first as distance but as *simultaneity*. Consider again the Author's Note and its description of the two columns of "Litany" as "simultaneous but independent." The poem's structure plays on human limitation—our inability to multitask, to concentrate on more than one thing at a time. In this sense, as a harbinger of the then-approaching digital age, the poem is remarkably prescient. By placing its two columns beside each other, the poem reminds us of all we will miss in the poem as we read one of its columns (and, by extension, all we miss in the world every day because of the strictures on our capacity to attend). Further still, it implicates us in the fact of all we miss each time we read a usual poem in the usual way, thanks to our short attention spans, competing concerns in the environment around us, the wayward and digressive functions of language itself, and so on.

No clear solution is offered to these dilemmas, but one response is apparent in the simple fact of the poem's ritualized persistence. The poem's title is significant here. A litany is a religious formula, a series of petitions recited by priests and parishioners in the context of worship. Establishing a link between the poem's title and content, Perloff asserts that "Litany" is "a penitential poem, playing on the conventions of intercession, supplication, and deprecation."[40] The vocabulary of the sacred, as she notes, litters the poem throughout. But the poem's consonance with its title seems inexact, Perloff writes, since "the one feature of litany this poem almost never manifests is the very central one of *repetition*."[41] This fact is indeed surprising, since a litany is organized around repetition and indeed assigns it a moral value. But Perloff does not see repetition in "Litany" only because she looks, as it were, too closely for it. "Litany" is a very long poem: hence what is being repeated in it is not a particular word but prosody itself. The poem enacts over and over again the process in language by which meaning is activated in the mind of the reader. Ritual, the repetition of sacralized action, involves the elevation of the body over speech, form over content. The simple, returning fact of a given action is privileged at least as much as its message. This is the action that "Litany" repeats—the act of intending, reaching out, trying to mean. While the content varies endlessly, the shape of the attempt remains basically consistent.

This means that, as Nikki Skillman writes, the true subject of "Litany" is "interpretation itself . . . the functions of poetry and criticism as modes of thought."[42] But where for Skillman the poem dramatizes Ashbery's assertion of "an earthbound poetics" that relegates "the ecstatic, the religious, the transcendental" to "the status of mere effects or appearances," I read the poem's argument, proceeding from its title, as far from definitively materialist in its consideration of poetry's final significance.[43] For as Ashbery moves in "Litany" from an earlier "poetry of consciousness" to what Skillman calls a "poetry of death," he weighs the twin acts of writing and reading in view of mortality, refusing to relinquish entirely the notion that the figure and promise of the future reader invests the act of poem-writing with transcendental weight.[44]

"Litany" is split into three sections of uneven length (thirteen, forty, and ten pages, respectively). I can glean little from the first section, most of which is opaque in the extreme. If anyone else is able to produce a sensible gloss on lines such as "The barriers real or fancied / Blowing like bedcurtains later / In the oyster light," I would be eager to discover it

(*AWK* 7). In its concluding lines, however, the section resolves into language whose meaning is somewhat traceable:

> Under the intimate light of the lantern
> One really felt rather than saw
> The thin, terrifying edges between things
> And their terrible cold breath.
> And no one longed for the great generalities
> These seemed to preclude. Each thought only
> Of his private silence, and hungered
> For the promised moment of rest. (*AWK* 16)

The stress in this passage is on difference and separation—the "terrifying edges between things"; the "great generalities" that, by uniting us, would assuage them seem here so fictive as to not even be hoped for. We are estranged from one another by a "private silence" that can end only in death. The challenges of the first section can be interpreted, in light of its final lines, as a *performance* of this privacy and not only a reflection on it; as readers, we sense our estrangement from Ashbery and from one another in the impossibility of locating a common, stable meaning in phrases like "The pancake / Is around in idea. / Today the wisteria is in league / With the Spanish minstrels" (*AWK* 5). To my mind, few other explanations can justify these kinds of passages, and even so, one wonders whether the poem would be improved if they were not there; perhaps Ashbery did not excise them simply because they record the process of the poem's slow journey toward coherence and are thus part of its mental furniture, its haphazard narrative.

For the second and third sections of the poem do offer more clarity than the first. The long second part of "Litany" emplaces us within a context that is primarily narrative in nature. We exist, the speaker says, within a story we find ourselves constantly trying to make sense of,

> . . . The old, old
> Wonderful story, and it's all right
> As far as it goes, but impatience
> Is the true ether that surrounds us.
> Without it everything would be asphalt. (*AWK* 17)

We are caught, the poem says, between our flickering awareness of an overarching "wonderful story" and our desire to solve, understand, or disassemble it—the "impatience" that makes poetry-writing necessary. The challenge is

that the story is indecipherable, or at least off-kilter, and our work of adding to it with our own lives and words can make it no less shambolic:

> It is not the disrepair of these lives
> Where we may find the key to all that gives
> Eloquence and truth to our passing thoughts,
> And shapes them as a shipwright shapes
> The staves for the hull of some desolate
> Ship; rather, it is in the disrepair
> Of these lives that we not find despair
> But all that nourishes and comforts death
> In life and causes people to gather round
> As when they hear a good story is being told . . . (*AWK* 53)

The kinship here between "disrepair" and "despair" is belied by the fact that the latter does not in fact follow from the former; what we find in "the disrepair of these lives" is what "nourishes and comforts death / In life," the will to narrate that makes a shared sense of the incomprehensible. The ever-present worry for the poet is that none of it finally matters: "Supposing," the speaker wonders,

> that you are a wall
> And can never contribute to nature anything
> But the feeling of being alongside it . . . (*AWK* 23)

Supposing, in other words, that we are only nature's effects, and cannot really cause anything to happen; at best, moving inexorably toward death, we can comment on our own condition without ever changing it. In that case, the poem suggests aphoristically, "We are perverse spelling and punctuation" (*AWK* 26).

Our unceasing desire to be more than this is also the source of lyric poetry, which, when read, talks to us from the past, but points to a future we can't wholly discern:

> Poetry
> Has already happened. And the agony
> Of looking steadily at something isn't
> Really there at all, it's something you
> Once read about; its narrative thrust
> Carries it far beyond what it thought it was
> All het up about; its charm, no longer

A diversionary tactic, is something like
Grace, in the long run, which is what poetry is.
(*AWK* 37–38)

Poetry, both because it seems (to our shortened perspectives) to have been there forever and because it never quite coalesces into anything we can subsume under a narrative, here acquires a religious dimension; transcending any one life, it amounts to "something like / Grace." The spiritual language chosen here is surely deliberate. Poetry is a source not only of inspiration and motivation but of a kind of fascinated worry, since we use it to talk about what cannot be said otherwise and about what we cannot understand. This metaphysical valence of lyric is confirmed, if semiparodically, by injunctions whose tones are drawn from the Gospels but whose subject is, again, poetry itself:

And so
I say unto you: beware the right margin
Which is unjustified: the left
Is justified and can take care of itself
But what is in between expands and flaps
The end sometimes past the point
Of conscious inquiry, noodling in the near
Infinite, off-limits. (*AWK* 42)

The pun in this excerpt on "unjustified" crystallizes the worry that follows from the ability of poetry to take us "*past the point / Of conscious inquiry*": it may be unjustified not only on the right margin of the page, but in a cosmic sense, since its source and purpose are shrouded. This is why, as Costello's essay makes clear, the reader takes such precedence for Ashbery. Amid the confused whorl of experience, writers can at least focus small acts of meaning-making toward a future reader whose reciprocity will assign the poet's words some value.

"*I want*," the speaker claims in the italicized right-hand column of "Litany,"

to write
Poems that are as inexact as mathematics. I have been
Sitting making mudpies, in the sparkling sunlight,
And the difficulty of giving them away
Doesn't matter so long as I want you
To enjoy them. Enjoy these! You are busy, I know,
But could find time for this. (*AWK* 46)

The self-deprecating comparison of his poems to "mudpies" is typical of Ashbery but perfectly captures his sense of poetry being extraneous in some way to nature but also built from its parts, as mudpies, made of earth and water, require the shaping press of a human hand. What poetry does by allowing us to communicate in this way is separate us from the otherwise blank emptiness of landscape as such; as Ashbery puts it, in a passage that again takes on religious overtones,

> In the psalms of the invisible chorus
> There is a germ of you that lives like a coal
> Amid the hostile indifference of the land
> That merely forgets you. Your hand
> Is at the heart of its weavings and nestlings.
> You are its guarantee. (*AWK* 33)

And just as Ashbery refuses to completely cast aside the dream of the perfectly understood poem, the poem spoken by the reader, he also refuses to disavow the possibility that poetry, in some as yet unknown way, is part of the story we inherit and alter, that what it makes possible—a sort of strangely intimate communion in language, a sanctioned social privacy—actually does engender change, of ourselves if not the universe:

> You are with me as the seasons
> . . . changing as they change,
> Only their changes are always the same, and we,
> We are always a little different with each change.
> But in the end our changes make us into something,
> Bend us into some shape maybe
> No one we would recognize,
> And it is ours, anyway, beyond understanding
> Or even beyond our perception:
> We may never perceive the thing we have become.
> But that's all right—we have to be it
> Even as we are ourselves. (*AWK* 35–36)

As other critics and Ashbery himself has noted, his use of pronouns in his poetry is very elastic and cross-referential; the "you" at the beginning of the above excerpt appears to refer to a lover or confidante. At the same time, even when it is also a specific individual, the "you" in Ashbery's poems is also always, in some further sense, the reader, with whom he has a relationship at once whimsical and respectful, characterized by the poetical banter that is inimitably Ashbery's:

But you
Will continue in your own way, will finish
Your novel, and have a life
Full of happy, active surprises, curious
Twists and developments of character:
A charm is fixed above you
And everything you do, but you
Must never make too much of it, nor
Take it for granted, either. (*AWK* 36)

Ashbery's supremely flexible "you" resonates within the interior world of the poem but also to the reader, to whom these lines will read almost like an optimistic horoscope. Sometimes, winkingly, Ashbery drops the mask entirely: "Anyway, I am the author. I want to / Talk to you for a while," he writes, in lines suggestive of poetics not only about but *as* relationality (*AWK* 48). Through such gestures a mood of rapport and reciprocity develops almost imperceptibly, until the conclusion of the second section, at which point, as Ashbery puts it, "*we enter / A new chapter, confused and possibly excited, / Yet a new one, all the same*" (*AWK* 57).

The abiding concern of the final section of "Litany" is whether the fellow-feeling it has thus far engendered—and by extension, the community fomented in and by lyric—can ever offer more than a diversionary, fleeting sense of togetherness. Pressing in almost palpably on the speaker are the exact possibilities Costello asserts as realities in her essay: namely, that writer and reader are fellow travelers "on the way to nowhere in particular," that at some level the whole of lyric is gratuitous, a kind of facade, since, again, "[t]he reader must know that the poet has nothing to tell him."[45] It is undeniable that "Litany" can feel aimless, digressive, its words put down for the sake of being put down. On a semantic level, though, it is striking how directly the speaker resists these conclusions:

And the life of art
Matters a lot now too, is seen
To be perhaps the most important of all, slightly
Overtopping that other, and joy
Is after all predestined. Isn't it? I mean
Otherwise, what the fuck are we doing
Here, worrying about it, having it all collapse
On our heads trying to dig our way out
Of this sand pit? No,
It's got to be preordained, in some way, by

Someone, otherwise we wouldn't like it,
Recognize it as it flies, and sit down casually
Again, knowing that, as the truth knows
A true story when it hears one, so we, wandering
Along the lake again shall hear blossoms
And imagine radiant blue flamingoes against the sacred sky.
(*AWK* 61)

A meditation on the purpose of art and the possibility of destiny resolves into a dizzyingly (and great) Ashberyan line: a promise that we will one day "*imagine radiant blue flamingoes against the sacred sky*." Here the poem makes its own promise come true. By describing this fantastical, utopian scene, the speaker directs the reader to envision it. To read the words is to imagine the vista they conjure: the blue flamingoes, their wings outstretched against a sky provoking wonder. What the poem does here is casually display its own power, how it can make minds meet across time and space. And the passage as a whole is given over to a rejection of precisely the sense of overwhelming meaninglessness for which critics have supposed Ashbery to be advocating in his poems. For the speaker here, at least, "*the life of art / Matters*" and "*joy / Is after all predestined*," and these two crucial ideas are linked, even if the poem is unable or unwilling to quite spell out how.

Ashbery can be—often is—ironic and parodic, but readers who characterize this passage as suffused with irony, so that Ashbery believes the exact opposite of what he writes, will be forced to dispense with large sections of "Litany" in which similar ideas are expressed. Moreover, this kind of distrust of a surface-level reading would finally invalidate any attempt to read Ashbery in any direction at all. This section of "Litany" is in fact self-evidently serious, as Ashbery moves, on the italicized side of the page, to the topic of art as labor and the fulfillment this work provides, both in the present and in an unspecified future:

I keep
Dropping my diary different places, forgetting
What I was talking about, letting it combine
With the loam and humus, and maybe a quick
Star-shape of a flower is produced. If not,
Each of us still has all our work to be done
In the joy of working so that the even greater joy
Of the hammock may be tasted later on, and so much

Of the padding may be appreciated then for what it is,
Just stuffing, of the kind that is needed
Everywhere, that keeps the Mozart symphonies
Apart and gradually leads us, each of us,
Back to the fragment of sense which is the place
We started out from. Isn't it strange
That this was home all along, and none of us
Knew it? (*AWK* 62–3)

The metaphor of lyric poetry as a dropped diary that might, enriched by soil, grow into the "*[s]tar-shape of a flower*" is another arresting depiction of the form, one in which the private world of diary-keeping and the vegetal, organic world of gardening are intertwined. What Ashbery terms the "*joy of working*" leads us eventually not only to the "*hammock*" of leisure but finally to a "*fragment of sense*" which, it turns out, was "*home all along*." Faintly echoed, here, are those well-known lines from Eliot's *Four Quartets*: "Home is where one starts from. As we grow older / The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated / Of dead and living."[46] And the reference is apt, since "Litany" seeks here to unravel this same pattern, in which are threaded together our tethered investments in art, labor, and happiness.

That the essential significance of these actions and feelings will, at some unspecified future date, be made legible is a belief the speaker of "Litany" refuses to relinquish. Happiness is itself sustained by thoughts of that future time, when he will be able to

walk through
Into the open air, onto God's road, in the blond,
Shambling sunlight, and look back
After all that, thinking how fortunate
It has all been on the whole, and how, though joy
Has been lacking, and that severely on occasion,
Happiness has not. I must
Make do with happiness, and am glad
To do so, as long as everyone
Is happy and doesn't mind. (*AWK* 61)

The sufficiency of happiness means that poetry, as an activity that provides happiness, can be its own reward. Still, the limitations of lyric intimate a fundamental deprivation in the current moment, a lack the

satisfaction of which remains outside language, outside any terms available in the present:

> Earthly inadequacy
> Is indescribable, and heavenly satisfaction
> Needs no description, but between
> Them, hovering like Satan on airless
> Wings is the matter at hand:
> The essence of it is that all love
> Is imitative, creative, and that we can't hear it. (*AWK* 66)

If lyric poetry is the voice reaching out, the poet's oft-unconscious attempt to remediate aloneness, then it is really about love, in the broadest sense of the word—our desire for it, its distance from us: "we can't hear it," Ashbery writes, though it is "imitative, creative," hidden wellspring and source of what we feel and make. The future of which and toward which Ashbery writes—however imaginary and unreachable—seems to be one in which such love may perhaps become not only constitutive and ordering but apparent, justifying the labor it inspired. It is a future in which "each task and catastrophe / Become clear and succinct. By that time kindness / Will have replaced effort" (*AWK* 67–8).

In the meantime, of course—in the world as we know it—we can be certain of little more than our own efforts and what they produce ("For the present," Ashbery writes, "our not-knowing / Delights them") (*AWK* 68). Under the force of all the ways in which we are at a remove from one another—temporal, spatial, cultural, linguistic—words begin to fragment even as they are written, but at the close of "Litany" the speaker clings to the possibility that, at least briefly, in the flight of meaning from one consciousness to another, they signify, they *matter*, for which reason, if no other, we must "hang on to" poetry:

> It would probably be best though
> To hang on to these words if only
> For the rhyme. Little enough,
> But later on, at the summit, it won't
> Matter so much that they fled like arrows
> From the taut string of a restrained
> Consciousness, only that they mattered. (*AWK* 68)

This is the poem's closing judgment regarding the words in poems: "they mattered." But what makes them matter? Can the final value of lyric

meaning be sourced from within the poem itself, from its relationship to the reader, or from some outside source, whether society, or language, or history? It will be clear by now that Ashbery borrows from the language and form of religious tradition not only to give "Litany" its title but as a means of attempting to invest this particular corner of the aesthetic realm—the flimsy yet resilient lyric—with some of the metaphysical weight historically associated with religious claims. In Skillman's phrasing, in "Litany" "Ashbery enlarges the spiritual meanings of mindlessness evident in his earlier work."[47] This dimension of "Litany" accords with an interest in the transcendental Ashbery displays throughout his career and which has been on the whole underdiscussed. In an interview with John Koethe shortly after the publication of *As We Know*, Ashbery describes himself, in typically droll fashion, as "still basically religious but in a way that is satisfactory to me and probably not to God."[48] And in lines that seem to echo, or speak to, "Litany," and a good deal of his other poetry besides, he adds, "Everything seems to be sort of transcendental, a kind of shadow of something else. . . . That seems to be basically what I feel about religion: that somehow we miss the boat at every possible moment. There is always the prospect of grace, but we shouldn't count on it too much."[49] Insofar as he invests his poetry with this hope, Ashbery's caution seems warranted: lyric, after all, is only ever the human voice, to all appearances "unsponsored," as the Stevens poem has it.[50] But through its investment in meaning itself "Litany" helps us delineate the germination of what might be called an ethic of lyric, one emergent from and consonant with its shape.

We have already observed the primacy of the reader in lyric, the poem's longing to make its reader fully share in its meaning. For the poet, what complicates but also enriches this dream is the fact that the poem's future reader is always and necessarily unknown in advance. However pointed its initial address, the poem's true audience is unguessable. The way the poem communicates—indirectly, prosodically rather than prosaically—has everything to do with this authorial limitation: since, as Ashbery notes, "[w]hat the poem *is* is going to be determined by the reader," the poet must inevitably surrender control of the poem's meaning to posterity.[51] As such, the lyric poet is always in a paradoxical position of estranged intimacy with the future reader—a position that asks a special good faith or generosity. This way of thinking about lyric poetry is nascent everywhere in Ashbery, whose awareness of the potential alterity of his reader is evident in what we could call his poems' rhetorical consciousness—their self-awareness as something proffered, public, and open. Hence, too, Ashbery's repeated insistence in interviews on the importance of the breadth of his poems' address, their availability to any reader whatsoever. What he is "trying to get

at," he explains in an interview, "is a general, all-purpose experience—like those stretch socks that fit all sizes. . . . I'm hoping that someday maybe people will see it this way, as trying to become the openest possible form, something in which anybody can see reflected his own private experiences without them having to be defined or set up for him."[52] A decade later, in a different interview, he strikes much the same note: "I try 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."[53]

These musings on lyric as "the openest possible form," at once reconciling us to difference and exploiting, across it, the moments of resemblance poems afford us, link Ashbery to a lineage that includes the great American poets of selfhood, Whitman and Dickinson at their forefront, but also to an intellectual tradition less visible in the United States than in continental Europe. The Russian poet Osip Mandelstam memorably compares the act of writing a poem to that of tossing a message in a bottle onto the ocean waves; whoever finds the bottle, he writes, is the message's "secret addressee."[54] Ashbery's poems often frustrate, of course. But here, I think, is the secret of why they can also amaze: they make us feel like secret addressees. At their most resonant, they bring us near to an inexpressible profundity we recognize having ourselves felt, having ourselves struggled to express. Because they are always on the verge of cohering, of fitting a neat pattern or thought, the lines give the reader the sense that his or her mind is the missing ingredient, that his or her particular consciousness is the vital ordering mechanism that will supply the wholeness toward which the words seem always to tend. I have repeatedly experienced this sensation myself when reading Ashbery. The trick is wrought grammatically, in the long and circuitous syntax of the sentences, and dictionally, in the blurring and merging of pronouns, and prosodically, in the regular cadence of the typically long lines—but it amounts, maybe counterintuitively, to a strategy of invitation, of *openness* less demonstrable in any one poem than in the body of work as a whole.

Such openness involves trust; the poem, on this account, is an artifact whose successful exchange depends not merely on the transmission of information but on an act of good faith involving writer and reader. Writing in this vein, Paul Celan, another famously difficult poet, describes the poem as a handshake [*Händedruck*], an artwork that enacts a mutual reciprocity between two minds who, through its action, encounter one another.[55] The poet must therefore trust not only in the future reader but

also in the lyric poem itself as a meaning-making vehicle. Lyric poetry is rhetorical rather than mimetic or narrative at its core exactly because it can give shape to no basic story but itself always takes the same shape: that of a greeting between friends. As "Litany" has it,

> You knew
> You were coming to the end by the way the other
> Would be beginning again, so that nobody
> Was ever lonesome, and the story never
> Came to its dramatic conclusion. . . . (*AWK* 15)

The dream slips in, enjambed as though deferring its named promise, uttered in a mysterious past tense: "Nobody / was ever lonesome." In a wished-for different reality, the lyric poem achieves the impossible aim embedded within it, a completion or union with the distanced other no words can actually accomplish. In this way, lyric embeds a sort of politics, too, by establishing human life as defined by some lack in need of assuaging, a condition we maybe can't mend but are endlessly compelled, in art, to attempt to.

Too broad to be co-opted, this political resonance may at least be used to defend Ashbery against the main criticism he faced besides his poems' impenetrability—namely, his resistance to overtly political writing. In 1969, publicly challenged in *The Nation* for this disinclination toward political affiliation, he responded, in a terse letter to the editor, "All poetry is against war and in favour of life, or else it isn't poetry."[56] Reading this statement for the first time several years ago, I dismissed it as imprecise. But I now believe that Ashbery was choosing his words carefully. War, after all, is state-sanctioned brutality and death, the apotheosis of human division. In the main, it is a glorification and planned consequence of wholly invented difference. Poetry is against war because it engenders war's opposite: not just clarity but unity, at its best allowing people truly to see the world and one another. In this way, Ashbery's statement intimates that poems are in a sense anti-ideological. By enjoining us to see ourselves as we really are, they correspondingly invite us to resist the ideological wherever it becomes a grammar or a fixation or a blind spot. The objection that culture itself is only ideology formation, so that we are entirely produced by our attachments to the historical and incidental, is a possibility not ignored by Ashbery: it is one his poems confront and, as attempts to bind together across distance, finally resist. And even if we are constituted by what divides us from one another, so that lonesomeness is our essential condition, lyric's defining action is the attempt to remediate it.

Ashbery's model of lyric thus put him at odds with a critical tradition dating back at least to John Stuart Mill, one according to which, as Northrop Frye argues in the introduction to his *Anatomy of Criticism*, poetry "is a *disinterested* use of words; it does not address a reader directly."[57] Given lyric's constant mutations, Ashbery's poems reveal less the inaccuracy of Frye's claim than its historical limitedness. To Frye's venerable conception of lyric, Ashbery's work responds that it is *only* by addressing a reader, even if it is usually done in an indirect fashion, that poetry escapes the threat of self-enclosure and stasis to which, in a modern era of disconnection and doubt, it has increasingly appeared to be subject. And since countering this threat is the chief aim of Ashbery's poems, they can be considered, in a strange turn, anything but self-absorbed and characterized above all by an openness to what is outside the poem and outside the self—the mingled realms of language, mind, and world toward which each poem is written and in which each seeks to reside.

Tim DeJong is a senior lecturer in the English Department at Baylor University. He is the author of Hope and Aesthetic Utility in Modernist Literature *(Routledge, 2020). His articles appear in venues such as* Arizona Quarterly*,* Modernist Cultures*,* College Literature*, and* Research in African Literatures*, among others. He has also published poems in* Waxwing*,* Descant*,* Image*,* Rattle*,* Modern Language Studies*, and other journals*. For more, see timothydejong.com.

NOTES

1. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, "General Introduction," in *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 1–8, quotation on 2.
2. A. Poulin Jr., "The Experience of Experience: A Conversation with John Ashbery," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 20, no. 3 (1981): 241–55, quotation on 250. Discussing Ashbery's pronoun usage, Antoine Cazé points out that he "persistently refuses to essentialize any kind of self he seems to be building in his poems." See Cazé, "'The End of Friendship with Self Alone': Autobiographical Erasures in John Ashbery's 'Fragment,'" *E-rea* 5, no. 1 (2007): 1–24, quotation on 21, https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.176.
3. Poulin, "Experience of Experience," 251.
4. Ben Lerner, "The Future Continuous: Ashbery's Lyric Mediacy," *boundary 2* 37, no. 1 (2010): 201–13, quotation on 209.
5. John Emil Vincent, *John Ashbery and You: His Later Books* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 145, 5.
6. Bonnie Costello, "John Ashbery and the Idea of the Reader," *Contemporary Literature* 23, no. 4 (1982): 493–514, quotation on 495.
7. Costello, 513, 514.
8. Costello, 514.

9. Marjorie G. Perloff, "'Transparent Selves': The Poetry of John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara," *Yearbook of English Studies* 8 (1978): 171–96, quotation on 183.
10. Perloff, 178, 187.
11. Peter Stitt, *Uncertainty and Plenitude: Five Contemporary Poets* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), 5.
12. Jody Norton, "'Whispers out of Time': The Syntax of Being in the Poetry of John Ashbery," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 41, no. 3 (1995): 281–305, quotation on 295.
13. Richard Kostelanetz, "How to Be a Difficult Poet," *New York Times*, May 23, 1976, https://www.nytimes.com/1976/05/23/archives/how-to-be-a-difficult-poet-john-ashbery-has-won-major-prizes-and.html.
14. Quoted in Perloff, "Transparent Selves," 195.
15. John Koethe discerns Ashbery's work as marked by a "unitary consciousness from which his voice originates, positioned outside the temporal flux of thought and experience his poetry manages to monitor and record. . . . The sense of the presence of a unified subject that conceives these poems is very strong, almost palpable." I agree with the initial conclusion Koethe draws from this insight—that "one never loses the sense that a perfectly definite point of consciousness is behind the whole enterprise," but I do not follow Koethe to his further contention that "the self underlying Ashbery's poetry is . . . that of the transcendental or metaphysical subject," since I believe Ashbery's poetry is effectively designed to resist exactly these kinds of critical apothegms. See John Koethe, "The Metaphysical Subject of John Ashbery's Poetry," in *Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery*, ed. David Lehman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 89, 93, 96.
16. Perloff, "Transparent Selves," 196.
17. Helen Vendler, *Invisible Listeners: Lyric Intimacy in Herbert, Whitman, and Ashbery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 60.
18. As Ashbery remarks in an interview with the *Paris Review*, "I would like to please the reader, and I think that surprise has to be an element of this, and that may necessitate a certain amount of teasing." See John Ashbery, "The Art of Poetry No. 33," interview by Peter Stitt, *Paris Review*, no. 90 (Winter 1983), https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3014/the-art-of-poetry-no-33-john-ashbery.
19. Ashbery, "Art of Poetry No. 33."
20. As Karin Roffman notes in her biography of Ashbery's early years, Ashbery "stopped giving interviews" for a while in the late 1960s out of "anger at the process of being asked to explain himself and his poems. . . . When critics claimed that his poems were difficult or needed explication, he often seemed surprised, a reaction perceived as feigned or outright hostile." See Roffman, *The Songs We Know Best: John Ashbery's Early Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2017), xii.
21. Poulin, "Experience of Experience," 246.
22. Harold Bloom, *Figures of Capable Imagination* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 172–73.
23. Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 267–68.
24. Costello, "John Ashbery," 495.
25. See, for example, Ashbery's careful dissent in his 1981 interview with Poulin: "I don't find that my poems are obscure. I think they're something else, not quite what we

mean when we say 'obscure' or 'hard to understand' or 'difficult.'" And again, later in the same interview: "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, "Experience of Experience," 246, 251).

26. John Ashbery, *Other Traditions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 136.
27. Ashbery, 138.
28. John Ashbery, *Collected Poems 1956–1987*, ed. Mark Ford (Manchester, UK: Carcanet Press, 2010), 698.
29. John Ashbery, *As We Know* (New York: Penguin, 1979), 2. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *AWK*.
30. Costello, "John Ashbery," 493.
31. Ashbery, "Art of Poetry No. 33."
32. John Ashbery, "John Ashbery in Conversation with John Tranter, New York City, 20 April 1985," interview by John Tranter, *Jacket* no. 2, Jacket2, http://jacketmagazine.com/02/jaiv1985.html.
33. Perloff, *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 280.
34. Perloff, 286–87.
35. Stitt, *Uncertainty and Plenitude*, 36–37.
36. John Keeling, "The Moment Unravels: Reading John Ashbery's 'Litany,'" *Twentieth-Century Literature* 38, no. 2 (1992): 125–51, quotation on 128.
37. Keeling, 128.
38. Keeling, 141.
39. James Longenbach, *The Lyric Now* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), ix.
40. Perloff, *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 283.
41. Perloff, 283.
42. Nikki Skillman, *The Lyric in the Age of the Brain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 188.
43. Skillman, 192, 190.
44. Skillman, 195.
45. Costello, "John Ashbery," 513, 514.
46. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1944), 22.
47. Skillman, 194.
48. John Ashbery and John Koethe, "An Interview with John Ashbery," *SubStance* 11/12 (1982): 178–86, quotation on 182.
49. Ashbery and Koethe, 182.
50. Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 70.
51. Poulin, "Experience of Experience," 246.
52. Poulin, 251.

53. Ashbery, "Art of Poetry No. 33."

54. Osip Mandelstam, "On the Addressee," in *The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*, ed. Jane Gary Harris, trans. Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1979), 68.

55. Paul Celan, [Letter to Hans Bender], May 1960, in *Collected Prose*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Riverdale-on-Hudson, NY: Sheep Meadow Press, 1986), 26.

56. Quoted in David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: The New York School of Poets* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 309.

57. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 4.