

TOPICS OF THE SKY:  
ASHBERY'S INVOLVING SEARCH FOR THE POEM

by

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A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts,

The City University of New York

2020

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

Topics of the Sky: Ashbery's Involving Search for The Poem

by

Tom Carlson

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This paper is a text's attempt at being lived by John Ashbery's *Three Poems*. The formal quality of this text is therefore just as important as the content. At the same time that I argue that Ashbery pioneers an aesthetics/poetics of abduction, I simultaneously permit the writing of this text to be abducted itself. The thoughts given textual existence and representation in this paper are thoughts that belong more originally to the consciousness of the poems rather than myself. My job has been to fit the thoughts into a lexicon proper to the occasion (of an academic capstone project).

This consciousness of *Three Poems* has provoked my ongoing consideration of the possibility of 'cosmic relevance,' the possibility of a human mode of living that can be relevant or irrelevant to the "generalized mind" living, feeling, and thinking in the stars. Nietzsche's aesthetic justification of life gives one answer to the possibility of cosmic relevance. But to live the aesthetic justification introduces a conflict. Cosmological unravelling is aloof and indifferent to the ambitions and morals of humanity. The possibility of belonging to this unravelling, rather than the movement of history, raises the need for a critique of humanity as a category and absolute. This paper explores these dilemmas, gathering its logic, momentum, and mechanics from the consciousness and world that exists within *Three Poems*.

## FOREWORD

*Collar up, you are lighter than air. The only slightly damaged bundle of  
receptive nerves is humming again, receiving the colorless emanations from  
outer space and dispatching dense, precisely worded messages.*  
John Ashbery, *Three Poems* (41-42)

Modern life is colored by a daily torrent of anonymous and flashing messages. Through a kind of censorship through noise, the torrent smothers and drowns out the “colorless emanations” that try to speak to us. The messages Ashbery refers to come from “outer space.” Whereas the messages that come to us from the setting of modern life are all the written things I see each day, all the messages communicated to me by laws, rules, expectations, and etiquettes. Sometimes these messages (from the setting of modern life) are kind—but they blatantly lack sincerity. They often speak with a parental voice, with a scolding and condescending tenor. Incidental contempt pervades the atmosphere. A general, impersonal meanness.

Hearts develop a kind of agoraphobia and the personality is a soul’s protective gear. The personality is camouflage. People need to blend into a socio-emotional ecology that imposes prepackaged terms of relation on its members. The organic responses and movements of the heart and spirit survive in privacy and secrecy. An unnamed and undiagnosed feeling of fundamental estrangement naturally ensues.

The poet’s struggle is against the great estrangement. The poet might seem silly because she opens up the windows to welcome and absorb the torrent of modern life’s messages. The poet can somehow hear something like birdsong or see a Thursday afternoon in the messages. This is her refusal. She syncs the banalities—the speech of email, shopping,

politics, law, managers, information, doctors, etcetera—to the rhythm that opens flowers and makes blizzards. She is able to do this when, as Ashbery says, her “bundle of receptive nerves” begins to hum again, as she remembers her capacity to pick up dispatches from “outer space” which are sometimes (ironically) coded into the barrage of messages ceaselessly communicated by the busy-ness of modern life. There are the “precisely worded messages” of poetry living *within* modernity’s impersonal and prepackaged laws and lexicon of relation to life.

The poet hears the blather of modern life’s messages from far away, impersonally, as if from the vantage point of the sky or an angel. This is why she feels “lighter than air.” Because she is so far away, the messaging of modern life takes on its true and cosmic context: it is only another series of things happening, just as necessary and preordained as the sound of wind on leaves, with just as much promise-fulfillment in it as the explosion of a volcano or supernova. The poet might try to record this fact in the poem, but her words, although selectively chosen, are forever insufficient, because there is no vocabulary that would be proper to a speaker in the sky or a speaker that is an angel. The poet’s words are strained and sometimes break because she forces words to point to incomprehensible things and concepts, making what are, logically speaking, incompatible analogies.

That is not a problem.

Paths are made by the words’ pointing gestures. These paths can be followed by a reader’s inner sensory organ. Trusting readers, that go along the paths, detect unknowable facts: i.e. a human destiny is not independent of or unconnected to the destiny that opens a flower. The same force that distributes the snow of a blizzard is also the force that

articulates the course of my daily thoughts. The torrent of modern messages, if I stand in the right place, sounds like snow.

Human life can be in sync, participating in the rhythm of snowfall. Humans can fumble this participation, even fall completely out of sync, alien to the rhythm that carries the universe forward. The poet struggles against this winning probability: that human life will become irreparably out of sync with the rhythm of the universe, no longer part of what, in poetic terminology, Ashbery calls “the self-propagating wind” (19).

That’s why poem readers, an odd sort, sometimes wonder if the general procession of the universe is about to desert human life. Will our absence be mourned? Or will the universe abandon humanity casually, “forgetting it / as easily as a child abandons a broken toy”? (Rilke 7).

This paper addresses the fear that it is possible to live and also be cosmically irrelevant. To be relevant in a cosmic sense or not, is a special choice that humans get to make. Humans cannot make this choice if they are not properly prepared for it, made aware that it is there and that it is theirs.

The poem can lure awareness to where preparing work for the choice gets done. There are technical names for these lures. These names are a little silly, the way they make poetic work seem like raking leaves or putting together furniture, as if the poet had a shed in the backyard or a set of hex wrenches. I don’t know if André Breton would say the analogy I made is poetic or logical, but poetic analogy is a name he gives to a technique of the poem. He says that poetic analogy,

transgresses the rules of deduction to let the mind apprehend the interdependence of two objects of thought located on different planes. Logical thinking is incapable of establishing such a connection, which it deems a priori impossible. (Breton 135)

Through the luring work of the poem I can establish invisible joiners to things, untenable yet true likenesses. These joiners “transgress the rules of deduction.” Ashbery says that “you *are* it all,” because you, your essence, goes forward along with “it all,” “like a river which is never really there because of moving someplace” (15). Logical thinking can never make the claim that you are “never really there” because it is too bogged down by the rigorous fact that you are present and therefore definitely “really there.” Poetic thinking does not get hampered by facts and is free and honest enough to see that you are “like a river,” ceaselessly “moving someplace,” and therefore “never really there.”

The poem, as it is often teased, looks at flowers a lot. Through the poem I might see, for example, an invisible joiner between the course of a flower’s life and the ideal maturation of the human soul. The soul can follow a course recommended by the same instructor that opens a flower. The flower always opens in perfect accord with the angle of the sun, always exactly when the season dictates, while the season itself takes its dictation from the positions of the planetary bodies. Maybe both the flower and the soul inherited a predestiny. That destiny came from the same event that (who?) put all the stars where they are specifically right now. From this analogy—that the ideal course of a human’s life is like the course made and exhibited by the blossoming of a flower—I establish that I and the flower share an interdependence on the position of the stars. I am lured into believing: specifically coded in every human heart is a cosmic license, condoning and ordering every heart to open up fully to its proper amicable sun angle (the way the flower does).

This is why I need to find reliable ways of hearing who is telling me things in colorless forms, from a space way outside, speaking in other, “dense, precisely worded

messages.” I am struggling to convert the blitz of modern messages into phosphorescent rays. Poems can heal my receptive nerves and help me advance the wishes of a dream that began with the universe.

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The first page of John Ashbery's *Three Poems* tricks the reader, incorporates them, passes them the pen, and puts them onto the page. There is a somebody that the reader encounters in *Three Poems*. That somebody poses from several planes, several dimensions at once. This gives the reader's encounter a confusing aspect, making her feel as if she were encountering her own self from the perspective of somebody else. It is a strange feeling: to be the deer, the headlights, and also someone watching the event from the comfort of a reading chair. The reader's identity is multiplied and juggled. One identity reads, one speaks the poem, and one holds a pen with an obligation to sustaining the development of the poem. The first page opens:

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

clean-washed sea

The flowers were.

These are examples of leaving out. But, forget as we  
will, something soon comes to stand in their place. Not  
the truth, perhaps, but—yourself. It is you who made  
this, therefore you are true. (Ashbery 3)

What is “it all”? Put it down? Does Ashbery mean write it down? Whatever “it all” is, its “truer” incarnation can be written down in the “leave all out” form. And in examples of this truer form of putting all down—which is achieved through the inverse, by leaving all out—it is “Not the truth” that takes up the space where leaving out was written down. Where

“it all” is left out, it is *you*, “yourself” that fills it in, and because there isn’t any truth that “comes to stand in their place”, the true is you. Let me color this in:

And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer, way.

*you/true you/true you/true you/true you/true you/true*  
clean-washed sea *you/true you/true you/true you/true*  
*you/true you/true you/true you/true* The flowers were.  
*you/true you/true you/true you/true you/true you/true*

These are examples of leaving out.

I ask: where are you seeing from? Are you reading you on the page, or do you see yourself as if your surrounding environment were the blank space of the page? Down there, from the perspective of the page, do you see your big face above you, reading the page? The first page looks at you like a separate you in a mirror that’s in a bathroom on another plane. And yet another you is watching the doubled you looking at each other. You are tripled.

You see your you filling in and surrounding the “clean-washed sea” and “The flowers were.” This is the immediate call of the page. From the beginning of the blankness until the reading eyes reach the image of a “clean-washed sea,” one of two plot points, there is a charge. Whatever is you, and is true as you, marches toward this sea. What do you plant in this white garden? You and the true, what is true to you and true *in* you—ephemera emerging from the intimations of your heart, clauses from the ratified credos of your soul—in specific forms and images that will successfully meet the sea. Then, once you feel this “clean-washed sea” lapping at your toes, or once you spot it from the top of a dune you’ve been clambering up (all this depends on how your heart ordains your mode of arriving at the sea), it will be time to make your way toward the next plot point, toward feeling that an answer to a conundrum is that: “The flowers were.” This answer will prompt more planting,

some last true intimations of you, until the stanza the poet coerced you into making is complete. Let me color it in again:

And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer, way.

*what-is-true-in-you:-heartfelt-images-aspiring-toward-a-clean-washed-sea-that-leads-you-rummaging-through-more-true-heartfelt-images-until-The flowers were. last-invisible-images-of-you/true-are-planted.*

These are examples of leaving out.

It is strange, literally estranging, to realize the second level of reading that occurs a remove from the first. As a reader, you watch you. Reader-you watches the you in the page planting things in the white space from above. Reader-you enjoys the perspective of an albatross or a god. You watch you plant these true things and intimately raw things, a voyeur to your own sacred acts. I say that it is sacred because what you see yourself planting are things unencumbered by the social world where you maintain a practiced etiquette you call your personality. Ejected from the social world, plunged into the white, the you on the page is pushed forward by an honesty that is pure like a reflex or dream. The things you plant in the white emerge of their own volition, without any feeling for the expectations that your personality tries to meet. As the reader-you bears witness to this raw and unmitigated iteration of you, it might become heartbreaking to realize how much of you you repress. After you complete this page and regather your multiplied self into a composite whole in the social world, you may experience a distressing revelation. It might become clear to you that the features of your personality, the character you assume in this social 'real' world, is a character whose features are artificial, derivative, counterfeit, and untrue. This revelation can also be exciting.

This is one of the revelations of the poet as they continually confront the ineptitude of the words they mobilize. Reader-you's job is to see these perfect and true intimations of the heart being planted take the form of their proper names so that the poem can be read. For this you need a writer-you. Dedicatedly and defeatedly, already realizing the futility of the task at hand, writer-you searches for words to name these things the you on the page has planted. Writer-you experiences the frustrating despair of the poet, who's search is of precisely the same doomed nature. The trueness understood and spoken by the heart overwhelms the sufficiency of words. The characters of the alphabet become horrendously inappropriate to a demand that thought be presented in a raw and honest form. Language takes on a foreignness, it exhibits its true incommensurable distance, because words, even at their best and most precise, still only remotely correspond to the intimations of the heart they signify.

It is true: what is you and is true will never be permitted by words' representing powers. Maybe you decide that the best thing to do would be to tell that you, the one who searches for words to name the true, to give it a rest. To try to say it will only slander the thing. Silence would be the most honest and most accurate. Now when I color it in it looks like this:

And next the thought came to me that to leave all  
out would be another, and truer, way.

clean-washed sea

The flowers were.

These are examples of leaving out. But, forget as we will, something soon comes to stand in their place. Not the truth, perhaps, but—yourself. It is you who made this, therefore you are true.

The reader who picks up *Three Poems* knows the poet's affliction: the keen and repeated awareness that there is something innately impudent to language. To speak is to lie. To count on language is to give loyalty to a traitor. Throughout human time more words are made to fit the ambitions of linguistic precision. The word "sad" has its more precise synonyms, such as "despondent" or "miserable." As each of these words with increasing precision are minted, more territory of the heart's inner space is ceded, deemed mass producible, fit for a mold that is recognizable to anyone with basic literacy. To speak is to sell your heart down river. And yet, the poet agrees: there is no other option. Maybe sometimes we trick the words and say something that provokes a near-identical reverberation in a listener's heart. Or maybe a better or more important (although different) reverberation occurs, one that gives both the poet and the reader's hearts a place to meet at a higher elevation. This is the environment of the poet's paradoxical vocation, characterized by a radical kind of loneliness and intimacy: lonely because words and communication are only and always faraway; intimate because the poet dwells in the space closest to the heart of things, where the alien location of language is plain.

Think about the book *Three Poems* sitting on a shelf in a library. Think about another person with their own you, which is their own true, finding the book, opening it, and seeing all their own ephemera of the heart planted and named in those white spaces. We imagine these people too, with their own personal intimacies falling out onto the pages when we read the first page of *Three Poems*. The book wasn't written as a letter to me. It was written for the readers. No one reads a book like it is personally addressed to them. But I've never read something that personally involves me this way, that contains open *physical* space that I

am meant, no *coerced* into occupying. And from this reflection I feel the presence of all the other readers, I realize the pristine appearance of the white spaces is misleading, it is not pristine, it is white like unremitting snowfall that presents as pristine by covering up footprints. There are footprints of another's heart here on this page, covered up by snow. I open the book again and the spaces still have their pristine appearance. But I sense, in a knowing and aware way, that there are buried intimate residues beneath. I see others planting their true yous in the white.

There is somebody that the reader encounters on the first page of *Three Poems*, they have at least several bodies, each posing from a different plane, observing and encountering each other for the first time. The encounter is literally haunted. Each body partakes of its observer and who it observes. I know of the other readers who peruse the shelves, pick up the book, throw themselves out of their body and onto the first page. As I consider them I impose them onto the page, doing their personal planting in the white. It's only true to say they haunt the book. And you haunt them as well. The you that does its own diligent planting, plants what a true them, to you, is. You try to write with invisible letters all these bodies with their true yous into the white.

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The sense that detects the self as multiplied—a sense that the reader has undergone—is a sense that can be a metaphor to something later in the poem. The reader can use her reading experience from the first page of *Three Poems* as a metaphor for the event of “the beginning of life” and its course—something Ashbery describes in a later stanza, a stanza that coincidentally demonstrates within itself the project of *Three Poems* as a whole. The stanza occurs toward the end of the first of *Three Poems*, “The New Spirit,” but before I

analyze it I need to develop and articulate the experience the reader will remember from the beginning of *Three Poems*.

After that experience, the reader must laugh at her former, contained sense of self. “As if I were only a flower after all and not the map of the country in which it grows,” she might say (Ashbery 15). And she would be right: the self is inner and also the surrounding country. The white snowscape on the first page, we know, is “you,” it is part of the reader standing outside of the reader. It’s like the reader is one part skygod looming over the white landscape, reading the flowers planted as her other iteration plants them. What are these flowers that are planted in the white space, what is their constitution? Each flower blooms as a perfectly true emblem to an intimation in the reader’s heart and so the landscape as a whole is a credo ratified by her soul.

The reader’s next move may be to think about the country of the ‘real’ world, outside the book, the country of her lived, ‘real’ life. She may think of the real flowers in real valleys that reach for the sun and then droop. She may think of all the other growing then eroding things. She thinks of the entire world.

Her education before this poem taught her two reigning accounts for why and wherefore the world and you and all of us are here. Both are, she realizes now, ridiculous. There is the quaint religious one which cites an omniscient idol (a jejune imagination calls this “God”) who needed a sycophant (worshipper) to hanker after moral perfection and a place (the earth) to do so. The other, the scientific explanation, feeling characteristically more mature about itself, says that procreation is pointless and harebrained; it says that the extravagant designs of butterfly wings serve one function and have one reason: to perpetuate a dreamless obligation to survival. That is life according to the science. But now

that the reader has had an experience inside a poem she thinks differently. She understands, from personal experience, how a skygod above her living self makes the country around her take on its poetic appearance. She knows that flowers in the valleys on earth were planted by a poet in the sky that was filling the empty space with the skygod's "you" and therefore "true." The reader knows that planted things grow toward something, perhaps a "clean-washed sea." She knows that, be it white or grassy space, it must be filled with the material of poetry so that the destination of the poem can be reached.

The creation of the existing world is *like* (a simile) that time the reader had her you thrown into the white spaces where she started planting her true things. This is the metaphor. The country, the external world around us, is the skygod's first page of the book. The skygod reads and is coerced by the country, which contains plot points that give the poem its emergence. By no volition of the god's, things begin to fall onto the page, onto the country. So that the god can read the poem. The skygod's you and true spring up. It must have been an eccentric and gaudy bit that fell onto the page when the butterfly's wings came about. The reader will remember the way the poem made her pour out certain trues that were particular to her approach to the "clean-washed sea." Maybe now she will wonder, during the next brilliant sunset, what plot-point the country-poem dangled; she may ask: on the way toward what stanza is the skygod trying to get to and therefore needs to paint this sunset? Maybe she will start to think in similar terms when the poem that is the country surrounding her becomes nightmarish.

I must stress: thinking this way does not mean that the nightmarish parts of life will become less terrifying to her. That would be wrong and bungle the poem. But the terror she feels will take on a necessary shape that she welcomes out of respect for its magnitude and

cosmic origin. Let's say that the first page of *Three Poems* had not been coercing the reader toward something so pleasant as a "clean-washed sea." Let's say the reader had to plant things that could get her to 'your broken apartment.' How would she get there? Does the true that is you that would be filling the white space contain any less intensity of the heart? Of course not. Whether it is toward a sea or toward calamity, it is the crystals of poetry that will fill the space that gets you there. This is a fact: all days of life are spilling out from the rim, too full of poetic honesty for any human-rendered image to give that day its proportionate depiction. Acknowledging this fact, we must accept that there is nothing that the material of poetry does not fill, even the spaces that lead toward the terrible, banal, horrifying, and abject are at the end of stanza-bricked roads. The days that host depressions and losses: these days are themselves poetic moments that the sky needed to plant on the earth so that the poem could get to where it needed to get to.

The seed for the revelation I described above occurs on the first page of *Three Poems* and alters the reader's mode of reading for the remainder of the book. A site of emergence, from the seed, into the full revelation occurs here:

It is necessary to go forward completing  
The gesture from the beginning of life  
That was worrying its shape into the trees  
All this time, as though that shape were responsible  
For the many fluctuating situations that fill the air. (Ashbery 47-48)

This stanza speaks directly to both the notion of cosmic relevance and directly to what Ashbery's *Three Poems* is trying to work out, and when the reader encounters it, she knows it because she has a memory of its truth. She has stood at the beginning of the development of the country before, a "beginning of life." The "gesture" she made as a reader "was worrying its shape" into the things she planted on the first page.

As I have noted earlier, the white space is a rough synonym for “it all,” all of life, all of everything, which is the only synonym possible. This is because of the basic fact that if any actual words were to fill the white, then the whole thing would become specific (with specific words) and would therefore be the opposite of “it all.” Silence and blankness are the best synonyms for “it all.” Therefore we can say that each time a reader opens that book “it all” is generated.

This fact (of “it all” being generated) is what makes the experience from the first page appropriate to the stanza above, which cites “the beginning of life,” which is the same as saying the beginning of “it all.”

When she reads the blankness, the reader fills it up with her you; this is how she fills a void, a nothingness, which is to say that this is how she fills the material that is prior to life. Before life there is void. This again makes her reading parallel to the gesture made at the beginning of life. She fills that void with ephemeral things: each time she (or any reader) reads the page the “it all” changes. With each passing moment the things that fill that void are different and shifting into their next. This is what makes these things and the moment of reading so like life and its generation. The invisible poetry that fills the void is unremitting, never stagnant, in flux, becoming rather than being, just like rivers, clouds, seasons, time, just like the “fluctuating situations that fill the air.”

What she plants and fills this void with somehow makes no disturbance on the rough, inarticulate, but paradoxically most precise representation of “it all”—that representation being blank space. There is room for all of any “you,” all of any reader, to fill it up, and the space will never run out: these things “are filling up space as they create more space” (Ashbery 15). This again makes the reader’s experience from the first page a perfect

metaphor to the generation of life, because like that generation, it never generates to the point of *taking* space, to the point that space for life becomes scarce. Where space is filled with life, more space for life is made. This is what makes the white space so like the universe. This is what makes the reader's reading and planting gesture rhyme so uncannily with "The gesture from the beginning of life."

Ashbery says that the gesture that is from life's beginning worries its shape into things. This may seem difficult to comprehend, but the personal experience from the beginning of *Three Poems* gives the reader an intuitive, almost effortless foundation to interpret this from. She has a memory of this phenomenon. Those things that emerged in the white space were shaped in exactly the way she worried her heart's intimations into them. To put it more precisely: she inflicted those things with her mental agitation as she conjured the images that could get her to the "clean-washed sea." If she planted trees then the shape of her planting gesture would have worried its shape "into the trees," the same way the gesture from "the beginning of life" did and continues to inflict itself on all the things in the universe. There is an exciting development that begins Ashbery's book and then makes stanzas like the one I cited above take on a personal resonance and experiential color. But even without that experience, the stanza referring to the "gesture from the beginning of life" is worthy of its own, isolated and close analysis.

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The stanza I will be analyzing further from "The New Spirit" can also be read as a full poem on its own, a quintain independent of the rest of the book. The stanza already invites emphasis by being one of the rare breaks from free verse. Almost the entirety of *Three Poems* is great blocks of unmetered text. Where line-breaks occur, we should

acknowledge the text's reach for a more emphatic register. I copy the stanza again for the reader's reference.

It is necessary to go forward completing  
The gesture from the beginning of life  
That was worrying its shape into the trees  
All this time, as though that shape were responsible  
For the many fluctuating situations that fill the air. (Ashbery 47-48)

I am shaken by what I interpret to be the stanza's gentle command: one must sync her hope, vision, and stepping movements to a calendar with a cosmological time-signature, a calendar that names and permits each day on the condition that all days obey their duty to completing "The gesture from the beginning of life." I hear a command where the quintain begins, saying to the reader "It is necessary." The thing that is necessary is to "go forward completing" something. Completing what? "The gesture." What kind of gesture? One "from the beginning of life." The reader sends her imagination all the way back to an anterior of time itself, contemplating a cosmic-level gesture that would begin life. This gesture is present as a "shape" that has made its way "into the trees." It gets there through "worrying" its way into things. It has been doing so "All this time," and as the reader acknowledges this fact, the quintain shares its culminating revelation with her: that this gesture worrying its shape into things is "responsible / For the many fluctuating situations that fill the air," responsible for the ceaseless changing that surrounds and imbues everything. The reader and all potential readers, all humans, are not excused from or even able to evade this gesture going forward that moves toward its completion and imposes its agitation on all things. "It is necessary" Ashbery says, speaking directly perhaps to the reader, perhaps to himself, and most likely to both and also all of everything. You, Ashbery, the reader, and all, must and will

“go forward” as an accomplice, as something whose shape continues the fulfillment of this gesture with cosmological roots.

The evidence of the truth and unshakable authority of this necessary charge (“to go forward completing”) is branded in all the things. Yes, the gesture worries “its shape into trees” and this shape is “responsible for the many fluctuating situations that fill the air”; in fact it is impossible to think of anything that could be an orphan to this heritage of worrying. The gesture, a flash or explosion or waterfall—whatever image of the cosmological beginning event you prefer—inflicts its agitations on all things so that they will sustain the continuation of the gesture’s unstoppable unfurling. There is nothing in the universe that does not exist as the consequence of this beginning gesture, there is nothing that does not share the common heritage that tracks a chain back to the beginning of life. There are no orphans. Thinking through this may give us the sensation Ashbery articulates in another moment within “The New Spirit”: “And we have the success of our gradual, growing belief in the importance of the universe as it came through to us to keep us going,” (17).

I want to pause and think about something that humans do that reveals itself as odd in the context of the above stanza. After the reader ponders what it is necessary to go forward completing, she is able to think about what might prevent her from carrying out that charge. The charge wouldn’t be worth articulating if there weren’t a need to do so, and the fact of that need carries with it the unsaid implication that some humans and some things do not heed and do not fulfill the completion of the gesture. The question emerges: do some humans estrange themselves from the cosmological chain? How? Why?

The unit that is called “human” is one that calls itself an individual. The individuals say that they form their own individual opinions and fashion their very own notions and

tastes. The stanza above challenges both the tenability of this belief and also its ideality. Ashbery's assertion—that it is necessary to go forward aiding in the completion of the gesture—carries the charge that even an invisible or immaterial thing, like an opinion or notion, should not betray the life-beginning gesture's chain. Opinions, notions, and all things of thought substance, should not imagine themselves as independent of the gesture's chain.

To heed to Ashbery's charge may wound humans and their special claim to being individuals, bosses of themselves. Humans (those who identify with and uphold the belief system that belongs to and enables this word/category) think that if you take away their opinion-making power that they may as well be as stupid as a bucket of nails. They think that without their individuation they are only an empty consequence of a metaphysics of chance determinism. This reaction is unimaginative. Why must the charge that "it is necessary to go forward" as the continued and extended iteration of a gesture from the beginning of life, in both physical and mental action, be a charge that, if heeded and accepted, means abdicating human sentience? Our sentience is precisely what is needed by the cosmological gesture. "You forget the salty and slightly bitter taste of those morning dreams whose aim was both to mislead and instruct" (Ashbery 35). Our dreams are one of the raw and unmitigated forms that our thought takes when it is completely possessed by the worrying gesture. Our sentience, our sense that we have a choice and control, is what makes us *able* to be misled or instructed by those morning dreams. Our thinking is needed by the worrying work of the gesture, because without our thinking, there wouldn't be anyone there to react to the gesture and its completion would be fumbled.

In an irreconcilable, inconclusive, contradictory, and logic-transcendent way, our personal thinking plays with, converses, and reacts to the ongoing, always unfurling movement of Time's thought. What is Time's thought? Thought that has been in invisible action since the beginning of life, it is the consciousness that belongs to the origin gesture, it is thought that rolls by and onward like a stream, bewitching all things, the total thought-stream whose headwaters are in the alpine tarns of The Beginning.

Thought, in its total reality, exists as a substance with an inherently anti-logical nature: it is thought that belongs to the cosmos, to all, and simultaneously plays on the individual's dreams, motor projects, sexuality, and anything else that is thought outside the purview of an individual's awareness. To say that a thing is everything and individual does not logically compute and because humans esteem their logical capacities with quasi-religious authority over knowledge, they choose against holding or trusting logic-transcendent concepts. An unnecessary dichotomy emerges from this need for concepts to be logically accessible. On one side is freewill and on the other is the bondage of determinism—if something else does all of our thinking on or for us, then all events and actions are predetermined and there is no freedom. It isn't surprising that humans choose, from these two *comprehensible* beliefs, one that (they believe) is the most flattering. They choose the belief that makes the human the boss of all of his thoughts. Even if he is not fully aware of it, he obstinately maintains a faith that restricts the dreams he has to the small space of his head, a space that (he believes) the universe cannot tamper with or create for him. If dreams can mislead then it is the individual who dreamt that is at fault (rather than some cosmic agent meddling with human thought).

The stanza above can give the ideal of individual thought a nihilistic appearance. Mental activity, if always exclusively something individual, is therefore activity that is orphaned by the gesture that began life, because if it is individual, then it is untouched by the worrying that shapes the trees. So much blindness is stubbornly maintained so that this estranging belief will be insulated from the evidence that would dissolve it. Humans protect the belief that they are the boss of their thoughts by selectively not seeing the way the origin gesture's shape is branded in all the things around them (the trees and the changing situations in the air). This stubborn selective seeing makes it impossible to see that the same phenomenon taking place in the outer world (of common shapes, of common gesture heritage) is a phenomenon that also takes place within human inner space, shaping human thoughts and emotions. Humans have a very hard time seeing the tree's shape as the sign that it is an inheritor of the original event; this narrow vision is both a symptom of the human's stubborn blindness and a verification of that blindness' dominance over human vision. I am describing a total and fully-intuitive confirmation bias. And so "the whole of mankind lay stupefied in dreams of toil and drudgery; their miserable condition offered no chance to glimpse how things were proceeding" (Ashbery 49-50).

The blindness situation is a sad one, because the only claim to human specialness is in human statements and actions that rhyme with, echo, or analogue either the original gesture or its worrying-into-things movement. Ashbery articulates what might be the feeling a human has when she realizes her possibility of participation in the movement of the original gesture, describing "That day you realize that just having a soul was not enough: you must yield it up, vanish into the oblivion prepared for you by your years of waiting that all your practice of stoicism was not enough to seal off" (Ashbery 32). What exactly Ashbery

means to evoke by referencing stoicism is difficult to know for certain, but my assumption is that the “practice of stoicism” is a practice of believing that mental activity is strictly personal, purely individual in its capacities, and those capacities reach their summit of power in reason (where mental activity is not corrupted by the passions). This is, albeit crudely, the ontology of stoicism. Ashbery says that this practice will not be “enough to seal off,” not be enough to close you off from the original energy that infects and possess you, your soul, and all things. Just being an individual in possession of a soul “was not enough.” To “yield it up,” to “vanish into the oblivion prepared for you,” is another way of saying that you must heed to what must necessarily go forward completing itself by worrying its way into things. To yield the soul up is to openly invite the possession of the worrying.

How does one yield the soul up? How does a human release her possession of her soul so that it can “vanish into the oblivion prepared” for her? I think of, for example, impressionist painting. The phenomenon of yielding up the soul is built in to the terminology of impressionism: to be given over to that which presses on you. Impressionist painting is profound in the way it openly acknowledges the agitation the human’s mood inherits from the visible world, the way impressionism ignores a commitment to accurate visual rendering and instead measures accuracy by the way the painted image exhibits fidelity to an impression. Impressionism asks the painting to be honest to an energy or mood that was worrying its shape into the painter’s blood and, next, the paint on the canvas. These paintings are therefore metaphors to the process that inflicts its shape into things. I wonder if an impressionist painter would agree with what Ashbery says is a feature of entering one’s late thirties: “When one is in one’s late thirties, ordinary things—like a pebble or a glass of water—take on an expressive sheen. One wants to know more about

them, and one is in turn lived by them” (41). The painter must see that the thing they paint has its own desire to make an expression, that is what it is to have “an expressive sheen.” To paint that expression means yielding the soul up so that the body and the motor projects that accomplish the action of painting are “lived by” the thing, the “pebble or glass of water” that has a sheen that wishes to express.

I said that for humans today it is difficult to see the common inherited shape that imbues all things. Perhaps seeing this ubiquitous inheritance can be easier once one is able to see other common shapes in apparently unrelated things, things that are actually close cousins. Cottonwoods against a gray sky in winter, for example, conjure varicose images, which in turn conjures the image-memory of an anonymous river you saw from the window of an airplane. These things (the bare tree against the sky, varicose, and the river seen from above) share a common shape and this commonness is a sign that they all share a grandparent in water.

The semblance between these three things is very easy to comprehend. A demand that the shared shape of all things be as comprehensible, that the sharedness be provable in an undeniable way, in a verifiable way, exhibits sad laziness. Why must the shape that confirms the common origin shared by all things be a shape that is so plainly legible to human intelligence? Just because human intelligence is unable to discern the shared shape directly, does this mean that the worried-into presence of the gesture must therefore be dismissed (simply because, if it does exist, it exists somewhere outside the territory of the fathomable)? This is dubious logic. If something is not plainly intelligible, must it necessarily follow that acknowledging its presence means falling prey to superstition or delusion? I think about who actually benefits from modern thought’s obligation to doubting and

dismissing until proven plainly and intelligibly. Is it the human experience that benefits or the status of the intelligible, the plain, and the fathomable that benefits? Human experience cannot possibly benefit from a systematic expulsion of all mental and emotional things that evade intelligibility. To expel the logic-transcendent species of thoughts from the environment of human thought cannot be anything other than an impoverishment of human life. There is within our inner life, thought and emotion that recalls “the wave of music which we were,” and as music it speaks in an indefinite and ambiguous sound; we were at some time in the past content with not fathoming it, “unable to grasp it as it unfolded but living it” (37).

This possibility of being again a “wave of music” makes another approach toward what or who Ashbery’s “New Spirit” might be: a “new life of action without development, a fixed flame” (37). The action of music is redundant, it develops toward redeveloping in each measure, it is our best metaphor for a “fixed flame.” To live and experience human living as a wave of music might give one the sensation that “Everything was guaranteed, it always had been, there would be no future, no end, no development except this steady wavering like a breeze that gently lifted the tired curtains day had let fall” (37). That is a much more accurate description, at least from the vantage point of the earth, of how time moves, how day transitions into night and back into day again, proceeding endlessly and redundantly, like a fixed flame. The days do not enterprise toward some ideal future, there is no end goal. There is only the non-developing yet unstoppable procession that is as ambition-void, whimsy, and indisputable as a breeze.

The wave of music, proceeding like a breeze, worrying its continuation of the beginning gesture into all things, leaves evidence of its totality in the shape of all things. It is

easy to see that the bare cottonwood, the veins, and the river I evoked earlier are all in the shape of water's course. They are shaped the way they are, in part, because of water's dictation. If one can see this, then one will be able to consider the real possibility of seeing that all things, emanating from the same common and original tarn (to use a river-system based metaphor), are necessarily always moving from and into the shape dictated by the original propulsion of water falling from the tarn. All streams are iterations of what the tarn began, as are deltas, riparian systems, and the clouds carrying what floats up from water-bodies to become rain. All things walk unthinkingly, without stress, ambition, resistance, or fear toward the the completion of a relentlessly cyclical ambition. The phenomenon can be illustrated vividly by the cycle of water, but the phenomenon of the haunting original tarn possesses and lives in all things. Ashbery gives words to what might be the moment of realizing this, saying that "The new casualness had been introducing itself, casually of course, but suddenly its credentials lay everywhere" (Ashbery 45). The credentials of the casually advancing gesture resides everywhere, even in the invisible inner space of your emotions and thought: the shape of your mood is the live consequence you inherited from the beginning of life and that mood is moving in tandem with the changing cloud-shapes and coming season.

The work of art is the simultaneous homage and reflection of the gesture's ubiquitous shape that worries into all things. To make a poem means first hearing and being molded by the worrying that is shaping you and then writing the best testimony possible to that event. When done right, the poem (or painting or song) gives cosmological information a means of becoming visible, although never in a direct way like a photograph or recording, but always in analogous terms and forms, the way a teardrop is not the loss of love itself but

is somehow perfectly competent if tasked with testifying to love and loss. To make things that are as silent yet perfectly legible as the teardrop, things that clearly reference and testify to something unspeakable—such as love, loss, or, to return to the quintain, the current shape of the gesture from the origin—is *half* of the ambition of the work of art, *half* of the highest commitment a human can make to life. The other half is fulfilled when that work of art is also simultaneously haunted, molded, *shaped* by the worrying that unfurls onward. The same way the teardrop refers to and is itself the continuation of love and loss, the work of art would like to refer to and itself be a continuation of the wave of music that carries the completion of the gesture forward. The feeling that accompanies an achievement of these two things at once in the work of art is, I think, what Ashbery would be happy for us to imagine as a feeling that “he” (which could be Ashbery, a universal he, and/or a personified pronoun for The Poem) would feel once “he had taken the universal emotional crisis on his own shoulders” (Ashbery 46). This is how the work of art becomes nothing less than an attempt “to fall in with the plans of the cosmos” (46).

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The quintain/stanza above, at *one* level, is telling the reader to see that it is necessary for her to aid in the completion of a cosmological gesture. Her sense of individualized freethinking is merely the iterated form her thinking has necessarily taken because of social cultivation. But no matter how freely one might try to think, the decision of necessity was made at the beginning of life: all thought continues the completion of the wave of music, “It is necessary.” Perhaps Ashbery invites the reader to step up, to see that there is something shared in the shape of the tree and the fluctuating situations filling the air. Perhaps Ashbery would like us to again feel what is worrying its shape into us. Perhaps he would like us to

surmount the stymying checks on intelligence that prevent us from seeing the rhyming contours that surround our moods and the visible world. Maybe we ought try to look back up the chain of command and make some speech that gives metaphoric visibility to its unfurling (a work of art).

That is how the charge—or observation, or both—of the stanza inverts the pride of freewill. The idea of an intellect, of a will that is free, is an idea trying to cut itself off from any participation in the completion of the gesture. By merely hoping or believing your will is free, you completely blunt your shape-seeing sensuality. To see the shape-sharing inheritance means installing the will in the linkages of infinite chains of sequences. Placing the will in that eternal chain dissolves its freedom. For the will to feel itself as free requires that it sustain a blinkered vision that is prejudiced against an awareness of what we inherit from the beginning of life. The sensual deficiency characteristic of this free will gives it something in common with a bucket of nails (which has total sensual deficiency).

The idea of an unfettered will is funny, because that possibility seems overwhelmingly unlikely. Yet it reigns. Hence so much disappointment; the full world never fails to remind us of its total control. The *idea* of cosmic relevance, which is what the stanza above contains, is gentle on our human pride. Arriving in the form of an idea, it commits the will (ignoring the debate around its freeness) to what “is necessary to go forward completing,” thus flattering the will with a feeling of deciding power. The idea doesn’t puncture the will’s inflated sense of autonomy and instead solicits the will’s consent to participate. It is probably more accurate to think of the dichotomy between freedom and determinism this way, as a play between two forces that do not negate each other and actually are intermingled. The idea of cosmic inheritance arouses debates about

determinism and the statement “It is necessary” has a tone of inevitability built into it. But the debate about the dichotomy—that the will is either free or a slave to the whims of rolled dice—lacks the subtlety and nuance a human thinker is capable of. The quintain helps the reader skip past this debate, so that she can pay greater attention to the sacred magnitude of the charge to continue the unfurling wave of music that worries the shape of the original gesture into everything. With her attention focused up here, the debate about whether her participation is determined or willed takes on the magnitude of a trifle.

Placed in the context of a cosmological gesture, and then in the context of all of human history, the sensation of a will that is free is probably, like all ideas and sensations that reigned over humanity for an interval, doomed to be eclipsed. In five hundred years the notion of a will that is free—if history has taught us anything—will be laughed at. Maybe those reigning and dominant ideas that periodize history are themselves iterations of that cosmological gesture. Like cloud-shapes. Maybe the sensation of the will independent of what engendered it is an ironic joke that the gesture is enjoying until it stops laughing and tries on another face. Maybe the poet is the ambassador to future iterations of the gesture’s unfurling. Ashbery encourages us to think in these terms, giving time and events their own agency, with special attention paid to the unfurling of cosmic thought.

The facts of history have been too well rehearsed . . . to require further elucidation here. But the other, unrelated happenings that form a kind of sequence of fantastic reflections as they succeed each other at a pace and according to an inner necessity of their own—these, I say, have hardly ever been looked at from the vantage point other than the historian’s . . . The living aspect of these obscure phenomena has never to my knowledge been examined from a point of view like the painter’s[.] (56)

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I have already elaborated on the way that the first page of *Three Poems* furnishes you with first-hand experience as a skygod. From that point on, the reader has been an involved

mechanism within the economy of the worrying that inflicts things with the shape of the gesture that writes the poetry. That is why the reader knew the quintain; she had done it herself once, she generated images that were afflicted by her emotional and mental agitations so that she could read the white spaces. Later Ashbery says to her “This is your eyes noting the passing of telephone poles and the tops of trees” (13). That a poem can *deliver* the reader the experience of being in and of the poem (or deliver *her* to the text’s experiences) is already an achievement that ought to dazzle literary study, specifically the genre known as the literature of the fantastic.<sup>1</sup> The reader feels toward the poem: “In you I fall apart, and outwardly am a single fragment, a puzzle to itself” (13). Ashbery makes you—*and the poem*—a Quixote: the terms of your personal reality is decided by the poem, while the poem gathers its reality and imagery from the personality of the reader. That this experience, that this deluded pan-identity reader-poem-Quixote then becomes a metaphor that illuminates a later stanza (the quintain I discussed in the last section) in the poem takes the achievement a step further. Is there any precedent?

“In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art” (14) says Susan Sontag in the last one-sentence sub-section of her essay “Against Interpretation.” It hangs, poised like a terse challenge. This is after she has communicated with fiery persuasiveness: stop mining for content, stop mutilating the text so that it fit a didactic agenda, and realize that art’s justification cannot and should not be made on an excavated inventory of data that “makes art into an article of use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories” (“Against Interpretation” 10). The erotics are restored in our sensual relation. “What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more” (“Against

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<sup>1</sup> “The fantastic therefore implies an integration of the reader into the world of the characters; that world is defined by the reader’s own ambiguous perception of the events narrated” (Todorov 31).

Interpretation” 14). *Three Poems* tells us: “We must learn to live in others” (13); could there be a more certain way to hear, see, and feel more?

When we, with our personal images, emotions, and experiences, when our self and its life-beginning gesture becomes a metaphor literally threaded into the text, then we discover, perhaps to our alarm, that we are deprived of our interpreting equipment. The metaphor that illuminates “the gesture from the beginning of life,” is not bogged down by the obligation of being something the reader must interpret because the metaphor is made up of her own self, of her memories and the way she afflicted the things that grew up in the white spaces. She has not *learned* to see, hear, or feel more; she was deprived of any other option. Because *Three Poems* harbors material from an abundance of sources—the poem, the poet, and the reader—hermeneutics are impossible. The text has been corrupted with elements of any and all readers and potential readers. Any attempt at interpreting would only continue the corrupting process, it would extend the initial act of planting, of coloring the landscape of the poem with the things of the reader’s you. Instead the reader of Ashbery’s *Three Poems* is elevated to a different mode of awareness, reading in a way that suits that elevation.

And so the denser moments of awareness are yours, not the firm outline I believe to be mine and which is probably a hoax as well: it contains nothing after all, only a few notions of how life should be lived that are unusable because too general. (Ashbery 15)

Sontag asks “What kind of criticism, of commentary on the arts, is desirable today?” (“Against Interpretation” 12). Ashbery’s reader, if they make any commentary or criticism, cannot do so with any hope of making *Three Poems* into an article of use. They have been induced into “denser moments of awareness.” They are aware of the form of

becoming aware: they watch their self become the poem generated by the heart's intimations while they read the poem. A situation after or over or further than self-awareness is reached or attained or stumbled into. "I as I seem to you, you as you are to me, an endless game in which the abraded memories are replaced progressively by the new empty-headed forms of greeting" (12). Maybe it should be called poem-awareness because it's a state of *ekstasis*: the true reality of the reader's inner world is casually displayed on the pages and now she knows the fact of a poem inside her. She must feel that the "firm outline" of a self is "a hoax."

That former self, that rigidly delineated self who had never fallen into a poem, always relied on slogans to be its guide through life. Now the reader sees that the old and stale easy ethics of a one size fits all genre (whether it be the "golden rule" or the "categorical imperative") operates on the presumption that every self is a mathematically identical unit that agrees to the demands of the equation. And so the reader dismisses "those notions of how life should be lived that are unusable because too general." She has ceded the boundaries that contain the self and sees her self from afar as a poem. The possibility of mining the art is removed: the reader cannot make Ashbery's poetry into an "article of use" because articles can only be useful to a self still stranded in the hoax, stuck in the firmly outlined math-unit form. Use has lost the majority of its meaning to the reader who has become multiple ("In you I fall apart . . . a puzzle to itself"). Sontag would be excited; the reader of *Three Poems* is a new sort of reader who could marshal a new "kind of criticism" a new "commentary on the arts."

And a new possibility in aesthetics presents itself. In Sontag's later essay "The Aesthetics of Silence," she comments on art's tendency to find a security from the

molestation of interpretation by becoming more difficult, more inarticulate, toward “an ideal plenitude to which the audience can add nothing, analogous to the aesthetic relation to nature” (16). She says that art, seeking protection from the utilitarian despots that interpret it, tries to obscure itself, become unintelligible, so that the audience regards it the same way they regard a thing of nature: as something that happens the way it does because nature ordains it so, with an explanation beyond the reaches of interpretation. What Ashbery does however, which I have never seen, is the opposite. He does not seek a “plenitude to which the audience can add nothing”; instead he literally adds the audience. Speaking to the reader, reminding her of that memory from the first page, he says “You know that emptiness that was the only way you could express a thing? The awkwardness around what were necessary topics of discussion, amounting to total silence on all the most important issues?” (12). Here, in case the reader doesn’t know she has already fallen into the poem, the poem tells her she did, reminding her that there was that one time when she was trying to express something (“it all” or “all the most important issues”) and her speech amounted to “total silence,” to “that emptiness” that was the white space at the opening of *Three Poems*. This the inverted aesthetic move to what Sontag describes, an aesthetic that involves the reader.

A *human’s* aesthetic relation to nature is one in which they cannot add anything. A human cannot tell a landscape what it means or how it should be used (in aesthetic terms) because the human recognizes the anthropocentric error in doing so. But a *thing of nature’s* aesthetic relation to nature is a different situation entirely, wherein what occurs I am not fully certain. We should read *Three Poems* again and take some field notes. Because the aesthetic contained in the book is one of (a thing of) nature’s relation to nature. The audience cannot add anything, there is no possibility of interpretive molestation because the

*audience is added* to the poem by the poem and any interpretive deduction is installed in the landscape of the poem as another image within it. The poem says this to the reader: “Your body could formulate these things, projecting them into me, as though I had thought of them” (12). To think about the poem is to add to it, is to give the poem more material than it had thought of itself. All acts of interpretation are nullified as they immediately become stanzas that are part of the great landscape of the poem. Instead of fending off and parrying the audience’s urge to make the poem into something useful, Ashbery has created an aesthetic mode that absorbs them, coopts them, makes them dance in the scene as the poem’s marionette.

This is exciting: a poetics that aspires better and better to do this, a poetics that makes the reader feel toward the poem “I am slurped into it, falling on top of you and falling with you” (11). Poetry does not need to flee the use-appropriating mania of the human world (as terrifying and despicable as it is). The artist’s preserve does not need to be a fortified landscape, impenetrable to the meaning-seeking reader. The poem can open up, put the reader *in*, dazzle them into forgetting meaningfulness as a thing, make the entire economy of meanings—that which sustains the social world—take on the appearance of a complex design fit for a giant butterfly wing.

As a feature of the poem’s landscape, this reader drops their memory of the teleological delusion, the sterile and didactic suburb to the world. They are added to nature’s dream world when the poem abducts them and adds them, plants them like a flower in the poem’s meadow.

This sensation can be a simile. The aesthetics that makes the viewer of nature (or reader of the poem) into a feature of that landscape can be applied to real living relations

that inform human ways of thinking and navigating their life. To be a feature of the landscape for no other reason than to aid in the forward completion of the poem, wherever it goes, with no other goal than “a clean-washed sea” at one moment, a shape correspondent with the tree’s the next, can be a ‘like or as’ a person is to living. Ashbery’s reader, when she puts the book down, can ruminate on the living landscape of life that brought her to the poem she just read. It’s as if some inner solstice ordained by the moon or wind brought her to her inner season’s next stage. She looks at all the people around her. She tries to feel her self and the people as mere trees on the side of a hill in a countryside of the world that continues forward with the inner logic that writes poems. The sensation raises questions about the possibility of cosmic relevance: are the people swaying in the wind in just the way the cosmic impellor had envisioned, in shapes with a worried inheritance? The poem, the landscape speaks: “Therefore I hold you. But life holds us, and is unknowable” (11) (and therefore profoundly inappropriate to the interpretive method).

The aesthetics that Ashbery demonstrates—the aesthetics that makes the audience or reader into a thing of nature with an aesthetic relation to nature (or the landscape of the poem)—has the philosophical potential to give us the experience necessary to understanding and living one of Nietzsche’s most important ideas. The idea is often cherry-picked from its total context so that it will fulfill a predetermined use. This particular idea comes from a sentence that is long with cumbersome punctuation. But to make it useful (to the mishandling of many theorists) it is often abridged terribly, as if Nietzsche’s ideas realize their proper destiny when reduced to fit on a bumper-sticker. Here is how this particular idea is usually presented.

“[W]e have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art—for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*” (Nietzsche 52).

Rendered thus, the idea still carries tremendous potential. There are at least a couple directions a thinker can go from this heavily redacted rendering of one of Nietzsche’s earliest and most profound statements.

One argues for an aestheticization of societal life, proposing an unrestrained ornamentation of civilization. This is very interesting, the way it calls for a sort of politically and legislatively mandated devotion to aesthetically enhancing what we encounter and endure in civilized life. Contemporary America’s aesthetic of plastic, right angles, screens, disposability, and efficiency does assert itself to the great depression of its people. America would benefit tremendously from a program of aesthetically justifying itself. Properly implemented, it could even neuter profiteering motives by supplanting monetary value.

Nietzsche is nauseated by this systematized and prescriptive use of his thinking.

Another interpretation, the reigning interpretation, argues that your personal lived life need not be legitimized on the level of happiness you feel or the amount of suffering you're able to skirt. You can learn to recognize a beauty in all you experience, a beauty that affirms life's pain. There is a thinking license that can annex the difficult things in life so that they become added colors to the palette you use to paint the picture that is your life. This notion is more honest to Nietzsche's general philosophy. It is a nice idea and I have used it to feel better many times. But again, it is an appropriation of Nietzsche's words that cherry-picks. Art laughs at the self-pitying theory that makes aestheticism a therapy.

The entire comedy of art is neither performed for our betterment or education nor are we the true authors of this art world. On the contrary, we may assume that we are merely images and artistic projections for the true author, and that we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art—for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*—while of course our consciousness of our own significance hardly differs from that which the soldiers painted on canvas have of the battle represented on it. (Nietzsche 52)

Art is not “for our betterment or education” so how could we possibly think that Nietzsche's aesthetic justification would improve our station here in the world, make it happier, easier, more pleasing? And any claim to being creators, authors, and artists is itself fraudulent: “nor are we the true authors of this art world.” We don't make art and it has no interest in helping us feel better.

If existence is *only* and *eternally* justified as an aesthetic phenomenon, then life, as we feel it, is dubious and unneeded until then. Where humans credit themselves with the creative capacity for making art, they block life's justification. Where humans assume that a justification of life contains information that could be used for their betterment, they plug their ears to the justifying speech. Difficult things will need to be admitted—that art does not benefit human life, and that humans do not create art—before life may be justified.

Until then, according to Nietzsche's logic, the human heart feels that living is a frivolous and irrelevant enterprise. If Nietzsche is correct, human awareness of this nihilism must very rarely be cognized, because if it were cognized, the dread one would correspondingly feel would beg to be resolved or surmounted. That human life subsists without any justification is not some ubiquitously recognized problem, which is why, if Nietzsche is correct, this fact must lurk in the background of our aware thought-forms. Perhaps the truth and form of this feeling is in the many ways the feeling is smothered by busy activities, through varying kinds of human submission to social and emotional professionalism.

We must think about what is needed to surmount and leave behind the condition of nihilism, the condition of living in a way that is irrelevant, frivolous, and unjustifiable. I will argue that Ashbery's *Three Poems* answers this need and provides a means for surmounting our present irrelevant condition. *Three Poems* provides the means of surmounting the problem of existential irrelevance by helping, no, coercing the reader into dropping their closed off sense of self. Questions like this one help: "Do these things between people partake of themselves, or are they a subtler kind of translucent matter carrying each to compromise distance painfully outside the rings of authority?" (10). Do the things that act as a means of relation between people belong to themselves? Does conversation belong to the people speaking or does it belong to the conversation itself? Or maybe conversation carries the things (the people and the words) that seem to partake of conversation to a "compromise distance," to a place "outside the rings of authority," a place where things are authorless, unauthorized, without agents.

The thoughts inspired by Ashbery's question above carry the reader to a place where they consider a space that has no author, no agent, yet still has thought and speech. A space

that would suggest that “things between people”—such as conversation and any other thing that relates people to each other—are things that manifest as the expression of an authorless (non)agent. To speak, then, is to give voice to the speaker “outside the rings of authority.” The heart’s membership to total existence is renewed through experiences of self and human divestment, which is precisely what I have described. From Nietzsche’s distant perspective, the self, with its fragile dignity and taste for optimism, is trivial. Thus this statement: “our consciousness of our own significance hardly differs from that which the soldiers painted on canvas have of the battle represented on it.” Self-consciousness, a hitherto exalted regalia, is no better than a delusion felt by painted soldiers who think that the outcome of the battle and their survival are of chief importance. The painter does not care for the well-being of the soldier or the outcome of the battle any more than they care for the well-being of the dark clouds looming over the battle or the crest on the soldier’s helmet. Well-being is not an aesthetic concern and the author of the cosmological does not comprehend the concept. The heart feels a denser worthiness in its beat when a sensation that it belongs to a total tapestry is possible. Ashbery’s *Three Poems* provides a means for experiencing this which, in turn, is also a way toward living Nietzsche’s aesthetic justification of life.

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John Ashbery’s *Three Poems* presents a possibility of a poetics of the aesthetic phenomenon. He writes the poems as if he were an instrument of another author, one we might call The Poem, but in his own self surrender he is not unique. The poetry of Rilke, Hölderlin, Mallarmé, and Novalis—to name only a few—offer (differing) examples of this writing mode. What makes Ashbery particularly impressive is that he goes further than

these great poets and puts the reader through the poet's hazing ritual. Rilke knows and can describe the self being overwhelmed and exploded by the embrace of an angel, but Ashbery's poems *are* angels, they overwhelm the reader's self, the reader is exploded and embraced by The Poem. We read and so think and feel: "we are merely images and artistic projections for the true author." We know what it's like to be a mere conduit of totemic impulses. This space where the self forgets its boundaries, "Can it be identified with some area in someone's mind? The answer is yes, if it is experienced, and it has only to be expected to be lived, suspended in the air all around us" (Ashbery 10). Ashbery delivers this experience to the reader, making them keen to its total presence, "suspended in the air all around us."

I am interested in imagining a new poetics that abducts the reader and makes their reading work into a projection of the author's. Instead of doing a really good job of explaining Nietzsche's aesthetic justification of life, Ashbery provides us with the means of personally experiencing a simulation that places the reader in two (or more) simultaneous perspectives. One as the reader clutching book, another as an aesthetic projection present in the actual text. The result is not answers—to what some cosmic author wants from us, something probably wrong and silly to imagine anyway—but a close look, a personal look at the mechanics of being an aesthetic phenomenon.

There is a nudge to fall into the poem that persists throughout the whole book. All of the pronouns in *Three Poems* have a porous quality and they have footholds on several planes. At one plane the reader is kidnapped. In Ashbery's words:

The personal pronouns in my work very often seem to be like variables in an equation. 'You' can be myself or it can be another person, someone whom I'm addressing . . . and my point is also that it doesn't really matter very much, that *we are*

*somehow all aspects of a consciousness giving rise to the poem* (my emphasis, “Craft Interview” 24-25).

About himself, Ashbery says that “I guess I don’t have a very strong sense of my own identity and I find it very easy to move from one person in the sense of a pronoun to another” (“Craft Interview” 25). The reader, whether they consent to it or not, feels the same. The pronouns she identifies with are multiplied and grammatical contradictions are laughed at. The effect places a portion of the reading perspective into a landscape that the poet, with reader alongside him, are exploring, each participating in what will “give rise to the poem.” Reader and poet both have discarded the things that individualize them, although neither know how or what those discarded things were exactly. “I could tell you about some of the things I’ve discarded but that wouldn’t help you because you must choose your own, or rather not choose them but let them be inflicted on and off you” (9). If the reader were to choose what she discarded (so that she could forget her self), she would fail, because the act of choosing fortifies her own authority and so nullifies the enterprise altogether. She must let the choosing “be inflicted” as if from an outside agent.

Richard Howard says that in Ashbery’s poems the “notion that The Poem is already there, *in the world*, and must be collected somehow by the poet, is what keeps these pieces going” (24). *Three Poems* makes the reader feel tasked with some of that responsibility. When a voice is addressing a “you”, it is on one plane an address directed at Ashbery spoken by The Poem (as latent incarnation?). But that “you” is doubled, and at another pitch it addresses you, the reader. A peculiar sensation emerges: like our actual life, our life as a reader, is the articulation of The Poem. We feel the charge of writing the text because the person the poet is appealing to, in order to find The Poem, is you, the reader. You find your

self trying to tell the poet, who is addressing you, The Poem, while you read it. “We see this moment from outside as within” (Ashbery 5).

Who is speaking and who is listening and do both do some of the reading? It’s as if “Your body could formulate these things, projecting them into me, as though I had thought of them” (Ashbery 12). To credit someone with original authority over any of the thoughts written in *Three Poems* calls on several bodies. This speech with a pan-origin, with a mouth speaking to and from three bodies “becomes a medium through which we address one another, the independent life we were hoping to create” (Ashbery 13). Is The Poem the independent life? Or are Ashbery, The Poem, and you creating a living thing here in this book and is the book the medium? Or is it that these pronouns of simultaneity, with their tripled “address [to] one another,”—is *this mode of address* the medium through which a life, independent of all anchoring pronouns, is created? A cubist painting of subjectivity comes to mind, hung in a museum that only admits animated paintbrushes. Ashbery gives you a feeling like you are being grasped by some omniscient painter. Self-consciousness seems trivial compared to this surging awareness that detects the total being who uses your self as a medium. Surpassing self-consciousness, you are elevated to the level of ‘as-a-medium-consciousness.’ Perhaps this experience will orient your ongoing ambition: to be, as best you can, a medium that brings out, manifests, and articulates life’s single and eternal justification (an aesthetic phenomenon).

This is the effect of the pronouns in *Three Poems*. The self, poet, and The Poem (as a living thing) intermingle, inverting a source of speech, then upending the chronology that could have a source altogether. Subjects speak as mouthpieces to another subject’s bodily formulation. The bodily formulations project speech into the thought of another. This

climate forces the reader to live as an aesthetic phenomenon for a moment. The experience gives her a tangible memory that explains, with the emotional rigor of a trauma, the only and eternal justification of life.

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It is unlikely that Ashbery wrote *Three Poems* in some kind of coordinated effort to affirm and exemplify Nietzsche's aesthetic justification of life. But there are moments in *Three Poems* that suggest the possibility of authentic clairvoyance, as if there were direct lines of psychic transference connecting *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Three Poems*. Someone, maybe Ashbery, maybe The Poem (as an energy or thing within the world), seems to have intended that the reader of *Three Poems* experience herself as an aesthetic phenomenon, as if her life were part of a work of art that an artist of cosmic identity and proportion creates. I have this suspicion (of clairvoyant connectedness) because within *Three Poems* are unambiguous echoes of Nietzsche's aesthetic justification of life. Below is an example. Instead of as a soldier at battle on a canvas (as Nietzsche evokes in his *The Birth of Tragedy* when asserting the aesthetic justification of life),<sup>2</sup> picture yourself as a plant in a garden:

“Nothing applies to your strict handling of how the roots should be lived, without caring about the flowers and leaves that may tower over them, a subsidiary mass, someday.” (Ashbery 15)

Nothing, no code of ethics or philosophy of life applies to the way you handle and care for those parts that anchor you and guarantee your sustenance (your roots) in this

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<sup>2</sup> I present the passage quoted in the previous section again for reference: “On the contrary, we may assume that we are merely images and artistic projections for the true author, and that we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art—for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*—while of course our consciousness of our own significance hardly differs from that which the soldiers painted on canvas have of the battle represented on it.” (Nietzsche 52)

garden (that hosts other living things, this world), unless that code or philosophy is oriented toward the maximizing of what will please the gardener who has planted you. The gardener and the painter are the same: the soldier in the painting has no reason for mattering except to the extent that they satisfy the aesthetic vision of the painter. The flowers and leaves that tower over your roots are the equivalent to the painted rendering of the soldier. They are a “subsidiary mass”: they are your company in that they pertain to you, but a higher company, the gardener, qualifies their presence, shape, and color. If you would like to find an explanation for your being here, one with equal duration to the setting that hosts your living, then you will have to empathize with the gardener. You are justified as a phenomenon who is capable of driving up flowers that will tower over you. Handle your roots with strict dedication to your life’s upward reach and blossom.

Did Ashbery intend this echo of Nietzsche? Did Ashbery have the aesthetic justification in mind at all or ever while writing *Three Poems*? Ashbery is untalkative when asked about the meanings of his poems. They might “elucidate a lot of almost invisible currents . . . but as for specific philosophical concepts I don’t think they play any role in my work” (“Craft Interview” 22). Is it wrong then to find doubled articulations of Nietzsche’s aesthetic justification in *Three Poems*?

I prefer a more mystic reading, which is coincidentally also more rigorous.

Suppose that Nietzsche is right: we, humans, are not “the true authors of this art world.”

Whatever content, then, that The Poem contains (if we must force it to have content) was thought or planned by the “true authors,” whoever or whatever they are. We must be faithful to the rules of form that Nietzsche prescribes: The Poem is spoken by *authorless*

*speech*, or a speech that has no human author. If that speaker (of *The Poem*) makes a judgment that agrees with Nietzsche, then as readers we must, if we would like to know where that judgment comes from, mind the mechanics of judgment in general, which coincidentally speaks to the mechanics and origins of poetic speech. Ashbery illuminates the mechanics of judgment here:

“For we judge not, lest we be judged, yet we are judged all the same, without noticing, until one day we wake up a different color, the color of the filter of the opinions and ideas everyone has ever entertained about us. And in this form we must prepare, now, to try to live” (Ashbery 8).

It is true that *Three Poems* would not have been written if Ashbery himself (as a human) had not sat down and wrote it. But from this fact it does not necessarily follow that Ashbery is therefore the speaker proper to the poem. How can I make this claim? The passage above articulates a mechanics of a type of subjectivity that deprives the human of his authority over his judgments. Whatever judgments “we make” are merely “the color of the filter of the opinions and ideas everyone has ever entertained about us.” We are haunted, bewitched, and decided for by a prior-to atmosphere of judgments. The sensation of making a judgment (as an individual) is only the most human-flattering instant of that judgment’s life. The judgement has been living invisibly above us and before us for who knows how long, until it reached a new summit, one in our personal thoughts and mouth, and at that moment the judgment took on human enunciation. Unsurprisingly, this enunciation, this moment when the judgment wears the plumage of human speech, enriches the greater atmosphere of judgments anew. The judgment that had been hovering over the human speaker for whatever amount of time—minutes, months, or a century—picks the human up like a medium, the way a painter picks up a paintbrush, and then the judgment takes on a form, through the human, that makes the judgement visible to other human senses, that is,

as speech or text. And from this form the judgment takes on greater radiance as the text or speech flings it back up into the air again, where it floats along swirling breezes of thoughts and feelings, searching for new mediums (humans) to fling the developing judgment up once more.

If *Three Poems* contains a judgment that agrees with any other judgment, be it Nietzsche's or anyone else's, we know that it is because Ashbery has taken on the color of what was thought about him without him having any control or say over it. It's the way he woke up ("until one day we wake up a different color"). The judgments contained in *Three Poems* are made by the invisible psychic energy that saw Ashbery and knew that he would be a consenting medium for their (the judgments') further articulation. It is this energy in the air that hovers above and before the human speaker that is "the true author" of The Poem. Whatever decides on the color Ashbery will be when he wakes up is the agent, the consciousness, the being that we want to address, asking if they (or it) had deliberately given *Three Poems* affirmations of Nietzsche's aesthetic justification of life. How do we ask this subject? Or how can we discover their intentions? The answer is, in part, within the way this prior-to-atmospheric subject speaks.

Ashbery's explanation of the origin of judgments can tell us two things: a) how to think and understand the origin of thought and speech (as something that colors us, therefore determining, for example, the thought that instructs a poem) and b) that the description of this explanation itself reiterates Nietzsche's aesthetic justification of life. Within the passage detailing the origin of judgments above, there is, *again*, an almost clairvoyant echo of Nietzsche's claim. Ashbery's account for the origin of judgments, along with the (non)subject he gives the authority of that judgment to, makes the human into a

mere instrument of the atmosphere of judgment. To say you wake up the color of all the judgments that have ever considered you is to say that your person is merely the canvas on which judgments use you to give themselves expression. As if to echo Nietzsche even further, Ashbery concludes this brief genealogy of judgment, this phenomenon of humans as judgment's mere medium, saying that "And in this form we must prepare, now, to try to live" (Ashbery 8). We must try to live in the form that makes us into the instruments or mediums (rather than agents or authorities) over the thoughts (judgments, feelings, opinions, fascinations) that hover above us, waiting to color us.

In an interview conducted right after he wrote *Three Poems*, Ashbery articulates his own real belief in the origin of poetic thought and this articulation reaffirms his genealogy of judgment. Speaking to his own authority over how he is able to write poetry he says he must find the time, have a "not too depressed state of mind," and then "start concentrating attentively in order to pick up whatever is in the air" ("Craft Interview" 13). Who puts things in the air to concentrate attentively to? The answer is unknown, the subject or being (that populates the air) is unknowable or identityless, like the subject or being that populates the air with judgments. This unknowability of the air that anticipates and eventually enunciates what is written aligns with the climate that Ashbery seeks before he writes a poem: "I think every poem before it's written is something unknown and the poem that isn't wouldn't be worth writing" ("Craft Interview" 12). If Ashbery were to have any personal knowledge about what he is writing, then he would abort that writing project because he wants to write something else, The Poem, which is written after careful attention is paid to "whatever is in the air." He says that he likes sestinas because they are good devices for getting him to "remoter areas of consciousness," areas of consciousness we might more accurately think of

as *remote* from human consciousness, the way judgements (or any immaterial bits of thought in the air) are until they usurp a human speaker. Here is more of what Ashbery says about writing sestinas:

I once told somebody that writing a sestina was rather like riding down hill on a bicycle and having the peddles push your feet. I wanted my feet to be pushed into places they wouldn't normally have taken[.] ("Craft Interview" 25)

All this conveys a calculated interest in yielding control and authority over to some other force that could be the author of The Poem. If Richard Howard is right, that Ashbery's work is to find The Poem that is already there, in the world somewhere, then we also know that to get to it, to find it, requires that something else be pushing the peddles that carry the poet's feet. The poet tries to get somewhere that they will fail to get to if they rely on their self and its willing power.

I want to take Ashbery's methodology, as articulated above, to its logical conclusions. I began by wondering if Ashbery deliberately echoed Nietzsche. But as evidenced above, Ashbery's participation in this phenomenon of echoing can only be incidental, a consequence of where the bicycle pushed him, a consequence of what is in the air prior to when Ashbery began his search for The Poem (in the world). The Poem as identityless energy or being, rather than Ashbery, is the author speaking to the reader, telling you how "your strict handling of how the roots should be lived." The poet just writes the words down.

This message about how the roots should live speaks in a doubled pitch. At one pitch it speaks to Ashbery, saying how the poem gets written. Ashbery nods, "my poems are frequently commenting on themselves as their getting written and therefore the methodology occasionally coincides with the subject" ("Craft Interview" 22). The Poem tells

Ashbery to consent to the ethics of the flowers that will tower over him, like The Poem is the gardener telling Ashbery to be the medium of art's true authors, to be the flower that the gardener intends. By writing The Poem he is being a medium for The Poem. Maybe while Ashbery writes he feels this toward the true author of The Poem: "This is our way of doing. Your body could formulate these things, projecting them into me, as though I had thought of them" (Ashbery 12). Ashbery receives and heeds these projections, which seem to be speaking from his own consciousness, and by writing the poem creates a subsidiary mass that towers above his roots.

We cannot forget about the second pitch in which The Poem addresses the reader. There is no way, no reason for the reader to disentangle themselves from this "way of doing" economy that receives projections and experiences them "as though I had thought of them." The address, at the most superficial level, looks at you, telling you that it is "Your body" that projects things onto somebody, The Poem or Ashbery or both. Ashbery and/or The Poem say that they feel "as though I had thought of" what you, the reader, has projected. And of course, you should recognize parts of your you down in The Poem; Ashbery (or The Poem) wants you here too, because "we are somehow all aspects of a consciousness giving rise to the poem" ("Craft Interview" 29). He tells you: "This is your eyes noting the passing of telephone poles and the tops of trees" (Ashbery 13), and you skip all hesitation over what Ashbery would like you to see, moving straight to your personal plane that remembers, perhaps, you in a car watching the tall things on the side of a forested highway passing by. You become an energy prior to The Poem, coloring it the way judgments color you. Again, this "becomes a medium through which we address one another, the independent life we were hoping to create" (Ashbery 13).

You've done it again, become yourself a feature of the poem. And by letting yourself be projected into it, you have tended your root structure in such a way that causes flowers to tower above, in *The Poem*. You have been an aesthetic phenomenon on accident. You helped push the pedals that push the poet's feet and at the same time have had your feet pushed by pedals that follow *The Poem's* volition. The last word in a line of a sestina tells the poet where they must get to. You read *The Poem* under the propulsion of a similarly predetermined momentum: *The Poem* does not speak or provide you with imagery when it abducts you and forces you to do the providing: "This is your eyes." The reader has been projected by the authorless author of *The Poem* into *The Poem*. The poet and reader share and partake in an intimate contact with the true author(s) of the art world. The reader is a medium as well, grasped by the true author(s).

Which is why the first poem of the book is called "The New Spirit." Ashbery, or whoever it is exactly that writes *The Poem*, is not being figurative when he/it refers to an "independent life we were hoping to create." In "The New Spirit" Ashbery says that it is a

fact that somebody is being born; in other words at the end [of "The New Spirit"] a person is somehow given embodiment out of those proliferating reflections that are occurring in a generalized mind which eventually run together into the image of a specific person, "he" or "me," who was not there when the poem began. ("Craft Interview" 33)

It isn't wrong to find an echo of Nietzsche's aesthetic justification of life in *Three Poems*. It's only wrong to ask Ashbery if he intended it. There are at least three bodies (Ashbery, the reader, and the "true author" of *The Poem*) involved in all of the speech contained in these poems. Probably more. And at least one of them isn't actually quantifiable because they speak in "proliferating reflections that are occurring in a generalized mind." If anyone intended to echo Nietzsche in *The Poem*, then it would be this

being. And If there is anybody that can verify the truth of Nietzsche's claim, it would be this being.

It remains probably impossible to ask that being anything directly. If "the true authors of this art world" have any point of consciousness from which they would deign to disclose something in the profane appearance of typeface, then that point would have to be pointless, without any trackable source, many-tracked (a generalized mind). The being who could answer that question is a being that is in the air, that *is* the air (hence Ashbery's attentiveness to what is in the air). This air-being's words would be written through a medium that addressed from multiple and simultaneous points of origin, like the things in the air that color us. Therefore, asking whether there was any organized intention to make *Three Poems* respond to and echo Nietzsche's aesthetic justification of life is a question with an answer that would speak in the phonetics and lexicon of the wind.

My untenable beliefs, my unacademic, mystic convictions draw the only logical conclusion. That the truth of life's justification only and eternally as an aesthetic phenomenon is written and ratified in the wind. It is neither coordination (between Nietzsche and Ashbery) *or* mere coincidence that the two texts in question (*Three Poems* and *The Birth of Tragedy*) assert the aesthetic justification and demonstrate it in action. The agreement and harmony between these texts is decided in a supernatural court, by the being in the wind. Here is how Nietzsche describes the mode of the Dionysian artist, saying that art achieves the

"the Dionysian, as artistic energies which burst forth from nature herself, *without the mediation of the human artist*—energies in which nature's art impulses are satisfied in the most immediate and direct way." (Nietzsche's emphasis, 38)

It only makes logical sense to assume that Nietzsche too, in his thinking, sought to relax and ideally completely dissolve his own “mediation” between what he wrote and what were the “energies which burst from nature herself.” His philosophical work deliberately tries to explode the division that prevents philosophy from being an aesthetic practice. There is therefore good reason to think that his work is the expression of “nature’s art impulses” rather than his own. He even gives us reason to believe that he, like Ashbery, wanted to be an expresser of what hovered above him, in the air: “In song and in dance man expresses himself as a member of a higher community; he has forgotten how to walk and speak and is on the way toward flying into the air, dancing” (37). If Zarathustra can only believe in a god that can dance (which he says), then we can assume that Nietzsche would have tried to write the word of a dancing god, to write from a feeling of “flying into the air.”

Dancing sounds a lot like riding a bicycle downhill. Where Ashbery describes having his feet pushed to places they would not have otherwise gone to, Nietzsche celebrates forgetting how to walk and speak so that one can be on the way toward what is in the air. And how can we not be reminded again of this dazzling passage from *Three Poems*, where Ashbery seems to be explicitly describing what it is to experience oneself as a Dionysian dancer?

Collar up, you are lighter than air. The only slightly damaged bundle of receptive nerves is humming again, receiving colorless emanations from outer space and dispatching dense, precisely worded messages. (41)

To express as a member of a higher community as Nietzsche aspires, to be usurped by nature’s art impulses: would the sensation not rhyme with the one Ashbery describes above? Wouldn’t we feel “lighter than air” if we were dancing the way Nietzsche describes? If we are able to be conduits of nature’s art impulses, then we would need the “nerves” that

would be “receptive” to “emanations from outer space,” sense organs capable of detecting emanations from outside our self, in the air. If a poem resulted from this reception, if a text that would give expression to this impulse belonging to nature herself emerged, then there would need to be, coming from that source of impulses, something “dispatching dense, precisely worded messages.” Ashbery seems to be describing a dithyrambic poetics.

All these coincidences, along with the mechanics both authors give us for explaining the origin of the work of art, lead me to my mystic conclusion. The reason Nietzsche and Ashbery write in complimentary harmony with each other is because they both assume the same methodology, one that cancels human authority. They are both interested in permitting the emergence of “art energies which burst forth from nature herself, *without the mediation of the human artist.*” The reason the messaging in these seemingly disparate texts is parallel is because *there really are* impulses that belong to nature herself and her voice is speaking through both. The authenticity of this reality has factual evidence in the consistency of her messaging, which says in more way than one, that you, the human, must assume a Dionysian state of consciousness, where you forget yourself, your ability to speak and walk. You become aware of the many things hovering in the air, nature’s impulses waiting to express themselves through a human instrument and “To be always conscious of these multiple facets is to incarnate a dimensionless organism like the wind’s, a living concern that can know no rest, by definition: it *is* restlessness” (Ashbery 61). Both of these authors write as organisms that forget their dimensions, attentive to the air, which must give one the feeling of incarnating an organism that is much like the wind.

This brings us back to the somebody or something that is born, Ashbery says, by the end of “The New Spirit.” His writing method, focused on being attentive to what is in the

air, rhymes with an effort to be “always conscious of these multiple facets.” If that is his writing method (a method of consciousness focused toward the multiple facets in the air), and he says that within the poem someone is born, then we have good reason to believe that for him, writing is an act that incarnates a “dimensionless organism like the wind’s.” This being fits the profile of a possible author of “this art world:” the dimensionless body proper to impulses that belong to nature, eager to be expressed by the human willing to no longer be a mediator, but a medium.

What makes the correlation between Ashbery and Nietzsche even more impressive is the way Ashbery also makes the reader an unconsenting champion and demonstrator of the aesthetic justification of life. Just before Nietzsche articulates what became this famous maxim, he writes that:

We contend . . . that the whole opposition between the subjective and objective . . . is altogether irrelevant in aesthetics, since the subject, the willing individual that furthers his own egoistic ends, can be conceived of only as the antagonist, not as the origin of art. Insofar as the subject is the artist, however, he has already been released from his individual will, and has become, as it were, the medium through which the only truly existent subject celebrates his release in appearance. (52)

This “opposition between the subjective and objective” that Nietzsche dismisses as “altogether irrelevant in aesthetics” is thoroughly eradicated in *Three Poems*. Even the reader, picking up the book, still retaining her sense as a “willing individual,” feels this “opposition between the subjective and objective” slip away once she begins to read, feeling as if her “body could formulate these things, projecting them into me, as though I had thought of them” (Ashbery 12). Nietzsche says that the subject who calls himself the artist “has already been released from his individual will” when he engages in the aesthetic practice. In Ashbery’s *Three Poems* we go a step further and say that the subject that calls herself the

reader, the spectator—she too is released from her individual will. Both poet and reader become “the medium through which” *some* subject, perhaps “the only truly existent” one, “celebrates his release in appearance.” *Both*—and this is a new emphasis I want to make—artist *and* reader, as *willing individuals*, ought to be conceived as antagonists that impede on the appearance that art facilitates. Both must become mediums. All those who cling to the delusion of being a willing individual must get out of the way. This includes the reader. I am proposing a new ambition to aesthetic practices, one that faces the antagonistic ontology of the reader/viewer/audience directly and forces them to forget that ontology, forget their individuation.

This idea and ambition (for a new aesthetics of abduction) further emphasizes the revolutionary potential of the aesthetic form demonstrated in *Three Poems*. An aesthetics of abduction and involvement (of the reader) reverses the direction that Sontag said art was necessarily moving. Ashbery’s aesthetics make the work of art *and* the reader into things of nature that aesthetically relate to nature (see above). The aesthetics of abduction—to give Ashbery’s involving poetics a terminological phrase—gives nature’s art impulses a method for going on the offensive. I have to provide a brief recapitulation for this to make sense.

Sontag observed the retreat of art—into the obscure, the cryptic—toward a space where the viewer (or reader) had no other option but to surrender their interpretive impulse and give in, instead, to a relation to the work of art she claims is analogous to the human’s aesthetic relation to nature. The same way a human cannot say what a sunset is beautiful for, what its beauty is useful for, the artist, according to Sontag, attempts to disarm the viewer, presenting a situation in which the viewer cannot make the work of art into an article of use.

Ashbery flips the retreat, abducts the viewer (reader), and, as I hope I have demonstrated, forces the reader to forget her notion of self, forget the individuation that is the antagonism which denies and frustrates the expression of nature's art impulses. Nietzsche marvels at the moment in Dionysian art where the artist "has already been released from his individual will, and has become, as it were, the medium through which the only truly existent subject celebrates his release in appearance." Ashbery raises Nietzsche one—exponentially. Ashbery, being himself an artist through which Nature celebrates her release and appearance, multiplies the celebration. Within the appearance and expression of nature's art impulses (which is the text of Ashbery's *Three Poems*) Ashbery makes each reader commit the same dithyramb. Each reader feels that "the everyday glamor of a 'personal life,' keeping a diary and so forth, is the outward sign of this progression that is built into us like the chain of breathing" (23). What the reader once deemed as personal and individual to her is now recognized finally as only the surface evidence, "the outward sign" of nature's total movement and ceaseless unfurling, a "progression" that is innate to her composition. In the sentence that follows the one above, *Three Poems* speaks again in the form of direct address to the reader:

So there is no need to wait to be transformed: you are already. I am aware of it because I see you like a star, that mild, friendly warming presence so many trillion miles away, and this suits me because I would have you only in this way: as you are, as you are to me. (23)

The reader, from the perspective of The Poem, is not just some person with a personal life "and so forth." She is a celestial body, a star, which is to say that she is a participating agent in the cosmic destiny, the destiny that nature's art impulses strive toward. She is *something* these impulses of nature's move through. The reader learns to join the artist (Ashbery) in the annihilation of the antagonist hampering the release and

expression of nature's art impulses. She becomes, not a person, but something else, something that suits the poem, a star.

I want to stress it again. Ashbery demonstrates an entirely new ambition for poetry and aesthetics in general: to abduct and involve those who encounter it, making them collaborators in the aesthetic sojourn. Nietzsche says "Let us now approach the *Greeks* in order to learn how highly these *art impulses of nature* were developed in them" (38). I say, let us now approach *Three Poems* in order to develop the *art impulses of nature* within our lived life. Let us live through an experience of a Dionysian festival and be satyrs for an hour or so.

The Poem is an event, both when read and while written, of the Dionysian celebration that gives nature a chance to express herself through the medium of mortals. Ashbery and *Three Poems* do not *agree with* or *echo* Nietzsche. These poems demonstrate and provide space for Nietzsche's hope for the aesthetic justification to take place, in life, alive again. This points to yet another new possibility for poetry: to bring Dionysus' festival to the reader's lived life.

If our hope and intention is that the heart recover its sense of intersection within the invisible and electric networks of the stars, seasons, and atmospheric emotions, why limit our poetic practices to a mode of display and exhibition? Don't we, as typical readers, participate in the stymying of poetic potential when we expect and feel entitled to not having our personal boundaries disturbed when we read? I am talking about the basic expectation that, as readers, we have the assumption that we occupy some omniscient and insulated remote protection from the wilderness within the poem. We read like we are scrutinizing scientists standing over the text, analyzing, making theories about what the author intended, treating the thing like a specimen, already dead and awaiting our dissection

of it. Is it a wild standard to say that the reader should have the experience of being plucked out of her omniscient comforts, placed straight into the environment of the poem? The current, traditional expectation, that gives the reader a sense of being a scientific authority over the text, as an interpreter engaged in hermeneutics, seems like a more bizarre mode of reading to me.

I don't mean to say that all poetry that presents itself as something to be read in the traditional sense is weak or worse. These texts can be profoundly moving and may often galvanize readers into their own actions and practices toward a restoration of the reader's availability to the cosmic author. But, while poetic writing methods demand that the poet forget his dimensions and become a utilizer of his bundle of receptive nerves, I think it is condescending, showy, and unimaginative for that poet to not try to provide that experience to the reader. It makes the poet look like a braggart if he is only satisfied by exhibiting his mastery at becoming like the wind while showing now interest in sharing and involving the reader in this experience as well. Ideally the reader will discover a need and method for becoming the wind as well. The text can be a launch pad from which the reader and poet depart on the work of engendering the images of a metatext: The Poem.

The images of all poems in the books on the shelves in all libraries can be cues for your eyes to search in your you for your telephone poles and trees passing by. These things you find will install themselves in the invisible stanza you create in collaboration with The Poem and poet, as their medium and conductor.

Instead of meriting art as a good that benefits humanity, Maurice Blanchot, in his “The Future and the Question of Art,” undermines the meriting scale that is humanity. Blanchot does not care to say that art benefits or enriches humanity. Instead he would have us ask: why must a thing provide a benefit or enrichment to humanity? Is there an interest, an absolute, that exceeds humanity? Should we be ashamed of our imaginative insensitivity if we cannot detect or orient ourselves toward it? Is there, somewhere to be sensed, somehow, “a salient force capable of assuming the shape of any of the great impulses struggling to accomplish the universal task”? (Ashbery 58). What is the method proper to sensing something like a “cosmic welter of attractions” (Ashbery 58) if not an artistic methodology?

Blanchot, probably heartbroken, agrees with this statement that Hegel made: “Art is for us a thing of the past” (Blanchot 214). Yes, art still exists, but it is not a thing of the future. There is no vested interest in art because there is no need for it. Within the superfluous status of art is a message; it comments on the obsolescence of a spiritual relation to life, on a vacuum beneath the human heart. A world with no need for art is a world that has become spectacularly indifferent to something we know is at least one part magic (art). These stammering thoughts of mine, approach the source of an obscure, unnamable, and growing source of the modern emotional depressiveness that exists more or less in every human that belongs to modernity. “Thus you find people whose perfect understanding of love is deduced from lust,” (Ashbery 67) people who think that the highest feeling of elation is only a function of the empty determinism of biology.

It is true that art develops, that it changes over time. Art today will be different in the future. But these developments are, more than anything, advancements in a methodology of fortification and evasion (art's way of evading and fortifying against its obsolescence). These advancements therefore ironically only illustrate the lack of futurity in art. Because the future, the place toward which humanity develops, has no need for art, art subsists by crucially stymying that revelation (that there is no need for art). Art protects itself from the discovery of being unneeded by being cryptic, vague, verbose, silent, or marketable, commercially viable.

The historic advent of the photograph is emblematic; the art form of painting felt the real possibility of obsolescence that day. The (purported) mimetic function of painting had to develop invisible points of reference when a technology became the reigning authority over representation of the visual world. Impressionism is one kind of response. Instead of referring to a thing with the ambition of a realistic representation of it through painted image, impressionist painting refers to a feeling that a moment, a glance from the world imposed on the artist. The a painter attempts to give that look from the world an accurate representation. The mimetic aspiration of art turns to an accurate representation of something invisible, a painted articulation of emotional energy that was conveyed by a moment or a thing in a setting. Perhaps "in this unnatural, dreamy state the objects you have been contemplating take on a life of their own and in and for themselves. It seems to you that you are eavesdropping and can understand their private language" (Ashbery 84).

Art continues to generate creative ways of obfuscating its lack of justification in modernity. The advent of the photograph is emblematic in more than one way, as it underscores the purported mimetic role of art. This role deserves scrutiny. For Susan

Sontag, it is a problem that “all Western consciousness of and reflection upon art have remained within the confines staked out by the [post-Socratic] Greek theory of art as mimesis and representation” (“Against Interpretation” 4). The desire for accuracy, transparency, and fact (the activating desire of mimesis) is a desire that is better sated by technical prowess, not art. Can Western consciousness imagine anything else to desire from art? As long as consciousness does not imagine anything else for art to do, art must continue to practice an alchemy of obfuscation and obscurity to protect itself. Art’s uselessness and disposability remains unapparent so long as what art even is cannot be confidently ascertained.

Bizarre side effects occur. Art’s obscurity naturally engenders it with exotic flavor-appeal. Art becomes, to give an example, a socialite’s trophy mount. The metropolis’s alone, liberal, and affluent provide for art a minimal but crucial commercial sustenance. The effect is that art is preserved and simultaneously further alienated from the vigorous thrum of life. Hanging in the gala, art dumbly provides conversation prompts to awkward but well-dressed first dates. For them “the beautiful is the relaxing, what is restful and thus intended for enjoyment. Art then belongs to the domain of the pastry chef” (*Metaphysics* 146). This is one sort of space that preserves art. It is a strange place.

Blanchot restores to memory a time when art was in the street and markets and fabric of life. Art posited the future and art was a check on eyes that gazed past the human horizon. There was a time when “Painting served the gods, poetry made them speak” (Blanchot 213). Antigone was there to remind the city that the unwritten laws of the underworld were final and had inviolable status. What science could, I wonder, in a vigorous sense, give reality to the holiness of the dead and their realm today? Nothing serious

protects living people from the scoffing truth that humans are empty decaying particles with no sacred quality. It would be tragically ironic if a creature (the human) named for its propensity to bury its dead in the earth could no longer articulate a compelling and rigorous defense for the sacredness of the dead. *Antigone*, the play by Sophocles is read, but the Antigone he tried to introduce us to, the guardian and protector of the sacred threshold between life and death, has been eradicated from presence and history. All that is felt is “the stale unprofitable journey you called your life” (Ashbery 83).

Blanchot remembers Antigone and he remembers a language proper to the sacred, a language spoken by immortal and invisible things that have no need or interest in being comprehended by humans. Ashbery has heard their murmur: “They are not talking about you at all, but are telling each other curious private stories about things you can only half comprehend, and other things that have a meaning only for themselves and are beyond any kind of understanding” (84). Modernity has no use and no interest in things that can only be ‘half comprehended.’ Modernity is threatened by the notion that there are other things out there conversing amongst themselves, invisibly, speaking on subjects that forever elude “any kind of understanding.” Modernity *is* the ambition and presumption that all can, someday, be understood. Art’s attentiveness to these outside non-understandable voices is only one more reason why the ambition of humanity and the ambition of history have no need for art. History’s and humanity’s ambitions depend on the possible understanding of all things, because the possibility of the humanitarian hope requires this possibility. For history and humanity, the act of acknowledging things that elude understanding forever, indifferent to the plight of humanity, is an act of surrender and forfeit.

Blanchot looks directly into this conflict between the ambition of humanity and the work that is proper to art. He does not try to reconcile the two. His response lays a foundation for new, more imaginative responses.

He claims that consciousness surrenders its greatest potentials to a domineering will (which he calls “the universal will”). This will bullies consciousness into habits that benefit the vision of this will. These habits cripple consciousness and stunt its awarenesses. Ashbery phrases it in a way that I find fitting: “The darkness that surrounds you now does not exist, because it never had any independent existence: you created it out of the spleen and torment you felt” (85-86). This torment is the symptom of the will that Blanchot will refer to, and this will works to numb us to the outside murmuring and creates an illusion of surrounding darkness that dissolves types of awareness. Because of lost awarenesses, because you have created a darkness around you, consciousness fails to locate a justification for art.

Blanchot’s essay inverts the issue of art’s justification. He does not try to justify art. Instead he turns to the terms of justification itself, to the valuation system used for justification and that system is what he interrogates. This interrogation draws our attention to a monopoly that surrounds (modern) human consciousness, a monopoly so total it is nearly impossible to locate, like pointing at air. It isn’t a problem if art cannot be justified. The problem is in the justifying impulse itself. The problem is in a monopoly on value that, by its design, cannot register value in art. An uncontested dogma of humanity excludes art from the future. Blanchot writes:

“Within the overall human undertaking, where the tasks conforming to the universal will for production and emancipation are necessarily the most important, art can only follow.” (212-213)

Art *follows* because it does not feature into the horizon that is envisioned by the future. Things of the future are mechanisms of production and emancipation. Yes, sometimes art contributes to changing cultural attitudes which then lead eventually to policy changes (changes that emancipate or democratize production). But, for Blanchot, it isn't even art we are citing if we are talking about something historically effective (something that has effects on the forward movement of history). It's journalism—perhaps an ornate sort. Journalism performs an action, it has “temporal effectiveness:” an act is performed by a thing that moves the drama forward. But “Art acts poorly and little” (Blanchot 213). As a mechanism of production or emancipation, art is inept. Aware of this, it apologizes for its uselessness and submits further to the demands of “the universal will.” This takes two basic forms. Both give art the task of generating human-flattering propaganda, underscoring the human protagonist in the drama of history. “Both are prepared to acknowledge in man the excellence of a power and in the artist the exercise of a form of this power” (Blanchot 211).

One form submits artistic activity to political and historical vision of humanity. Here, art squarely engages with history, examining the mistakes and atrocities, steeping the artistic practice in the political philosophies that respond to and correct the past. Art tries to perform an action that has “temporal effectiveness” by portraying humanitarian possibilities, speaking to historical mistakes, and by making many other kinds of criticisms on the incompleteness of the humanitarian vision, thereby benefiting that vision's hegemony and providing it with further means of exerting its aspiration of totality. There are fierce disagreements within this form of art making, but these factions maintain a forward orientation, fixed on the hopeful ambition implied by the historical record. This forward

ambition unites these art forms as followers of “the universal will” thereby making their works something entirely unartistic in Blanchot’s view. Art here submits to a belief and hope that the excellence of human power culminates in the eradication of all things that hamper human freedom. The hope for total human freedom is the crusade of modernity and art, for Blanchot, has little to nothing to do with this crusade. To call works that participate in this crusade ‘art’ is to use the word ‘art’ as a counterfeiting moniker.

The other form of allegedly artistic activity worships the idol of the human, submitting artistic activity to the articulation of emancipation’s ideal. It elevates the individual, showcasing them. This artist, with a delusion that they are unencumbered by social mores, glamorizes the individual’s will as free, a will with unbounded courage to express its self. The prior form invests in a vision of all humanity, while this one aggrandizes the unit of measurement (the human). This artist “submits to the universal destiny no less than the artist who produces ‘useful’ works. Perhaps he submits more” (Blanchot 217). Art here is a means of consecrating the human. The monopolizing will has religious needs. Like any fundamentalism, it must gather momentum from a presumption to sanctity. This art form provides, portraying the individual as the absolute. Art is still, in this situation, a form of propaganda, it is still carried out and performed in the interest of fueling the “universal will” of humanity.

It may seem cynical and ruthless for Blanchot to reduce so much of what we are used to calling art to propaganda. Blanchot makes so much of art, thought to be a herald of nonconformity, into a follower, just another task “conforming to the universal will.” Wounded, our first reaction may be to think of art forms that avoid the pressure of humanity’s monopoly over the will. But that is a squandered effort. Blanchot’s polemic

offers an opportunity and the wounded reaction misses it. He gives the vision of humanity and freedom an imperial character. “And it was just here that philosophy broke down completely and was of no use” (Ashbery 87). It may strike us utterly backward to give humanitarianism—along with the philosophies that guide it and use it as their ideal—a despotic character. Humanitarianism defines itself in polar terms from tyranny. But this reasoning falls victim to a sophist’s trick. Why would the primary architect of value-terms hire a demolition crew? A monopoly buys out competition. “Good” has no competition. We must seize the opportunity to wonder that Blanchot would like for us to consider: can a thing be good because it benefits someone or something else? Even despite not having any direct benefit to humanity?

Are we able to want things for the good of not humanity? Are we able to produce non-good things, to anti-produce, to generate obsoletely? This is how Blanchot would like us to permit *The Poem*. As something making redundant and regressive productions, designs that are rigorously obsolescent. *The Poem* inverts the ethic of emancipation, revering the prison of suffering that detains human life, falling in love with the nature incarcerating us. It is like the sky, indifferent to both the happiness and despair of humanity.

Ashbery might recommend asking the dream world about what would be valuation of the good proper to it. “When will you realize that your dreams have eternal life? I of course don’t mean that you are a moonstruck dreamer, but that they do exist, outside of you, without your having anything to do about it” (85). Through dreams we bear witness to the workings of a world outside our individual self, one that has eternal life. The dream world’s movement operates on rules and within a setting that is “outside of you” and is therefore following an ambition and vision that has only an incidental interest in the hopes of

humanity. Where it goes, what it wants, it moves toward “without your having anything to do about it.”

The poet is able, and for Blanchot, *must* be a traitor to the human and care about things the same way the sky or dream world might. It may be disturbing, to promote some ideal of humanitarian indifference, but it could not be true if it were not a heresy. Because this ideal of poetics and art contradicts and ignores the charges of humanity, it is, by default, heretical.

If we could see from the perspective of the sky or the dreamworld we would see things plainly. “You know longer have to remember the principles, they seem to come to you like fragments of a buried language you once knew (Ashbery 86). The charges of mores and morality seem like excerpts from a rulebook from a board game—specific to the functioning of a game and belonging to a fragment of living that played that game and spoke in its language. From this vantage point you may think: how bizarre that those creatures tolerate the verdict of some arbitrary will. How can they give this invisible agent ultimate judgment over what is accepted or snubbed from the catalog of permissible human activities? Everything it cannot discern as useful is proudly thrown into a trash heap.

When you wonder if you’ve wasted your life, you’re asking the domineering will if you should to go to the trash heap. The universal will responds in ethically unimpeachable messaging: “it’s never too late to be a good person.” Good for what? For who? From the sky, the contours of the atmosphere can be seen and there are strata that exist above and outside the world of the universal will with its goodness and its vision of unanimous happiness. “It didn’t do to dwell on those ideal forms of happiness that had haunted you ever since the cradle and had now defined themselves almost in a paroxysm” (Ashbery 87). Happiness is

what the “universal will” has promised to provide if you will follow its program. The “universal will” is the judge, the measurer of the ethical, and by measuring things this way, it submits all to its program. The “universal will” is the sovereign to all the states combined and it is the parent company to commerce. Its brand gets no bad press because press cannot be bad without asking the “universal will” what bad is. All humans, by virtue of being human, are its employees. They work the public relations wing; their duties include: accepting that they are a human and that this is the *only* available category for all the people in the world. The category is “fact.” To refuse membership to the human category is to deny fact. To be in the sky means seceding the world of fact, of goodness, of happiness, and universality.

Under the gaze of the sky, things shed their value, no longer needing it. All things simply are. The sky looks down on valleys and cities, satisfied by all the green *and* the glass, by the concrete and leafy structures that send praise upward in reverence. A bird’s nest and commercial real estate seem, to the sky, to be merely different forms of the same basic prayer. The sky sees one island colored by the concentrated and swirling amalgams of two-legged creatures and looks over there, toward another island that is colored by wave like migrations of antlered creatures. Maybe the sky, discerning in its special way, the differences in the patterns of two-legged and antlered movements, categorizes the species of its epistemology with headings like ‘swirling,’ ‘wave,’ and other patterns of movement that only the sky can distinguish. Beings of the sky “would know other sets of objects, limited to their own perceptions and at the limit of the scope of visibility of those that discuss them and dream about them” (Ashbery 84). What objects and concepts belong to the discussion

topics of the sky? What are the creatures, the anxieties, and the feelings of flight that belong to a dream that the sky has at night?

Humans can push their imagination toward the position of the sky and, from up there, consider humanity's vision of the "universal day," humanity's idea for a better world, and see that there is something dubious in the hope for "the true world to come where only freedom shall dwell" (Blanchot 212). Is this day, uninhabited by suffering—this day that is a desert of a kind—is this *all* that can be desired and envisioned by the heart? Ashbery answers:

No, what was wanted and was precisely lacking in this gay and salubrious desert was an end to the "end" theory whereby each man was both an idol and the humblest idolaters, in other words the antipodes of his own universe, his own redemption or his own damnation, with the rest of the world as a painted backdrop to his own monodrama of becoming of which he was the lone impassioned spectator. (64)

There is nothing that is merely recreational about reading or writing *The Poem*. Ashbery gives the reader and poet the chance to notice that the shape of the tree and the shape of your emotions inherit their shape from a worrying gesture of cosmological origin. That chance is not luxury, it is not unnecessary for each human life to find it. It is not the underemployed and spiritually indulgent that are seeking the development of a sensitiveness that will detect the cosmic heritage that shapes all things. It is those that already feel that human life is dangerously condemned to a desert, one with stunted hopes, limited to a "gay and salubrious" fantasy that is nevertheless vapid, estranged, and irrelevant. According to general certitude, "man" has already become "the antipodes of his own universe." Imagining otherwise immediately arouses hissing. Imagine a greater scope of the universe, one that positions the existence of human life outside human contexts, outside the explanations that cite verified facts, outside human knowability. You've already incited, by virtue of your

imaginative dexterity, the smug reprimand of the cynic. You're already superstitious: you're thinking at a level outside the reach of human truth and fact. Without The Poem—which may as well not exist for many people—the world is already just a “painted backdrop” for the “monodrama” of man. With a runted awareness, his feelings clipped, oblivious to the sky and ground, this man salivates, enthralled, “the lone impassioned spectator” to his own performance that literally no one else in the universe is even aware of.

When Ashbery says “No, what was wanted and was precisely lacking . . . was an end to the ‘end’ theory whereby each man was both an idol and the humblest idolaters” he anticipates and illustrates the situation of a monopolized imagination: the monopoly’s logo is man, the unit of measurement is man (“humblest idolaters”), the absolute is man (“idol”), and the object of all ambition is the benefit of man. That ambition, vested in total emancipation and production for the sake of humanity, has no knowledge of *why*, toward what *end* its enterprise works.<sup>3</sup> Its idol is its idolaters and that is a tautological situation. To ground human existence on a tautology is an especially grotesque nihilism<sup>4</sup>: it is antilife out of a laziness that cannot be bothered with making a real statement. Reasoned and developed nihilism can at least be rigorously argued. But this tautological sort of nihilism is lethargic, symptomatic of a pathetic and feeble imagination that has atrophied its capacity to imagine something sacred to live for and in the service of. “You cried out in the desert and you collapsed into yourself, indifferent to the progress of the seasons and the planets in their orbits, and you died for the first time” (Ashbery 96).

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<sup>3</sup> Georges Bataille makes a similar call in the forward to his *Tears of Eros*: “Civilization in its entirety, *the possibility of human life*, depends upon a reasoned estimation of the means to assure life. But this life—this civilized life—which we are responsible for assuring, cannot be reduced to these *means*, which make it possible. Beyond calculated means, we look for the *end—or the ends*—of these means” (19).

<sup>4</sup> To make a careful qualification: this paper venerates a type of nihilism, a Nietzschean sort, a nihilism that basks in the lack of need for meanings. The Poem permits life its meaninglessness and thus affirms it.

“Formerly, art was able to coexist with other absolute demands” (213) says Blanchot. But today there is only one. It isn’t hard to notice the symptoms. It’s becoming harder and harder to justify even studying an art. Subdisciplines proliferate, borrowing from the lexicon of the more serious, more concerned, and more efficacious disciplines. The Poem is mined for political, economic, psychoanalytic, and theoretical data. It has, as Nietzsche predicted, become the “handmaid,” the “ancilla” to proper knowledge. Without an absolute to merit literary work, its study and practice seeks refuge under the auspices of other, more legitimate schools.

“It is clear that if Marx had followed the dreams of his youth and written the most beautiful novels in the world, he would have enchanted the world, but he would not have shaken it. Thus it is *Capital* that must be written and not *War and Peace*.” (Blanchot 213)

Has the pressure to shake the world lessened or increased? Are the dreams of youth encouraged to enchant the world? Or are they discouraged, are they dismissed as whimsical and frivolous?

If art has already become unneeded, then an argument in defense of enchanting the world will not be able to rescue it. The tenor of that argument would only guarantee art’s condemnation further. A snowflake’s defense. “Formerly, art was able to coexist with other absolute demands” (213) says Blanchot. A new demand with the gravity of an absolute, one with teeth, capable of real contest, that could compete with the current monarch over the imagination is needed. Blanchot recalls when poems gave speech to gods, when paintings were mementos brought back from a deity’s dream. “Dead is our Earth” said Hölderlin, because there was no one left to believe and give existence to “the Thunderer or the Sea-God” (17). Ashbery, who turned to Hölderlin for the inspiration of pure poetry, seems to

respond directly; *Three Poems* may be an attempt to reanimate our Earth, to give the possibility of speech back over to gods, and thus incarnate a new absolute demand.

At a sign from you these spirits could be set free from their tunnels in the earth to complete the circle of the act which you would have begun in this way, giving ideas to local deities of place and river gods to whom it might never have occurred otherwise . . ." (30)

A new absolute demand, one that could stand up to the dominance of humanity, might be one that answers the demand that our Earth live again. This demand would implore you to make the "sign" that would make spirits "set free from their tunnels in the earth." A "sign from you" could give places and things their particular "local deities" again, could reinstate the god proper to every river, and these gods and deities could have ideas "whom it might never have occurred" if it weren't for your sign. We must learn how to make that sign. We must aspire toward giving speech to gods and deities of local places and rivers again, so that our Earth will be alive again, so that there will be the healthy competition of multiple absolute demands and the monopoly on human imagination will be lifted.

## CONCLUSION

Ashbery's *Three Poems* lures me into believing: specifically coded in every human heart is a cosmic license, condoning and ordering every heart to open up fully to its proper amicable sun angle. Daily life sustains a blitz of banalities. A life denied the means of converting this blitz into phosphorescent rays is a life that is literally incapable of handling "how the roots should be lived," incapable of "caring about the flowers and leaves that may tower over them, a subsidiary mass, someday" (Ashbery 15). Nietzsche was right: "art is neither performed for our betterment or education" (52); art gives the roots of the soul a possibility of fulfilling the command of the cosmos, so that a blossom—the sun's entitlement—will open above and feed on the gift of light.

This is not mysticism. The facts are plain. The evidence is in all of the things that surround us. We are able to commiserate with the plants that we thought were dumb all this time: "You know now the sorrow of continually doing something that you cannot name, of producing automatically as an apple tree produces apples this thing there is no name for" (Ashbery 110). The dreams of youth are apples. You produce many other kinds of apples and the seasons that foster them become increasingly subtle, bittersweet, and complex as you age. I mean your sense of humor, your taste in film, the rhythm of your thought when you go for a walk, and everything that is sexual to you. To be an organism in this universe is to be a thing that produces automatically, in obedience to an invisible order, "things there is no name for." There is no name because there is no fully knowing what the apples are. "And it is possible that you will always remain unaware of their existence; this won't matter either, to them, that is" (Ashbery 85).

This makes sense too. The roots, the part of your existence you are permitted to give your deliberate will to, are underground and in the dark. Because you and the realm that permits you to make deliberate decisions is underground, you have no possibility of confronting, of looking squarely at the blossom of the flower that comes to tower above you and your way of handling your life. So when the officers of human knowledge demand proof from you, proof that handling the roots in a certain way has some bearing on a fantastical blossom-metaphor towering above your fathoming and seeing range, remind them that proof is impossible, it goes against the fundamental terms of the phenomenon. We are stuck down here in the dark, on this lower plane, like the roots; the flower towers above the range of plain sight. To leave this plane of limited visibility is to be uprooted and die. So yes, dying does offer something beautiful to look forward to. You get to see your flower.

All it takes is a little honest straightforward thinking to see what everything is doing. You are here among other things that are here and all of them continue to arrange themselves in a way that fulfills a promise made beforehand, before life. To live is to fulfill the promise of maximum blossoming, so that the sky will be gladdened by what you unwittingly fling as praise upward. Things fulfill this promise that has no name and it comes automatically to them, the way the tree produces apples. All the things outside are doing the fulfilling of the blossoming destiny without protest or troubling with questions about the veracity of the assignment. Realizing this, you

sense an undeniable fact of exaltation on many fronts, a sense of holiness growing up through the many kinds of passion like a tree with branches bearing candelabra higher and higher up until they almost vanish from sight and are confused with the stars whose earthly avatars they are: the celestial promise of delights to come in another world and still lovely to look at in this one. (Ashbery 57-58)

Within your kinds of passion are the energies that would like to reach upward, toward the sky, like a flower, “like a tree with branches bearing candelabra.” If you can release these passions, encourage their ascendent wish to grow and reach toward the sky, they will tower so high up that they will, as they become harder to see, begin to resemble the stars “whose earthly avatars they are.” Your passions are the earthly avatars of the stars above. All this time you had the skill and capacity for cosmic relevance, it was pulsing casually through your blood and dreams. You can fulfill the promise that began life by committing your energy to making promises to your self, by planting today “the celestial promise of delights to come in another world.” You promise this to yourself by producing from yourself those things that are like apples, encouraging the passion that overwhelms your will, giving speech to the eternal dream world that speaks to you through images when you sleep. This receiving and then giving to speech is the human form of blossoming. The blossom exists above the ground, promising itself to you from the position of the next world.

To enchant the world seems superfluous to human-knowledge because enchantment feels no need to be knowable and understood. It is independent of human estimation. Would the flower abort its blossom if no one could give it a comprehensible reason why? I think it would be terrified by the question *why*. The community of flowers would suppress the question. But humans have an affinity for being terrified; this is a special apple you have a taste for propagating automatically. You ask why and are exhilarated by the windy reply you get. Instead of needing everything (literally) spelled out, you work on those intuitive comprehensions you use your sensuality to divine: the stars are speaking, they communicate

a “celestial promise of delights to come in another world”; you know because tonight they are “still lovely to look at.” This is how an epistemology of the poetic does its knowing.

All the evidence you need to know that you inherited something cosmic is calmly everywhere, it’s just that you got used to a suspicious and doubting angle. Look at the swirling pattern on your fingertips, how perfectly yours it is. Who gave you that? It’s shape and pattern have no function and yet it persists, as your personal mark of belonging to an order that shapes you with its own mission in mind.

Of course you must be mindful of the smaller ideas and beliefs that will speak to you with recommendations that you ignore your duty to the sky. The universal will of humanity and its ambition will succeed in demonstrating, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that this thing you follow, this ‘duty to cosmic relevance,’ is nothing but the sham of a faith. It will be up to you to say that you don’t see doubts (or their shadows) and so have no need to get beyond them. “Roots don’t get to see the flowers,” you’ll remind them. And this conviction might be the sort that can protect the new absolute, the absolute that is committed to the destiny written by the stars and is written into the avatars that live in your passionate blood.

Ashbery’s poetics gives us the possibility of a defense for the literary that uses *literary* things, literary values and terms to justify The Poem’s place in the world of human activities. This defense is needed. It must be developed. It is possible to defend The Poem without lapsing into arguments about its social benefit, about its capacity to galvanize political action, etc. There is a primacy of *being here* that is threatened by the “universal will” that spreads itself like the greatest empire ever known. This will’s total manifestation, which is precisely its vision, not only denies its adherents from handling their roots with the intention of generating towering flowers, but also erases the possibility of remembering the

blossoming destiny of all things. The poem is nothing shy of a written protest against epistemological and ontological homogenization. When the dominant knowledge becomes *the only* knowledge—and it already claims sole certifying privileges over what gets to be knowledge—a worldwide amnesia will complete itself. At that moment it may become forever impossible to think again about a “growing progression” that living here, that being here in the world once took as its north star. Today those who retain this sense are few and unwell,

the few who want order in their lives and a sense of growing and progression toward a fixed end suffer terribly. Sometimes they try to dope their consciousness of the shifting but ineluctable grid of time that has been arbitrarily imposed on them with alcohol or drugs, but these lead merely to mornings after whose waking is ten times more painful than before, bringing with it a new and more terrible realization of the impossibility of reconciling their own ends with the cosmos. (Ashbery 65)

If a springtime were told to observe the timestamp of the workweek, it would also feel as though some “grid of time” had been “arbitrarily imposed on” it. Imagine if an apple tree were told that it must collaborate in the universal will of apple trees, toward the utopia where no apple tree competes with any other tree for sunlight and rain. This tree will also turn to alcohol and drugs, because it has been given an aspiration of a worldwide tree farm, a forest that looks like a pegboard from above, a place where it makes no difference if apples are produced or not, because there is no need.

All things and all people have nothing but drugs and alcohol, nothing but numbing agents, if the possibility of “reconciling their own ends with the cosmos” is smothered and then eradicated. No thing or person should feel the need to “dope their consciousness,” the need to smother the charge that we all inherit from the beginning of life and is written in the avatars of the stars (our passions). There is an incorrigible evangelism that intends, out

of benevolence it claims, to give existential orientation and employment to the whole globe. It gathers momentum from its altruistic interpretation of itself. This self-proclaimed altruism is unsurprising; a savior mentality is not new to the ontology of empire. What makes this crusade unique is its indifference to the cosmos. Because the cosmos doesn't speak English, the moderns think that considering a possibility of reconciling their own ends with the cosmos is a stupid consideration made by people in need of a job.

*Three Poems* relieves us of the need to dope our consciousness, the need to numb ourselves to the requests made by the stars. This request "is again affirmed in the stars: just their presence, mild and unquestioning, is proof that you have got to begin in the way of choosing some one of the forms of answering that question" (51). The question, Ashbery says, is made in a special lexicon, one beyond human fathomability, "in the impassive grammar of cosmic unravelings of all kinds, to be proposed but never formulated" (51). If the question made by the cosmic unravelings were formulated, then the cosmos would debase itself, taint and degrade its grammar, asking a merely human question. It is the search for The Poem that brings us into contact with an unformulated method of answering and fulfilling. Living beings who seek at least a basis to begin a conversation about reconciliation with the cosmos should pick up *Three Poems*. *Three Poems* defends the means to this conversation. And does more. Ashbery's poetics, with its special abductive power, goes on the offensive as well, making readers into unwitting collaborators in the answering of the question proposed in the grammar of cosmic unravelings.

"From now to the end of consciousness, we are stuck with the task of defending art," says Susan Sontag.

“None of us can retrieve that innocence before all theory when art had no need to justify itself, when one did not ask of a work of art what it said because one knew (or thought one knew) what it *did*. (“Against Interpretation” 4-5)

Ashbery takes the reader to an “end of consciousness,” a ledge where the material of consciousness leaks out of the self that contains it and onto the pages. The reader is deprived of the position that can ask The Poem what it says because they are caught up in the action of what it is doing. Richard Howard says that “Ashbery’s poems themselves are a *blazon of making*,” a display or exhibition of making. Making is a cosmological act; the poems are displays of actions that rhyme with cosmic creation. The reader is incorporated, contributes to this display of generation. This is the offensive that an aesthetics of abduction mounts.

If the reader isn’t already one of those “few” who need to “dope their consciousness,” they may be by the end of *Three Poems*. If the reader does not currently employ methods of numbing herself to the requests made by the stars—perhaps because she faced the “realization of the impossibility of reconciling their [her] own ends with the cosmos”—then she may develop that need to numb herself when she finishes the book. Because reading these poems imposes on you a wish to respond to the stars, and feeling this wish is difficult. Friends and family may wonder what happened. Are you sick? Maybe you’ll say “it isn’t my fault that I can really notice how everything around me is waiting just for me to get up and say the word, whatever that is” (Ashbery 94). You’ll say this because The Poem is haunting you, dwelling in you, and now you are cognizant of the way that the universe looks back, waiting on its humans to “say the word.” This sense, this untapped range of consciousness, aware of the pressure that everything around you is making a request on you dismantles the shell containing your self.

To be always conscious of these multiple facets is to incarnate a dimensionless organism like the wind's, a living concern that can know no rest, by definition: it *is* restlessness. (Ashbery 61)

Ashbery's reader is commanded into this dimensionless state of being. This state eludes the form and category of the human, it is conscious of too many facets, and senses the waiting look of everything. The idealism and ambition proper to humanity doesn't register properly on this reader's ears because she doesn't recognize herself as a member of the human category. She feels more like the wind. To her, the "universal will" is only another thing around her, another facet to "be always conscious of," another anxious thing asking her to "say the word, whatever that is." The vision of humanity is itself a thing installed by the same gesture that shapes the tree and situates the sun as it is today in the sky. No more or less worthy of *The Poem* than the flower or love. The vision of humanity is here with us in the world with the same cosmic and worrying passport stamp, a long way off from where it all began.

The poet and Ashbery's reader might seem silly because they welcome and absorb the torrent of waiting looks from all facets, even those that threaten to eradicate *The Poem* (even the humanitarian monopoly that makes art a thing of the past is prone to poetic application). The reader and Ashbery learn to hear something analogous to birdsong or see a Thursday afternoon in the "universal will." This is their refusal. The destiny of all of humanity is not independent of the destiny that arranges the trees. This recognition dissolves the chasm of estrangement. All things undergo a conversion. They shine and you drink the phosphorescent rays. The overflowing is almost too much.

Ashbery says that your "bundle of receptive nerves" are only "slightly damaged." A titanic force tries to erase the function of those nerves. It enlists the intellect and deploys

an army of moral charges. These things collude against your blooming predestiny. But good arguments like Nietzsche's make it plain and obvious to you that the only basis for being here is explained by the way the wind makes fallen leaves swirl around in dancing patterns. You ask to be usurped by the wind and your nerves are stirred awake. They remember that they are needed somewhere today and start to hum. Outside agents are "dispatching dense, precisely worded messages" (Ashbery 41) and it would be sidereal treason if you did not heed.

Good, plain-seeing vision like Blanchot's reveals facts only discernible from the sky's vantage point: an unnatural commander hijacks human life and sends it on a mission of cosmic betrayal. Maybe you want to jump ship but you wouldn't know the railing if it was right in front of you. And so we all remain captive, waiting for poems to solicit our movement into a dimensionless state.

Try the library. Find *Three Poems*: these poems will dismantle the fettering hoax that individuates you, severs you from all the cosmic unravelings. You will recover the heart's boundless territories. You'll see that your passions and other heirlooms from the beginning of life are inflicting their wishes onto the images that rise from the pages. You didn't know you had this backlog of patient prehistoric ancestors. You still don't really know, you just stand aside and gawk at their rising release. When you put the book down you'll realize your obligation to the stars is possible again. You know what it feels like and how to invite the grasp that makes you a design of their gentle command. You look out the window at the people walking on the windy street. Leaves that believe they have a mind all their own. It's an endearing quality and gives their dance a unique claim. Then you realize the time,

remember the broken apartment you need to get back to and smile because you see the tremendous white space you will cover on your way home.

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