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**“Set free on an ocean of language that comes to be part of us”:
John Ashbery and the influence of Emerson, Whitman, James,
and Stevens**

Sloan, Benjamin, Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1990

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"SET FREE ON AN OCEAN OF LANGUAGE THAT COMES
TO BE PART OF US": JOHN ASHBERY AND THE INFLUENCE
OF EMERSON, WHITMAN, JAMES, AND STEVENS

by

BENJAMIN SLOAN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in
English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
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1990

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NOTE ON ABBREVIATIONS

References to frequently-cited books have been made in the text with the following abbreviations:

- RWE Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays & Lectures. Ed. Joel Porte. New York: The Library of America, 1983.
- W:P&P Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose. Ed. Justin Kaplan. New York: The Library of America, 1982.
- A The Ambassadors. Ed. S.P. Rosenbaum. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1974.
- GB The Golden Bowl. New York: Penguin Books, 1981.
- AN The Art of The Novel: Critical Prefaces. Ed. R.P. Blackmur. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1984.
- CP The Complete Poems of Wallace Stevens. New York: Vintage Books, 1982.
- NA The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and The Imagination. New York: Vintage Books, 1951.
- OP Opus Posthumous By Wallace Stevens. Ed. Samuel French Morse. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957.
- HD Houseboat Days. New York: Viking Press, 1977.
- AWK As We Know. New York: Penguin Books, 1979.
- ST Shadow Train. New York: Viking Press, 1981.
- AW A Wave. New York: Viking Press, 1984.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

1. Influence

An understanding of John Ashbery's more recent poetry will be enhanced by a detailed thinking through of the ways in which he has been influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Henry James and Wallace Stevens. In saying this, it might seem to some as if the critical approach suggested by the word "influence" in my title is out-dated and therefore should be replaced by reference to more recent theoretical models such as intertextuality. In an article entitled "Intertextual Representation: On Mimesis as Interpretive Discourse," the critic Michael Rifaterre gives us a description of intertextuality:

An intertext is a corpus of texts, textual fragments, or textlike segments of the sociolect that shares a lexicon and, to a lesser extent, a syntax with the text we are reading (directly or indirectly) in the form of synonyms or, even conversely, in the form of antonyms. . . . The term indeed refers to an operation of the reader's mind, but it is an obligatory one, necessary to any textual decoding. Intertextuality necessarily complements our experience of textuality. It is the perception that our reading of the text cannot be complete or satisfactory without going through the intertext, that the text does not signify unless as a function of a complementary or contradictory intertextual homologue.¹

If I understand Professor Rifaterre correctly, he considers the process

of "decoding" a text as one which should involve the tracing of all those related "texts" which, if we were to do our homework properly, would be revealed as informing in one way or another a reader's experience of the text immediately before him or her. As an example he considers how in William Carlos Williams' famous poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" the word "glazed" may be described as "conjur[ing] up a vast intertext of artifacts made with aesthetic intent."²

The problem with this, as useful as it may be in other contexts, is that Emerson and his literary heirs are involved in approaches to the entire concept of a "text"--and the relationships evident among language, text, reader, writer, and everything else--which are far more complex and challenging. Intertextualists would have us believe that our primary task should be to map the network of textual interminglings embedded within a primary text. However this approach ignores an entire dimension of literary experience which Emerson invokes when he writes in "Plato; Or, The Philosopher" that

. . . the experience of poetic creativeness . . . is not found in staying at home, nor yet in travelling, but in transitions from one to the other, which must therefore be adroitly managed to present as much transitional surface as possible (RWE 641)

The moment we think we have discovered Emerson either at home or travelling on the road, the very next second we notice that he is in the vestibule preparing for a departure or arrival; and in fact we finally have to admit that this vestibule, this in-between place, this state of having fallen between the cracks, is where he actually lives, odd as that may seem. In Poems of Our Climate Harold Bloom points out that, similarly, "Stevens' purpose in the poem's text ["Notes Toward a

Supreme Fiction"], like Whitman's [in general], is to define himself, not poetry"³; and, he goes on to say, part of the reason for this has to do with the way "Stevens never stays philosophic for very long [since] he is himself only when he is most evasive."⁴ In making these points, Bloom, as he has acknowledged, uses Angus Fletcher's meditations upon the sublime (and what Bloom describes as Fletcher's liminal poetics⁵) in arguing against a deconstructive (or any text-centered) approach to Stevens' work:

How can we speak of degrees of knowing [when understood as being primarily rhetoric- or text-centered] in the blind world of the wish, where the truth is always elsewhere, always different, always to be encountered only by the acceptances and rejections of an energy that in itself is the antithesis of renunciation, a force that refuses all form?⁶

With respect to my exploration of relationships between Ashbery's work and the other writers under discussion here, their emphasis upon constant troping as a turning away from our tendency to see the text as a dwelling place for the writer's soul suggests that "intertextuality" will be of little use to us. So as vague as the word "influence" may seem, the way that it does not impose a critical framework will allow to rise to the surface these writers' own often unconventional attitudes toward the relationship between language and experience.

2. Henry James

If we were to go back and remove Henry James from my first sentence on page one, then a version of this thesis has already been set forth by Harold Bloom. And indeed I use Bloom's work as a critical base.

However with respect to Ashbery's poetry, I am not aware that Bloom or anyone else has considered how rich a resource the late novels of Henry James can be when, for example, works such as The Ambassadors and The Golden Bowl are used as lenses through which to see what it is in Ashbery's poetry we have in mind when we call it "Emersonian." To be fair, though, critics have from time to time mentioned the Ashbery-Henry James connection. For example John Bayley, in "The Poetry of John Ashbery," writes:

The sonnet poems of Shadow Train have something of the Jamesian absence of specification, of events suggested which, as in The Turn of the Screw, are not intended by the author to have taken place either one way or another. But James's absence of solution is not the absence of a story. . . . Helplessness is a pose: the real thing is hard to turn into an art that makes it seem authentic. What is more impressive about Ashbery's poems is their tactile urbanity, the spruce craft of their diction, which, like James's prose, becomes more enjoyable and revealing, in and for itself, each time one makes one's way through it.⁷

But one important link between Ashbery and James which has not been stressed is the way that, when it comes to certain peculiarities of style, a useful first step in beginning to understand how to read one of Ashbery's poems may be to imagine that he writes on the outer edge of what at its nearest is the way certain characters in James' novels ponder a particularly knotty social or moral or psychological crux; in other words, in Ashbery's more recent poems, the unusual quality of his language picks up where the complex deliberations of Maggie Verver leave off. R.P. Blackmur wrote that James' language is "elaborate in the degree that he rendered shades and refinements of meaning and feeling not usually rendered at all." (AN xxi) This is an important point--and it is to this quality in Ashbery's poetry that Charles Altieri refers

when he remarks that

Ashbery's versions of the poetics of thinking opens new alternatives to conventional dramatic ways of presenting and understanding the forms of relatedness and patterns of unfolding central to our emotional lives.⁸

But to say that both these writers think hard about related issues is to stop short. More importantly, each is preoccupied with the way one's thinking can constantly modify and advance itself upon first acknowledging that its chief operative element is a kind of revitalizing movement; in other words in Ashbery's and James' work, instead of a prevailing point or argument tyrannizing over a particular passage, we see rather an inner and always idiosyncratic logic to the movement of the thought which constantly revitalizes itself as it makes discoveries along the way. This approach is Emersonian in the way that Emerson believed "all our progress is an unfolding, like the vegetable bud" (RWE 419); also it follows from the way Henry's brother described our thought as working:

As we take . . . a general view of the wonderful stream of our consciousness, what strikes us first is . . . [the] different pace of its parts. Like a bird's life, it seems to be made of an alternation of flights and perchings. The rhythm of language expresses this, where every thought is expressed in a sentence, and every sentence closed by a period. The resting-places are usually occupied by sensorial imaginations of some sort, whose peculiarity is that they can be held before the mind for an indefinite time, and contemplated without changing; the places of flight are filled with thoughts of relations, static or dynamic, that for the most part obtain between the matters contemplated in the periods of comparative rest.⁹

What is added, though, is that James and Ashbery are such precise and well-informed thinkers that the far-flung net of their meditation on western culture challenges a reader to re-think his or her relationship

to both language and culture. Of course Emerson paved the way by engaging in a meditation of this kind himself. But James and Ashbery carry into unexplored territory their investigations of the relationship between language and thought. David Kalstone has pointed out that

Ashbery is not simply reminding us that poetry has access to the inner life; he is emphasizing the unique power of language to reveal how much of the external life the inner life displaces. . . . Ashbery stresses the activity of consciousness and not its power to fix or communicate its content.¹⁰

This emphasis upon the processes of language-generated thought (rather than the traditional vision of meaning inherent in references outside the language) was what T.S. Eliot referred to in Henry James when he said that he "had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it."¹¹ Any number of contemporary critics have noted the way that, as Leslie Wolff puts it, "Ashbery involves us in sentences whose machinery makes us feel how, not what, they mean."¹²

What needs to be studied are the similarities between the extremes to which James pushed language in order to express the workings of a mind, and the way Ashbery uses language to illustrate related processes in a contemporary context; the novels of James' third period and Ashbery's more recent poems are alike not only in their pursuit of the processes of modern consciousness, but also in the subtleties, nuances and intricacies of language through which these processes work themselves out. In fact we can go so far as to say that in Ashbery's later work one detects the lingering sense of a narrative of thought (as opposed to a narrative of events in the physical world)--as in the late involuted fiction of Henry James. I will expand upon these points in Chapter II as I explore how a careful reading of two novels from Henry

James' third phase can contribute to an understanding of John Ashbery's poetry.

3. Whitman and Stevens

Besides the as-yet-unexplored territory introduced by the Henry James connection, there is another reason why Bloom's association of Emerson and Ashbery needs further exploration. As brilliant and helpful as Harold Bloom is, he is also maddening in the way that he sometimes will make a remark that seems exactly right and then immediately turn to another idea, leaving us to puzzle the details out for ourselves. But of course, as Joan Richardson has pointed out to me, this approach is about as Emersonian as you can get and is therefore perfectly appropriate. One such moment occurs in Figures of Capable Imagination where he writes:

Even as [Ashbery's] father is Stevens, his largest ancestor is Whitman, and it is the Whitmanian strain in Stevens that found Ashbery . . .¹³

Some of the links between these writers are well documented and may be seen to begin with Whitman's saying that Emerson set his simmering mind to boiling. What Whitman did was translate into poetry Emerson's belief that "The man of genius . . . must draw from the infinite Reason, on one side; and he must penetrate into the heart and sense of the crowd, on the other." (RWE "Literary Ethics" 109) For Whitman, of course, there were not two sides but the one process of integrating all that he saw (and became) into his poems. To some degree Stevens, in his preoccupation with a perceived conflict between "reality" and

"imagination," returned to Emerson's distinction between "Materialism" and "Idealism." However finally it would be Whitman's model which Stevens followed in poems such as "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"; and it is this Stevens-as-influenced-by-Whitman which we see in Ashbery's work. In any case Emerson's work is the place where one must begin the search for a fully-fleshed-out representation of what Bloom is getting at. Along the way I will consider not only the role of meditation in literature (using Louis Martz's detailed study), but also the way a clarification of the distinction between conventional and unconventional perceptions of time (as discussed in G.J. Whitrow's What Is Time?¹⁴) can contribute to an understanding of these writers.

What we see happening, ultimately, is the way Ashbery gives a post-Einsteinian significance to the word "Transcendentalism." While Emerson meditated upon who we are, where we need to go, and how we can get there, it was the way his sentences began to take on independent lives of their own that first suggested how a self-conscious reflection upon the relationship between language and thought can prioritize the way we must constantly "abandon" one place (sentence, or whatever) for the next. Whitman, meanwhile, would use as the basis for his poetry Emerson's suggestion that the distinction we make between material and ideal reality is an illusion ("Time and space," Emerson wrote, "are but physiological colors which the eye makes"); for Whitman, the integration of the perceiver and his perceptions into poetry happened spontaneously. Beyond our long-standing devotion to two worlds--one out there and one in here--Whitman mapped a third: the combining of the two within one consciousness. The way that this ongoing movement through

our experience ignores any boundary assumed to separate objective and subjective realities anticipates, in a crude way, Einstein's theory of relativity. To understand where Ashbery comes out of this it is useful to consider what Michel Foucault says about Raymond Roussel, and how Ashbery's situation is analagous:

He doesn't want to duplicate the reality of another world, but, in the spontaneous duality of language, he wants to discover an unexpected space, and to cover it with things never said before.¹⁵

Carrying to a logical extreme Einstein's vision of the universe and Emerson's meditation on the nature of the self, Ashbery moves out ahead of us as he uses language to reformulate his self and explore the always unexpected place where his consciousness is now. Discovering and inventing are intertwined in one process as we watch Ashbery suspended in his words like a high-wire acrobat out over his own advancing language-embodied conception of himself; his poems are his explorations of consciousness in the act of renewing itself. For us these poems-meditations-explorations point towards an understanding of human consciousness which Roger Penrose discusses in his book The Emperor's New Mind; I will talk about Penrose's book in relation to these matters in Chapter IV after we have considered in Chapter III ways that Ashbery's work has been influenced by Whitman and Stevens.

4. "Now That The Preliminary Negotiations Are At Last Over" (AW 79)

Although Ashbery's poetry is published by one of the top-drawer presses in the country, and he has won nearly every major prize

available to poets (including the coveted MacArthur Award), many readers continue to look askance at his work. The assumption seems to be that, having lived in France for ten years and studied (and translated) a number of French writers (most notably, perhaps, Raymond Roussel)--and having been an art critic in close contact with contemporary painting and painters such as Larry Rivers, Jane Freilicher, and others--Ashbery is primarily an alien, "decadent" poet working at cross purposes to the main-line American literary tradition. For example, as David Shapiro writes:

The central metaphysical-moral component in Ashbery's verse is its deadly withdrawal of the transcendental term and insistence on individual liberty.

John Ashbery can properly be called a child of the muse of Rimbaud. In the somewhat unenthusiastic tones of the introduction to Some Trees, W.H. Auden also placed him in the tradition of Rimbaud's dereglement de tous les sens.¹⁶

That this approach to Ashbery's work needs revision becomes apparent in light of the necessary re-seeing of the American tradition described in Richard Poirier's The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections which points out that writers such as Henry James and Wallace Stevens can be seen as developing directly out of what lies at the heart of Emerson's writing. Also the work done by such critics as Gay Wilson Allen, Charles Feidelson Jr., and Roy Harvey Pearce points to how complex and innovative Whitman's writing is, suggesting direct connections with Stevens and Ashbery. And ultimately, it seems to me, a close reading of some of Ashbery's recent work shows that beside the "decadent" in his poetry sits her more positive, life-affirming twin. Taken together these two "selves" become the basis for an ongoing

meditation which Emerson would have heartily approved.

* * * *

My principal texts for this dissertation will be four of Ashbery's more recent collections: Houseboat Days (1977); As We Know (1979); Shadow Train (1981); and A Wave (1984).¹⁷ I choose these not only because they have received less critical attention than some of the earlier books, but also because I feel a discussion of them will bear directly upon the reading of Ashbery I propose: Ashbery's poetry, since his return in 1966 from a ten year stay in France, has exhibited to an increasing degree the sorts of concerns which would lead one to see him not only as a poet working in a style very like that found in James' later novels, but also as Bloom reads him, i.e., in line with Whitman and Stevens, as "American" poets producing work which takes impetus from Emerson's notion of the poet as a visionary thinker. Consistent with Emerson's remark, that ". . . a poem [is] a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own . . ." (RWE "The Poet" 450) is Ashbery's own vision:

But always and sometimes questioning the old modes
 And the new wondering, the poem, growing up through the floor,
 Standing tall in tubers, invading and smashing the ritual
 Parlor, demands to be met on its own terms now,
 Now that the preliminary negotiations are at last over. (AW 79)

NOTES

¹ Michael Riffaterre, "Intertextual Representation: On Mimesis as Interpretive Discourse," in Critical Inquiry 11 (September 1984), pages 141-162. I thank Professor W. Speed Hill for showing this article to me.

² Riffaterre, 145.

³ Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 175.

⁴ Climate, 216.

⁵ Bloom uses Angus Fletcher's work as the basis for his discussion of Ashbery in an essay called "The Breaking of Form," which is anthologized in Bloom's Modern Critical Views: John Ashbery (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985).

⁶ Climate, 387.

⁷ John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 202-203.

⁸ Charles Altieri, Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry During the 1960s (Cranbury NJ: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1979), 137.

⁹ Willian James, The Principles of Psychology (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), I, 236.

¹⁰ David Kalstone, Five Temperaments: Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 200-201.

¹¹ T.S. Eliot, Selected Prose, Ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/Farrar, Straus Giroux, 1975), 151.

¹² "The Brushstroke's Integrity: The Poetry of John Ashbery and the Art of Painting" in Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery, Ed. David Lehman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 253. Although, actually, I could have quoted other critics who have written almost the same comment. David Kalstone, in Five Temperaments (see footnote five, above), writes: "What seems strange is not so much what he says as the space between his sentences, the quickness of his transitions." (page 195) Or Marjorie Perloff in The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981): "Not what one dreams but how--this is Ashbery's subject." (25)

13 "John Ashbery: The Charity of the Hard Moments" in Figures of Capable Imagination (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 130.

14 Louis L. Martz, The Poetry of Meditation: A Study In English Religious Literature of The Seventeenth Century (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954); and G.J. Whitrow, What Is Time? (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1972).

15 Michel Foucault, Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel, with an introduction by John Ashbery (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1986), 16.

16 David Shapiro, John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 12 and 18. In fact W.H. Auden may have been the first to place Ashbery in the French Symbolist tradition when in his preface to the 1956 Yale Press edition of Some Trees he wrote: "From Rimbaud down to Mr. Ashbery, an important school of modern poets has been concerned with the discovery that, in childhood largely, in dreams and daydreams entirely, the imaginative life of the human individual stubbornly continues to live by the old magical notions. Its world is one of sacred images and ritual acts . . . a numinous landscape inhabited by demons and strange beasts." (Some Trees, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956, p. vi) Marjorie Perloff continues to see Ashbery's poetry in this context: "For, like Rimbaud's, his [Ashbery's] are not dreams about such and such characters or events; the dream structure is itself the event that haunts the poets imagination." (The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 252)

17 April Galleons appeared in 1987, just at the moment when my prospectus for this project was approved and I was ready to begin writing the dissertation, so I decided not to include it in my discussion. However I wish sometimes that I had since I think it would fit well into a study of the kind I am doing here.

CHAPTER II

"MORE INTERESTED IN THE MOVEMENT AMONG IDEAS
THAN IN THE IDEAS THEMSELVES": EMERSON, JAMES AND ASHBERY

1. Introduction

It is reasonable--at first--to feel nervous about admitting that we see any apparent family resemblance among the three figures who we have drawn from separate epochs in American literary history to sit together for this group portrait: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry James and John Ashbery. One reason we feel this way is because they are associated with the three separate genres of the essay, the novel and the poem. This reluctance begins to dissolve when we notice two things: One is that all three writers are poets if we think of a poet as not exclusively a maker of poems. As Emerson said in "The Poet": ". . . we do not speak now of men of poetical talents, or of industry and skill in metre, but of the true poet

. . . [who] stands one step nearer to things, and sees the flowing or metamorphosis; perceives that thought is multiform; that within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form; and, following with his eyes the life, uses the forms which express that life, and so his speech flows with the flowing of nature. (RWE 450 and 456)

As a passage from a February 1st, 1835, letter to Lydia Jackson attests,

Emerson thought of himself as first and foremost a poet:

I am born a poet, of a low class without doubt, yet a poet. That is my nature and vocation. My singing, be sure, is very "husky," & is for the most part in prose. Still am I a poet in the sense of a perceiver & dear lover of the harmonies that are in the soul & in matter, and specially of the correspondences between these & those.¹

And as Douglas Crase has said, "Emerson's real poetry is in the essays and not so much the verse."² Also, though there is no doubt about the appropriateness of identifying James as a novelist, as R.P. Blackmur has pointed out, it is especially in the works of James' third phase that one sees a refinement of expression which suggests that we have here in addition to the sensibility of a fine novelist that of a poet:

In his three novels, The Ambassadors, The Wings of the Dove, and The Golden Bowl, written one a year as he approached the age of sixty, Henry James made a spiritual trilogy which, with each succeeding volume, approached nearer and nearer the condition of poetry. This is one way of stating James' achievement as a novelist and one way of qualifying the stature of his imagination. I mean that the authority and the mystery--the riches and the waste places--of these novels tend increasingly to lie in the poetry of his language, but that the poetry is the poetry of the soul in action. These novels, then, constitute poetic dramas of the inner life of the soul at the height of its struggle³

And in an essay on the first paragraph of The Ambassadors Ian Watt comes to a similar conclusion:

The most obvious and demonstrable features of James's prose style, its vocabulary and syntax, are direct reflections of his attitude to life and his conception of the novel; and these features, like the relation of the paragraph to the rest of the novel, and to other novels, make clear that the notorious idiosyncrasies of Jamesian prose are directly related to the imperatives which led him to develop a narrative texture as richly complicated and as highly organised as that of poetry.⁴

So if upon closer inspection Emerson and James may be seen as writing a

prose which comes perilously close to the status of poetry, then the boundaries between genres which were thought so solidly to distinguish these three authors as separate begin to break down.

The second reason we become willing to think of these writers as consanguinous has to do with the way each is unusually ambitious: all three wish to explore the extraordinary processes which constitute ordinary experience. This shared interest requires a rethinking and reformulation of the way each chooses to use language. In other words, the process of thinking about what it means to think and be human requires each author to come to terms with the relationship between language and ideas. What Northrop Frye says in the following passage from The Anatomy of Criticism is pertinent here:

. . . all verbal structures with meaning are verbal imitations of that elusive psychological and physiological process known as thought, a process stumbling through emotional entanglements, sudden irrational convictions, involuntary gleams of insight, rationalized prejudices, and blocks of panic and inertia, finally to reach a completely incommunicable intuition. Anyone who imagines that philosophy is not a verbal imitation of this process, but the process itself, has clearly not done much thinking.⁵

Also what Richard Poirier says of Emerson can be used to describe James and Ashbery as well, that

his . . . is a design upon language and syntax . . . an exploration and never completed effort in which the reader is asked to join. He struggles, and he knows he struggles, within the mediations which consciousness creates for itself through language.⁶

And finally in his poem "A Wave" Ashbery will make a similar point as follows:

By so many systems
As we are involved in, by just so many

Are we set free on an ocean of language that comes to be
Part of us, as though we would ever get away.

(AW 71)

2. Sentences: The "Wish To Be [Temporarily] Settled" (RWE 413)

Emerson, James, and Ashbery not only all use the sentence as a preferred "unit" of thought, but also, as F.O. Matthiessen has written with respect to Emerson, this giving to sentences a separate and independent life of their own is a stylistic mirroring of an emphasis upon the individual:

His [Emerson's] work corresponds so naturally to his life that it constitutes the purest example of what individualism could produce. The sentence was his unit, as he recognized when confessing sadly to Carlyle (1838) that his paragraphs were only collections of "infinitely repellent particles." . . .

It might be said that the sentences by which Emerson has become a living part of our language, the ones in which he showed a poet's delicate attention to the word and an equally poetic gift of phrase and of rhythmical balance, still contain a residue of the Yankee's respect for Franklin.⁷

In a mind that would be free (would, as Irving Howe puts it, take "what Washington and Jefferson had enabled institutionally, . . . [and] bring [this same process] to fruition in the sphere of the spirit, and therefore in the life of the culture"⁸), Emerson allowed that the unit of thought within which consciousness should find identity and a temporary sense of completion would be the sentence. As a result the kind of pressure he brought to bear on his sentences was enormous; Emerson would ask, as he did in his essay "Montaigne; or, the Skeptic," that the composite physical and mental life of the author be introduced

into his or her syntax:

The sincerity and marrow of the man [Montaigne] reaches to his sentences. . . . Cut these words, and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive. (RWE 700)

It is possible at times to see in a single sentence of Emerson's a self-contained representation of not only the man and his thought, but also of his vision for the entire culture. Take for example the following from the essay "Circles": "Our culture is the predominance of an idea which draws after it this train of cities and institutions." (RWE 403) Even the widest-angle lens of the mind strains to see this train comprised of cities and institutions. However it is in the very paradoxical unlikelihood of anything pulling such a load that the power lies of imagining that the engine at the head of such a train should be that merest and most fleeting of machines, "an idea." Also important to what Emerson is saying is the way he says it--his syntax and grammar: the main subject-verb-object (or what would ordinarily be considered the "predominant") component of the sentence is finished with the first five words, the rest of it (in the form of subordinate clause structures) following like a train. But Emerson makes his sentence an odd train: The "engine" words at the head of the sentence seem vague ("culture" and "predominance"). As we move along, however, they will be filled out by what follows as the sentence unfolds; the subordinate elements ("idea," "train," and "cities and institutions") take on an increasing sense of specificity and weight as we move further out to the end of the strung-together clauses. The point is that, with respect to meaning, the subordinate elements in the sentence are more precise and dramatic and

therefore, in a sense, draw the main (and initially-present) elements of the sentence along behind them--just as the idea pulls the cities and institutions behind it. Thus despite (or, more to the point, because of) the strain Emerson's formulation puts on our assumptions, Emerson's sentence perfectly captures and contains his meaning. In this way, from a stylistic standpoint, Emerson's sentences--like this one--are indeed unusually "self-reliant."

Though often adopting methods aesthetically more self-involved and complex than Emerson's, Henry James is also a builder of remarkable sentences. Northrop Frye, among others, has pointed out the degree of sophistication which James' sentences attain:

The long sentences in the later novels of Henry James are containing sentences: all the qualifications and parentheses are fitted in to a pattern, and as one point after another is made, there emerges not a linear process of thought but a simultaneous comprehension. What is explained is turned around and viewed from all aspects, but it is completely there, so to speak, from the beginning.⁹

Consider, for example, the following from The Ambassadors: "They [Waymarsh and Lambert Strether] walked, wandered, wondered and, a little, lost themselves; Strether hadn't had for years so rich a consciousness of time--a bag of gold into which he dipped constantly for a handful." (A 76) James, like Emerson, in one stroke encapsulates complex meanings: Here the first half of the sentence (up to the "and," at least) imitates a walking rhythm, while the alliterative "W"s and "L"s reproduce stylistically the hypnotic sensation Strether experiences. The progress from "walked," to "wandered," and finally to "wondered," begins with the exclusively external and physical experience

of "walking"; then moves to the linking notion of "wander" which could refer to either outer or inner worlds (for example it could suggest going astray in a moral or spiritual sense); and then finally we come to "wonder" which describes an exclusively internal movement. Also the liquid, like-sounding quality of these three words together contributes to our sense of how Strether slipped, without feeling he had any control over the matter, from an awareness of his external surroundings and Waymarsh into the private world of his own thoughts.

This sentence introduces a distinction between two separate ways of experiencing "time"--ultimately a pivotal issue in The Ambassadors. As the novelist Robert Coover describes this distinction:

There is a tension in narrative, as in life, between the sensation of time as a linear experience, one thing following sequentially (causally or not) upon another, and time as a patterning of interrelated experiences reflected upon as though it had a geography and could be mapped. It is, in a sense, the tension between future time, which, with its promise of death and its intransigent sequence of days and nights, bears down upon us remorselessly, and time past, which, if it can be said to exist at all, exists only in cranial space, in that sprawling, multilevel and often chaotic house of our memory.¹⁰

The only thing one might add to Coover's model is the mind's experience of present time which, in its multiplicity, may become for us the equivalent of Strether's "bag of gold." (Also it is useful to remember here that the way our minds experience a sense of present time was of particular interest to 19th century thinkers like C.S. Peirce and William James.) To a successful businessman like Waymarsh time is money in a literal sense and therefore must be watched closely so as to be narrowly channeled into the processes which will result in material gain. For Strether time becomes an alternative "bag of gold" but only

insofar as he abandons the uses which the business world makes of time and "wander[s]" among the "rich" impressions which the movement of time makes available to consciousness. To summarize, we might say this sentence suggests at least three sets of contrasting ideas: implied by "the bag of gold" is, on the one hand, the materialism of capitalist and business-minded American values (for which Strether was intended to be the "ambassador") and, on the other hand, a different value system which gives priority to the riches to be found within an expanded and enriched consciousness. Secondly, James introduces the problem of choosing control over abandonment of control as the appropriate means to that which one considers valuable, since it seems Strether must become "lost" before he can find his "rich . . . consciousness of time." And finally there is the opposition between narrative time and time as internally experienced--a distinction which has implications not only for Strether's life but also, stylistically, for what comes to be an emphasis upon internal time as an aesthetic consideration in James' later novels. The point is that James gives to individual sentences the kind of care towards developing them as containers for multiple layers of significance which a poet is expected to bring to language.

In the case of John Ashbery it sometimes seems as if the primary unit of meaning in his poetry is more the sentence than the line. Consider, for example, the following sentence from the poem "Houseboat Days":

So, winding past certain pillars
 Until you get to evening's malachite one, it becomes a vast dream
 Of having that can topple governments, level towns and cities
 With the pressure of sleep building up behind it.

(HD 39)

One consideration in this sentence has to do with a disparity inherent in our desire to see the world as fixed and unchanging when everything in our experience argues that the opposite is the case. The use of the initial "So" (meaning here either "in the way or manner previously described, indicated or suggested" or "accordingly; consequently"--OED) suggests a sense of transition and fluidity which the next words, "winding past," immediately take up and advance. In the next phrase the "pillars" that we are "winding past" give us a contrasting sense of fixity and seem further to defy any possibility of change or movement since the added information we have about them is that these are not just any but "certain" pillars. However at this point a next pillar ("evening's malachite one") takes on a very un-pillar-like identity, which is to say that of "a vast dream." (And one reason the "malachite" pillar is so volatile may have to do with the fact that "malachite" is named for the mallow plant (and its distinctive green color), suggesting the ability to grow and change shape as plants will.)

In an Ashbery poem the process of changing identity is often so speeded-up as to be dizzying. The process is ultimately not unlike certain exchangings of identity or 180-degree shiftings of perspective which take place in James's last novels. In The Ambassadors, for example, Lambert Strether and Chad Newsome exchange roles over the course of the narrative to the extent that they take on qualities thought to be fundamental to the character of the other; likewise, in Strether's view, Madame de Vionnet changes from the embodiment of "supreme respectability" (as she appeared upon the occasion of his first visit to her home) to "a vulgarly troubled . . . maidservant crying for

her young man" (which is his judgment of her upon the occasion of his last visit to her home-- A 323). Thus in the work of both James and Ashbery we see the way that often neither is life what it seems, nor are we who we thought we were. The issue then is not so much whether or not we change, but given the fact that we constantly do, "the whole thing" (as James puts it in his preface to The Princess Casamassima) "comes to depend thus on the quality of bewilderment" (And, he goes on to say, "there are doubtless many such qualities, ranging from vague and crepuscular to sharpest and most critical"). (AN 66)

Like James, Ashbery demands from his reader a posture of mind flexible enough to accept and negotiate with "bewilderment" not as an enemy but as a necessary and frequently occurring state of mind in a world where, in Emerson's words, "we change sexes every moment." (RWE 680) The impression in Ashbery's sentence is, on the one hand, of evening as that station in the progress of one's day when the mind begins to relax into a sense of drifting self-absorption which wipes out --for the time being, at least--our reliance upon that aspect of day-time consciousness responsible for the creation of rationally conceived and organized institutions. On the other hand, we may read this meditation as entirely epistemological, even so far as to think of it as Mr. Ashbery's version of what Emerson says immediately after the sentence from "Circles" discussed above ("Our culture is the predominance of an idea which draws after it this train of cities and institutions"), namely: "Let us rise into another idea: they will disappear." In Ashbery's sentence it is the "desire" itself "Of having" which undermines the having, suggesting that Ashbery agrees with

Emerson's idea (also stated in "Circles") that "People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them." (RWE 413)

Ashbery, like Emerson, places a value upon a willingness to be "unsettled" as an attitude set off against the "sleep" associated with the dream "Of having" (of having, it would seem, things stay settled in the way "governments [. . .] towns and cities" seem "settled"). His unsettling style mirrors his valuation. In fact we may go so far as to observe in Emerson, James and Ashbery that, as Northrop Frye points out, "the moral attitude taken by the poet in his work derives largely from the structure of that work."¹¹

3. "Nature Hates Calculators; Her Methods Are Saltatory" (RWE 483)

How we move in prose, as in life, from one to a next as yet unknown point, was a preoccupation of Emerson's. Although he elaborates on his method for solving this dilemma throughout his work (and indeed, Emerson's writing was for him the act of solving this problem¹²), one of the most important passages in this regard appears in the essay called "The Method of Nature":

And because all knowledge is assimilation to the object of knowledge, as the power or genius of nature is ecstatic, so must its science or the description of it be. The poet must be a rhapsodist: his inspiration a sort of bright casualty: his will in it only the surrender of will to the Universal Power, which will not be seen face to face, but must be received and sympathetically known. (RWE 126)

In this paragraph the locution "assimilation to" must be looked at twice since it does not, as we are accustomed, use "assimilate" in the sense

of "absorb," but means here "to come to resemble" or to make oneself like "the object of knowledge."(OED) In other words instead of taking possession of information about something else (which is the sense in which we usually think of ourselves as gaining knowledge) Emerson suggests we do the opposite in giving ourselves over to the object of knowledge. This seeming paradox is in line not only with the word "ecstatic" (in the sense of "ex - stasis" which literally means to stand outside of or beside oneself) but also the idea (expressed later in this passage) that in writing, as in life, it is the "surrender of will" to something larger than oneself which is the important thing. Emerson had a lifelong dialogue with himself over this issue of the self-conscious imposition of control in order to take charge of the self versus a conscious abandonment of control as a means to self-empowerment. As Joel Porte explains:

Here was Emerson's fundamental question: how could life be conducted without the unimpeded circulation of vital energies? Which was more natural, control or release?¹³

In his book Reading America: Essays on American Literature, Denis Donoghue concludes that

The more we read Nature, the more clearly it appears that the whole essay is predicated upon the capacity of Will. Not knowledge but power is its aim; not truth but command. Human will is deemed to participate in the vitality of natural forms, Mind is a chosen direction of will.¹⁴

It is important to point out, however, that in Emerson's writing, as in the following from Nature, there is a real sense in which "capacity of Will"--to use Donoghue's phrase--is synonymous with "surrender of will" (a phrase used in "The Method of Nature"):

But the best read naturalist who lends an entire and devout attention to truth, will see that there remains much to learn of his relation to the world, and that it is not to be learned by any addition or subtraction or other comparison of known quantities, but is arrived at by untaught sallies of the spirit, by a continual self-recovery, and by entire humility. He will perceive that there are far more excellent qualities in the student than preciseness and infallibility; that a guess is often more fruitful than an indisputable affirmation, and that a dream may let us deeper into the secret of nature than a hundred concerted experiments.

(RWE 43)

Thus even though Donoghue is right to argue that what Emerson is after in Nature is "power," he fails to mention that it is the power made available through "untaught sallies of the spirit." As Richard Poirier writes:

Emerson has a predilection for what he calls "abandonment." . . . the word helps explain his tendency to move out of any rhetorical position he has just occupied into another one, as if in hot pursuit of a truth elusive of more orderly verbal and syntactic inquiry.¹⁵

In fact there are many instances where Emerson relies upon either the word "abandonment" or some intimately-related notion:

What is Love, and why is it the chief good, but because it is an overpowering enthusiasm? Never self-possessed or prudent, it is all abandonment. (RWE "The Method of Nature" 128)

It is the vice of our public speaking that it has not abandonment. Somewhere, not only every orator but every man should let out all the length of all the reins; should find or make a frank and hearty expression of what force and meaning is in him. (RWE "Spiritual Laws" 310)

Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm. The way of life is wonderful: it is by abandonment. (RWE "Circles" 414)

It is a secret which every intellectual man quickly learns, that, beyond the energy of his possessed and conscious intellect, he is capable of a new energy (as of an intellect doubled on itself), by

abandonment to the nature of things; that, beside his privacy of power as an individual man, there is a great public power, on which he can draw, by unlocking, at all risks, his human doors, and suffering the ethereal tides to roll and circulate through him: then he is caught up into the life of the Universe, his speech is thunder, his thought is law, and his words are universally intelligible as the plants and animals. (RWE "The Poet" 459)

Power keeps quite another road than the turnpikes of choice and will, namely the subterranean and invisible tunnels and channels of life. . . . All good conversation, manners, and action, come from a spontaneity which forgets usages, and makes the moment great. Nature hates calculators; her methods are saltatory and impulsive. Man lives by pulses; our organic movements are such; and the chemical and ethereal agents are undulatory and alternate; and the mind goes antagonizing on, and never prospers but by fits. . . . The most attractive class of people are those who are powerful obliquely, and not by the direct stroke

(RWE "Experience" 482-483)

The important point seems to be that in moving from one place to another --e.g., from one sentence to a next--we should proceed neither by strict adherence to a rationally pre-conceived system, nor by wishing to "possess" knowledge, but rather by means of "abandonment."

To go back then to the passage from "The Method of Nature": In the passage "The poet must be a rhapsodist," to rhapsodize means literally to stitch together or piece together a song as did the rhapsodists of ancient Greece who collected and recited the Homeric poems.¹⁶ The implication Emerson wants to emphasize when he uses the word is the way in which there should be no prevailing argument which tyrannizes over individual elements. In other words the emphasis is upon the process of stitching together "disconnected" parts in the absence of "a fixed form or plan" (as the OED explains "rhapsody"). This image of one who "stitches" is, for Emerson, a proper model for the way in which the spontaneous processes of mind function, and his point is that ideally

one should work to encourage this approach in oneself so that there comes to be an inner logic of thought which constantly revitalizes itself as it makes discoveries along the way.

Joel Porte, in Representative Man, describes this emphasis in his reading of Emerson's essays:

. . . for Emerson man is "a self-evolving circle" perpetually giving birth to himself out of the womb of his own fertile imagination. . . . Emerson's career, in fact, is one of the best examples we have of the American literary character in the process, perpetually, of defining and redefining itself. It is utterly appropriate that Emerson's preferred mode of expression should have turned out to be the essay--that tentative and fragmentary record of the mind in search of its meaning. . . . the source of Emerson's vitality [is] in his willingness to make one moment's circumference the next moment's center, as he redrew the circle of his meaning and thus reshaped the configurations of his existence. ¹⁷

The image described here of making "one moment's circumference the next moment's center" is an example of the non-linear (or, perhaps one should say, eccentric) approach Emerson intends when he uses the word "rhapsody" in the sense of "to stitch" or "weave." Henry James describes a similar process in his preface to Roderick Hudson where he says:

Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so. He is in the perpetual predicament that the continuity of things is the whole matter, for him, of comedy and tragedy; that this continuity is never, by the space of an instant or an inch, broken, and that, to do anything at all, he has at once intensely to consult and intensely to ignore it. All of which will perhaps pass but for a supersubtle way of pointing the plain moral that a young embroiderer of the canvas of life [James himself, that is, at an earlier stage of his life when starting to write Roderick Hudson] soon began to work in terror, fairly, of the vast expanse of that surface, of the boundless number of its distinct perforations for the needle, and of the tendency inherent in his many-coloured flowers and figures to cover and consume as many as possible of the little holes. . . . (AN 5)

Fundamental to this passage, of course, is what Henry learned from his own brother, William: that inherent to the life of thought is the truth that "relations stop nowhere," and that in the mind--as in all of life--the "continuity is never, by the space of an instant or an inch, broken" As William puts it in The Principles of Psychology:

Consciousness, . . . does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as "chain" or "train" do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A "river" or a "stream" are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, or consciousness, or of subjective life.¹⁸

As a novelist Henry with his style adds Emerson's idea of "rhapsody": that not only is the mind a continuous flow but also an "embroiderer." Ashbery will acknowledge this same process in his poem "Train Rising Out of The Sea" in his use of the phrase "weaving a song":

Do you hear the wind? It's not dying,
It's singing, weaving a song about the president saluting the trust,

The past in each of us, until so much memory becomes an institution,
Through sheer weight, the persistence of it, no,
Not the persistence, that makes it seem a deliberate act
Of duration, much too deliberate for this ingenuous being

Like an era that refuses to come to an end or be born again.
(AWK 87)¹⁹

In my discussion here of "abandonment" and "rhapsody," it is important to recognize how rich this link between Emerson's and Ashbery's work really is. In the growing body of criticism surrounding Ashbery's poetry it has come to be accepted by certain readers that his work is the counterpart in the realm of contemporary letters to (depending on the critic one asks) Mannerist, Cubist, Surrealist or

Abstract Expressionist technique in painting.²⁰ Yet while Ashbery has undeniably been influenced by modern art (since he has, after all, made much of his living as an art critic), when readers argue that those aspects of Ashbery's poetry which seem baffling are to be seen as derived by analogy from the visual arts, since nothing comparable exists in modern literature, then they are overlooking Ashbery's roots in 19th century American literature. For example in Emerson's essays one sees a kind of inchoate literary counterpart to "Cubism" in the way that each of his gnomic sentences will be mirrored and extended by other sentences which are not necessarily contiguous to it but which may surface at some point later on in the text: in this way Emerson's prose is comprised of tightly-formed sentences arranged in a non-linear format in the same way that a Cubist painting is comprised of facets of visual surface arranged on a non-representational field. The critic Gaeton Picon has described certain aspects of Cubism as follows:

[In a Cubist painting] it is as if volume had been fragmented and reassembled on a flat surface by a pictorialization that offers simultaneously a view of all that is normally seen in successive views: the front as well as the side and back of the object. . . . In depicting an object not as seen by the eye but as it exists in the mind, the Cubists strayed from visual reality toward conceptual reality. Braque himself declared that "the senses distort, while the mind creates."²¹

Compare this with Northrop Frye's description of Henry James' prose which I quoted on page nineteen, above. In Frye's remarks the way "there emerges not a linear process of thought but a simultaneous comprehension" corresponds to the way in Cubist painting, as described in the previous passage, "a pictorialization . . . offers simultaneously

a view of all that is normally seen in successive views . . ."; in other words both Henry James and Cubist painters like Georges Braque want to depict "an object not as seen by the eye but as it exists in the mind."

Henry James, like Ashbery, worked as an art critic²²--and it is at least in part owing to this fact that we may describe his as an "attempt to use prose as a plastic medium."²³ However it needs to be emphasized that it is in line with the man who wrote "mind is the only reality" (and, after the fact, Wallace Stevens' remark that "We live in the mind") that, as an application of this idea, Henry James could write in his New York Editon Preface to "The Altar of The Dead" the following remarks:

With the preference I have noted for the "neat" evocation--the image, of any sort, with fewest attendant vaguenesses and cheapnesses, fewest loose ends dangling and fewest features missing, the image kept in fine the most susceptible of intensity--with the predilection, I say, the safest arena for the play of moving accidents and mighty mutations and strange encounters, or whatever odd matters, is the field, as I may call it, rather of their second than of their first exhibition. By which, to avoid obscurity, I mean nothing more cryptic than I feel myself show them best by showing almost exclusively the way they are felt, by recognizing as their main interest some impression strongly made by them and intensely received. We but too probably break down, I have ever reasoned, when we attempt the prodigy, the appeal to mystification, in itself; with its "objective" side too emphasised the report (it is ten to one) will practically run thin. We want it clear, goodness knows, but we also want it thick, and we get the thickness in the human consciousness that entertains and records, that amplifies and interprets it. (AN 256)

Similarly, in a 1983 interview, John Ashbery remarked: "I think I am trying [in my poetry] to reproduce the polyphony that goes on inside me, which I don't think is radically different from that of other people. After all, one is constantly changing one's mind and thereby becoming something slightly different."²⁴ As Joel Porte points out in the

following passage:

For Emerson, listening to himself implied in a real sense making himself the very subject of his discourse. He could have his audience in his mind only by taking them into his mind. Somehow, that process would inform the actual point of view and shape of his speech.²⁵

It is this same experience of being inside the processes of a mind as it thinks which Richard Poirier sees in James:

The entire career of Henry James leads him toward The Golden Bowl His characters in that novel are devoured by his voice which is why they mostly sound alike. Henry James is the turn of the screw, and he knows it, even while, as in the story of that title, he writes in apparent abhorrence of any gross efforts at governing.²⁶

And finally it is John Unterecker who, in his introduction to David Shapiro's book on John Ashbery, comments:

Such a writer [as John Ashbery], representing the real world of the mind, finds meandering thought his true vocation. . . . By drawing on private materials, he forces us to have the strange experience of roaming through someone else's head.²⁷

If we see James and Ashbery as inheriting from Emerson the notions of "abandonment" and "rhapsody" as techniques appropriate to a depiction of the way one's mind can give itself access to its own images and processes, then we can open a window on specific methods at the very heart of James' and Ashbery's work.

4. Lambert Strether Is "At Sea" (A 78)

In the later novels of Henry James the way certain characters over the course of the narrative will experience an evolution of sensibility

illustrates Emerson's idea that "The poet must be a rhapsodist." For example, as carefully designed and controlled as James' technique is in The Ambassadors, Lambert Strether goes through a process of change which has its basis in his willingness to surrender control and endure the uncertainty of his situation "without"--as John Keats puts it in describing what he calls "negative capability"--"any irritable reaching after fact and reason."²⁸ Without knowing it (although James may have known it), Strether comes to accept Emerson's postulate that "all our progress is an unfolding, like the vegetable bud" (RWE 419). From the outset of The Ambassadors we are aware that Strether does not subscribe to the "fine cold thought" (A 297) which typifies Mrs. Newsome in whose mind there is described to be "no margin, as it were, for any alteration" (A 298). Rather on the second page of the novel we see the narrator describing Strether as possessing a very different kind of consciousness:

He was burdened, poor Strether--it had better be confessed at the outset--with the oddity of a double consciousness. There was detachment in his zeal and curiosity in his indifference. (A 18)

What is suggested is Strether's unwillingness at any given time to surrender complete control over his consciousness to any defining mood or posture. This type of "double consciousness" allows Strether (as one pulled out to sea by the undertow) to let himself abandon control to a process which is a true "unfolding":

Poor Strether had at this very moment to recognise the truth that wherever one paused in Paris the imagination reacted before one could stop it. This perpetual reaction put a price, if one would, on pauses; but it piled up consequences till there was scarce room to pick one's steps among them. (A 69)

Here his "imagination" responds spontaneously and goes out to the

cosmopolitan sense of variety which Paris displays despite the dictates of conscience which, Strether comes eventually to realize, keep Mrs. Newsome and Sarah Pocock moored exactly where they are. Thus over the course of the novel Strether will begin to realize that his "double consciousness" is, without his having any ability to control it, shifting away from the restraining sense of conscience and towards that part of mind dominated by the free play of imagination. ("You've . . . no imagination, don't you see? at all" [Strether says to Chad late in the novel, on page 290; and Chad replies:] . . . "But haven't you yourself rather too much?") Strether's recognition that he wants and needs to change comes in an early conversation with Maria Gostrey:

"Then get me out!" [says Lambert Strether]

[Maria Gostrey's] face fairly brightened for the joy of the appeal, but, as if it were a question of immediate action, she visibly considered. "Out of waiting for [Waymarsh]?--of seeing him at all?"

"Oh no--not that," said poor Strether, looking grave. "I've got to wait for him--and I want very much to see him. But out of the terror. You did put your finger on it a few minutes ago. It's general, but it avails itself of particular occasions. That's what it's doing for me now. I'm always considering something else; something else, I mean, than the thing of the moment. The obsession of the other thing is the terror. I'm considering at present for instance something else than you."

She listened with charming earnestness. "Oh you oughtn't to do that!"

"It's what I admit. Make it then impossible."

She continued to think. "Is it really an 'order' from you?--that I shall take the job? Will you give yourself up?"

Poor Strether heaved his sigh. "If I only could! But that's the deuce of it--that I never can. No--I can't."

She wasn't, however, discouraged. "But you want to at least?"

"Oh unspeakably!"

"Ah then, if you'll try!"--and she took over the job, as she had called it, on the spot. "Trust me!" (A 26 and 27)

Strether knows that his unwillingness to experience what is in his immediate environment at the moment--to "seize the day," as it were--

has been a limitation, and one he shares with his fellow countryman, Waymarsh. (As Emerson says in "Self-Reliance": "But man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present. . . . He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time.")

RWE 270) We find, for example, on the one hand, how Strether sees Waymarsh's personality as dominated by an unwillingness to live with the satisfactions of the here and now which our senses have access to, and how he insists on discomfort as necessary to his world view:

. . . --there was yet an impression of minor discipline involved for our friend [Strether] in the picture Waymarsh made as he sat in trousers and shirt on the edge of his couch. With his long legs extended and his large back much bent, he nursed alternately, for an almost incredible time, his elbows and his beard. He struck his visitor as extremely, as almost wilfully uncomfortable; yet what had this been for Strether, from that first glimpse of him disconcerted in the porch of the hotel, but the predominant note? The discomfort was in a manner contagious, as well as also in a manner inconsequent and unfounded; the visitor felt that unless he should get used to it--or unless Waymarsh himself should--it would constitute a menace for his own prepared, his own already confirmed, consciousness of the agreeable. On their first going up together to the room Strether had selected for him Waymarsh had looked it over in silence and with a sign that represented for his companion, if not the habit of disapprobation, at least the despair of felicity; and this look had recurred to Strether as the key of much he had since observed. "Europe," he had begun to gather from these things, had up to now rather failed of its message to him; he hadn't got into tune with it and had at the end of three months almost renounced any such expectation. (A 29)

Waymarsh's "wilful discomfort" and "despair of felicity" result from the use of moral standards to short-circuit whatever comfort his senses might otherwise be able to find in his surroundings; and this response in Waymarsh is what is referred to at several points in the novel as his "sacred rage." Strether's development in a different direction over the course of the novel will make him more open to his senses as his aesthetic response to Paris later in the book suggests:

All voices had grown thicker and meant more things; they crowded on him as he moved about--it was the way they sounded together that wouldn't let him be still. He felt, strangely, as sad as if he had come for some wrong, and yet as excited as if he had come for some freedom. But the freedom was what was most in the place and the hour; it was the freedom that most brought him round again to the youth of his own that he had long ago missed. He could have explained little enough today either why he had missed it or why, after years and years, he should care that he had; the main truth of the actual appeal of everything was none the less that everything represented the substance of his loss, put it within reach, within touch, made it, to a degree it had never been, an affair of the senses. That was what it became for him at this singular time, the youth he had long ago missed--a queer concrete presence, full of mystery, yet full of reality, which he could handle, taste, smell, the deep breathing of which he could positively hear. It was in the outside air as well as within; it was in the long watch, from the balcony, in the summer night, of the wide late life of Paris, the unceasing soft quick rumble, below, of the little lighted carriages that, in the press, always suggested the gamblers he had seen of old at Monte Carlo pushing up to the tables. (A 281 and 282)

As Strether begins to be able to participate in that part of his life which is "an affair of the senses," one of the important differences between Strether and Waymarsh comes to be that understood to exist between the constricting force of an imposed morality and the free play of imagination. Northrop Frye describes a related contrast in The Anatomy of Criticism:

. . . poetry continually tends to right its own balance to return to the pattern of desire and away from the conventional and moral. . . . The moral and the desirable have many important and significant connections, but still morality, which comes to terms with experience and necessity, is one thing, and desire, which tries to escape from necessity, quite another. Thus literature is as a rule less inflexible than morality, and it owes much of its status as a liberal art to that fact.²⁹

The process Strether goes through in order to become more flexible and open to experience is one dominated by the need to relax control during moments of uncertainty. If the conversation I quoted above (on page 34)

between Strether and Maria Gostrey is his introduction to someone possessing a consciousness very different from Waymarsh's--and the kind of consciousness he himself would like, in some respects at least, to possess--then his next step in a new direction takes place on one morning he spends with John Little Bilham and Miss Barrace (members of a group of young expatriate artists and bohemians whom he sees as living "the irregular life" (A 79) in Paris). It is when Strether and Waymarsh have breakfast with Miss Barrace and Bilham that Strether hears them conversing in a way which he finds somehow entirely new:

. . . he was in fact so often at sea that his sense of the range of reference was merely general and that he on several different occasions guessed and interpreted only to doubt. He wondered what they meant, but there were things he scarce thought they could be supposed to mean, and "Oh no--not that!" was at the end of most of his ventures. This was the very beginning with him of a condition as to which, later on, it will be seen, he found cause to pull himself up; and he was to remember the moment duly as the first step in a process. (A 78)

This "process"--or, as he thinks of it a little later, "the maze he had but begun to tread" (A 80)--makes Strether feel progressively more "at sea" (A 78). Eventually Strether must face the fact that what he had previously thought to be unimpeachable assumptions (to which his character is permanently anchored) are now beginning to shift. In this regard Strether comes to an important stage of his journey on the occasion of his first encounter with Chad:

He was in presence of a fact that occupied his whole mind, that occupied for the half-hour his senses themselves all together; but he couldn't without inconvenience show anything--which moreover might count really as luck. What he might have shown, had he shown at all, was exactly the kind of emotion--the emotion of bewilderment--that he had proposed to himself from the first, whatever should occur, to show least. The phenomenon that had suddenly sat down there with him was a phenomenon of change so complete that his imagination, which had worked so beforehand, felt

itself, in the connexion, without margin or allowance. It had faced every contingency but that Chad should not be Chad, and this was what it now had to face with a mere strained smile and an uncomfortable flush. (A 90)

Thus it is near the end of Book Three when Strether first lays eyes on Chad that Chad's appearance and manner are a complete surprise to Strether and a landmark in his new (and progressively more Emersonian) consciousness:

Again and again as the days passed he had had a sense of the pertinence of communicating quickly with Woollett--communicating with a quickness with which telegraphy alone would rhyme; the fruit really of a fine fancy in him for keeping things straight, for the happy forestalment of error. No one could explain better when needful, nor put more conscience into an account or a report; which burden of conscience is perhaps exactly the reason why his heart always sank when the clouds of explanation gathered. His highest ingenuity was in keeping the sky of life clear of them. Whether or no he had a grand idea of the lucid, he held that nothing ever was in fact--for any one else--explained. One went through the vain motions, but it was mostly a waste of life. A personal relation was a relation only so long as people either perfectly understood or, better still, didn't care if they didn't. From the moment they cared if they didn't it was living by the sweat of one's brow; and the sweat of one's brow was just what one might buy one's self off from by keeping the ground free of the wild weed of delusion. It easily grew too fast, and the Atlantic cable now alone could race with it. That agency would each day have testified for him to something that was not what Woollett had argued. (A 92)

Strether changes so much that, unlike the moment during his early talk with Maria Gostrey (on page 26) when he admits he's "always considering something else . . . than the thing of the moment," later in the book, during a talk with Chad, Strether can finally let himself realize that the given "moment really took on . . . an intensity." (A 142) This is something new with Strether, as is the evident transformation from his earlier preoccupation with constantly checking his watch (on page 25) to see what time it is ("He looked repeatedly at his watch, and when he had

done so for the fifth time Miss Gostrey took him up. 'You're doing something that you think not right'") to an altered state of mind which begins to care little about time as something the quantity of which one must always keep track of:

He lighted, in the street, a cigarette, which again gave him more time. But it was already sharp for him that there was no use in time. (A 143)

Again, as ever, Emerson is our context: "It is the quality of the moment, not the number of days, of events, or of actors, that imports." (RWE "The Transcendentalist" 204) Strether's consciousness, as he admits, has altered to such a degree that he wonders--as he says to Miss Gostrey--if perhaps he isn't "mad": "I dare say in fact I'm quite fantastic, and I shouldn't be at all surprised if I were mad." (A 191) The point, then, is that Strether becomes aware that he has gone through a complete transformation with respect to the way he experiences and thinks about the world and his place in it:

. . . and the time seemed already far off when he had held out his small thirsty cup to the spout of [Miss Gostrey's] pail. Her pail was scarce touched now, and other fountains had flowed for him; she fell into her place as but one of his tributaries; and there was a strange sweetness--a melancholy mildness that touched him--in her acceptance of the altered order.

It marked for himself the flight of time, or at any rate what he was pleased to think of with irony and pity as the rush of experience; it having been but the day before yesterday that he sat at her feet and held on by her garment and was fed by her hand. It was the proportions that were changed, and the proportions were at all times, he philosophised, the very conditions of perception, the terms of thought. (A 196)

When James develops his character so that for Strether previously-assumed-to-be-immutable laws are overturned, we see an example of what Emerson wanted his readers to understand when he used the word

"abandonment." Also Strether begins to keep "the sky of life clear" of "the clouds of explanation" (A 92) and in this way we see him throwing over any preconceived, linear, rational "explanation" he may by habit wish to bring to his experience in favor of a "stitching together" of whatever information his senses provide him--a process which results (as Strether acknowledges) in a reorganization for him of "the very conditions of perception, [and] the terms of thought." So it is, then, as if James gives us a lesson illustrating Emerson's beliefs that "Adaptiveness is the peculiarity of human nature" (RWE "Montaigne; or, The Skeptic" 696) and also that "He in whom the love of truth predominates will keep himself aloof from all moorings, and afloat" (RWE "Intellect" 426).

5. "Houseboat Days" (HD 38)

It is this formulation on Emerson's part--and illustration on James' part--of an alternative logic of thought, namely one based on the power of "abandonment" and also of "rhapsody," which John Ashbery picks up on and explores in his later poetry. Consider, for example, the title poem in the book Houseboat Days and the way in which it could almost be a journal entry made by a latter-day version of Lambert Strether. The poem's opening quote suggests something overheard. In a 1983 interview Ashbery discusses incorporating overheard remarks into poems:

. . . I often put in things that I have overheard people say, on the street for instance. Suddenly something fixes itself in the flow that is going on around one and seems to have a significance.
 . . .

Likewise in the process of gaining access to hidden meanings which surround him, it is through overheard remarks (as I mentioned above on page 37) that Lambert Strether, in part, progresses:

. . . he was in fact so often at sea that his sense of the range of reference [in the conversation he was listening to between Bilham and Miss Barrace] was merely general and that he on several different occasions guessed and interpreted only to doubt. He wondered what they meant, but there were things he scarce thought they could be supposed to mean, and "Oh no--not that!" was at the end of most of his ventures. (A 78)

In "Houseboat Days" the opening sentence--"The skin is broken"--introduces two of the poems important motifs: one concerns the presence of pain in our lives. ("Pain" also appears in lines 18 and 19 where we read "--do you see where it leads? To pain, / And the triumph over pain"; and in lines 26 to 29 which read "Pain in the cistern, in the gutters, and if we merely / Wait awhile, that denial, as though a universe of pain / Had been created just so as to deny its own existence." HD 38 and 39) The second motif this first sentence introduces concerns a vision of change or movement as one which is fundamental to human experience as suggested in the idea of the breaking of the "skin" so as to pass beyond something. In fact the way that in the second line it may be the "poking ahead" which is responsible for breaking the "skin" suggests that this opening statement is about life's inevitable changes which are often accompanied by the pain of giving up the familiar and comfortable as part of the process of moving through boundaries into that which is new. (Another poem opening on a similar note is "A Wave": "To pass through pain and not know it, / A car door slamming in the night. / To emerge on an invisible terrain." AW 68) The rest of this opening quote in its ungrammatical quality seems like

pieces of unconnected conversation coming from the tables around us as we sit over breakfast in the coffee shop of a hotel where we are staying:

"The skin is broken. The hotel breakfast china
Poking ahead to the last week in August, not really
Very much at all, found the land where you began..."
(HD 38)

The collective sense here, in addition to the feeling of pain, is one of movement ("Poking ahead"), limitation ("not really / Very much at all") and finally discovery ("found the land where you began...")--this last suggesting the kind of circular movement T.S. Eliot described in "Little Gidding":

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started³¹
And know the place for the first time.

The effect of Ashbery's opening lines is to evoke the transitive and partial or unfinished nature of experience.

In its mention of "breakfast china" (in the first line) and "teacups" (in the last line), the poem uses synecdoche to introduce a consideration of domestic, indoor life as associated with travel, as in the idea of a "hotel" (also in the first line) and as suggested by "some distant, speeding train" (in line 38); and then onto this picture is superimposed the third element of "pain" I mentioned before. But how, we might ask, is staying in a hotel or traveling painful? The poem helps us gain a sense of how we should construe the meaning of "hotel" in the sentence: "The mind / Is so hospitable, taking in everything / Like boarders, and you don't see until / It's all over how little there

was to learn / Once the stench of knowledge has dissipated, and the
trouvailles / Of every one of the senses fallen back." "Knowledge" can
be gathered by no other means than through our senses--which is to say
that if the "mind" wants to know anything at least at first it has no
choice but to take in "everything / Like boarders."

However in some way, and for the time being, we are blind: "and
you don't see until / It's all over." The fault seems to lie with our
"senses," since what we focus upon in our lives--what we think is
important at the time--is "the trouvailles / Of every one of the
senses," even though the point where we really begin to "see" is when
these "trouvailles" have "fallen back." A passage shedding some light
on this one appears in the long poem, "A Wave":

Moments as clear as water
Splashing on a rock in the sun, though in darkness, and then
Sleep has to affirm it and the body is fresh again,
For the trials and dangerous situations that any love,
However well-meaning, has to use as terms in the argument
That is the reflexive play of our living and being lost
And then changed again, a harmless fantasy that must grow
Progressively serious, and soon state its case succinctly
And dangerously, and we sit down to the table again
Noting the grain of the wood this time and how it pushes through
The pad we are writing on and becomes part of what is written.
Not until it starts to stink does the inevitable happen.

(AW 73)

It is when a reliance upon sense data is abandoned in the process of
allowing oneself to experience the "reflexive play of our living and
being lost" that a kind of mystical blending of objects with one another
occurs as "the grain of the wood [. . .] pushes through / The pad we are
writing on and becomes part of what is written." What "stinks" is
"reasoning on behalf of one's / Sincere convictions" (a phrase used in
the sentence in "Houseboat Days" after the one under discussion) since

this emphasizes not only the boundaries between ideas (as if they were objects and needed to be strictly defined), but also the belief that some ideas are more permanent than others (i.e., are "convictions"). Ashbery suggests that what we "don't see" is that "knowledge" is not the "boarders" in the "hospitable" mind, but the way the boarders come and go--the way they look when seen "As in the window of some distant, speeding train." (line 38) What we see in the windows is not so much individual passengers but a collective passage that pulls us along with it; once we situate ourselves in relation to the world of our own experience so as to think we are not at the door of a hotel as much as looking at a "speeding train"--then we become accomplices and, as if magically, are on that train. The frustration we feel comes, in part, from realizing that we do not possess our experience in the way that we have been trained to believe that we can own land or a car, but are rather moving along and changing with it; the painful part is accepting the difficult-to-accept and even seemingly paradoxical fact that the mind, though a home (of sorts), is also always changing and in this sense never on solid ground. An extension of this idea is suggested in lines 6 through 8: "We can botanize / About this for centuries, and the little dazey / Blooms again in the cities." Here Ashbery suggests we can "botanize" (or, in other words, structure our minds into rational intellectual compartments or categories) all we want, but "the little dazey" (which is to say a bewildering experience of one sort or another) will always intrude itself and upset our neatest categories (and perhaps even, as he says in lines 53 and 54, "topple governments, level towns and cities"). Part of the point is that in the same way that a daisy

will grow on a hillside, let's say, and play its role in the ensemble of flowers and plants which, upon being seen, contribute to our peace of mind--likewise those experiences which daze and bewilder one in an urban setting (New York City, for example, where John Ashbery lives) contribute to an unsettled state of mind which, if we are to believe Emerson, is important to the growth of our spirit: the point is not the daisy or the "dazey," but what we do with it.

While I hesitate to "botanize" too much about anything so diverse as Ashbery's poems, it is possible to generalize about the sentences in his poems in the four books under discussion in so far as Ashbery presents each poem as if it were its own consciousness in the process of receiving sentences in all the different ways a mind registers language. In other words it is as if some Ashbery poems are themselves examples of the way that, as Emerson says, "life is what a person thinks all day," so that initially overheard snippets of conversation can start one thinking about something (as in this poem's opening); then a state of mind or passage of thought or feeling will be portrayed as a piece of seemingly surreal landscape (as in lines 18-23: "To pain, / And the triumph over pain, still hidden / In these low-lying hills which rob us / Of all privacy, as though one were always about to meet / One's double through the chain of cigar smoke / And then it . . . happens, like an explosion in the brain, / Only it's a catastrophe on another planet"); and then, third, given these events depicted as happening on a mindscape, he will offer an often paradoxical one-sentence summary or interpretation which--as with Emerson's aphoristic sentences--often do not so much provide an answer as suggest more questions (as in lines 31

to 33: "To praise this, blame that, / Leads one subtly away from the beginning, where / We must stay, in motion"). With respect to this third "type" of sentence we find in Ashbery's later poems, it is important to remind ourselves of what Richard Poirier says about Emerson's sentences: "Emerson is interesting and important not for any solutions proposed by his aphorisms, but for the trouble and contradictions into which his aspirations put him."³² But what gives some readers trouble is their insistence that sentences in an Ashbery poem be structured in a rational and linear fashion (as if the poet were "reasoning on behalf of [his] / Sincere convictions") when in fact it is by means of a rhapsodic stitching together that the mind of the poem moves from one point to another. The reader must learn to "assimilate" himself or herself to Ashbery's processes and thus learn an important lesson concerning the way knowledge can come through "abandonment."

The last sentence of Ashbery's quoted above (lines 13 to 23) suggests in the context of the poem the idea that "To praise this [or] blame that" is a matter of self-delusion if the "this" and "that" are thought to be "certainties" since--as the previous line tells us--the only "certainties" are "living and dying." (I pointed out earlier, on page 22, how the "certain pillars" in line 51 become "a vast dream," and thus themselves must be seen as dissolving into illusion.) What we are being told is that change (like the "weather" in the previous line) is the only certainty, and that "the beginning, where / We must stay" (lines 32 and 33) is, in fact, "motion" itself (again like the "weather" which is at once "certain" and always in "motion"). Ashbery discussed related ideas in an interview from 1983:

INTERVIEWER: Could you explain the paradox concerning ambiguity and certitude [as they relate to modern poetry and art]?

ASHBERY: Things are in a continual state of motion and evolution, and if we come to a point where we say, with certitude, right here, this is the end of the universe, then of course we must deal with everything that goes on after that, whereas ambiguity seems to take further developments into account. We might realize that the present moment may be one of an eternal or sempiternal series of moments, all of which will resemble it because, in some ways, they are the present, and won't in other ways, because the present will be the past by that time.³³

That Henry James shared this view is clear from his preface to Roderick Hudson where he wrote: "Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so." (AN 5) And so to return for a moment to Lambert Strether's feeling "the emotion of bewilderment" (A 90), it is as if indeed "Houseboat Days" could have been written by him, the "pain" mentioned at several points in it being what he has in mind when he realized "The phenomenon that had suddenly sat down there with him was a phenomenon of change so complete that his imagination, which had worked so beforehand, felt itself, in the connexion, without margin or allowance" (A 90).

The corresponding passage in Ashbery's poem reads:

--do you see where it leads? To pain,
 And the triumph over pain, still hidden
 In these low-lying hills which rob us
 Of all privacy, as though one were always about to meet
 One's double through the chain of cigar smoke
 And then it ... happens, like an explosion in the brain,
 Only it's a catastrophe on another planet to which
 One has been invited, and as surely cannot refuse:
 Pain in the cistern, in the gutters, and if we merely
 Wait awhile, that denial, as though a universe of pain
 Had been created just so as to deny its own existence.
 (HD 38, lines 21 through 28)

The "double" one is "always about to meet" is for Strether, in one

sense, Chad. But also it is the ever-unexpected encounter within oneself; it is the ability to turn away from conscience (or the argument that one must hold fast to the dictates of moral imperative as Mrs. Newsome and Susan Pocock believe) towards "imagination" which, given the unexpected "explosion in the brain," will acknowledge this "catastrophe on another planet to which / One has been invited, and as surely cannot refuse." The description here is of the kind of experience Strether is having of events which cannot be explained on the basis of one's possessed accumulation of beliefs and ideas--thus the need to give "one's double" (Ashbery's phrase, but also an apt description of Strether as we see him on page 18: "He was burdened . . . with a double consciousness") a chance to lead the way into the future³⁴ (as happens in Lambert Strether's case). The "triumph over pain" mentioned in line 19 (at the beginning of this sentence) comes, as in Strether's case, when "we merely / Wait awhile, that denial, as though a universe of pain / Had been created just so as to deny its own existence." The suggestion here is of a type of pain designed to self-destruct over time ("to deny its own existence" . . . "if we [. . .] wait awhile") as is appropriate given the ease one slowly begins to feel with any unfamiliar experience as it eventually comes to seem less threatening and part of a status quo. This is what happens to Lambert Strether's pain as he comes more and more to understand and accept for what it is the life lived by his acquaintances in Paris and the, for him, implied new "terms of thought." (A 196)

In this reading of "Houseboat Days" my identification of Lambert Strether with the author of the poem is not so far-fetched if we

consider that when John Ashbery went to Paris in 1956 (for a ten year stay) and developed finally into the poet we read today, he in a sense fulfilled what Lambert Strether (visiting Paris later in his life) thinks back upon as "the promises to himself [made as a young man] that he had after his other [earlier] visit never kept." (A 62) In other words if we grant, as E.M. Forster argues, that

. . . Paris irradiates [The Ambassadors] from end to end, it is an actor though always unembodied, it is a scale by which human sensibility can be measured, and when we have finished the novel and allow its incidents to blur that we may see the pattern plainer, it is Paris that gleams at the centre of the hourglass shape--Paris--nothing so crude as good or evil³⁵

--then Ashbery may well have been as strongly affected by Paris as Strether is imagined as being since Ashbery went to Paris after growing up in an atmosphere which may not have been all that different from our sense of Woollett, Massachusetts. In a 1985 interview (published in the British Poetry Nation Review) Ashbery spoke of his youth as follows:

INTERVIEWER: You have a reputation for being a very sophisticated, very New York, modern baroque poet, yet there's quite a strong rural element in your work--for example, the first two poems in A Wave--the "haystacks aflame" and so on . . .

ASHBERY: Yes, although those "haystacks aflame" came directly from a French nineteenth century painting I saw in Cleveland once. But, yes, I grew up in a very rustic environment--to put the best possible construction on it. My father was a plain ordinary farmer and we were rather poor. It was during the depression. The fact that I was born in New York State tends to confuse English readers. In fact Rochester is about 350 miles from New York City, almost as far as the Hebrides are from London. I never got to New York at all until I was seventeen, and even then it took a great deal of persuading my parents to allow me to go. So it might as well have been the Midwest.³⁶

6. "Houses Founded On The Sea" (RWE 696)

Whatever biographical details may be shared by the three writers under discussion (and a case may be made for this since not only did all three go to Harvard but also during visits to Europe when James was 26, Ashbery was 27, and Emerson was 29, each was strongly affected by the aspects of European culture with which he came into contact), they share a common vision which is suggested in the title of the poem I just discussed, "Houseboat Days." In an interview conducted in 1982 (published in 1984 in the American Poetry Review) John Ashbery said the following about this title:

INTERVIEWER: What about the title of Houseboat Days?

ASHBERY: I stole that one too--from an old National Geographic that I found--actually the October, 1929 issue--and on the cover is "Houseboat Days in Old Kashmir" or "in the Vale of Kashmir" or something like that and I sort of liked the kind of homely, old-fashioned sound of the phrase "Houseboat Days." Also, although I didn't choose it because of a list of things I liked about it, had I done so, probably one would have been the idea of both being on the move and being stationary in one's home--which is sort of like what life is like. . . .³⁷

This "idea of both being on the move and being stationary in one's home --which is sort of like what life is like," as I emphasized in my discussion of "Houseboat Days," is as central to Ashbery's writing as it is to both Emerson and James. In fact Emerson uses the very image of the "houseboat" in the following passage from his essay on Montaigne:

The philosophy we want is one of fluxions and mobility. . . . We want a ship in these billows we inhabit. An angular, dogmatic house would be rent to chips and splinters in this storm of many elements. No, it must be tight, and fit to the form of man, to live at all; as a shell is the architecture of a house founded on the

sea. The soul of man must be the type of our scheme, just as the body of man is the type after which a dwelling-house is built. Adaptiveness is the peculiarity of human nature. We are golden averages, volitant stabilities, compensated or periodic errors, houses founded on the sea. (RWE 696)

In the paradoxical image of "houses founded on the sea" (or some version thereof), these three writers wish to depict consciousness as not a place wherein one is confined, but a process requiring the freedom to evolve along lines inherent to the fabric of our consciousness. In this regard what R.P. Blackmur says about Henry James is true of Emerson and Ashbery as well:

His intention and all his labour was to represent . . . intelligence at its most difficult, its most lucid, its most beautiful point. This is the sum of his idiosyncrasy; and the reader had better make sure he knows what it is before he rejects it. (AN, xxi)

James and Ashbery, in depicting intelligence at "its most difficult, its most lucid point," move away from popular understandings of the mind as like (to use Emerson's analogy) an "angular, dogmatic house [that] would be rent to chips and splinters in this storm of many elements"--and move towards a vision of consciousness as a "volitant stabilit[y]."

To continue with Emerson's model of "a house founded on the sea" as representing a paradoxical view of mind in its capacity to be at once both container (like a house) and something which to stay alive must shift and change (like a sea), it is not hard to see in James' late novels the complex ways in which he depicts this model. In The Golden Bowl, for example, those features which most clearly define Adam and Maggie Verver (in the beginning, at least, since over time Maggie changes) are those associated with their relationship to architecture

and material possessions. For example when first introduced to us, Adam Verver is presented as one by choice "shut in" to a world of his own design:

Adam Verver at Fawns, that autumn Sunday, might have been observed to open the door of the billiard-room with a certain freedom--might have been observed, that is, had there been a spectator in the field. The justification of the push he had applied, however, and of the push, equally sharp, that, to shut himself in, he again applied--the ground of his energy was precisely that he might here, however briefly, find himself alone. . . . The vast, square, clean apartment was empty, and its large clear windows looked out into spaces of terrace and garden, of park and woodland and shining artificial lake, of richly condensed horizon, all dark blue upland and church-towered village and strong cloud-shadow, which were, together, a thing to create the sense, with everyone else at church, of one's having the world to one's self. (GB 111)

The qualities of the room he enters, the way it is "square, [and] clean," correspond to what we come to know as the "square, clean" lineaments of his neat, well-ordered businessman's mind as it is presented to us:

He was simple, he was a revelation of simplicity, and that was the end of him so far as he consisted of an appearance at all--a question that might verily, for a weakness in it, have been argued. . . . Quantity was in the air for these good people, and Mr. Verver's estimable quality was almost wholly in that pervasion. He was meagre and modest and clear-browed, and his eyes, if they wandered without fear, yet stayed without defiance. . . . (GB 245)

Also "the artificial lake" . . . [and] "richly condensed horizon" suggest one who has structured and landscaped himself so as to present to others the type of person Amerigo describes a little later on:

That was what it all came back to again with these people among whom he was married--that one found one used one's imagination mainly for wondering how they contrived so little to appeal to it. (GB 238)

Thus the picture we have of Adam Verver as associated with his house and

its carefully groomed grounds presents him as "artificial," "condensed," "shut . . . in," and "square."

And it is not only that Adam thinks of the world as something possessed--"of one's having the world to one's self"--but also that Verver's "conditions of perception . . . [and] terms of thought" (A 196) use as the basis for their method terms borrowed from the field of architecture. In other words the governing premises, methods, and objectives of Adam Verver's thought are wholly modeled on the houses in which, depending on the season, he and Maggie reside (which is to say that during the summer they go to "Fawns," while during the remainder of the year they may be found at the "Eaton Square" house)--and the objects for the safe keeping of which these houses find a large measure of their reason for being.

For an example consider Prince Amerigo and the way Adam Verver envisions him:

At first, certainly, their decent little old-time union, Maggie's and [Adam's] own, had resembled a good deal some pleasant public square, in the heart of an old city, into which a great Palladian church, say--something with a grand architectural front--had suddenly been dropped; so that the rest of the place, the space in front, the way round, outside to the east end, the margin of street and passage, the quantity of overarching heaven, had been temporarily compromised. Not even then, of a truth, in a manner disconcerting--given, that is, for the critical, or at least the intelligent, eye, the great style of the facade and its high place in its class. . . . The Palladian church was always there, but the piazza took care of itself. The sun stared down in his fulness, the air circulated, and the public not less; the limit stood off, the way round was easy, the east end was as fine, in its fashion, as the west, and there were also side doors for entrance, between the two--large, monumental, ornamental, in their style--as for all proper great churches. By some such process, in fine, had the Prince, for his father-in-law, while remaining solidly a feature, ceased to be, at all ominously, a block. (GB 118)

So as elaborate and large as the image of the Prince is which Adam

Verver holds, it is nonetheless as an object which Mr. Verver sees Amerigo: an old Italian cathedral with "side doors for entrance . . . [which are] large, monumental, ornamental, in their style."

And in contrast to the "square" quality of Verver's own mind which we noted, he wants his possessions to be "round":

It all came then, the great clearance [*i.e.*, Amerigo's acceptance as a suitor], from the one prime fact that the Prince, by good fortune, hadn't proved angular. . . . Oh, if he had been angular! He spoke--and it was the way he had spoken to Mrs. Assingham too--as if he grasped the facts, without exception, for which angularity stood.

. . . "You're round, my boy," [Adam Verver] had said--"you're all, you're variously and inexhaustibly round, when you might, by all the chances, have been abominably square. . . . As it is, for living with, you're a pure and perfect crystal. . . ."

. . . Representative precious objects, great ancient pictures and other works of art, fine eminent "pieces" in gold, in silver, in enamel, majolica, ivory, bronze, had for a number of years so multiplied themselves round [Adam] and, as a general challenge to acquisition and appreciation, so engaged all the faculties of his mind, that the instinct, the particular sharpened appetite of the collector, had fairly served as a basis for his acceptance of the Prince's suit. (GB 119-121)

Thus Adam Verver's defining characteristics are not only those associated with the collector of fine objects, but also one who lives in fine houses amongst these fine objects (among which Adam ultimately counts Amerigo).

Maggie Verver, for her part, is very much the child of the father in that she too sees life--at first at least--as a collection of objects, as architecture, even to the point of describing herself in terms not so different from Adam's "square, clean" mind: "I believe things enough about you, my dear," [Maggie says to Amerigo,] "to have a few [*i.e.*, "things" Maggie believes about Amerigo] left if most of them, even, go to smash. I've taken care of that. I've divided my faith into

water-tight compartments." (GB 37) However the hopeful aspect here is that though she sees herself (or at least, that is to say, her "faith" in Amerigo) as comprised of "compartments," unlike Adam whose consciousness is firmly anchored into the grounds of his various estates, Maggie--like Ashbery's "Houseboat" (or "April Galleons") and Emerson's "houses founded on the sea"--sees herself in terms associated with boats:

"Water-tight[" Maggie said]--["and are you, Amerigo,] the biggest compartment of all? Why, it's the best cabin and the main deck and the engine-room and the steward's pantry! It's the ship itself--it's the whole line. It's the captain's table and all one's luggage--one's reading for the trip." She had images, like that, that were drawn from steamers and trains, from a familiarity with "lines," a command of "own" cars, from an experience of continents and seas, that [Amerigo] was unable as yet to emulate; from vast modern machineries and facilities whose acquaintance he had still to make, but as to which it was part of the interest of his situation as it stood that he could, quite without wincing, feel his future likely to bristle with them. (GB 37)

So for Maggie, as the remainder of The Golden Bowl bears out, there is the suggestion that, unlike Adam, she at least has the potential to navigate what Emerson in his essay "Experience" (RWE 473) pessimistically describes as "An innavigable sea [that] washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with." Or it may be seen as Maggie's ability to grow and become a different person along the lines of Fanny Assingham's intended meaning when she says to the Colonel that "Maggie's awake" (GB 298); and Maggie herself will realize what has happened to her when she says to her father, later on: "I had been assured--always by dear Fanny--that I could get it [i.e., a sense of social equilibrium which would allow a renewal of close relations between Maggie and her father], only I must wake up. So I was

trying, you see, to wake up--trying very hard." (GB 475)

To bring Ashbery into my discussion now is to introduce a writer who, like Henry James, is also preoccupied, as I have already pointed out, by the resistance a mind presents to the need to be flexible and to grow out of the "compartments" which, as we reflect on and try to understand who we are at any given time, can become so confining. In this regard one poem deserving close attention is "The Path To The White Moon." (AW 31)

In his book A Wave John Ashbery considers the process according to which a late-20th century urban consciousness may try to adapt itself to an increasingly unpredictable environment. In doing this Ashbery avoids intellectual or theoretical constructs in favor of a direct assessment of the particular moments when a mind must adjust itself to meet the demands made by a constantly shifting world. The interesting thing is that his style is as restless as the world it depicts: Constantly focusing, shifting and re-focusing, Ashbery's is a flexible but deliberate language. The result, as suggested in the lines "It belongs where it is going / Not where it is" (AW 56)--from the poem "Never Seek To Tell Thy Love" (which title alludes to Blake's poem "Never Pain To Tell Thy Love"³⁸)--is a book whose premise is akin to that presented by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay "Circles" when he says "In nature every moment is new; and the past is always swallowed and forgotten; the coming only is sacred." (RWE 413)

In "The Path To The White Moon" the title suggests not only an emphasis upon process or the means by which one moves from here to there ("the path") but also a difficult-to-reach ideal of some kind ("the

white moon"). In the poem "Never Seek To Tell Thy Love" the word "path" appears in the phrase "now, / Like dazzled insects skimming the bright airs, / You are back on the road again, the path leading / Vigorously upward, through intelligent and clear spaces": thus throughout A Wave the emphasis upon flexibility, movement, or process is crucial.

In the poem's first line ("There were little farmhouses there they") the word "farmhouses" is reminiscent of the book's first poem, "At North Farm," in which a speaker is waiting with the knowledge, the hope, that "Somewhere someone is traveling furiously toward you"--while in "The Path To The White Moon" someone is recollecting previous points along a journey of some kind. The halting movement of this and the second line ("Looked like farmhouses yes without very much land") suggests how a remembered experience will shift in and out of focus as one searches for the words to describe it: here the declarative "There were" moves out of focus with "Looked like," then more firmly back into place with "yes without very much land." The mood of these first two lines is one of making demands upon the degree to which (and the ways in which) we know our own experience. The next line continues to focus the details of a memory; then the image suddenly shifts into an abstraction carried over into the next line which removes the need for tangible detail by asking us to consider an element which every member of the set of "things" has in common--"a mistake / Built into each thing rather charmingly": the very word "thing" undercuts what was otherwise coming to be an exteriorized setting. The reason for this shift from the concrete to the abstract is explained in the next line ("But once you have seen a thing you have to move on") which reminds us that we are on

a "path," the emphasis being not upon the settling into a mental landscape of some kind (or the "farmhouses" there) but the degree to which it may be "seen" then left (since "you have to move on"). One is reminded again of the Emerson remark I quoted above: "People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them."

The first two lines of the second stanza continue the imperative mood with which the previous one ended:

You have to lie in the grass
 And play with your hair, scratch yourself
 (AW 31)

Reminding us of "Leaves of Grass" and the suggestion in the likeness of hair to grass that human growth may mirror the cyclical processes of nature (that, as Emerson says, "All progress is an unfolding, like the vegetable bud"), by the time we reach this phrase we realize the farmhouses and trees are not physical farmhouses and trees but that we are working within a new kind of landscape: to "lie in the grass / And play with your hair, scratch yourself" suggests the mental counterpart to physically stretching and relaxing. Approaching these lines in this way removes what would otherwise seem a contradiction in the commands "move on" and "lie in the grass" since the mind can grow while physically staying in the same place; a guide to this reading may be found in the following line from the poem "More Pleasant Adventures": "We haven't moved an inch, and everything has changed." (Or, as Emerson says in "Experience" (RWE 471): "We do not know today whether we are busy or idle. In times when we thought ourselves indolent, we have afterwards discovered, that much was accomplished, and much was begun in us.")

The next four lines present a central image in the poem and book:

And then the space of this behavior, the air
 Has suddenly doubled
 And you have grown to fill the extra place
 Looking back at the small, fallen shelter that was
(AW 31)

The word "little" in the poem's first line, along with "farmhouses yes without very much land" in the second line, suggest that our minds are limited (or, as in the poem "When The Sun Went Down," that one is "strapped to one's mindset"); but if "land" in line two suggests the "mindset" onto which one is "strapped," then "air" in line eight suggests another dimension of a psychological nature into which, it is implied, there is plenty of room to grow. The idea in these first two stanzas involves the process of (1) seeing some "thing"; (2) drawing conclusions about its nature (that, for example, "a mistake / Is built into each thing rather charmingly"); (3) allowing under relaxed circumstances (or, at least, those of everyday life) this conclusion to be absorbed into the fabric of one's overall thought; and (4) realizing how at these times there are always two of us: the "us" of our old disintegrating assumptions about the world (and our relationship to it, the "fallen shelters")--and the new awareness (the way "you have grown to fill the extra place"). "No wonder we look out from ourselves / To the other person going on" is a sentence from the poem "Just Someone You Say Hi To" describing in different terms the moment of growth when we still live inside a circumscribed identity but, in adapting to the everchanging environment, are forced to proceed as if the weather had changed and different clothing became necessary as we trim our personality to fit that in response to which it must operate. The

"fallen shelter" suggests the "little farmhouses" of stanza one, or the constructs of the mind in which one hopes to find protection but can't, since it is now revealed that "air" is the element into which "growth" takes place. This reading is reinforced by the image in "When The Sun Went Down," in the middle of the poem, of "a roofless love standing open / To the elements"; also appropriate are the following lines from "A Wave":

if it pleases all my constructions
To collapse, I shall at least have had that satisfaction, and known
That it need not be permanent in order to stay alive,
Beaming, confounding with the spell of its good manners.

(AW 70)

Also another version of the idea expressed in these first two stanzas of "The Path To The White Moon" appears at the end of "Down By The Station, Early In The Morning":

And so each day
Culminates in merriment as well as a deep shock like an electric one,

As the wrecking ball bursts through the wall with the bookshelves
Scattering the works of famous authors as well as those
Of more obscure ones, and books with no author, letting in
Space, and an extraneous babble from the street
Confirming the new value the hollow core has again, the light
From the lighthouse that protects as it pushes us away.

(AW 14)

In this passage the "hollow core" could be some private part of the mind which is separate from but influenced by "the wrecking ball" world which has unexpectedly altered the mind's environment so as to let in "space." The process of these opening stanzas of "A Path To The White Moon" is that of showing how a landscape inhabited by human beings (a civilization of some kind) is transformed, the implicit metaphor involving the way a civilization is constantly building and rebuilding

itself (each stage being "a wave").

Stanza three comments upon the process described in the stanzas above, suggesting that time, as a process, is self-consuming, existing as it does in the shifting present moment:

If a stream winds through all this
 Alongside an abandoned knitting mill it will not
 Say where it has been
 The time unfolds like music trapped on the page
 Unable to tell the story again
 Raging

(AW 31)

To the landscape metaphor--the "farmhouses," "trees," and "air" of the mind--is now added a "stream" winding "alongside an abandoned knitting mill": this last, like the "fallen shelter," is an indication that former inhabitants have come and gone. (And of course all the while Ashbery continues to speak Emerson's language, "abandoned" reminding us of such lines as "The way of life is wonderful; it is by abandonment" in "Circles" (RWE 414), and "unfolds" reminding us of the line in "Intellect" (RWE 419) which reads: "All our progress is an unfolding, like the vegetable bud.")

In the fourth line of stanza three (having returned in the first three lines to the central image in the poem, the landscape) Ashbery moves from a metaphorical mode into a literal one, self-consciously considering the poetic process. The issue here concerns that within the poem which is not the "story" or narrative behind the feeling (since one is "Unable to tell the story again") but that lyric element or moment (both emotion and "music") "trapped" within the language which--given a responsive reader--may, in the process of being read, be experienced as "Raging." The attitude implied in these lines is that language does not

have an autonomous existence apart from the person who uses (or reads) it--a corollary to this being a de-emphasis of past experience in favor of a stress upon the present moment as it (or our consciousness of it) unfolds into a future.

In the beginning of the fourth stanza the poem, like the "stream," winds into a new time--and place:

Where the winters grew white we went outside
 To look at things again, putting on more clothes
 This too an attempt to define
 How we were being in all the surroundings
 (AW 31)

Even though the "Winters grew white," suggesting snow (making it no longer possible to "lie in the grass") it is still possible--even necessary--to go "outside" and see "things." Clothes, like farmhouses, are tangible expressions of what we perceive our relationship to the outside world to be just as "thought" itself, like clothes and farmhouses, mediates between ourselves and the world: it either protects us from the world (like the farmhouse) or becomes the vehicle in and through which we may explore a potentially dangerous world (as clothes do during winter).

"Big ones sleepy ones," the next line, may be understood better when read in juxtaposition with the following lines from other poems in A Wave:

and the general life
 Is still many sizes too big, yet
 Has style, woven of things that never happened
 With those that did, so that a mood survives
 Where life and death never could.
 (from "But What Is The Reader To Make Of This?" AW 13)

What did they want us to do? Stand around this way, monitoring every breath, checking each impulse for the return address,

wondering constantly about evil until necessarily we fall into a state of torpor that is probably the worst sin of all?

(from "Whatever It Is, Wherever You Are" AW 63)

"Big," then, refers to the "general life" mentioned in "But What Is The Reader To Make Of This?"--or that changed and changing environment into which one may not yet have grown (as a child does clothes); "sleepy" is the mind fallen "into a state of torpor" (as in "Whatever It Is, Wherever You Are") so that it doesn't or can't or won't grow into the "general life": in other words both "Big" and "sleepy" refer to an as yet unrealized or unfulfilled "attempt to define / How we were being in all the surroundings" (the key word being "attempt").

The next line, "Underwear and hats speak to us," like "Big ones sleepy ones," sounds as if it comes from a child's reader: in other words as the child has a fresh fascination with and eventually comes to know the meaning of simple things (such as articles of clothing) so, too, adults continue to negotiate between what is perceived at any given moment to be their own personalities and the totality of always-new "things." The next lines, in their style, continue the implied analogy with a child's fresh approach to the world and place (fantastically) humans in the role of cats who, when spoken to, may or may not understand and respond to the "shouted instructions" which are "grayed" (or "blurred," a word used in the poem's penultimate line) given the breakdown in communication one blames upon the limitations of a cat's sensibility. "Dependent and independent" suggests both the way cats seem to people (attached and "dependent" upon human attention while at the same time curiously aloof and "independent"), and the way people live as if oblivious to their environment while in fact intimately

caught up in its slightest fluctuation. The implied metaphor in this section suggests the degree to which people may or may not be able or willing to respond to their "surroundings" (or "general life"). What Ashbery is saying is expressed in the following terms near the end of "Description Of A Masque":

I still say that what counts isn't the particular set of circumstances, but how we adapt ourselves to them.

(AW 29)

The final stanza brings together all the issues raised thus far: "Us" at the end of the first line refers to all the elements in the environment, an understanding of which contributes to a "doubl"-ing of the "space of behavior"; "It gets to be so exciting but so big too" refers to this same process, the expanding of personal awareness. (And in this reading "Exciting" is to be contrasted with "sleepy" as a potential response to the process I have been describing.) The next two lines concern the psychological mechanisms for absorbing and growing ("we have ways to define")--and the "terms," or whatever "things" time comes up with for our brains to take in and grow from, which, since no one knows what will happen next, we do not have "Yet." But since we do not know what lies around the next bend--temporally speaking--the next phrase, "We know what is coming," comes as something of a surprise. The last five lines of the poem speak with a suddenness and authority similar to that experienced in meeting the last line in the first stanza ("But once you have seen a thing you have to move on"). In the poem's final lines what "we know [. . .] is coming" is the "coming" itself: the continuation of a process (as signaled in the phrase in the fifth to last line, "That we are moving").

In contrast to the seemingly child-like, understated simplicity of "Big ones sleepy ones," "Toward the resolution of time" seems to be an opaque, philosophical reference: what is "the resolution of time" anyway? In explicating this phrase we need to recall the line "The time unfolds like music trapped on a page" in the third stanza to reinforce a reading of "resolution" in musical terms as "the process by which a discord is made to pass into a concord" (OED): in other words "Toward the resolution of time" refers to the ability of the personality, over time, to bring into some kind of inner harmony the random, disjunctive events which constitute our "surroundings." (Pertinent here is what Emerson says in "Experience" (RWE 484): "Underneath the inharmonious and trivial particulars, is a musical perfection, the Ideal journeying always with us, the heaven without rent or seam. Do but observe the mode of our illumination.") In the line "Dangerously and gracefully," "Dangerously" refers to the personal, emotional danger associated with the acknowledging of these disjunctive events, the making of ourselves vulnerable to them--while "gracefully" implies the need to learn to live in a way which accommodates the unlikely into an ongoing movement of the personality which is harmonious in whatever terms.

The final line, "Inside this conversation," may also be read in terms of music so that the relationship between self and surroundings is understood as two melodic lines between which there is some potential "resolution." The use of "inside" and "outside" is crucial in this poem: in the early part of "The Path To The White Moon" the "fallen shelter," "abandoned knitting mill," and "winters [. . . when] we went outside" encourage the leaving of conventional modes of protecting

oneself from that which is "outside" the self, to the entering into (or going "inside") a "conversation" with that which can lead to a point where "the space of [a] behavior, the air / Has suddenly doubled / And you have grown to fill the extra place." Instead of being rigid like the walls of a "farmhouse," the personality must become like "clothes"-- in other words flexible enough to allow one to go "outside," see a "thing," and then "move on" (i.e., grow).

By not using periods in "The Path To The White Moon," so that sentence boundaries are no longer rigidly fixed, Ashbery creates as fluid and associative a language as possible, emphasizing in the poem's form the importance of movement and change. The reduced, pared-down quality of the work reinforces the implied psychological process which operates through "abandonment." His constant and careful use of internal rhyme (such as "farm" and "charm" in stanza one; "air" and "hair," and "place" and "space," in stanza two; "been" and "again," and "page" and "Raging," in stanza three--though this time it is not internal but end rhyme; and "cats" and "hats" in stanza four), amidst what otherwise seems a rhythmic disjointedness, is a stylistic mirroring of the thematic suggestion that one absorb one's "dangerous" surroundings into a self which continues, despite it all, to operate "gracefully."

In using the phrase "the dungeon of Better Living" in "A Wave" (AW 75), Ashbery suggests how impatient he is with the schemes we come up with to protect ourselves from change (at another point he refers to the tendency to "Hurry to deal with the sting / Of added meaning, hurry to fend it off"). "The Path To The White Moon" is Emersonian in its call

to be "alive," flexible and responsive to the potential for growth given the ever-changing nature of the world. The following remarks from Emerson's "Circles" could be a paraphrase of "The Path To The White Moon":

The extent to which this generation of circles, wheel without wheel, will go, depends on the force or truth of the individual soul. For it is the inert effort of each thought, having formed itself into a circular wave of circumstance,--as for instance an empire, rules of an art, a local usage, a religious rite,--to heap itself on that ridge and to solidify and hem in the life. But if the soul is quick and strong it bursts over that boundary on all sides and expands another orbit on the great deep, which also runs up into a high wave, with attempt again to stop and to bind. But the heart refuses to be imprisoned; in its first and narrowest pulses it already tends outward with a vast force and to immense and innumerable expansions. (RWE 404-405)

7. "The world is a force, not a presence." (OP 172)

To advance our discussion by showing how Henry James fits in with Ashbery's vision, it is necessary to emphasize that in "The Path To The White Moon" the reason the shelter is "fallen" and the knitting mill is "abandoned," is the same reason that in The Golden Bowl the golden bowl itself must eventually be smashed: to indicate that there is a fluidity to the processes of consciousness requiring that each succeeding thought burst over or through the walls a previous thought has built around itself. Thus (as I illustrate in the quotation on page 55 of this chapter), Maggie Verver is one whose consciousness can be characterized not only by its divided "water-tight compartments" (GB 37) but also by the implied ability she has--being, as the compartments are in this image, inside a ship--to proceed over a sea. The distinction is between fixed, unchanging, "founded" objects as a model for the mind's

relationship to its ideas, and one's potential ability to allow the evolving, moving processes of thought to prevail as a guide to inner and outer experience. In Maggie's life she has tended to pattern her thought on the model presented by her father, as we can see in the way she (as I showed Adam Verver doing with his idea of Amerigo on page 53) endeavors to place an experience into the larger context of her thought by giving it a specific architectural shape:

This situation had been occupying, for months and months, the very centre of the garden of her life, but it had reared itself there like some strange, tall tower of ivory, or perhaps rather some wonderful, beautiful, but outlandish pagoda, a structure plated with hard, bright porcelain, coloured and figured and adorned, at the overhanging eaves, with silver bells that tinkled, ever so charmingly, when stirred by chance airs. She had walked round and round it--that was what she felt; she had carried on her existence in the space left her for circulation, a space that sometimes seemed ample and sometimes narrow; looking up, all the while, at the fair structure that spread itself so amply and rose so high, but never quite making out as yet, where she might have entered had she wished. . . . no door appeared to give access from her convenient garden level. The great decorated surface had remained consistently impenetrable and inscrutable. (GB 301)³⁹

At first Maggie, like her father, tends to see the world of thought as mirroring what, prior to Darwin, was assumed to be the dominating characteristic of the world our senses have access to: its unchanging and reliable permanence. The qualities associated with this vision are those of "equilibrium" and "balance" which, in fact, have been the very qualities Maggie has most prized as defining her and her father's world:

That was at the bottom of [Maggie's] mind, that their equilibrium was everything, and that it was practically precarious, a matter of a hair's breadth for the loss of the balance. (GB 311)

[It was . . .] as if a sense for the equilibrium was what, between them all, had most power of insistence; quite as if Amerigo himself were all the while, at bottom, equally thinking of it and watching it. (GB 326)

It was the strangest thing in the world, but it was as if Mrs. Assingham might in a manner mitigate the intensity of [Maggie's] consciousness of Charlotte. It was as if the two would balance, one against the other; as if it came round again in that fashion to her idea of the equilibrium. (GB 366)

The equilibrium, the precious condition, lasted in spite of rearrangement; there had been a fresh distribution of the different weights, but the balance persisted and triumphed: all of which was just the reason why [Maggie] was forbidden, face to face with the companion of her adventure [her father], the experiment of a test. (GB 349)

And guarding as the most cherished of possessions her father's love of "equilibrium" and "balance" (the way, as I mentioned earlier, Adam needs Amerigo to be--on pages 119-121--"a pure and perfect crystal"), Maggie comes to experience as internal a reality she at first conceives of as externally present to her vision: "a great picture hung on the wall of her daily life, for her to make what she would of." (GB 306) As her relationship with her experience evolves so that she eventually can begin to see her environment (and what had seemed separate pieces of an exterior, objective reality) as a continuous fabric which she herself is woven into, a first sign of this evolution is suggested in the following passage:

She might [as she sat and meditated] have been watching the family coach pass and noting that, somehow, Amerigo and Charlotte were pulling it while she and her father were not so much as pushing. They were seated inside together, dandling the Principino and holding him up to the windows, to see and be seen, like an infant positively royal; so that the exertion was all with the others. Maggie found in this image a repeated challenge; again and yet again she paused before the fire: after which, each time, in the manner of one for whom a strong light has suddenly broken, she gave herself to livelier movement. She had seen herself at last, in the picture she was studying, suddenly jump from the coach; whereupon, frankly, with the wonder of the sight, her eyes opened wider and her heart stood still for a moment. She looked at the person so acting as if this person were somebody else, waiting with intensity

to see what would follow. The person had taken a decision--which was evidently because an impulse long gathering had at last felt a sharpest pressure. Only how was the decision to be applied?--what, in particular, would the figure in the picture do? She looked about her, from the middle of the room, under the force of this question, as if there, exactly, were the field of action involved.

(GB 315-316)

If we allow consciousness to be what William James in his Principles of Psychology describes it as being--a "stream"⁴⁰--then what might at first seem surreal in this passage becomes recognizable as a growing involvement or identification with not an exterior world but with the very processes of thought. In other words at first Maggie sees "some strange tall tower of ivory" which, as she continues to look, resolves itself into a picture of a moving coach from which she eventually sees herself jumping. That Maggie goes through a kind of epistemological thaw is evident in the way that the image she uses to define her mind's place in some larger scheme of things goes through a complete transformation: the earlier fixed structure to which she could not gain admittance becomes a moving conveyance from which she presently sees herself jumping. What she learned was the way that (as Wallace Stevens put it in "Imagination as Value") "the imagination is the power of the mind over the possibilities of things." (NA 136)

It may at first seem hard to accept these unlikely transformations until we accept that we are moving through an internal or psychological landscape where William James' "stream of consciousness" is the prevailing law making every limit or boundary an illusory and therefore temporary one. ("Suffice it for the joy of the universe," Emerson says in "Experience" (RWE 487), "that we have not arrived at a wall, but at interminable oceans.") And of course if we accept for what they are the

terms of this psychological landscape in which Maggie can see a tower become a painting of a carriage from which she eventually sees herself jumping--then it is a difference not of kind but of degree when in a short prose work by John Ashbery called "Description of A Masque" the following events take place:

Behind the bar, opposite the spectators in the audience, was a mural adapted from a Tenniel illustration for Through the Looking Glass--the famous one in which a fish in a footman's livery holds out a large envelope to a frog footman who has just emerged onto the front stoop of a small house, while in the background, partially concealed by the trunk of a tree, Alice lurks, an expression of amusement on her face. Time and fumes of a public house had darkened the colors almost to a rich mahogany glow, and if one had not known the illustration it would have been difficult to make out some of the details.

.
 . . . After a few moments Daffy got down off her bar stool and walked over to Mercury. Opening a green brocade pocketbook, she pulled out a small revolver and shot him in the chest. The bullet passed through him without harming him and imbedded itself in the fish in the mural behind the bar, causing it to lurch forward regurgitating blood and drop the envelope, which produced a loud report and a flash like a magnesium flare that illuminated an expression of anger and fear on Alice's face, as she hastily clapped her hands over her ears. (AW 18, 20-21)

In other words it is as if Ashbery, like Henry James (in his description of the processes of Maggie Verver's thought), attempts to articulate a challenge to the implicit assumptions which in each of us may act to confine the life of the mind--and in this way, like Maggie, Ashbery defies the seeming laws of concrete experience.

What Ashbery does in certain poems is to detach these processes of thought from the thinker. This suggests the following remarks of Edmund Wilson in Axel's Castle: "What the symbols of symbolism really were, were metaphors detached from their subjects. . . ."41 And indeed, as Marjorie Perloff (among others) has argued, the influence of French

symbolist poets is certainly present in Ashbery's poetry.⁴² However, unlike the symbolists, there is in Ashbery's later work the lingering presence of narrative, the fractured-seeming nature of which⁴³ is due to the fact that we have in his work not the narrative of experience in the physical world but the narrative of thought, as in the late involuted fiction of Henry James.⁴⁴

What Maggie Verver discovers in the passage I have just been discussing is a fluidity of thought which will eventually teach her to rely more upon process than fixity:

It was, for hours and hours, later on, as if she had somehow been lifted aloft, were floated and carried on some warm high tide beneath which stumbling-blocks had sunk out of sight. This came from her being again, for the time, in the enjoyment of confidence, from her knowing, as she believed, what to do. All the next day, and all the next, she appeared to herself to know it. She had a plan, and she rejoiced in her plan: this consisted of the light that, suddenly breaking into her restless reverie, had marked the climax of that vigil. It had come to her as a question--"What if I've abandoned them, you know? What if I've accepted too passively the funny form of our life?" There would be a process of her own by which she might do differently in respect to Amerigo and Charlotte--a process quite independent of any process of theirs. Such a solution had but to rise before her to affect her, to charm her, with its simplicity, an advantageous simplicity she had been stupid, for so long, not to have been struck by; and the simplicity meanwhile seemed proved by the success that had already begun to attend her. She had only had herself to do something to see how immediately it answered. This consciousness of its having answered with her husband was the uplifting, sustaining wave.

(GB 316)⁴⁵

To emphasize the degree to which Maggie has changed from one who, like her father, sees the world as a collection of possessions--and of houses or structures containing objects--consider the frequency with which from this point in the novel on she uses the word "process" to identify what she considers the solution to the predicament in which she finds herself:

What befell, however, was that even while [Maggie] thus waited she felt herself present at a process taking place rather deeper within [Amerigo] than the occasion, on the whole, appeared to require--a process of weighing something in the balance, of considering, deciding, dismissing. He had guessed that she was there with an idea, there in fact by reason of her idea
(GB 318)

This new perception bristled for [Maggie], as we have said, with odd intimations, but questions unanswered played in and out of it as well--the question, for instance, of why such promptitude of harmony should have been important. Ah, when she began to recover, piece by piece, the process became lively; she might have been picking small shining diamonds out of the sweepings of her ordered house.
(GB 328)

The intensity of the taste of these registered phenomena was in fact that somehow, by a process and through a connexion not again to be traced, she [Maggie] so practised, at the same time, on Amerigo and Charlotte--with only the drawback, her constant check and second-thought, that she concomitantly practised perhaps still more on her father.
(GB 348)

If they [Maggie and her father] balanced they balanced--she had to take that; it deprived her of every pretext for arriving, by however covert a process, at what he thought.
(GB 349)

And the basis for Maggie's "process" is what is referred to as her "quickened sensibility" (GB 320)--her ability, as Fanny Assingham puts it, to "think":

"It's your nature to think too much," Fanny Assingham a trifle coarsely risked.⁴⁶

This but quickened, however, in the Princess the act she reprobated. "That may be. But if I hadn't thought--!"

"You wouldn't, you mean, have been where you are?"

"Yes, because they, on their side, thought of everything but that. They thought of everything but that I might think."
(GB 523)

8. Postures of Mind

After Maggie realizes something is going on, and after a new

emphasis upon the process of thought becomes an active force within the context of her relationships with Adam, Amerigo and Charlotte, it becomes the way she sees what she sees--her shifting perspective or posture--that becomes central to her expanding awareness ("At the rate at which she was living," we read on page 449, "she was getting used hour by hour to these extensions of view"). When Maggie acquires the cracked bowl and explains to Fanny Assingham, in Chapter 33, how the shopkeeper who sold it to her ultimately gave her information which made her realize the truth about Amerigo's and Charlotte's intimacy, it is at this point that the crack comes to suggest to Maggie the flawed nature of Amerigo's commitment to her--and Charlotte's to her father. However the possibility that the important issue is not so much that there is a "crack" in anything, but that one's perspective can be (and needs to be) shifted, is first suggested by Fanny:

[Maggie] had come away from her window, one of the three by which the wide room, enjoying an advantageous 'back,' commanded the western sky and caught a glimpse of the evening flush; while Mrs. Assingham, possessed of the bowl, and possessed too of this indication of a flaw, approached another for the benefit of the slowly-fading light. Here, thumbing the singular piece, weighing it, turning it over, and growing suddenly more conscious, above all, of an irresistible impulse, she presently spoke again. "A crack? Then your whole idea has a crack."

Maggie, by this time at some distance from her, waited a moment. "If you mean by my idea the knowledge that has come to me that--"

But Fanny, with decision, had already taken her up. "There's only one knowledge that concerns us--one fact with which we can have anything to do."

"Which one, then?"

"The fact that your husband has never, never, never--!" But the very gravity of this statement, while she raised her eyes to her friend across the room, made her for an instant hang fire.

"Well, never what?"

"Never been half so interested in you as now. But don't you, my dear, really feel it?"

(GB 420-421)

When Fanny's sentence breaks just at the point where what would seem to

come next is a reference to Amerigo's involvement with Charlotte ("The fact that your husband has never, never, never--!"), and then turns after the dash towards an emphasis upon his relationship with Maggie ("Never been half so interested in you as now"), the shift is also away from a preoccupation with the bowl as the symbol of a flaw associated with sexual infidelity, and towards the "one fact with which we can have anything to do" which, it is implied, is the alliance in the immediate foreground of Maggie's life: her marriage to Amerigo. And Amerigo's timing is perfect since his walking in just after the bowl is smashed underscores this shift of emphasis Fanny is encouraging in Maggie away from his involvement with Charlotte and towards his connection with Maggie herself.

At the same time, Fanny's smashing of the bowl when she did was her way of trying to shift Maggie's focus away from a preoccupation with objective reality and its seemingly malignant flaws, towards a subjective, inner world, where by manipulating her own perspective the outer reality will follow suit. In other words there are two ways in which Maggie has moved her attention from a background to the foreground: One is the way she comes to place an emphasis not upon what seems to be a flawed objective reality, but upon her own subjective posture. The second is the way it becomes apparent to Maggie that by concentrating on her relationship with Amerigo he will follow her lead and Charlotte his. To show how far Maggie has come, look at how it is soon after the above-quoted exchange between Fanny and Maggie that Maggie arrives at the following realization:

It had operated within her now to the last intensity, her glimpse

of the precious truth that by her helping him [Amerigo], helping him to help himself, as it were, she should help him to help her. Hadn't she fairly got into his labyrinth with him?--wasn't she indeed in the very act of placing herself there, for him, at its centre and core, whence, on that definite orientation and by an instinct all her own, she might securely guide him out of it? She offered him thus, assuredly, a kind of support that was not to have been imagined in advance, and that moreover required--ah most truly!--some close looking at before it could be believed in and pronounced void of treachery. (GB 427)

Thus when Fanny says, on page 420, "A crack? Then your whole idea has a crack," she is the one who suggests the need to shift the field within which one sees oneself as acting away from the external or physical world and into the internal world of one's ideas. (As Emerson said in "Experience" (RWE 471), "Our life is not so much threatened as our perception.") And the evidence that Maggie comes fully to understand what Fanny intended to happen when she smashed the bowl comes later when Maggie thinks to herself

. . . it was only the golden bowl as Maggie herself knew it that had been broken. The breakage stood not for any wrought discomposure among the triumphant three--it stood merely for the dire deformity of her attitude toward them. (GB 461)

That Henry James, like Emerson and Ashbery, chooses words very carefully is evident here in the choice of "attitude" which (the OED tells us) originally was a technical term referring to the posture or disposition of a body in statuary or painting (thus implying also a mental "posture"). In fact the larger context of this last sentence, as suggested by the phrase "wrought discomposure," is that of the arts with specific reference to aesthetic composition. The meaning here sends us back to something Charlotte said to Amerigo early on in the book:

"Thank goodness then that if there be a crack we know it! But if we may perish by cracks in things that we don't know--!" And she

smiled with the sadness of it. "We can never then give each other anything." (GB 109)

The point, as Maggie realizes, is that the world--including the world of human relationships--is full of "cracks" (as Emerson himself admits in "Compensation" (RWE 292): "There is a crack in everything God has made") and that therefore salvation can only come through a manipulation of one's mental posture as it takes into consideration these "cracks."

For Maggie the role one's consciousness plays in the complex setting of human relations goes from imagining her relationship to others as an exotic "tower" one cannot enter (pages 301-302), to the point where the fixed physical object this "tower" has become--the golden bowl--can be smashed (pages 420-421) as the means to a reliance upon a sense of one's own flexible mental attitude (page 461). Maggie's, then, has been a complete psychic revolution. And as in the case of Lambert Strether, who, I suggested, could find in John Ashbery's poem "Houseboat Days" a distillation of his experience in The Ambassadors, a version of what Maggie Verver experiences during her "awakening" is described in a poem in As We Know called "Tapestry."⁴⁷

But to return for a moment to the scene in The Golden Bowl (pages 420 to 421) where Fanny smashes the bowl: during the exchange at this point between Fanny and Maggie, there is confusion over the meaning each gives to the pronoun "it." When Maggie first uses the word during this discussion "it" is used to refer to the bowl itself. Then when Fanny uses the pronoun, she is referring to Amerigo's increasing interest in Maggie. Finally, however, coming from Maggie, "it" seems to suggest most strongly Amerigo's intimacy with Charlotte, since this last is now

filled out in her mind by the image she possesses of these two meeting over the bowl in a "little antiquario's shop in Bloomsbury." (GB 427) Similarly, in "Tapestry" versions of the pronoun "it" are used repeatedly in all but the last stanza: "It is difficult . . ." (line one); ". . . which takes precedence over it" (line two); "For it must always be frontal . . ." (line three); "It insists on . . ." (line four); "It proposes . . ." (line six); ". . . awareness of its formal splendor" (line eight); ". . . the impact of itself" (line ten); "If it has the form . . ." (line 14); "We are eager . . . to be wound in it" (line 15); and "This must be the good of not experiencing it" (line 16). Furthermore, not only in the first sentence is "it" both the first and last word, but also in the penultimate stanza "it" again holds an opening, concluding and (in the second line of the stanza) a key transitional position before the colon.

Why all this emphasis on a common third person neuter pronoun? One reason has to do with Ashbery's focusing in his work on pronouns generally as a way to undermine our tendency to think of objects and persons as, like their names, unchanging: everybody knows that pronouns are inhabited only on a brief basis which, for Ashbery, would be more the way identity and life actually work (since, as Emerson says, "we change sexes every moment"--thus the need for a new name every moment). Another reason, particularly relevant in this case, is our tendency to experience the world as if it were comprised of no more than a collection of objects in the way that Maggie Verver at first sees as the defining element in her experience the seemingly unalterable material facts surrounding and represented by the golden bowl with a crack in it.

To be "wound in" Ashbery's tapestry is, likewise, to experience it only as a material object--which, in "Tapestry," is not to "experience" it at all:

If it has the form of a blanket, that is because
 We are eager, all the same, to be wound in it:
 This must be the good of not experiencing it.

(AWK 90)

But this ignores another way of reading both the golden bowl and the tapestry. In the first sentence in the poem--"It is difficult to separate the tapestry / From the room or loom which takes precedence over it"--the initial "it" refers not to an object of any kind, but rather to the process associated with one's trying "to separate" one object from other contingent or contiguous objects (here the "room" and "loom") and specifically the "difficult[y]" of not seeing these other objects as part of what some may insist upon as the discrete identity of the tapestry. Thus the way that Ashbery uses the first word we encounter to imply a process of mind, and then the sentence's final "it" to refer to the tapestry as an object, sets up for the entire poem a duality which is central to its meaning.

What is "difficult" about the tapestry is its double identity as Ashbery sees it since, on the one hand, "it must always be frontal" in that it is a kind of two dimensional "picture" which may be (as pictures always can be) seen all at once (and in this sense as existing out of time)--while, on the other hand, it is also "to one side" in the sense that it depicts "history / in the making." In understanding what this last phrase means it is useful to remind ourselves that one root for the word "history" is "story" which implies narrative or movement through

time. And indeed traditionally tapestries have been thought of as depicting scenes from the ongoing narrative of a given culture as if in the tapestry one were viewing individual still "frames" taken from a movie. Also in his reference to "the room [and] loom" Ashbery emphasizes the way cultural artifacts such as this tapestry may be conceived of as part of the ongoing processes of a society when thought of as fitting into the larger "fabric" of the culture in which rooms, looms and tapestries do not exist independently but as resurfacings of a stitch as it weaves together all that we create and are. Ashbery's sense here is related to Emerson's passage in "The Method of Nature" where he says "The poet must be a rhapsodist" (discussed in this chapter beginning on page 27) as is suggested in a poem I quoted earlier, "Train Rising Out Of The Sea," where we read in lines 7 to 13:

Do you hear the wind? It's not dying,
It's singing, weaving a song about the president saluting the trust,

The past in each of us, until so much memory becomes an institution,
Through sheer weight, the persistence of it, no,
Not the persistence, that makes it seem a deliberate act
Of duration, much too deliberate for this ingenuous being

Like an era that refuses to come to an end or be born again.
(AWK 87)

In this latter poem not only does the image of "A Train Rising Out Of The Sea" suggest and visually recreate the image of a needle as it is pushed through so as to rise out of a piece of fabric--but also, like Emerson, Ashbery depicts here the mind struggling between, on the one hand, the tendency for memory to become an "institution" (i.e., rigidify) and, on the other hand, the need to recognize how one is inevitably "thrown forward"⁴⁸ into the moving, changing processes of

nature as they "inundate" our lives:

We need more night for the sky, more blue for the daylight
That inundates our remarks before we can make them
Taking away a little bit of us each time

To be deposited elsewhere
In the place of our involvement
With the core that brought excessive flowering this year
Of enormous sunsets and big breezes

(AWK 87)

What we see here is a purely Emersonian vision of the processes of the human mind as penetrated by and in fact identifiable with the processes of nature at large (i.e., "With the core"). Fundamental here is the weaving together of mind with not only all that it creates and which we call our "culture" but also with all in nature that it is an extension of through a sharing of the processes which "inundate" everything.

The poem "Tapestry" reverses what we would ordinarily expect to be the case since unlike Ashbery most people would have no trouble seeing the tapestry as an independent object; in fact most people probably could not see it as anything but an independent, discrete object without some help (which this poem proposes to give). However Ashbery turns the world upside down and identifies himself with a new way of "seeing" which is exactly what Emerson describes in the following passage from "The Transcendentalist":

The idealist, in speaking of events, sees them as spirits. He does not deny the sensuous fact: by no means; but he will not see that alone. He does not deny the presence of this table, this chair, and the walls of this room, but he looks at these things as the reverse side of the tapestry, as the other end, each being a sequel or completion of a spiritual fact which nearly concerns him. This manner of looking at things, transfers every object in nature from an independent and anomalous position without there, into the consciousness.

(RWE 193-194)

To be "dead on the line" (as line 12 of Ashbery's poem puts it) is for an object after it has been seen to be defined in both senses of the word "define" (OED): both "to make distinct in outline or form" (giving one in this way the visual shape or outline of an object) and "to bring or come to an end"--or to de / finire in the sense of to finish completely (which suggests that the fully "defined" object has reached an end point in our perception of it and thus, in a sense, is "dead"). But what the poet as idealist would have us recognize is the possibility of seeing not as the identification of oneself with objects seen and therefore "dead on the line," but with what Wordsworth meant in an 1815 Essay (supplementary to the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads) when he said "In nature everything is distinct, yet nothing defined into absolute independent singleness."⁴⁹

In other words Ashbery wants for human consciousness a freedom which comes when the collaboration between light and the human eye in the production of things seen "dead on the line" breaks down--is "blinded"--thus allowing us to experience "The seeing taken in with what is seen"--or, that is to say, the recognition of "seeing" as the living, ongoing and ultimately vital process preceding and therefore making possible the "dead" object which "is seen" (thus--to return to the quote by Emerson, above--"seeing," the living process, is "the reverse side of the tapestry" which suggests that our ordinary emphasis upon things "seen" must be "blinded" before the new way of "seeing" may be experienced). In other words Ashbery, Emerson, and Fanny Assingham (when she says to Maggie Verver "A crack? Then your whole idea has a crack") feel that we have it all backwards if we foreground the object

seen rather than the process of seeing. As Emerson puts it in "The Over-Soul":

And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one.

(RWE 386)⁵⁰

Even the title of this book from which "Tapestry" is taken, As We Know, can be read as suggesting, on the one hand, "the way that we come to know what we know" (i.e., "as we know" as it suggests the process of "knowing")--and, on the other hand, the phrase used in its idiomatic sense of "As we know all men are mortal" implying a popularly accepted fact or thing indisputably "known" (the pivotal word in this swing being, of course, "as" since it can mean here both "in the way that" and "it is true that").

Seeing the tapestry as an object, as "dead on the line," is to see it as "a blanket" (line 14), which is to say as an exclusively physical reality. And, as I mentioned earlier, to think of it in this way is to conceive of it as Maggie Verver thought of the golden bowl before Fanny Assingham smashed it since she was--to use Ashbery's phrase--"eager . . . to be wound in" the golden bowl in the sense of letting its seemingly fixed and unchanging reality represent what she might, without thinking further about the matter, construe as a corresponding immutability in her "cracked" relationship with Amerigo. But Fanny suggested to her another way of seeing the matter when she smashed the bowl and pushed Maggie into a world of thought where all is mutable and where she can take control of the situation--as she realizes when we hear her think:

Hadn't she fairly got into his labyrinth with him?--wasn't she indeed in the very act of placing herself there, for him, at its centre and core, whence, on that definite orientation and by an instinct all her own, she might securely guide him out of it?
(GB 427)

The "labyrinth," of course, is the mind, and this passage reminds us not only of that point in The Wings of The Dove where Susie Stringham says to Milly Theale "My dear child, we move in a labyrinth," but also Emerson's remark in Nature, that "[Idealism] leaves me in the splendid labyrinth of my perceptions, to wander without end." (RWE 41) Though Emerson's intention here is to indicate a shortcoming of "Idealism" when it does not "satisfy the demands of spirit," Idealism is construed as desirable to the extent that it does "deny the existence of matter" and does therefore allow one intellectually to "wander." And this is exactly what Ashbery refers to when he says in "Tapestry": "But in some other life, which the blanket depicts anyway." Suggested here is the "life" of the mind to "experience" (line 16) the tapestry as inseparable from "the room or loom"--as "picture" and "history"--which the mind, seeing itself (along with the tapestry) as "inner," may participate in. To this "life" the corresponding "death" is to see it as "separate"--as "a blanket." "The dream" which is "Upended in a puddle somewhere" is the "dream" which we read about in the poem "Houseboat Days": "a vast dream / Of having." In other words Adam Verver's preoccupation with possession, "Of having," is to surrender to "the death" of defining oneself ("define," that is, in the sense of coming to an end--of surrendering the power of the imagination) in terms suggested by the objects around one rather than, as Ashbery encourages here and elsewhere, experiencing "the seeing taken in with what is seen."

Speaking to this issue Ashbery said in a 1983 interview: "I think I am more interested in the movement among ideas than in the ideas themselves, the way one goes from one point to another rather than the destination or the origin."⁵¹

9. "You Are Half-Asleep At Your Instrument Panel" (AW 48)

One way to read James and Ashbery, then, with respect to a particular moral posture, is to see them as considering the presence of "evil" in life as neither an objective force existing separate from the self nor as an enemy which can be conquered and done away with once and for all--but rather as one of the many processes inherent to human consciousness which, over time and to a greater or lesser degree, weaves in and out of everyone's thinking. And in fact if we agree with Stevens that "It is the explanations of things that we make to ourselves that disclose our character . . ." (OP 164), then within these "explanations" which disclose and, in a sense, constitute our "character," language as it is intentionally or unintentionally misused would seem to be the operative element in civilization's inability to understand and halt its own immoral behavior. The point is that we are part and parcel of the "evil" which we traditionally have grown accustomed to projecting beyond ourselves.

In The Golden Bowl a conversation between Bob and Fanny Assingham in the first half of the book suggests that the "situation" (GB 275) which Fanny has come to realize exists between Amerigo and Charlotte is a matter of grave seriousness:

". . . Maggie was the person in the world to whom a wrong thing could least be communicated. It was as if her imagination had been closed to it, her sense altogether sealed. That therefore," Fanny continued, "is what will now have to happen. Her sense will have to open."

"I see." [Bob Assingham] nodded. "To the wrong." He nodded again, almost cheerfully--as if he had been keeping the peace with a baby or a lunatic. "To the very, very wrong."

But his wife's spirit, after its effort of wing, was able to remain higher. "To what's called Evil--with a very big E: for the first time in her life. To the discovery of it, to the knowledge of it, to the crude experience of it." (GB 286)

How Maggie's "sense . . . open[s]" to the "crude experience" of "Evil--with a very big E" so as to allow for her own understanding of life and her place in it to be redeemed is revealed during a meditation of hers which occurs later in the book, during a social evening at "Fawns":

She continued to walk and continued to pause [after having left for a stroll the bridge game around which Adam Verver, Mrs. Assingham, Amerigo and Charlotte are still grouped]; she stopped afresh for the look into the smoking-room [where the game was proceeding], and by this time it was as if the recognition had of itself arrested her--she saw as in a picture, with the temptation she had fled from quite extinct, why it was she had been able to give herself so little, from the first, to the vulgar heat of her wrong. She might fairly, as she watched them, have missed it as a lost thing; have yearned for it, for the straight vindictive view, the rights of resentment, the rages of jealousy, the protests of passion, as for something she had been cheated of not least: a range of feelings which for many women would have meant so much. . . . She saw at all events why horror itself had almost failed her; the horror that, foreshadowed in advance, would, by her thought, have made everything that was unaccustomed in her cry out with pain; the horror of finding evil seated, all at its ease, where she had only dreamed of good; the horror of the thing hideously behind, behind so much trusted, so much pretended, nobleness, cleverness, tenderness. It was the first sharp falsity she had known in her life, to touch at all, or be touched by; it had met her like some bad-faced stranger surprised in one of the thick-carpeted corridors of a house of quiet on a Sunday afternoon; and yet, yes, amazingly, she had been able to look at terror and disgust only to know that she must put away from her the bitter-sweet of their freshness. The sight, from the window, of the group so constituted, told her why, told her how, named to her, as with hard lips, named straight at her, so that she must take it full in the face, that other possible relation to the whole fact which alone would bear upon her irresistibly. It was extraordinary: they positively brought home to

her that to feel about them in any of the immediate, inevitable, assuaging ways, the ways usually open to innocence outraged and generosity betrayed, would have been to give them up, and that giving them up was, marvellously, not to be thought of.

(GB 458-459)

What Maggie sees revealed here "as in a picture" is not a monstrous, alien presence (as she had been tempted to think before, on page 456: "There reigned for her, absolutely, during these vertiginous moments, that fascination of the monstrous, that temptation of the horribly possible, which we so often trace by its breaking out suddenly lest it should go further, in unexplained retreats and reactions") but "evil seated, all at its ease" amongst those situated around the card table. When she had first met her "evil" and described it to Fanny Assingham (in the passage discussed in this chapter on page 74) she had indeed come to realize, as she put it to Fanny, that "Amerigo knew Charlotte-- more than I ever dreamed" (GB 408); it was at this point that "evil" did seem "some bad-faced stranger surprised in one of the thick-carpeted corridors of a house of quiet on a Sunday afternoon." However after her talk with Fanny, Fanny's smashing of the bowl, and her subsequent meditation on Fanny's "point of view" (GB 426), Maggie realizes that it is not a "stranger" at all but, during this scene, another facet of the "group" arranged before her. In other words Maggie's own "point of view" has opened so as to allow her to see that "evil" is not something requiring "the straight vindictive view, the rights of resentment, the rages of jealousy, [and] the protests of passion," but an ongoing, internal presence with which one must open a dialogue on a familiar basis.

In an article entitled "En Route to Annihilation: John Ashbery's

Shadow Train,⁵² John Gery discusses several poems from Shadow Train in light of the suggested context "that within the two or three hours it might take to complete a nuclear war, everything we all know and take for granted can be utterly and finally annihilated."⁵³ And I do agree that it is appropriate to consider an ominous presence to be at the center of Shadow Train's concerns, as we can see suggested in the very first poem:

Meanwhile there was one
 Who all unseen came creeping at this scale of visions
 Like the gigantic specter of a cat towering over tiny mice
 About to adjourn the town meeting due to the shadow,
(ST 1)

As John Gery points out, this "cat" is "feared yet welcomed"⁵⁴ in that it comes to be identified as a rainstorm which "every blistered tongue welcomed as the first / Drops scattered [...]" (lines 11 and 12); the sense here is obviously paradoxical and suggests to John Gery "the 'psychic numbing' the self may experience in the face of the nuclear threat."⁵⁵

A first point to note about the first poem in Shadow Train, "In Pursuit of Happiness,"⁵⁶ is that, as in the poem "Tapestry" which begins "It is difficult to separate," the opening word "It" refers not to any object but to the process of there being "no way of passing / Between the twin partitions that presented / A Unified facade, that of a suburban shopping mall / In April." Secondly, the phrase "It came about that" indicates that this process--whatever it is--is to be understood as an entirely passive one, *i.e.*, beyond our control. In fact it turns out that "it" is so much beyond our control that in the next sentence we read how "One [and this could suggest the poet, the reader, or anyone]

turned, as one does, to other interests / Such as the tides of the Bay of Fundy." Finally in our attempt to understand this poem's opening we read that a third activity is occurring while these first two are taking place: "Meanwhile there was one / Who all unseen came creeping at this scale of visions / Like the gigantic specter of a cat." So looking back at the poem's path in the opening section, our passage seems to take us through three stages--and we might diagram or paraphrase this three-step process as follows: [Since] it came about that [X, and that nothing could be done about it,] one turned, as one does, [to Y--however] meanwhile [Z was occurring]. To begin understanding what is going on here it is necessary to note that the poem is about America and Americans--as the phrase taken from the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence, and used as a title here, suggests. Next we must work backwards in considering that originally America was primarily the "forest" mentioned in the poem's last line, and that indeed there was (and is) something awesome about "nature" as represented by the "forest" and storms--the "drops scattered by the west wind" in line 12--so that in fact as the establishment of our country proceeded it would be necessary from time to time to "adjourn the town meeting" (as stated in line eight). But as in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" there is here the evocation of not only Nature's cyclical movement from summer to winter and back again, but also the identification of seasonal changes with human cycles (as Shelley suggests in the lines "Be thou, Spirit fierce, / My Spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one! // Drive my dead thoughts over the universe / Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!").⁵⁷ In Ashbery's poem the

movement during a flood-tide in towards the shore and then back out again during the ebb tide of "the tides in the Bay of Fundy" suggests an image of two alternating but complementary processes: one is a destructive impulse in nature (and instinctual violence in ourselves) as suggested in "the gigantic specter of the cat"; the other is the impulse towards constructive (or human non-violent and civilized) activity. The human mind as seen in this way is a kind of paradox, Ashbery suggests, in that it has a dual identity and can be at once destructive and constructive, violent and non-violent. The problem has come to be, however, that in contemporary America there is "no way of passing / Between [these] twin partitions [of the mind, which are] presented [to us now as] / A unified facade, that of a suburban shopping mall / In April." In other words Ashbery seems to be saying that in "the pursuit of happiness" we have come to ignore the constructive / destructive dialectic inherent in nature and human consciousness by presenting to ourselves an image of our mind as "unified" in its identification with "a suburban shopping mall / In April." "The peril," as Ashbery puts it in his long poem "A Wave," "consists in explaining everything too evenly," (AW 74) forcing us into what in this same poem he refers to as "the dungeon of Better Living." (AW 75)

Also the "facade" in "The Pursuit of Happiness" presents a vision of consciousness as rigid--not as the flowing "stream" which William James used as an image for the human mind; in the next poem, "Punishing The Myth," the sentence "In time even the rocks will grow" suggests that Ashbery accepts not only Darwin's vision of nature as always evolving, but also, by implication, William James's "principle of psychology" that

the mind recreates in its own terms this process Darwin found to prevail in nature.⁵⁸ In any case the "unified facade" Ashbery mentions is dangerous to the extent that it denies a Darwinian and (William) Jamesian vision of nature as circular, with constructive and destructive forces built into what should be viewed as an ongoing, unbroken cycle. A related point of view is expressed by Herbert Marcuse in his book Eros and Civilization:

With the decline in consciousness, with the control of information, with the absorption of individual into mass communication, knowledge is administered and confined. The individual does not really know what is going on; the overpowering machine of education and entertainment unites him with all the others in a state of anaesthesia from which all detrimental ideas tend to be excluded. And since knowledge of the whole truth is hardly conducive to happiness, such general anaesthesia makes individuals happy.⁵⁹

What Marcuse calls "the decline in Consciousness" is the same "decline" Ashbery has in mind when he says "there was no way of passing / Between the twin partitions that presented / A unified facade, that of a suburban shopping mall / In April."

In the last line of "The Pursuit of Happiness" Ashbery seems to argue that if the "forest [is] not emptied," it is because there is an internal forest in each of us containing primeval destructive forces which, in their way, continue to "beckon" us to them. To reinforce a reading of "The Pursuit of Happiness" as representing a psychic rather than a physical landscape, "Punishing the Myth," the book's second poem, points out in its first line that we are concerned not so much with (in "The Pursuit of Happiness") "the giant specter" or its "shadow," but rather (in "Punishing the Myth") "the knowledge of the shadow line"--or, that is to say, the mind in the act of knowing something. Also the fact

that our role is--or at least up to now has been--a passive one is reinforced here by the way "the shadow line" comes to "stand far from you to bless you incidentally / In sorting out what was best for it"--not, that is to say, what is best for us. All that we are able to do in this vision of a deterministic environment is suggested in the way "we wiggled in our separate positions / and stayed in them for a time" (lines 7 and 8). However after the use early on in the poem of the past tense with "it came" (line one) and then "wiggled," it is with the words "After something has passed" in line eight that a movement into the present occurs where a kind of "free will" is introduced when the perspective shifts and "you begin to see yourself as you would look to yourself on the stage, / Appearing to someone" (lines 9 and 10). Notable at this point is not only the shift from the past to the present tense, but also a shift from the third person "it" to the second person "you," suggesting a shift in the way we were considered to be not responsible for what happened at the opening of the poem (as a phrase such as "At first it came easily" implies) but now have become responsible so that by the time we get to the poem's last sentence it is this very sense of our accountability which is being addressed: "And if you have curled and dandled / Your innocence once too often, what attitude isn't then really yours?" The vision in the last eight lines of the poem moves inward to the way we might experience--as it was put in the poem "Tapestry"--"the seeing taken in with what is seen"; the suggestion in the second half of the poem is that we hide from ourselves so as not to be implicated in whatever violence and destruction we know to be inherent to nature (which, we need to remember, in lines nine and

ten of "The Pursuit of Happiness," is "too perfect in its outrageous / Regularity to be called to stand trial again").

The passive role we may be playing with respect to destructive forces in nature--and, by implication, in us--is emphasized in the first stanza of this book's title poem:

Violence, how smoothly it came
 And smoothly took you with it
 To wanting what you nonetheless did not want.
 It's all over if we don't see the truth inside that meaning.
(ST 48)

The idea of "wanting what you nonetheless did not want" is mirrored in the passage in the second stanza which reads: "But to desire it / And not want it is to chew its name like a rag." In this sentence "want" means "to lack" or "to be deficient of" so that a paraphrase would read "but to desire something without really needing it" (since the first sentence in the second stanza may be construed as "To know what you really need is to be better off for this knowledge") "is to chew on that which offers no nourishment" (since of course desiring and then acquiring that which you don't need is of no use). Returning to this first stanza, then, a way to read it is to understand Ashbery as suggesting that one reason "Violence" is potentially such a threat is because our culture proceeds on the basis of a fundamental misunderstanding if we "desire" the total absence of "violence" from our lives--when in fact it is not its absence which we need, but rather its integration into an enlarged understanding of the fabric of human nature.

That "the banana shakes on its stem" and "the strawberry is liquid and cool" suggests male and female sexuality, and the way the male is

traditionally thought to be more active (i.e., "shakes on its stem") while the female is thought to be passive (i.e., "cool"). Sexuality as it has come to be identified with processes in nature is appropriate here since historically sex in the context of matrimony and procreation has been associated more with duty than desire, its coming to be acknowledged only in this century that "To desire what is / Forbidden is permitted." And "a photograph / of someone smiling at a funeral" equates pleasure and death, suggesting that death like sex is a purely natural phenomenon--and that in some sense, as Herbert Marcuse has argued, death and sex belong together:

This inability to discover in the primary instinctual structure anything that is not Eros, the monism of sexuality--an ability which, as we shall see, is the very token of the truth--now seems to turn into its opposite: into a monism of death. To be sure, the analysis of the repetition and regression-compulsion, and "ultimately" the sadistic constituents of Eros, restores the shaken dualistic conception: the death instinct becomes Eros' partner in its own right in the primary instinctual structure, and the perpetual struggle between the two constitutes the primary dynamic. However, the discovery of the common "conservative nature" of the instincts militates against the dualistic conception and keeps Freud's late metapsychology in that state of suspense and depth which makes it one of the great intellectual ventures in the science of man. The quest for the common origin of the two basic instincts can no longer be silenced. . . . The death instinct is destructiveness not for its own sake, but for the relief of tension. The descent toward death is an unconscious flight from pain and want. It is an expression of the eternal struggle against suffering and repression. And the death instinct itself seems to be affected by the historical changes which affect this struggle. ⁶⁰

The "dynastic fly-whisk" (in line twelve) invokes the way "nature" has traditionally been imagined to conduct itself like a monarch preoccupied by his or her own private interests into which we can never with any certainty know where we might fit: "who can say / What it means, or whether it protects?" In its suggestion of "dynastic" pre-

eminence, on the one hand this image rhymes with the description in "The Pursuit of Happiness" (ST 1) of "The gigantic specter of a cat towering over tiny mice"--while on the other hand its "fly-whisk" indifference reminds us of the way "the shadow line" in "Punishing the Myth" (ST 2) came to "stand far from you, to bless you incidentally / In sorting out what was best for it, and most suitable." In other words this vision of a "dynastic fly-whisk lurch[ing] daily / Above our heads, as far up as clouds" confirms us in our sense of helplessness. However the next sentence--"Yet it is clear / That History merely stretches today into one's private guignol"--points out that the seeming brutality of history we picture to ourselves as existing on a large scale and beyond our "tiny mice"-like selves (i.e., "as far up as clouds") is an extension of the instinct to destroy woven into the very fabric of our consciousness; the implication here is that we are not helpless. The last line of the poem ("The violence dreams. You are half-asleep at your instrument panel") suggests not only that we are part of some ongoing and larger something that happens to pass through us--but also that the fundamental terms according to which human consciousness operates never really change, its being our ability to recognize this fact and the way that we are as a result always partially out of control (i.e., "half-asleep at your instrument panel") that may put us not necessarily ahead of the game, but--potentially--in the position where we are aware of at least some of its rules.

Ashbery is trying in this poem and others in Shadow Train to take part in a discussion involving issues raised in an essay written during World War II by Wallace Stevens where he said that "The war is only a

part of a war-like whole"; and that

Reality . . . became violent and so remains. This much ought to be said to make it a little clearer that in speaking of the pressure of reality, I am thinking of life in a state of violence, not physically violent, as yet, for us in America, but physically violent for millions of our friends and for still more millions of our enemies and spiritually violent, it may be said, for everyone alive. (NA 26-27)

As I mentioned in the beginning of this discussion on page 85, one point being made here is that for both James and Ashbery "evil," whatever else it may be, does not exist independent of human consciousness but is intimately bound up in the very fabric of the way we think. Thus both James and Ashbery see some hope for the human race in so far as we understand how our thought processes work and acknowledge the possibility for a "revolution of [our] thought" (GB 522) even though, as Amerigo says to Maggie in The Golden Bowl, "Everything's terrible, cara--in the heart of man" (GB 534)--and, as Ashbery says to us in the last line of "Shadow Train": "The violence dreams. You are half-asleep at your instrument panel."

NOTES

- 1 The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Ralph L. Rusk (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), I, 434-435.
- 2 Douglas Crase, "How Emerson Avails," Boulevard: Journal of Contemporary Writing, Spring 1988, 45. See also Douglas Crase's essay "The Prophetic Ashbery" in Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery, ed. David Lehman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 30-65. (Crase also has a book of poetry, The Revisionist, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1981.)
- 3 R.P. Blackmur, from the "Introduction" to Henry James, The Golden Bowl (New York: Grove Press, 1952), v.
- 4 Ian Watt, "The First Paragraph of The Ambassadors: An Explication," from Essays in Criticism, X (July, 1960), 273-274.
- 5 Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), 83.
- 6 Richard Poirier, The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1987), 75.
- 7 F.O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression In The Age of Emerson and Whitman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), 64, 66.
- 8 Irving Howe, The American Newness: Culture and Politics in the Age of Emerson (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986), 22.
- 9 Frye, 267.
- 10 Robert Coover, "He Thinks the Way We Dream," The New York Times Book Review, 20 Nov. 1988, 15.
- 11 Frye, 114.
- 12 This understanding of Emerson's relationship to his lectures and essays is emphasized by Joel Porte in Representative Man: Ralph Waldo Emerson in His Time (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1988), 165: "Essaying to be is the fundamental conceit of this greatest of American essayists. He too dares, endeavors, tries, attempts, essays (all these are the actual terms Emerson employs in the [July 1838 Dartmouth "Literary Ethics"] Oration) to create himself in the very process, in the very act, of setting words on paper or uttering them aloud. In order to exist, he must speak, for the speech validates itself--brings into

being that which is envisioned or hoped for and gives Emerson a solid platform on which to stand ('Utterance,' he wrote Carlyle in 1834, 'is place enough'). As Emerson was to say in 'The Poet': 'The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression.' Not to speak, in this high Emersonian sense of speaking in the service of self-culture, is not to be; and despair might be defined as the settled belief that one is unworthy to utter oneself."

13 Porte, 246.

14 Denis Donoghue, Reading America: Essays on American Literature (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 36.

15 Poirier, 74.

16 I thank Joan Richardson for suggesting to me during a conversation we had in January of 1988 that this notion of "rhapsody" is crucial to any understanding of Emerson's essays and lectures.

(Also it is interesting (and useful) to note that in ancient Greek the word for "needlework" or "stitching" was closely related to the word meaning "to recite poems" or "rhapsodize.")

17 Porte, 5, 6, and 7.

18 William James, The Principles of Psychology (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981), I, 233.

19 Certainly this last line (and perhaps this entire section of the poem) is Ashbery's response to Stevens' remark in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (NA 22), that "the imagination is always at the end of an era."

20 One example of this approach may be found in an essay by Leslie Wolf, "The Brushstroke's Integrity: The Poetry of John Ashbery and the Art of Painting" in Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery, ed. David Lehman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 224-254.

21 Gaeton Picon, Modern Painting: From 1800 to the Present (New York: Newsweek Books, 1974), 92-93.

22 See Leon Edel, Henry James: A Life (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), 173: "Of the five art notices contributed to the Nation during this period [1875], one, 'On Some Pictures Lately Exhibited,' contains a spirited defense of art criticism:

"It may be very superficial, very incompetent, very brutal, very pretentious, very preposterous; it may cause an infinite amount of needless chagrin and gratuitous error; it may even blast careers and break hearts; but we are inclined to think that if it were suppressed at a stroke, the painters of our day would sadly miss it, decide that on the whole it had its merits, and at last draw up

a petition to have it resuscitated.'

"He proceeded--as he invariably did--to give a good example to the Nation readers of what a perceptive and schooled eye, supported by aesthetic feeling and strong verbal skill, could do in the observation of pictures."

- 23 Edel, 300.
- 24 Paris Review, 90 (1983), 50.
- 25 Porte, 148.
- 26 Poirier, 164.
- 27 John Unterecker in his "Foreword" to David Shapiro's John Ashbery: An Introduction to The Poetry (New York: Columbia Univ Press, 1979), xii-xiii.
- 28 John Keats, The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Fourth Edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1962), II, 867.
- 29 Frye, 156.
- 30 Paris Review, 90 (1983), 54.
- 31 T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1943), 59.
- 32 Poirier, 30.
- 33 Paris Review, 90 (1983), 46.
- 34 "Imagination attempts to have a future. At first it is an element of imprudence which detaches us from heavy stabilities. We shall see that certain poetic reveries are hypothetical lives which enlarge our lives by letting us in on the secrets of the universe. A world takes form in our reverie, and this world is ours. This dreamed world teaches us the possibilities for expanding our being within our universe. There is futurism in any dreamed universe." Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and The Cosmos, trans. by Daniel Russell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 8.
- 35 E.M. Forster, Aspects of The Novel (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1955), 220.
- 36 Poetry Nation Review, 46, Vol. 12, No. 2 (1985), 33.
- 37 American Poetry Review (May/June 1984), 33.
- 38 For a more detailed discussion of "Never Seek To Tell Thy Love,"

see Chapter IV.

39 What should not be missed in this passage, as in other parts of The Golden Bowl, is the way that the "garden" referred to here suggests the Garden of Eden, and in it the Adam of Adam Verver and Eve of Maggie Verver with the snake being represented by the combined efforts of Charlotte Stant and Prince Amerigo. The twist, of course, is that the apple of knowledge which Maggie has no choice but to accept is ultimately what saves her. For a discussion of the role of "evil" in this book, as well as in John Ashbery's Shadow Train, see in this chapter pages 85 to 96.

40 See William James, The Principles of Psychology (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981), I, 233.

41 Edmund Wilson, Axel's Castle: A Study in The Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), 21.

42 See Marjorie Perloff, The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

43 This idea that one way of describing certain of John Ashbery's poems is as "fractured narratives" I owe to a remark made by Angus Fletcher in a conversation we had during the earliest stages of my planning the proposal for this dissertation.

44 The same could be said about a writer such as James Joyce, for example, but there is an important difference: unlike Joyce who exposes the intricacies of an extraordinarily literate, language-conscious mind, James and Ashbery--in line with Emerson--are moralists in that they promote a specific mental posture founded on a given set of principles.

45 Notice in this passage how the "process" is linked in Maggie's mind with the notion of being swept away on "some warm high tide," and how consciousness is always in this way tied closely to sea imagery: "This consciousness of its having answered with her husband was the uplifting, sustaining wave." Of course this not only suggests Emerson's vision of minds as the "houses founded on the sea" I discussed earlier, but also William James' "stream of consciousness," and Ashbery's "Houseboat Days."

46 One is reminded here of that point in The Ambassadors, page 290, when Chad says to Lambert Strether: "But haven't you yourself rather too much [imagination]?"

47 My discussion of "Tapestry" is not intended as a replacement for but as a footnote to Harold Bloom's brilliant reading. See "Measuring The Canon: 'Wet Casements' and 'Tapestry'" in Modern Critical Views: John Ashbery, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985), 217-232.

48 ". . . [Lambert Strether] was to be thrown forward, rather, thrown quite with violence, upon his lifelong trick of intense reflexion: which friendly test indeed was to bring him out, through winding passages, through alternations of darkness and light" Henry James, Preface to The Ambassadors in The Art of The Novel: Critical Prefaces, ed. by R.P. Blackmur (Boston: Northeastern Univ. Press, 1984), 316.

49 William Wordsworth, "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface (1815)" in Literary Criticism of William Wordsworth, ed. by Paul M. Zall (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1966), 178-179.

50 Where Emerson is transcendental and emphasizes the "over-soul," Wallace Stevens is modernist and emphasizes the "personality" in "Effects of Analogy": "The truth is that a man's sense of the world dictates his subjects to him and that this sense is derived from his personality, his temperament, over which he has little control and possibly none, except superficially. . . . So seen, the poet and his subject are inseparable." The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and Imagination (New York: Vintage Books, 1951), 122.

51 Paris Review, 90 (1983), 55. Preferring "the way one goes from one point to another rather than the destination or the origin" corresponds exactly with an ideal of Emerson's as he describes it in "Plato; or, The Philosopher" (RWE: E&L 641): "Our strength is transitional, alternating; . . . which is not found in staying at home, nor yet in travelling, but in transitions from one to the other, which must therefore be adroitly managed to present as much transitional surface as possible" Emerson and Ashbery both write so as "to present as much transitional surface as possible."

52 John Gery, "En Route to Annihilation: John Ashbery's Shadow Train" in Concerning Poetry, Vol. 20 (1987), 99-116.

53 Gery, 101.

54 Gery, 105.

55 Gery, 107.

56 On page 114 of Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) Northrop Frye comments on this phrase, "the pursuit of happiness": "Beauty in art is like happiness in morals: it may accompany the act, but it cannot be the goal of the act, just as one cannot 'pursue happiness,' but only something else that may give happiness." Read Peter Quennell's book The Pursuit of Happiness (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1988).

57 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Ode to The West Wind," The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927), II, 294-296.

58 See William James, The Principles of Psychology (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981).

59 Herbert Marcuse, Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), 104.

60 Marcuse, 28-29.

CHAPTER III

"THE MOVEMENT OF EXPERIENCING":

EMERSON, WHITMAN, STEVENS AND ASHBERY

1. "What reality lacks is a noeud vital with life." (OP 178)

Given the categories we typically use to identify which camp someone belongs in, Emerson is a difficult case since he seems to be neither a Christian nor, on the other hand, entirely free of certain basic assumptions which accompany a Protestant world-view. For example his Divinity School Address of 1838 was condemned as no more than "the latest form of infidelity" (RWE 1301) because in it he challenged the role of the church as an institution by arguing that "The stationariness of religion; the assumption that the age of inspiration is past, that the bible is closed; the fear of degrading the character of Jesus by representing him as a man; indicate with sufficient clearness the falsehood of our theology." (RWE 88) However at the same time Emerson held on to "the basic Christian idea of man's dualistic nature: an eternal soul and a corporeal body."¹ As Gay Wilson Allen writes:

Emerson . . . rejected an anthropomorphic God and called his Deity Mind, Reason, or Over-Soul; but the traditional Christian belief in the subordination of matter to soul or spirit always remained the central assumption in his philosophy.²

With respect to these two categories--matter and spirit--it is in part thanks to Emerson that a certain agenda came to be set for American literature; as Denis Donoghue has written:

It is the moral and rhetorical aim of American literature, after all, to separate essence and existence, and to protect essence--or call it selfhood--from the vulgarity imposed by mere conditions.³

If, then, Emerson's work presumes a certain metaphysical patterning, and the possibility for freedom of movement within whatever is assumed to be predetermined about life--then it is with this state of affairs and the potential margin of psychic autonomy that Whitman, Stevens and Ashbery will establish a dialogue in their poetry.⁴

Though his divided world is by no means a new vision of our universe, Emerson--as Allen suggests--has his own evolving set of terms with which to describe it. He presents a first version of these in Nature:

Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE. (RWE 8)

If "nature" is thought of as that set of forces outside of which we can never step, then there is a sense in which Emerson can never close the gap separating the individual "soul" and "nature"-at-large. In fact if this part of the question is isolated as a preoccupation in his writing, then it appears as if over the years Emerson becomes increasingly more frustrated by an intractable sense of dividedness:

Nature is, what you may do. There is much you may not. We have two things,--the circumstance, and the life. Once we thought, positive power was all. Now we learn, that negative power, or circumstance,

is half. Nature is the tyrannous circumstance, the thick skull, the sheathed snake, the ponderous, rock-like jaw; necessitated activity; violent direction; the conditions of a tool, like the locomotive, strong enough on its track, but which can do nothing but mischief off of it; or skates, which are wings on the ice, but fetters on the ground. (RWE "Fate" 949)

However he never fully withdraws from his belief in the possibilities open to individual power. Later in this same essay he will write:

So far as a man thinks, he is free. And though nothing is more disgusting than the crowing about liberty by slaves, as most men are, and the flippant mistaking for freedom of some paper preamble like a "Declaration of Independence," or the statute right to vote, by those who have never dared to think or to act, yet it is wholesome to man to look not at Fate, but the other way: the practical view is the other. His sound relation to these facts is to use and command, not to cringe to them. (RWE 953-954)

As Harold Bloom has argued:

Emerson wanted Freedom, reconciled himself to Fate, but loved only Power, from first to last, and I believe this to be true also of the central line of American poets coming after him.⁵

Whatever "power" means to Emerson (and, as I tried to illustrate in the previous chapter, for Emerson the complex notion "power" ultimately represents the opposite of what most people associate with the word⁶) it is what he sees as our margin of choice--and within this margin the potential for action--which will interest his literary heirs. Consider, for example, these remarks from "The Transcendentalist":

As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists; the first class founding on experience, the second on consciousness; the first class beginning to think from the data of the senses, the second class perceive that the senses are not final, and say, the senses give us representations of things, but what are the things themselves, they cannot tell. (RWE 193)

The matter as described here--i.e., that, "As thinkers mankind have ever

divided into two sects"--presents not a closed system but offers to the individual a choice, a decision to be made concerning down which path to travel. In other words in this lecture from 1842 Emerson advises each American that he or she is always at a crossroads; and it is in a related sense that we are still at this fork-in-the-road when, a little more than a century later, Louis L. Martz writes the following in a review of Transport to Summer:

It has seemed more important to stress here the fact that the superb craft of [Stevens'] best poems grows out of a deep concern for the role of the imagination in a world preoccupied with the tragic plans of the materialist.⁷

What in Nature Emerson called "Reason" comes to be replaced in Stevens by "imagination," but the adjustment is Emersonian in spirit: for Emerson "The Imagination may be defined to be, the use which the Reason makes of the material world." (RWE 34) Stevens would have been quite happy with this definition since he wrote that "In poetry at least the imagination must not detach itself from reality" (OP 161); and "Perhaps there is a degree of perception at which what is real and what is imagined are one: a state of clairvoyant observation, accessible or possibly accessible to the poet or, say, the acutest poet." (OP 166) However between Emerson's materialist and idealist, and Stevens' imagination and reality, there is frequently--in each case--an element of antagonism. As Harold Bloom comments:

War, as A. Walton Litz observes, is the unifying theme of Parts of a World, whether it be war between the sky and the mind or between nations. But mostly I think it is between the sky and the mind, as it always is in Stevens.⁸

For example at the end of "The Noble Rider and The Sound of Words"

Stevens describes as follows certain pressures with which one must contend:

It [the mind] is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives. (NA 36)

Earlier Stevens had said that "By the pressure of reality, I mean the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation." (NA 20) Likewise for Emerson's "transcendentalists":

They say to themselves, It is better to be alone than in bad company. . . . A picture, a book, a favorite spot in the hills or the woods, which they can people with the fair and worthy creation of the fancy, can give them often forms so vivid, that these for the time shall seem real, and society the illusion. (RWE 202)

That a perceived tension existing between something "out there" and something else "in here" corresponds to the Protestant vision of a world engaged in spiritual combat is no accident--as we can see from Emerson's Romantic conception that "A man is a god in ruins." (RWE 45) (Also Whitman was thinking about the future that would be made available to the life of the spirit in an increasingly secular environment when in his Preface to the 1855 Leaves of Grass he expressed the hope that some day ". . . every man shall be his own priest." W: P&P 25) For Emerson, as we know, Christianity as a system of belief was inadequate to the needs and terms of his own spiritual life. As Irving Howe has written:

Repudiating "historical Christianity," Emerson dismissed the image of "our God of tradition . . . our God of rhetoric." Did he thereby quite abandon Christianity? In a historicist move that was hardly in keeping with his usual depreciation of history, Emerson proposed

to incorporate the moral conquests of Christianity within a new spirituality even as it ruthlessly shed theological doctrine. In this purified faith a young seeker might find that "Within and Above are synonymous," a notion that forms a central religious affirmation of the nineteenth century. So a modest difference could be established between abandoning Christianity and foreseeing its supercession. The old gods become emeriti, a retirement also favored by Emerson's literary offspring--as in Whitman's amused proposal that we take those gods "for what they are worth and not a cent more" and Stevens' secular anthropology in "Sunday Morning."⁹

Thus a particular cast of American consciousness leans out beyond but can never entirely separate itself from Christianity as a kind of cultural backdrop. Denis Donoghue notes with respect to Stevens:

At an early age [Stevens] ceased to be a Christian, but he retained a deeply religious sensibility and spent a lifetime trying to console it for its loss. . . . Stevens' entire work was an effort to find the consoling words, as if, in all his later poems he were trying to find an answer for the questions raised, the losses registered, by the woman of "Sunday Morning."¹⁰

Thus for Stevens, as for Emerson, even though the values are gone from Puritanism as an historical process, it still persisted as a psychological framework.¹¹ In other words Stevens, taking impetus from Emerson, lived with the sense of a divided universe and so wrote "hymns appropriate to / The complexities of the world" (CP 447) where one's priority becomes finding that force which "pierces the physical fix of things." (CP 364)

2. "The poet is the priest of the invisible." (OP 169)

One way for someone in our culture to begin seeing as unified an apparently divided universe is to participate in the tradition of

Christian devotion conducted through meditation. In a discussion of Stevens's poetry, Louis L. Martz begins by pointing out that

The world of Greek myth and traditional beauty, the world of the Hebrew Deity, the world of Nordic legend--worlds of imaginative faith and of unity between man and the universe--these things are gone. No manna falls. The poet lives in a world from which the elemental, the supernatural, and the mythical have been drained, and in which the deeper instincts of the human race are consequently starving. Somehow, by his own mind and senses, man must find sustenance, must make terms with air and earth, must establish some relation between himself and the world about him. The "war between the mind / And sky, between thought and day and night," must be resolved: this is the poet's mission.¹²

As Martz describes in The Poetry of Meditation, during the Counter-Reformation in Europe and England the practice of devotional meditation as a formal spiritual exercise offered to an individual the means of focusing all the aspects of the self--physical, intellectual, and emotional--into a "unification of sensibility" so as to allow for a sense of spiritual communion with the Will of God.¹³ Martz emphasizes, however, that meditation as understood in this context was a strictly prescribed exercise:

. . . the process of meditation . . . begins with the deliberate creation of a setting and the placing there of an actor, some aspect of the self; this is the famous composition of place recommended by the Jesuit exercises. This is followed by predominantly intellectual analysis of some crucial problem pertaining to that self; and it all ends in a highly emotional resolution where the projected self and the whole mind of the meditator come together in a spirit of devotion. This threefold process is related to the old division of the soul into memory, understanding, and will; the exercise of meditation integrates these faculties.¹⁴

Although they probably did not practice meditation as the rigorous exercise it was understood to be during the Counter-Reformation, it is

nonetheless appropriate to see Emerson and Stevens (as well as Ashbery) as participating in what Martz calls the "meditative tradition."¹⁵ In other words as in the case with certain 16th and 17th century poets, an important objective for Emerson and Stevens was "the union of the powers of the soul"¹⁶ so that ultimately

It is the creation of a self that a meditative style records: a self that is, ideally, one with itself, with other human beings, with created nature and with the supernatural.¹⁷

This desire to create a new or second and wholly spiritualized "self" as a primary aim is an appropriate way of thinking about what is important to the authors under consideration here. In Emerson's case, for example, the critic William Gass considers "meditation" to be at the center of what the essay form is all about:

Meditation is the essence of it; it measures meanings; makes maps; exfoliates. . . . [The essay] turns round and round upon its topic, exposing this aspect and then that; proposing possibilities, reciting opinions, disposing of prejudice and even of the simple truth itself--as too undeveloped, not yet of an interesting age.¹⁸

Likewise Joan Richardson describes Wallace Stevens' poetry in terms which associate it with meditation:

. . . in journal entries, letters, and poems Stevens described himself as the hermit-monk who performed his service in enforced solitude. This mask was most appropriate for one increasingly concerned, as he was, with making poetry a form of "higher conversation" [a phrase taken from Bacon's essay "On Friendship" which Stevens had read] for the century that could no longer pray to an empty heaven.¹⁹

Even in Ashbery's poems, we can see the rudiments of meditation as a devotional exercise. In my discussion of "Houseboat Days" (Chapter II, pages 45 and 46) I suggested that lines in Ashbery poems--"Houseboat

Days" being a good example--often fall into at least three distinct if overlapping categories. At one point, for example, he will introduce an experience or part of an overheard conversation--as in the opening of "Houseboat Days" where we read:

"The skin is broken. The hotel breakfast china
Poking ahead to the last week in August, not really
Very much at all, found the land where you began..."
(HD 68)

Then he will offer a surrealistic-seeming landscape-of-the-mind which has a deeply-thinking, analytic cast to it, even though the overall shape is often so zany that it would seem to be trying to empty itself of thought--as in the case of lines four through eight in "Houseboat Days":

The hills smouldered up blue that day, again
You walk five feet along the shore, and you duck
As a common heresy sweeps over. We can botanize
About this for centuries, and the little dazey
Blooms again in the cities.

(HD 38)

And then in addition he will offer an aphoristic summary or interpretation--as in the following lines from "Houseboat Days":

The mind
Is so hospitable, taking in everything
Like boarders, and you don't see until
It's all over how little there was to learn
Once the stench of knowledge has dissipated and the trouvailles
Of every one of the senses fallen back.

(HD 38)

If one thinks of an Ashbery poem in the context of the model Louis Martz describes, then there seem to be unavoidable parallels. As Martz describes it, the initial "composition of place" in meditation served to "call to memory the matter to be meditated upon,"²⁰ an important element

in this process being "visualization" of either "one's own sins or an event from the life of Christ or Mary."²¹ The corresponding element in an Ashbery poem will be the introduction of a remembered fragment of experience--e.g., the lines of seemingly overheard conversation opening "Houseboat Days" which I quoted above--which may be either a centerpiece for the poem or a springboard into other matters. Next the formal process of meditation requires that one use "the understanding to comprehend the true nature of the material provided by memory."²² As with the "pain, / And the triumph over pain, still hidden / In these low-lying hills which rob us / Of all privacy" in "Houseboat Days," Ashbery's analyses often come in the form of landscapes which, as we move through them, suggest human consciousness always in the process of changing as we turn a corner and encounter previously unimaginable vistas. (And, of course, although wholly transformed and often surreal in Ashbery's case, to describe consciousness in terms of landscape is a specifically Emersonian habit of style--as when in "The Over-Soul" he writes that "Man is a stream whose source is hidden.") As a last stage in the meditation--subsequent to focusing upon remembered events or experiences and then analyzing their content so as to draw spiritual implications from them²³--one next uses the will to "draw forth the affections, having convinced oneself of what the truth is."²⁴ The third and corresponding element in an Ashbery poem is the presentation of a paradox or an indirect formulation such as "To praise this, blame that, / Leads one subtly away from the beginning, where / We must stay, in motion." (HD 89) Of course in an Ashbery poem these elements will often not only occur in some combined, hybrid form, but also the different

"types" of sentences will appear in an order which would seem to belie the possibility that serious contemplation of any kind is taking place. However, no matter how odd a specific work may seem, the course Ashbery's poems follow strongly suggests that he is preoccupied with the way truth of one kind or another issues forth from an experience which has been contemplated in the most serious and deeply felt way. (Ashbery, in other words, agrees with Stevens that "What our lives behold may well be the text of life but one's meditations on the text and the disclosures of these meditations are no less a part of the structure of reality." NA 76)

Ashbery seems to view thinking as a complex game one plays alone in the way that revelation often involves denying to the self those gestures toward closure which in our culture are so ingrained. For example in the opening lines of "The Pursuit of Happiness" (ST 1), the way that not only are we told that there is "no way of passing"--but also that this information is conveyed to us in a sentence written in the passive voice--suggests the presence of both external and internal restraints:

It came about that there was no way of passing
Between the twin partitions that presented
A unified facade, that of a suburban shopping mall
In April. One turned, as one does, to other interests

What is implied is that the passive role of the thinker may become inherent to the very terms of his or her thought--as if, without even realizing it, we came to the point where, instead of thinking, we began to prefer picking out our thoughts from the surrounding culture like shoppers at a "suburban shopping mall" of the mind. Breaking free of

this mold is one important place where each Ashbery poem finds its reason for being. And in this process Ashbery's comic side may serve the ongoing thought by dislodging the mind's temptation to take its concepts too seriously which, if allowed, would in turn stop the overall movement of thought. Also in certain poems it is as if when some thought is expressed in a self-asserting form (in a declarative sentence or part of a sentence, let's say) then a passage will appear whose purpose seems to be to dismantle either some aspect of the previous passage or its entire thrust--so that one sometimes has this sense that at the same time that a poem is being written it is also un-writing itself. The result is a dynamic paradox promoted to the role of *modus operandi* for the entire poem, so that inherent to the movement of the thought is its need to be self-contradicting or -denying. So the path poems take often appears to involve some internalized and self-challenging form of negotiation which fits into the dialogue Ashbery seems to have been having with himself for years (of which this is only the most recent installment).²⁵ One consequence for a reader is that passage through the poem means creating a third track of one's own which requires coming to terms with these idiosyncratic, sometimes contradictory voices. If engaged, then, in the proper way--which is to say out of a willingness to accept the terms of the poem as they issue forth from the contours of its intricate thought and language--one will find that there is a rigor of self-examination at the core of Ashbery's poems which places him squarely in what Louis L. Martz has labeled the meditative tradition.

3. "Not what we see but how we see it matters" (HD 34)

To take this tradition of "meditation," and then to place in the foreground not the object of meditation but its processes, is to see one's place in the universe in an entirely different way. For example in "Self-Reliance" Emerson writes: "Society is a wave. The wave moves onward but the water of which it is composed does not." (RWE 281) This notion is mirrored in something Stevens will say in "The Noble Rider and The Sound of Words": "But as a wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed, which is never the same, so nobility is a force and not the manifestations of which it is composed, which are never the same." (NA 35-36) The emphasis in these propositions is upon the intangible, unquantifiable force rather than the particles which it carries along, since the former is ongoing while the latter constantly fall away and are replaced--thus Stevens' adage: "The world is a force, not a presence." (OP 172) Extending this idea into the realm of mind, Emerson will write that "Man is a stream whose source is hidden" (RWE "The Over-Soul" 385) and "A man of thought must feel the thought that is parent of the universe: that the masses of nature do undulate and flow" ("Montaigne; or The Skeptic" 708). The way that Emerson's ideas may have influenced modern theories concerning the way our minds work is described by Gay Wilson Allen:

Through his close observation of his own mind he came to feel that a greater Mind was in some mysterious way thinking through him, or prompting his finite mind. This introspection led him to anticipate William James's description of the "stream-of-consciousness." Like James, too, he strongly suspected that the hidden source of

consciousness was an unconscious mind in which his thoughts originated.²⁶

As I suggested in Chapter Two, Emerson's theories helped to shape the way he wrote his essays, resulting in a style which may best be described as "rhapsodic" (see page 27, above, and "The Method of Nature," 126). However the contemporary of Emerson whose writing exhibits the most far-reaching influence of these ideas was Walt Whitman; as Roy Harvey Pearce has commented:

[Whitman] had an amazing capacity to yield himself wholly to the moment--and then, as though he were quite another person, to seize himself in the moment of yielding. And so he changed,²⁷

As we see it depicted here by Pearce, Whitman's mind--given a relationship it seemed to have both with its environment and its self--had the uncanny ability to relax to the point where it would flow without hesitating into some always advancing version of its own identity; this unusual way of spontaneously giving oneself over to the way one's identity is constantly expanding and changing also characterizes the poetry of John Ashbery. Along these same lines Louis L. Martz has written: "Moving to live consciously in the full flow of the divine creative process--this is the heart of Whitman's prophecy."²⁸

In Figures of Capable Imagination Harold Bloom has written that "Even as [Ashbery's] father is Stevens, his largest ancestor is Whitman, and it is the Whitmanian strain in Stevens that found Ashbery . . .

.²⁹ Like Emerson's circles within circles reaching infinitely inward and outward, Bloom's image is tantalizing--and I think accurate--but needs unpacking.³⁰ Bloom suggests that even though ultimately all four

writers emphasize a vision of the mind's ability to flow around and through matter as the most fundamental aspect of human experience, Emerson and Stevens, in their ruminations upon philosophy and theology, will foreground the dualism of subject and object, thinker and world--while for Whitman, even though there is an underlying dualism in his opposition of, for example, "home" and "road," in the foreground of his poems--as Charles Feidelson, Jr., puts it--will be the way that they "not only are about voyaging but also enact the voyage."³¹ This way in which the mind's processes become an integral part of the poem is also crucial to Ashbery's poems--as he acknowledged during an interview conducted in 1972:

ASHBERY: . . . My poems aren't usually about my experiences, because I don't find my experiences very interesting as a rule. When they are about them, they are so in a very oblique, marginal way. It was really nothing for me to be leaving this particular railway station [i.e., the Atocha train station in Madrid in his poem "Leaving the Atocha Station"]. It meant nothing to me at the time except that I was in a strange city going somewhere. But it strikes me that the dislocated, incoherent fragments of images which make up the movement of the poem are probably like the experience you get from a train pulling out of a station of no particular significance. The dirt, the noises, the sliding away seem to be a movement in the poem. The poem was probably trying to express that, not for itself but as an epitome of something experienced; I think that is what my poems are about. I mean it doesn't particularly matter about the experience; the movement of experiencing is what I'm trying to get down. Does that make it any clearer?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, I suppose. The poem, then, is simply about the experience of leaving a particular station. Is this common among the rest of your poems? The fact of the poem being its own experience?

ASHBERY: Most of my poems are about the experience of experience. As I said before, the particular occasion is of lesser interest to me than the way a happening or experience filters through to me. I believe this is the way in which it happens with most people. I'm trying to set down a generalized transcript of what's really going on in our minds all day long. . . .³²

When Ashbery says here "I'm trying to set down a generalized transcript of what's going on in our minds all day long" one cannot help but think, of course, of Emerson's remark that "Life is what a person thinks about all day long." Also "the movement of experiencing" not only suggests Stevens' idea that "Experience, at least in the case of a poet of any scope, is much broader than reality" (OP 160), but also is analagous to Stevens' "motion of thought" in the poem "The Place of The Solitaires":

Let the place of the solitaires
Be a place of perpetual undulation.

Whether it be in mid-sea
On the dark, green water-wheel,
Or on the beaches,
There must be no cessation
Of motion, or of the noise of motion,
The renewal of noise
And manifold continuation;

And, most, of the motion of thought
And its restless iteration,

In the place of the solitaires,
Which is to be a place of perpetual undulation.
(CP 60)

This emphasis upon the mind's ongoing processes--i.e., William James' "stream of consciousness"³³--as embodied within the very texture of a poem's language, constitutes the fundamental element pervading the best poetry of both Whitman and Ashbery. In order to see how this and other strands of influence link all four writers under consideration, I will now turn to a poem of Ashbery's from A Wave called "Never Seek To Tell Thy Love." (AW 56)

*

And the serial continues:
 Pain, expiation, delight, more pain,
 A frieze that lengthens continually, in the happy way
 Friezes do, and no plot is produced,
 Nothing you could hang an identifying question on.
"Darlene's Hospital" (AW 57)

*

To pass through pain and not know it,
 A car door slamming in the night.
 To emerge on an invisible terrain.
"A Wave" (AW 68)

As I suggested during my discussion of "Houseboat Days" (on pages 40 through 49 in Chapter Two), the most characteristic aspect of experience, as Ashbery's poetry both describes and enacts it, is change (which, in life, is often accompanied by some kind of pain). However here "pain" does not seem necessarily to be the byproduct of any ongoing struggle; rather, as in the case of Whitman who can say "Agonies are one of my changes of garments" (W: P&P 65), the "pain" in the passages quoted above seems disembodied and painless--as if the word and idea associated with it were just a recurring phrase or passage in a symphony. The way that a significant element will be repeated as if Ashbery were writing a musical composition is an important aspect of his method, as it was for Whitman. Gay Wilson Allen has remarked that

. . . [Whitman's] favorite method of organizing a long poem . . . is, as remarked elsewhere, symphonic. He likes to advance a theme, develop it by enumeration and representative symbols, advance other themes and develop them in similar manners, then repeat, summarize, and emphasize. Thus Whitman's repetition of thought, of words, of cadences--playing variations on each out of exuberance and unrestrained joy both in the thought and form--all combine to give him the satisfaction and conviction that he has "expressed" himself, not logically or even coherently, but by suggestion and by sharing his own emotions with the reader. ³⁵

It is as if in the process of thinking, a certain word or idea or motif (with which the poet is preoccupied) will, as a matter of course, become woven into the fabric of the poem so that each time it reappears, given a new environment, it will continue to be subtly altered and redefined. About this aspect of Whitman's poetry Malcolm Cowley has written that

The true structure of the poem is not primarily logical but psychological, and is not a geometrical figure but a musical progression. As music "Song of Myself" is not a symphony with contrasting movements, nor is it an operatic work like "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," with an overture, arias, recitatives, and a finale. It comes closer to being a rhapsody or tone poem, one that modulates from theme to theme, often changing in key and tempo, falling into reveries and rising toward moments of climax, but always preserving its unity of feeling as it moves onward in a wavelike flow. . . . His themes modulate into one another by pure association, as in a waking dream, with the result that all his transitions seem instinctively right.³⁶

With respect to style the key word here, as I emphasized in the previous chapter, is "rhapsody." And it is crucial to see Whitman and Ashbery as in line with Emerson who emphasized that the "thought is prior to the form"--a corollary of this being, as Cowley points out, that the poem becomes "not primarily logical but psychological, and is not a geometrical figure but a musical progression." Thus the woven or rhapsodic element is evident when a word or idea resurfaces at various points in the text without being carried--or if carried at all then only for a short distance--along the surface of the text. One implication this has for a reader is the necessity of learning to read vertically instead of horizontally: rather than follow the logical development of an idea, the reader must adapt his or her reading to the alternate surfacing and diving of the poet's thought as it resumes or abandons

particular passages which, in the fluid process of thinking, can be suddenly dropped or reappear out of nowhere, and for this reason need not interact with contiguous elements.

The title "Never Seek To Tell Thy Love" alludes to the way that in Blake's poem there seems to be an implied right and wrong way of doing-- or seeing--things. For in Blake's poem "love" requires that one proceed like the "traveller" who knows to "move" like (and therefore with) "the gentle wind that does move / Silently, Invisibly." The situation presents a paradox in the way that doing what would seem to be the rational thing (*i.e.*, telling one's love) ruins one's chances of attaining this love; success comes with abandoning one's self to what is the essence of "love" as depicted here: which is that it "move[s]" and therefore is accessible only to a "traveller."³⁷ The distinction Blake is making in his poem is one Emerson expresses in the following remarks from "The Poet":

. . . Imagination is a very high sort of seeing, which does not come by study, but by the intellect being where and what it sees; by sharing the path or circuit of things through forms, and so making them translucent to others. The path of things is silent. Will they suffer a speaker to go with them? A spy they will not suffer; a lover, a poet, is the transcendancy of their own nature,-- him they will suffer. The condition of true naming, on the poet's part, is his resigning himself to the divine aura which breathes through forms, and accompanying that.

(RWE "The Poet" 459-460)

In the same essay Emerson states that "all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead." (RWE "The Poet" 463) For Whitman, in this same vein, it will be necessary

To gather the minds of men out of their brains as you encounter them,
to gather the love out of their hearts,

To take your lovers on the road with you, for all that you leave
 them behind you,
 To know the universe itself as a road, as many roads, as roads for
 traveling souls.

All parts away for the progress of souls,
 All religion, all solid things, arts, governments--all that was or
 is apparent upon this globe or any globe, falls into niches
 and corners before the procession of souls along the grand
 roads of the universe. (W: P&P "Song of The Open Road" 305)

The "road" here--"the grand road of the universe"--suggests the way we
 incorporate the world we experience into an evolving sense of identity;
 while set off against the "road"--and seeming to draw one away from it--
 is the image of the "home" which suggests fixity, immobility, and that
 which does not evolve. Woven into "Song of Myself" are numerous
 references to a "house," "home" or "dwelling"; some examples are:

She owns the fine house by the rise of the bank,
 She hides handsome and richly drest aft the blinds of the window. (36)

*

Gentlemen I receive you, and attach and clasp hands with you,
 The facts are useful and real they are not my dwelling
 I enter by them to an area of the dwelling. (49)

*

In vain the buzzard houses herself with the sky, (57)

*

I swear I will never mention love or death inside a house,
 And I swear I never will translate myself at all, only to him
 or her who privately stays with me in the open air. (84)

Ashbery would also seem to be preoccupied with this motif, judging from
 how frequently it comes up in his book A Wave:

The dial has been set
 And that's ominous, but all your graciousness in living
 Conspires with it, now that this is our home.
 A place to be from, and have people ask about.
 "Rain Moving In" (AW 2)

*

It seems we were going home.
 The smell of blossoming privet blanketed the narrow avenue.
 The traffic lights were green and aqueous.
"Purists Will Object" (AW 17)

*

Meanwhile you're
 Looking stretched again, concentrated, as you do not pass
 From point A to point B but merely speculate
 On how it would be, and in that instant
 Do appear to be traveling, though we all
 Stay home, don't we.
"Cups With Broken Handles" (AW 51)

*

with all kinds of nice
 People and plants waking and stretching, calling
 Attention to themselves with every artifice of which the human
 Genre is capable. And they called it our home.
"A Wave" (AW 68)

*

Yet one does know why. The covenant we entered
 Bears down on us, some are ensnared, and the right way,
 It turns out, is the one that goes straight through the house
 And out the back.
"A Wave" (AW 71)³⁸

And, at long last, in the first two lines of "Never Seek To Tell Thy Love": Many colors will take you to themselves / But now I want someone to tell me how to get home. (AW 56) Corresponding to the way that in Blake's poem there was a right and wrong way of attaining one's "love" (as, likewise, in Whitman the "home" and the "road" are antithetical), here the conjunction "But" sets up an opposition which will prevail throughout the poem. On the one hand a speaker wants "someone to tell" him or her something, suggesting possibly that Blake's lesson--that there are some things that "never told can be"--has not been properly learned. (Also, later on in the poem, the untellable aspect of certain

truths seems to lie at the heart of what is misguided about the "way they taught us back in school" to "read poetry.")

In the first line of "Never Seek To Tell Thy Love" (Many colors will take you to themselves) although "colors" seems an odd choice for that which must balance with the heavily-weighted "home," this oddity seems less odd when we realize that (1) in the poem's penultimate line (Filling the road up with colors, faces) "colors" is associated with Whitman's "road"--and (2) the "tell[ing]" of the second line (which from Blake we learned should be avoided under certain circumstances) is set off against the way in the first line no directions are necessary since we are going to be "take[n]" some place. The fact that the "Many colors will take you to themselves," not "home," suggests that our "soul," as Ashbery puts it in "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," has as "its room, our moment of attention."³⁹ In other words Ashbery seems to suggest that we live most fully in a heightened present moment when we allow "colors . . . [to] take . . . [us] to themselves." This is exactly Whitman's point of view as we can see from the following remarks in his Preface to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass:

The land and sea, the animals fishes and birds, the sky of heaven and the orbs, the forests mountains and rivers, are not small themes . . . but folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects . . . they expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls. (W:P&P 10)

About this passage Gay Wilson Allen points out that

There we have the poet's most fundamental intention: to indicate the path between reality and the soul. And this is why both the theory and the expression must always remain vague and ambiguous. It is also why Whitman attaches so much importance to gestures and "indirections."⁴⁰

In the first line of Ashbery's poem it is apparent he also wishes "to indicate the path between reality and the soul" given the way he considers it important enough to point out that "Many colors will take you to themselves"; as the critic Lynn Keller emphasizes, for Ashbery "poetry is a process in a constantly advancing present."⁴¹ I see this as a distinctly Whitmanian concern, although as Keller indicates it is also precisely that of Wallace Stevens whose preoccupation was with "The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice." (CP 239) . Ultimately, however, as Harold Bloom has written, "Emerson [is] the father of us all"⁴² since he was the first among these Americans to argue that "It is the quality of the moment, not the number of days, of events, or of actions, that imports" (RWE "Transcendentalist" 204)--and that

. . . the soul that ascends to worship the great God is plain and true; has no rose-color, no fine friends, no chivalry, no adventures; does not want admiration; dwells in the hour that now is, in the earnest experience of the common day,--by reason of the present moment and the mere trifle having become porous to thought, and bibulous of the sea of light. (RWE "The Over-Soul" 397)

When in "A Fish-Scale Sunrise" he says that "although my mind perceives the force behind the moment, / The mind is smaller than the eye" (CP 161), Stevens suggests that "the present moment . . . having become porous to thought"--this combination--has an essential value beyond any conscious judgements concerning value our "mind[s]" may wish to make; and this is what I think we will find Ashbery hopes to suggest in the line "Many colors will take you to themselves."

Ashbery switches from the second person "you" in the first line of "Never Seek To Tell Thy Love" to the first person "I" in the second line

for what seems the following reason: The "I" voice here is the unself-conscious expression of one's more basic, elemental desire for the security and protection associated with the idea of "home" which the child in all of us will occasionally demand access to right "now." The "you," meanwhile, is the more complex voice which, in its "you"-status, seems to be at a distance from some other part of the self--as if it were not a given but just out of reach and therefore must always be moved toward, and perhaps even earned. The distinction between the "I" and the "you" in these lines seems parallel to the one Whitman makes in "Song of Myself" between the self that is "contained between my hat and boots" (W: P&P 32) as opposed to "the Me myself" (30).

In the second line the individual asking for directions to a specified place would be annoyed with the indirection of such a response as "The way back there is streaked and stippled, / A shaded place" since this does not set us on a course, but asks us to turn our attention towards the unusual quality of the light underneath trees which is given the unique identity associated with the words "streaked and stippled." (These words remind me of how "beneath / The stillness of everything gone, and being still, / Being and sitting still, something resides, / Some skreaking and skrittering residuum" in "Autumn Refrain," CP 160.) However Whitman would have been happy with such an answer since in his Preface to the 1855 Leaves of Grass he says that "The indirect is always as great and real as the direct" (W: P&P 21)--and

Great is the faith of the flush of knowledge and of the investigation of the depths of qualities and things. Cleaving and circling here swells the soul of the poet yet is president of itself always. The depths are fathomless and therefore calm.

(W: P&P 15)

However for the one who wants direct directions "home," the next sentence (It belongs where it is going / Not where it is) would add to an increasing sense of confusion. To begin with, up to this point each line has been end-stopped (and in fact the first was an iambic pentameter line), setting up a pattern which a reader of "traditional" verse would feel comfortable with (or, as the poem itself puts it later on--in lines nine and ten--someone who can read poetry "the way they taught us back in school"). However at this point several things happen: for one, the ends of lines no longer correspond to the tidy completion of the thought since "It belongs where it is going / Not where it is" not only begins and ends in the middle of lines, but also straddles two stanzas, giving it--from a stylistic point of view--a special status. Also if in fact we were asking a passer-by for directions home, then "The way back there is streaked and stippled, / A shaded place" might be accepted as a friendly if eccentric response--but "It belongs where it is going / Not where it is" suggests that we have encountered either a speaker of oriental wisdom in the form of Zen koans, or a madman. (With respect to the latter, in his preface to an interview with Ashbery published in 1984 in The Washington Weekly, Terence Winch comments that: "Reading Ashbery can be like having an involved dialogue with a sophisticated, smart, literate insane person. If sometimes he is frustrating and incomprehensible, often he is full of clarity and brilliance."⁴³)

What is happening at this point--as in the poems I discussed in the previous chapter--is that a state of mind is presented as landscape through which one travels, with the direction the poem takes acting as

the guide as it attempts to nudge the reader into new and previously unexplored territory. The terra incognita of the mind can only be located--as is the case with these lines--by means of a paradox. In lines three and four, for example, a certain displacement occurs in the presentation of "The way back there" as itself a "place," since we tend to think of the means as in a separate category from the end to which they lead--thus "The way back" should not itself be a "place," but "the way" to move toward a "place." The phrase "It belongs" opening the next sentence implies a fixed, definable identity (a sense of belonging) associated with a given place (perhaps the "place" ending the previous sentence)--however the subsequent phrase "where it is going / Not where it is" contradicts the feeling of fixity suggested in "It belongs" and returns to the sense of fluidity with which the previous sentence opened in the phrase "The way back there." In other words, the sense is circular, with the second and third sentences in this poem acting as paradoxes in which the same terms are reversed; if seen in a reductive form these two sentences could be re-written as "That which is fluid or associated with motion [i.e., 'the way back'] is fixed [i.e., a 'place']. Also that which is fixed [i.e., in that it 'belongs'] is moving [i.e., in that it is also 'going']." The impulse here is akin to Whitman's in Specimen Days at the point where he describes his desire to write so as to present "the solid marrying the liquid":

Even as a boy, I had the fancy, the wish, to write a piece, perhaps a poem, about the sea-shore--that suggesting, dividing line, contact, junction, the solid marrying the liquid--that curious, lurking something, (as doubtless every objective form finally becomes to the subjective spirit,) which means far more than its mere first sight, grand as that is--blending the real and ideal, and each made portion of the other. (W: P&P 796)

In the poem "Variations On A Summer Day" (CP 232) Stevens also imagines a somewhat more fanciful version of this interaction:

III

The rocks of the cliffs are the heads of dogs
That turn into fishes and leap
Into the sea.

Further on he gives us a more direct sense of what this image suggests:

X

To change nature, not merely to change ideas,
To escape from the body, so to feel
Those feelings that the body balks,
The feelings of the natures round us here:
As a boat feels when it cuts blue water.

In the poetry of Whitman, Stevens and Ashbery alike one frequently sees this hope resurfacing for, as Whitman says, the "blending [of]the real and ideal"--or, as Stevens puts it, the chance "To escape from the body, so to feel / Those feelings that the body balks." For Whitman the "blending" takes place spontaneously--whereas for Stevens one's "body" frequently seems to stand between the merging of the self with its surroundings. Ashbery "blends" himself with his surroundings as spontaneously as Whitman does but he seems as much identified with "mind" and set apart from "body" as Stevens--except that Ashbery has sidestepped the mind/body problem and engaged his own mind in an involved sort of dialogue which uses paradox as its fundamental shape.⁴⁴

Ashbery frequently communicates in paradoxes. For example in the title poem from Houseboat Days we encounter the following: "To praise this, blame that, / Leads one subtly away from the beginning, where / We must stay, in motion" (HD 39). Here, as in the sentences just discussed

from "Never Seek To Tell Thy Love," it seems impossible to "stay" any place if in fact we are at the same time to be "in motion." The way to read this kind of poetry is the same way we must read Whitman when he, likewise, communicates in paradoxes--as he does, for example, in the opening of "Song of Myself":

I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (W: P&P 27)

How it becomes possible for "every atom belonging to me" to belong "to you" too is also the same way that, in the following passage, Whitman can be both sitting still and moving faster than a stallion:

I but use you a moment and then I resign you stallion
and do not need your paces, and outgallop them,
And myself as I stand or sit pass faster than you. (W: P&P 59)

The answer lies in our acknowledging the truth in Gay Wilson Allen's statement about Whitman: "It [*i.e.*, Whitman's unusual style] must . . . [be seen as] express[ing] an inner rather than an outer harmony."⁴⁵ Allen also suggests that "even in his most vivid realism [Whitman] is still allegorical and subjective."⁴⁶ In other words, as with Ashbery, Whitman's landscapes and paradoxes are intended to give the reader access to an inner spiritual or psychological realm which would otherwise be inaccessible. Whitman, Ashbery and Stevens alike push for an experiencing of one's consciousness--and of its relationship to its surroundings--which allows for two recognitions: (1) there are no boundaries setting consciousness apart from the environment within which it finds itself moving--implying a fundamental unity shared by human consciousness and the world at large (which means, as Roy Harvey Pearce

has said about Whitman, that "he is, as though for the first time, 'in' the world"⁴⁷ where--as Gay Wilson Allen puts it--"the mind and the material world into which it ventures are not ultimately different in kind"⁴⁸); and (2) given the absence of boundaries, borders, walls, or what have you (i.e., any confining presences which might be seen as separating consciousness from whatever else exists) one's role in the world becomes that of a "voyager" or traveller moving along the road of life. In other words for Emerson, Whitman, Ashbery and Stevens, one's "home" is one's consciousness as it is forever "on the road" in the sense of constantly evolving or changing given always new perceptions and experiences. Thus what D.H. Lawrence has said in describing Whitman is also true of Ashbery and Stevens:

The soul is not to pile up defenses round herself. . . . She is to go down the open road, as the road opens, into the unknown, keeping company with those whose soul draws them near to her, accomplishing nothing save the journey, and the works incident to the journey, in the long life-travel into the unknown, the soul in her subtle sympathies accomplishing herself by the way.⁴⁹

The willingness "not to pile up defenses around" oneself, and thus to allow for a sense of unity which could result in the process where, as Ashbery says, "Many colors will take you to themselves," would mean--as Gay Wilson Allen says--that

However unselected the mass of images may seem to some readers, [Whitman] intended them to symbolize a spiritual unity in himself and all creation.⁵⁰

Wallace Stevens and John Ashbery have a similar aim; as Lynn Keller writes: "Like Stevens' paradoxes and his proliferating resemblances and metaphors, Ashbery's paradoxes point ultimately toward an affirmation of

essential unity in the cosmos."⁵¹ Or as Stevens said in the essay "On Poetic Truth":

To know facts as facts in the ordinary way has, indeed, no particular power or worth. But a quickening of our awareness of the irrevocability by which a thing is what it is, has such power, and it is, I believe, the very soul of art. But no fact is a bare fact, no individual is a universe in itself. The artist exhibits affinities in the actual structure of objects by which their significance is deepened and enhanced. What I desire to stress is that there is a unity rooted in the individuality of objects and discovered in a different way from the apprehension of rational connections. (OP 237)

The foregrounding of one's interaction in and with some larger universe in the work of Whitman, Stevens and Ashbery comes as a consequence of their belief that the boundaries, which our rational mind believes true as distinguishing one category of objects or ideas from another group, are in fact illusions. As Joan Richardson has remarked:

In pursuing the origin and course of human development, the central question to emerge for the seriously enquiring thinkers, philosophers and poets was and is whether the habit of dividing the mind, or consciousness, from the rest of the world really reflects a genuine division in nature and not just an accident of convention or intellectual history.⁵²

Also Richardson's conclusion with respect to Stevens can as well be said of Whitman and Ashbery:

The hero that emerges from his work is nature itself or, rather, consciousness as it understands itself to be part of nature.⁵³

Beginning with Emerson and Whitman, and continuing down through and including the work of Stevens and Ashbery, one sees the shifting of an epistemological balance away from a priority given to objects in their separate identities, and towards the human consciousness which exists as

a fluid, ongoing present in the form of what William James labeled the "stream of thought." In The Matrix of Modernism Sanford Schwartz describes as follows what was first argued by Henri Bergson and William James:

What we perceive is inseparable from how we perceive it. Things are permeated with emotions, facts with values, the objects of present sensation with the coloring of all that we have experienced in the past. But we usually attend to the selfsame object rather than its ever-changing appearances, and therefore lose sight of an important dimension of experience.⁵⁴

The sense here is what Emerson had in mind when in "The Method of Nature" he pointed out that "a man never sees the same object twice: with his own enlargement the object acquires new aspects." (RWE 127) Thus in Ashbery's poem it is important that it be the "colors" that "will take you to themselves," not the objects with which the colors are associated. This learning to allow oneself to live in the present as a facet of American literature dates at least from Emerson who, as I mentioned earlier, suggested in "The Over-Soul" that "the present moment and the mere trifle . . . [should] become porous to thought. . ." (RWE 397). Whitman also recognized--as he puts it--that "something there is in the float of the sight of things that provokes it [wisdom] out of the soul" (W: P&P 301). Gay Wilson Allen writes that Whitman's is an "endless continuity in an eternal present"⁵⁵; in a similar vein, as I quoted earlier, Roy Harvey Pearce feels that "[Whitman] had an amazing capacity to yield himself to the moment--and then, as though he were quite another person, to seize himself in the moment of yielding. And so he changed. . . ." ⁵⁶

One consequence of all this is that the poet becomes a "voyager" in

the sense which Charles Feidelson, Jr., has described:

Whitman is less concerned with exploration of emotion than with exploration as a mode of existence. Similarly, his poems not only are about voyaging but also enact the voyage, so that their content (the image of the metaphysical journey) is primarily a reflection of their literary method, in which the writer and his subject become part of the stream of language.⁵⁷

This remark is absolutely crucial to all the writers under discussion here: in "Never Pain To Tell Thy Love" Blake suggests in traditional rhymed stanzas that there is a difference between that which is told and that performance which involves an abandoning of the self to a sympathetic participation in life's processes.⁵⁸ Whitman, however, like Stevens and Ashbery after him, recreates in the very structure of his poems the processes of mind he describes. As Feidelson goes on to say:

[In Whitman's work] there is no clear distinction among the traveler, the road, and the journey, for the journey is nothing but the progressive unity of the voyager and the lands he enters; perception which unites the seer and the seen, is identical with the real process of becoming. . . . A poem, therefore, instead of referring to a completed act of perception, constitutes the act itself, both in the author and in the reader; instead of describing reality, a poem is a realization. . . . Most of Whitman's poems, more or less explicitly, are "voyages" in this metaphysical sense.⁵⁹

What Feidelson says of Whitman's poetry is also true for Stevens':

The I of Whitman's poems speaks the world that he sees, and sees the world that he speaks, and does this by becoming the reality of his vision and of his words, in which the reader also participates.⁶⁰

If we keep Whitman in mind while reading the next lines of "Never Seek To Tell Thy Love" they open before us in a useful way. For example "The flowers don't talk to Ida now,"⁶¹ odd as it may seem at this point,

can be situated in the unfolding scenario (or, perhaps one should say, anti-scenario) by noticing that we appear to have here a continuation of what have seemed a series of responses to the request in the second line indicating that "now I want someone to tell me how to get home." It fits on one level because the word "now" is repeated (as in line two), and the words "don't talk to" suggest a negation of the earlier request that someone "tell me" something (which splitting-off or negation the stanza break helps to reinforce). Also the "colors" of the first line have a context in the "flowers" we see here. Having established certain textual links, however, it seems as if this sentence has an oblique life all its own which--as with the seventeenth line, "They don't make rocks like us any more"--makes it seem unapproachable. But help comes when one remembers in Specimen Days the point where Whitman tells us:

(I had a sort of dream-trance the other day, in which I saw my favorite trees step out and promenade up, down and around, very curiously--with a whisper from one, leaning down as he pass'd me, We do all this on the present occasion, exceptionally, just for you.)
(W: P&P 816)

For Whitman this is not so much a whimsical aside as a version of what for him is ordinary experience. This is, in other words, a re-presenting of the "rapport" which he mentions, earlier, in the following passage:

As I walk'd slowly over the grass, the sun shone out enough to show the shadow moving with me. Somehow I seem'd to get identity with each and every thing around me, in its condition. Nature was naked, and I was also. It was too lazy, soothing, and joyous--equable to speculate about. Yet I might have thought somehow in this vein: Perhaps the inner never lost rapport we hold with earth, light, air, trees, &c., is not to be realized through eyes and mind only, but through the whole corporeal body, which I will not have blinded or bandaged any more than the eyes. Sweet, sane, still Nakedness in Nature!--ah if poor, sick, prurient humanity in cities

might really know you once more! Is not nakedness then indecent? No, not inherently. It is your thought, your sophistication, your fear, your respectability, that is indecent. There come moods when these clothes of ours are not only too irksome to wear, but are themselves indecent. (W: P&P 807-808)

When Ashbery says "They speak only the language of flowers," the language he is referring to could be Whitman's "inner never lost rapport we hold with earth, light, air, trees, &c. [which] is not to be realized through eyes and mind only, but through the whole corporeal body. . . ." Also the name "Ida" may refer indirectly to the Freudian "id" in the way that suggested here is that part of our psyche which is unconscious and therefore the repository for instinctual needs and drives. The fact that the flowers are "Saying things like, How hard I tried to get there. / It must mean I'm not here yet" looks ahead to the way that constantly "Returning to the point was always the main thing" when we were "back in school"--how "It was our North Pole / [and] We skulked and hungered there for years" What Ashbery is getting at, I feel, is the way just after the passage I quoted from Specimen Days, Whitman says he feels that "the highest and deepest depth known to civilization" comes from the "natural and religious idea of Nakedness" (W: P&P 808)--which is stated in a different way earlier on as follows:

Somehow I seem'd to get identity with each and every thing around me, in its condition. Nature was naked, and I was also. It was too lazy, soothing and joyous-equable to speculate about.

Ashbery, in line with Whitman, suggests that we cannot learn to be "here yet" ("here," that is, where "Many colors will take you to themselves" and thus open the way for us to experience whatever set of myriad surfaces consitute the here and now) as long as we believe that our role

is always to seek the elusive "there" mapped out for us during the course of a traditional American education. With respect to our search for "home" (alias "the point," "the main thing," and "our North Pole") both Ashbery and Whitman wish to say to us: "Did we ever leave it? I don't think so." As Whitman says in "Song of Myself":

Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin
of all poems,

You shall possess the good of the earth and sun . . . there are
millions of suns left,

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand . . . nor
look through the eyes of the dead . . . nor feed on the
spectres in books,

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.

I have heard what the talkers were talking . . . the talk of the
beginning and the end,

But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.

There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now;
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.

(W: P&P 28)

When Whitman says in this passage "I do not talk of the beginning or the end," he introduces a consideration of time--and a relationship between one's personal experience and time--which Ashbery also suggests as his preoccupation, given not only his frequent mentioning (in lines two, five and thirteen) of the word "now," but also a reference like "We skulked and hungered there for years." One must recognize that, as Lawrence Kramer puts it, in an Ashbery poem

Time flows, but not in a straight line; it flows every which way.

. . . [Ashbery subverts] our unacknowledged illusion that time is simple.⁶²

On this same subject the critic Lynn Keller has pointed out that

For Ashbery the only genuine and crucial choice we face is how we relate to time. We must not remain fixed, nor allow ourselves to be sucked into the past, but must flow with the tumultuous current of an ever-changing now.⁶³

What our vision of time as divisible into minutes, hours, days, months and years does is to turn it into a commodity--to make it as much like a possessable material object as possible; whereas for Emerson time is a series of points of access in the way that with each new moment a corresponding new shape is made available to the life of the spirit.

What is crucial for Whitman and Ashbery is their particular attitude towards our place in "time"--and thus in the world. In order to see how "time" figures into the work of these authors, it will be useful to step back for a moment and consider just what assumptions we usually bring to this complex notion. In his book called What Is Time? G. J. Whitrow argues that the popular contemporary understanding of our relationship to time derives primarily from four preeminent sources.

The first of these is Christianity:

The influence of Christianity on our modern concept of time is not restricted to calendrical details. It was far more fundamental than that. Its central doctrine of the Crucifixion was regarded as a unique event in time not subject to repetition, and so implied that time must be linear and not cyclic.⁶⁴

The second is an attitude towards time prevalent among scientists up until this century, and which was present in and disseminated through the work of such people as Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727):

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries . . . the Newtonian point of view was dominant so that by the beginning of the present century it had come to be generally assumed that there is but one

universal system of time and that it exists in its own right. This belief was not confined to scientists but was fostered by the growing tendency in industrial civilization for men's lives to be regulated by the clock, particularly following the mass production of cheap watches. ⁶⁵

The third factor, then, influencing the way we see time, was the invention and distribution of mechanical time-keeping devices which, perhaps more than anything else, encourage us to see time as having a separate, independent life all its own. The fourth and final factor has to do with the modern individual's relationship with his or her workplace:

. . . the Puritans . . . advocated . . . strict adherence to a regular routine of six days of work followed by a day of rest. By the end of the seventeenth century this routine had become generally accepted in this country [*i.e.*, Britain]. . . the Puritan insistence on a rhythm of living based on the week was more natural to those who worked in towns instead of being tied to the soil. During the latter part of the seventeenth century developments in economic life began to prevail over the traditional seasonal routine and this made for general acceptance of the scientific idea of homogenous and continuous time. ⁶⁶

Given a sense of what even today prevails as a popularly accepted understanding of time, it is important to recognize that not only do Whitman and Ashbery diverge from this view, but that Whitman's attitude in the mid- to late-19th century was a crude anticipation of what in the next century Einstein would describe in much more sophisticated and detailed terms. As Whitrow says:

[Einstein] came to the conclusion that physical reality should be regarded as a four-dimensional existence rather than as the evolution of a three-dimensional existence. In other words, the passage of time is to be regarded as merely a feature of our consciousness that has no objective physical significance. This sophisticated hypothesis makes the concept of time completely subordinate to that of space. ⁶⁷

This is to say that one vision of "time"--the more traditional--describes it as having a separate and fixed identity all its own, characterized not only by the way the hands on all clocks are supposed to be set to move at the same rate of speed, but also by the way each unit of time is perceived as having a mutually acknowledged beginning, middle and end. Working contrary to this view, however, Emerson--for example--argued that "Time and space are but physiological colors which the eye makes" . . . (RWE "Self-Reliance" 270), suggesting that our individual consciousness gives to time and space a distinct shape which may, by implication, diverge from what we are taught to accept them as having inherently. Thus emphasis is placed not so much on time as a separate phenomenon, but on the individual human consciousness which Emerson suggests operates "above time." According to Emerson:

It is the quality of the moment, not the number of days, or events, or of actors, that imports. (RWE "The Transcendentalist" 204)

*

. . . man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future. He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time. (RWE "Self-Reliance" 270)

*

We must set up the strong present tense against all the rumors of wrath, past or to come. (RWE "Experience" 481)

*

All good conversation, manners, and action, come from a spontaneity which forgets usages, and makes the moment great. Nature hates calculators; her methods are saltatory and impulsive. Man lives by pulses; our organic movements are such; and the chemical and ethereal agents are undulatory and alternate; and the mind goes

antagonizing on, and never prospers but by fits.

(RWE "Experience" 483)

*

We must be very suspicious of the deceptions of the element of time. It takes a good deal of time to eat or to sleep, or to earn a hundred dollars, and a very little time to entertain a hope and an insight which becomes the light of our life.

(RWE "Experience" 492)

In "Self-Reliance," for example, Emerson urges us to live in "the thousand-eyed present" (RWE 265)--which is what Whitman urges when in "Song of Myself" he says "This minute that comes to me over the past decillions, / There is no better than it and now." (W: P&P 49)

Whitman's preoccupation with experience in the here and now is evident not only in the way "Song of Myself" is written almost entirely in the present tense, but also in the way that Specimen Days opens by stressing how much the work will be taken up with matters happening in, and concerned with, a feeling for the present:

A HAPPY HOUR'S COMMAND

Down in the Woods, July 2d, 1882.--If I do it at all I must delay no longer. Incongruous and full of skips and jumps as is that huddle of diary-jottings, war-memoranda of 1862-'65, Nature-notes of 1877-'81, with Western and Canadian observations afterwards, all bundled up and tied by a big string, the resolution and indeed mandate comes to me this day, this hour,--(and what a day! what an hour just passing! the luxury of riant grass and blowing breeze, with all the shows of sun and sky and perfect temperature, never before so filling me body and soul)--to go home, untie the bundle, reel out one after another, into print-pages, and let the melange's lackings and wants of connection take care of themselves.

(W: P&P 689)

Whitman's emphasis is upon a certain quality of attention in the here and now which gives one access to meanings imbedded within what Ashbery calls "the movement of experience"; Stevens wrote in a similar vein that

Novelty must be inspired. But there must be novelty. . . .
 There is one most welcome and authentic note; it is the insistence
 on a reality that forces itself upon our consciousness and refuses
 to be managed and mastered. (OP 238)

Ashbery echoes sentiments like these when in his long poem "A Wave" he
 says: "And then it all happens blindingly, over and over / In a
 continuous, vivid present that wasn't there before." (AW 84)

Three lines into the third stanza of "Never Seek To Tell Thy Love"
 the tone shifts completely so that instead of our movements being
 described in terms like "skulked," at this point we move "Like dazzled
 insects skimming the bright airs." One is reminded here of that point
 in "Song of Myself" where we are told

Long enough have you dreamed contemptible dreams,
 Now I wash the gum from your eyes,
 You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of
 every moment of your life (W: P&P 83)

Also the next line of "Never Seek To Tell Thy Love"--"You are on the
 road again"--suggests all those points where Whitman evokes the open
 road: "I tread day and night such roads" (W: P&P 63); or "We walk the
 roads of Ohio and Massachusetts and Virginia and Wisconsin and New York
 and New Orleans and Texas and Montreal and San Francisco and Charleston
 and Savannah and Mexico, / Inland and by the seacoast and boundary lines
 and we pass the boundary lines" (W: P&P 71); or "My left hand
 hooks you round the waist, / My right hand points to landscapes of
 continents, and a plain public road. // Not I, not any one else can
 travel that road for you, / You must travel it for yourself" (W: P&P
 82). For Ashbery as well the "road" and the "path" are frequently
 mentioned images; besides in the poem "The Path To The White Moon,"

discussed in Chapter Two, "the path" appears again in "Destiny Waltz" where we read:

It is a question of forbearance among the days.
 Ask, but not too often: that way most ways
 Of leading up to the truth will approach you
 Timidly at first, wanting to get to know you
 Before wandering away on other paths
 Leading out of your meanwhile safe precinct.
 Your feet know what they're doing. (AW 60)

The importance this idea of the "path" or "road" has for Whitman and Ashbery might best be considered under the light shed by the following remarks made by Emerson, Whitman and Ashbery:

Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim. This one fact the world hates, that the soul becomes
 (RWE "Self-Reliance" 271)

*

The great gifts are not got by analysis. Everything good is on the highway. The middle region of our being is the temperate zone. We may climb into the thin and cold realm of pure geometry and lifeless science, or sink into that of sensation. Between these extremes is the equator of life, of thought, of spirit, of poetry,-- a narrow belt. Moreover, in popular experience, everything good is on the highway.
 (RWE "Experience" 480)

*

Our strength is transitional, alternating; or, shall I say, a thread of two strands. The sea-shore, sea seen from shore, shore seen from sea; the taste of two metals in contact; and our enlarged powers at the approach and at the departure of a friend; the experience of poetic creativeness, which is not found in staying at home, nor yet in travelling, but in transitions from one to the other, which must therefore be adroitly managed to present as much transitional surface as possible; . . .
 (RWE "Plato; Or, The Philosopher" 641)

*

Every molecule of matter in the whole universe is swinging to and fro; every particle of ether which fills space is in jelly-like vibration. Light is one kind of motion, heat another, electricity

another, magnetism another, sound another. Every human sense is the result of motion; every perception, every thought is but motion of the molecules of the brain translated by that incomprehensible thing we call mind. The processes of growth, of existence, of decay, whether in worlds, or in the minutest organisms, are but motion.
(W: P&P Specimen Days 921)

*

you do not pass
From point A to Point B but merely speculate
On how it would be, and in that instant
Do appear to be traveling, though we all
Stay home, don't we. Our strength lies
In the potential for motion, not in accomplishments, and it gets
Used up too, which is, in a way, more effective."
(AW "Cups With Broken Handles" 51)

A vision of the human mind which Emerson, Whitman, and Ashbery all share is of a phenomenon tied not so much to either the anatomical operations of the brain or any objective world "out there" which we perceive, but a complex, ever-changing process of consciousness which is comprised of so many elements that, ultimately, the movement along paths connecting one part to another is the crucial experience. As Lawrence Kramer has put it:

As a rule, an Ashbery poem does not articulate a process but simply lets a textured consciousness persist shimmeringly for a given duration, which is presented as something like an objet trouve. Within that duration, the poem's voices participate in the continuous flow of the present, without imposing any shape on it . . . The nature of this flow is to be quirky, inconsistently coherent, and, contrary to conventional expectation, non-linear.⁶⁸

Also as Charles Feidelson, Jr., writes:

The shift of image from the contemplative eye of "establish'd poems" to the voyaging ego of Whitman's poetry records a large-scale theoretical shift from the categories of "substance" to those of "process." Whitman's "perpetual journey" is not analagous to a sight-seeing trip, though his catalogues might give that impression; the mind and the material world into which it ventures are not ultimately different in kind. . . . [Whitman's] new method

was predicated not only on the sense of creative vision--itself a process which renders a world in process--but also, as part and parcel of that consciousness, on the sense of creative speech.⁶⁹

This description could just as easily apply to Ashbery since his poetry embodies a contemporary version of what Whitman meant when he said "I am afoot with my vision." (W: P&P 59) These poets are engaged primarily in a "metaphysical journey" which acknowledges no boundaries between human consciousness and any other aspects of the universe of which it is a part and through which it moves. Thus when Whitman in "Song of Myself" lists specific experiences, he is displaying instances of the way experience is at least a two-way street (although as we have seen one can move in an infinite number of directions on this street) in that at the same time that consciousness goes out to and involves itself in the events it perceives--the events as perceived enter into the individual human consciousness and subtly transform it. This important way of reading Whitman's poetry is described by Denis Donoghue as follows:

The detail is not lost or buried: it is incorporated in the rhythm, contained there like juice in an apple. That is: the detail is not given to the reader as a separable event, but as one phase in the movement of feeling. . . . [Thus] the way to read Whitman's catalogues is to attend to the rhythm, their flow and ebb, the cadences of feeling which they embody. Poetic value does not depend, then, upon the self-renewing power of feeling. . . . Whitman does not claim to possess . . . objects; what he possesses is a flowing sense of them, of their interest, their value, their amazing existence.⁷⁰

This "flowing sense of" objects is what Wallace Stevens referred to when he wrote "Things seen are things as seen," and "There is nothing in life except what one thinks of it." (QP 162) In other words the focus in

these poets' work shifts from "Things seen" to the processes of consciousness through which "things" are seen; or, as Ashbery put it in an interview: "I think I am more interested in the movement among ideas than in the ideas themselves, the way one goes from one point to another rather than the destination or the origin."⁷¹ The result is that instead of seeing impressions rendered subjectively, the object (or events) and perceiving mind become mutually porous in a unified form of consciousness which the poem enacts, and which exists at some point between--and includes--the object of attention, the poet, the poet's language, and a reader. This is to say that for Whitman, as for Ashbery, the poem has a unique status--which is the point Charles Feidelson wishes to make when he says that for Whitman "A poem . . . instead of referring to a completed act of perception, constitutes the act itself, both in the author and in the reader; instead of describing reality, a poem is a realization."⁷²

The way that a Whitman or Ashbery poem seems to be suspended somewhere on the paths connecting subject, object, language and reader, is suggested by Susan Stewart in her article about April Galleons when she says about Ashbery's poems that

They are not "poetry monuments," aloof and expert. Rather, they move through each other, summoning an ongoing consciousness built between their signs and the reader's work.⁷³

This description reminds one of Emerson's remarks in an article about a book of poetry by Jones Very:

The author, plainly a man of a pure and kindly temper, casts himself into the state of the high and transcendental obedience to the inward spirit. He has apparently made up his mind to follow all its leadings, though he should be taxed with absurdity or even with

insanity. In this enthusiasm he writes most of these verses, which rather flow through him than from him. (RWE 1178)

Again, Emerson's remarks should be seen as also accurately describing John Ashbery's poetry. What all this points to is the need to locate the Whitman or Ashbery poem in an entirely different place than we do in the case of most poems--which is to say not at points of origin or destination (with respect to either content or style) but rather on the paths and roads of consciousness along which the poet is moving (and wants us, the readers, to move as well).

In other words, typically what a poet has been thought of as doing is giving his or her reader a gift of some kind as if the poem itself were a self-contained and transferable object; and to this end traditional critical language has sought to delineate a set of boundaries so as to lend intellectual shape to these gifts. For Emerson, Whitman, Stevens and Ashbery, however, a shared aim has been to eliminate boundaries since for them a poem is not an object but an infusion of energy. Thus they take for granted a reader's willingness to abandon certain habits of mind and involve oneself in the original aim of the poem-as-meditation, which is to begin to see consciousness as analagous not so much to material reality but to the energy which, thanks to Einstein, we now know to be the primary constituent element in the universe. As Stevens puts it: "The world is a force, not a presence." (OP 172)

In "Never Seek To Tell Thy Love" the last line in the third stanza (They don't make rocks like us any more) may be read in conjunction with a similar line in "Punishing the Myth" (ST 2) which reads: "In time

even the rocks will grow." Thus, in a comical vein, instead of the flowers' unwillingness to talk to Ida any more, what we have here are rocks telling about how they "don't make rocks like us any more." Implied is the way that, given what we have learned from both Darwin and Einstein, it is not that rocks are made differently now, but that our perception of "matter" has altered so as to include the understanding that not only is all matter in a state of constant flux (or evolution), but also, instead of existing as separate, distinct realities (as we have long assumed), matter and energy represent different forms of the same reality (as Einstein's famous equation reveals: $E = MC^2$). By analogy the suggestion is that human beings need not view themselves as immovable (in psychological or spiritual terms)--like rocks--but like that which "bursts over [the] boundary on all sides, and expands another orbit on the great deep, which runs up into a high wave . . ." (RWE "Circles" 404). Ashbery seems to suggest, then, that I should not think of myself as a rock, but more like--to use the title of his book--a wave. As Lynn Keller writes: "In Ashbery's mature work there is an insistence, both thematic and technical, on the certitude of continual change, on the irreducible complexity of experience, and on the necessity of accepting both these conditions."⁷⁴

The first two lines of the last stanza (And holding on to the thread, fine as a cobweb, but incredibly strong, / Each of us advances into his own labyrinth) bring to mind two sentences from Henry James' "The Art of Fiction" (1884) which render a vision of the nature of human consciousness which is similar to the image Ashbery wants to present in his lines:

Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative--much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius--it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations. (AN 359)

Whitman would say that the important elements here are the way our experience as filtered through consciousness is "never limited . . . never complete"--and, at the same time (to use Ashbery's words), "incredibly strong."

Of course by this point we are aware that as "Each of us advances" there is no longer any concern with the desire to "get home"--and "Returning to the point" is out of the question now; our path leads into "the splended labyrinth of [our] perceptions, to wander without end" (RWE "Nature" 41). The word "invisibility" in the poem's last lines again brings to mind Blake's poem to which Ashbery's title alludes, where "the gentle wind does move / Silently, invisibly" and "A traveller came by / Silently, invisibly."⁷⁵ The word "gods" here, with a lower-case "g", suggests whatever or whoever in a secular society is openly honored, revered or adored, as opposed to the way otherwise it is "invisibly" that "Each of us advances into his own labyrinth" of thought and feeling. In Blake's poem the speaker's confessed mistake was that "I told my love" instead of, like the "traveller," empathetically participating in the silent and invisible forces which are presented as the essence of "love." Ashbery's addendum to Blake is that even though this silent and actively sympathetic movement forward of our consciousness is fundamental to a proper understanding of our place in

the scheme of things (and Ashbery's poem illustrates his agreement with Blake in this regard), nonetheless our "invisibility" means that we have no choice but sometimes to come out by making "Tender speeches"--and that we must at least attempt to "say such things" even though sometimes the only way to do so is (again, as this poem demonstrates) in the form of paradoxes. In other words--to return to my earlier discussion of Blake's poem--Ashbery corroborates what may be read as Blake's idealism to the extent that he says "It belongs where it is going / Not where it is"; however he suggests in the last lines that in the "real" world it is necessary that, like the speaker in Blake's poem, "we say such things, / Filling the road with colors, faces, / Tender speeches, until they feed us to the truth." Ashbery seems to argue that ultimately, as Whitman says, we are inevitably "Both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it" (W: P&P "Song of Myself" 30)--and that while on Whitman's "road" if we attend to and hold intercourse with the "colors, faces, [and] / Tender speeches" we meet there, that despite our habit of skulking and hungering for years in an effort to return to "the point," that these experiences will bring us to all we can know of the "truth."

5. "The path between reality and the soul." (W:P&P 10)

So even though he agrees with and reinforces Blake's point, at the end of his own poem Ashbery suggests that the kind of truth he has in mind is one we can best understand in the context of Whitman's poetry. In other words, we live in both an ideal and real world in the way that

experience is an ongoing dialogue between the two, our attention to the interaction which is at the heart of this process being the place where we stand or fall--not the "ideal" or "real" as independent and contending forces. Thus, attention to the interaction between and among various elements in one's experience must be emphasized in these American poets; as Stevens writes:

. . . the inter-relation between things is what makes them fecund. Interaction is the source of poetry. Sex is an illustration. But the principle is not confined to the illustration. . . . The inter-relation between reality and the imagination is the basis of the character of literature. (OP 293)

What is important is "inter-relation" or the mind's fluid ability to eliminate boundaries and include everything in an ongoing state of consciousness by making itself flexible enough to become the arena in which this relation can be watched. In other words, what becomes important in the Emerson-Whitman-Stevens-Ashbery analogy is not the usual highly-charged repositories of meaning where critics, depending upon the currently popular modes, will skulk and hunger for years (e.g., the mind itself as understood in Psychoanalytic theory--or language and rhetoric to the Structuralist or Deconstructionist), but a complex form of evolving consciousness as we see it depicted in the work of these four authors. This emphasis upon forever outwardly-opening inter-relationships, and the anti-reductive reading that poetry of this kind would seem to demand, may be one reason so many readers and critics--who are schooled in the art of finding closure wherever they look--are so frustrated by Ashbery who constantly slips past and into open space just as another door in the reader's mind is about to close. As Richard Poirier has written:

The neglect of the Emersonian connection, as it might be called . . . reveals, I suspect, an instinctive recognition that Emerson and his influence, if its nuances and skepticisms were deeply enough explored, would prove disturbing, even disruptive of the critical-interpretive enterprise as most people practice it.⁷⁶

Also this emphasis upon movement along invisible inter-linking paths becomes an extension into the present of what we may call the American Sublime--as Harold Bloom writes in Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate:

I think that Stevens . . . ventures the crucial formula for American Romantic poetry, including even Eliot, Pound, and Williams at their infrequent best: it must make the visible a little hard to see, which is one of the great achievements of Whitman and Dickinson, and of Frost, Stevens, Hart Crane after them, and is still the gathering achievement of Robert Penn Warren, Elizabeth Bishop, John Ashbery, A. R. Ammons, and our other distinguished contemporaries who maintain this major tradition of our verse.⁷⁷

I take it that what Bloom means by "it must make the visible a little hard to see" (or, we should say, what Stevens means, since this is his phrase) is, also, that it must make the invisible a little easier to see by evoking the complications of which we are made, and which Stevens suggests when he says:

Tell X that speech is not dirty silence
Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier.
(CP 311)

What we want to see is the special energy or force which has been identified with the sacred relationship between our souls and God--this inner and always potential sense of connectedness as set apart from a fragmented material world by which our sight has traditionally been taken up. A more modern Freudian version of this scenario is suggested

by Harold Bloom when he writes:

How can we speak of degrees of knowing [as, Bloom argues, the deconstructive critic does in saying that "a trope is a figure of knowing and not a figure of willing"] in the blind world of the wish, where the truth is always elsewhere, always different, always to be encountered only by the acceptances and rejections of an energy that in itself is the antithesis of renunciation, a force that refuses all form?⁷⁸

For Emerson, Whitman, Stevens and Ashbery, then, there is an intended emphasis upon a kind of metaphysical confusion associated with and arising out of the need to focus upon not any elements of human consciousness or particular modes of expression themselves, but the movement between and among these elements--the "force that refuses all form." (Although paradoxically, of course, one can never "focus" upon something which is always moving just as--also paradoxically--"Litany" is a poem one can never really read, although its unreadability, if considered in the proper way, may place one further along a certain path than many poems one can read).

Ultimately one important point is the way that in an Ashbery poem, for example (although we may as easily refer to a work by Emerson, Whitman or Stevens), one moves as though through a psychological landscape which is a version of the physical landscape transformed according to a set of ground rules extrapolated from the way consciousness itself operates--so that, potentially, we experience a new sense of involvement with ourselves and the world around us as it is thought through and internalized. In terms of technique, this psychological terrain we journey through gives us the option of picking up or putting down any facet of experience at will--thus "rhapsody"

becomes central to these writers' separate but related styles. Also paradox becomes, among other things, a means of discouraging the mind from its habit of identifying with a material world of objects and forcing one back into the shifting, self-contradictory world of the mind. Paradox, then, is a way to introduce the necessary "shattering" which Bloom describes:

The persona of my self, as in the title Song of Myself, is only a perpetual breaking of forms or shattering of vessels, a dance of roles constantly substituting for one another, an interplay of re-cognitions that leads Whitman from the haunts of his soul to the recognitions of the real me.⁷⁹

Paradox pulls the rug out from under us and makes us think constant troping is its mode; the idea is for us to join in "the dance" these poets are doing:

. . . we are like Blake's Los, reading not the tropes or stars of Albion but the topoi or voids between the stars. Freedom or the second chance, the saving blend of Vocation and Temperament, has been discovered in the dance of substitutions, not in the substitutions themselves.⁸⁰

As Richard Poirier writes:

For Emerson, the reading of life or of art is not a search for morally stabilizing moments or summary, but for infusions and diffusions of energy, for that constant redistribution of forces called troping, including the troping of the self.⁸¹

When Bloom says in Figures of Capable Imagination that it is the Whitman in Stevens that comes through most strongly in Ashbery, he wants us to look at the way Stevens sets aside the concern he shares with Emerson involving a felt conflict between reality and the imagination (though Emerson's words were "Nature" and "Soul"), and emphasize that

part of Stevens we see in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," for example, where, like Whitman, he allows himself to be completely given over to observing the ongoing processes which constitute experience without making moral distinctions concerning their various elements. The important thing to recognize here is that for Whitman, as with Ashbery, the concern is not, given the fact that matter and spirit represent separate realities, how can I move myself away from the one and toward the other--rather the issue is given the fact that matter and the soul are bound up intimately one with the other in an evolving form of consciousness, how can I push myself further into experience so as more effectively to discover what it is all about.⁸²

One related aspect of this is that, as Feidelson says of Whitman: "his object is not so much to impose a new form on the world as to adopt a new stance in which the world takes on new shapes."⁸³ Given this approach, the emphasis is not so much on the finished poem but on the mind's ability continually to move and grow--as Ashbery said in his interview with A. J. Poulin, Jr.: "I'm always trying to think of something new to do."⁸⁴ Whitman's mistake was to try through continual revision to perfect Leaves of Grass as a work in which what he considered to be the spiritual core of Democracy might be described and promoted. Ashbery, like Stevens (who wrote that "All poetry is experimental poetry" OP 161), seems to have learned a lesson from Whitman's mistake since instead of perfecting a particular form or work, Ashbery is always willing in his books to try new approaches.

Also crucial, as I mentioned earlier, is the way that with the kind of aesthetic we are describing here, the reader is more thoroughly

implicated into the poem's operations than is the case when it is assumed that the reader is the audience sitting before and at a distance from the poem up on its stage. Whitman seems conscious of this new role for a reader in the following remarks from "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads":

I round and finish little, if anything, and could not, consistently with my scheme. The reader will always have his or her part to do, just as much as I have had mine. I seek less to state or display any theme or thought, and more to bring you, reader, into the atmosphere of the theme or thought--there to pursue your own flight.
(W: P&P 667)

Gay Wilson Allen describes this aspect of Whitman's poetry as follows:

What [Whitman] is attempting . . . is not so much the complete "expression" or communication of a thought or an experience as exerting an influence on the reader so that he himself, by willing cooperation with the poet, may have an esthetic-religious experience of his own. It is literally true that Whitman attempts less to create a "poem," as the term is usually understood, than to present the materials of a poem for the reader to use in creating his own work of art.⁸⁵

In similar fashion Lynn Keller emphasizes that Ashbery's "techniques serve to bind the reader to the immediate moment in the poem."⁸⁶

Something of the spiritual guide in Emerson has rubbed off on Whitman, Stevens and Ashbery in their seeming desire not only to "indicate" an inner path which we might follow, but also by providing in their poems instruments a reader may use in exercising his or her mind while at the same time seeing described the process in which one is participating.

As Richard Poirier put it with respect to Emerson, "for him movement is paradoxically the fixed principle of life."⁸⁷ Ultimately it is this belief which is the basis for an aesthetic shared by Whitman, Stevens, and Ashbery. Their message, which is integral to their

techniques, was expressed by Gustave Flaubert as follows in a letter he wrote to Mlle. Leroyer de Chantepie in 1857:

Superficial, limited creatures, rash, feather-brained souls, demand a conclusion from everything; they want to know the purpose of life and the dimensions of the infinite. Picking up a handful of sand in their poor, puny grasp, they say to the Ocean: "I shall now count the grains on your shores." But when the sand slips through their fingers and the sum proves long, they stamp and burst into tears. Do you know what we should do on that shore? Either kneel down or walk. You must walk.⁸⁸

NOTES

¹ Merle Curti, "Psychological Theories in American Thought," Dictionary of The History of Ideas, ed. Philip P. Wiener, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), IV, 16B.

² Gay Wilson Allen, Waldo Emerson: A Biography (New York: The Viking Press, 1981), x.

³ Denis Donoghue, Reading America: Essays On American Literature (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 10.

⁴ ". . . [Emerson] believed in the autonomy of spirit apart from mere conditions." Irving Howe, The American Newness: Culture and Politics In The Age Of Emerson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 30.

⁵ Harold Bloom, Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 8.

⁶"Power keeps quite another road than the turnpikes of choice and will, namely, the subterranean and invisible tunnels and channels of life."
(RWE "Experience" 482)

⁷ Louis L. Martz, 'the unique bird, inimitable,' Yale Review, Vol. XXXVII, No. 2, Dec. 1947, 339-341 collected in Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage, ed. by Charles Doyle (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 301.

⁸ Bloom, The Poems of Our Climate, 137.

⁹ Irving Howe, The American Newness: Culture and Politics In The Age Of Emerson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 8.

¹⁰ Denis Donoghue, Connoisseurs of Chaos: Ideas of Order In Modern American Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 191-192.

¹¹ This is not my formulation but one I have heard Alfred Kazin discuss on many occasions. A version is discussed by R.P. Blackmur in a chapter of Language As Gesture: Essays in Poetry (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1952), 32-34, called "Emily Dickinson: Notes On Prejudice And Fact":

Emily Dickinson came, he [Allen Tate] says, exactly at the dying crisis of Puritan New England culture--not at the moment of death, but at the moment--it was years long--when the matrix began to be

- 24 Martz, Meditation, 34.
- 25 "We believe the lies we want to believe because they help us to survive. Similarly we read (reread) the poems that keep our discourse with ourselves going. Strong poems strengthen us by teaching us how to talk to ourselves, rather than how to talk to others." Harold Bloom, The Poems of Our Climate.
- 26 Allen, Waldo Emerson, xi.
- 27 Roy Harvey Pearce, "Introduction," Whitman: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), 1.
- 28 Martz, The Poem of The Mind, 90.
- 29 Harold Bloom, Figures of Capable Imagination (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 130.
- 30 He helps us out to the extent that in Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977) he discusses the influence of Whitman on Stevens; also in certain other works--most notably his pieces included in the collection of essays he edited called John Ashbery (New York: Chealsea House, 1985)--Bloom describes Ashbery's work in the context of American literary history, with special attention paid to the poetry of Whitman and Stevens. Although many other books and articles are helpful with respect to these issues, I found especially useful the discussion of Stevens' influence on Ashbery included in Lynn Keller's Remaking It New: Contemporary American Poetry and The Modernist Tradition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- 31 Charles Feidelson, Jr., "Whitman As Symbolist," in Whitman: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), 88.
- 32 A. Poulin, Jr., "The Experience of Experience: A Conversation With John Ashbery," Michigan Quarterly Review 20:3 (Summer 1981), 245.
- 33 William James, The Principles of Psychology (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), I, 233.
- 34 William Blake, The Complete Writings of William Blake With Variant Readings, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 161.
- 35 Gay Wilson Allen, The New Walt Whitman Handbook (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 228.
- 36 Malcolm Cowley, "Introduction," Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1959), xvi.

37 Consider in this context the following from "A Vision of The Last Judgement" (Complete Writings, ed. Keynes, 604-17):

Mental Things are alone Real; what is call'd Corporeal, Nobody Knows of its dwelling place: it is in Fallacy, & its Existence an imposture. . . . I assert for My Self that I do not behold the outward Creation & that to me it is hindrance & not Action: it is as the dirt upon my feet, No part of Me. . . . I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would question a window concerning a Sight. I look thro' it & not with it.

38 And that in fact we would not want to return home even if we could is illustrated in "A Wave" when Ashbery enacts for us what such a return might be like:

"I was lost, but seemed to be coming home,
Through quincunxes of apple trees, but ever
As I drew closer, as in Zeno's paradox, the mirage
Of home withdrew and regrouped a little farther off.
I could see white curtains fluttering at the windows
And in the garden under a big brass-tinted apple tree
The old man had removed his hat and was gazing at the grass
As though in sorrow, sorrow for what I had done.
Realizing it was now or never, I lurched
With one supreme last effort out of the dream
Onto the couch-grass behind the little red-painted palings:
I was here! But it all seemed so lonesome. I was welcomed
Without enthusiam. My room had been kept as it was
But the windows were closed, there was a smell of a closed room.
And though I have been free ever since
To browse at will through my appetites, lingering
Over one that seemed special, the lamplight
Can never replace the sad light of early morning
Of the day I left, convinced (as indeed I am today)
Of the logic of my search, yet all unprepared
To look into the practical aspects, the whys and wherefores,
And so never know, eventually, whether I have accomplished
My end, or merely returned, another leaf that falls."

(AW 85-86)

39 Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 69.

40 Allen, Whitman Handbook, 209.

41 Keller, Re-Making It New, 25-26.

42 Bloom, Climate, 5.

43 Terence Winch, "Interview: John Ashbery," The Washington Weekly October 8, 1984.

44 An example of Ashbery's preoccupation with "paradox" is the way that he originally considered using Paradoxes and Oxymorons as the title for his book Shadow Train:

INTERVIEWER: Any comment you'd like to make about your most recent volume, Shadow Train? You chose that title, I gather, over an earlier one which you had in mind. You must have had a strong feeling about it.

ASHBERY: I fussed a great deal about the titles in that collection and changed a lot of them several times. I don't know why I did this or whether they were improved by doing so. I liked the idea of "Paradoxes and Oxymorons" as a title for the collection, but it seemed a bit difficult for your average book buyer who goes into a bookstore and says "I'd like that book by John Ashbery . . . What's it called?" It would have been quite a mouthful. I feel that most people don't know what an oxymoron is, and I haven't known too long myself. I like the idea of using the title "Paradoxes and Oxymorons," with the photograph I found that I like very much of the interior of a Viennese house--in a Jugendstil style--which seemed to have overtones of Wittgenstein in it, not only the title but the room itself. As you know, Wittgenstein was an architect in that period and designed at least one very odd-looking house and then, of course, Kafka has a title that's pretty similar--"Paradoxes and Parables" or something like that. Then I figured this middle-Europe thing was all very nice, but it really wasn't what the book was about and I needed something perhaps more general. I finally chose Shadow Train with some reservations. I liked the idea of the poems in the book being like the cars of a train being pulled along through the night, but my reservation was that it seems a little too macabre, which I feel I have already got enough of in my poetry anyway without overdoing it. But at that point I felt I was getting totally led astray by the question of the title and decided, since it was almost time for the book to come out anyway, just to leave that title on.

(American Poetry Review May/June 1984, 33)

45 Allen, Whitman Handbook, 220.

46 Allen, Whitman Handbook, 213.

47 Roy Harvey Pearce, "Whitman Justified: The Poet In 1860," Whitman: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), 44.

48 Allen, Whitman Handbook, 81.

49 D.H. Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), 173.

50 Allen, Whitman Handbook, 213.

51 Keller, Re-Making It New, 28.

52 Joan Richardson, Stevens I, 21.

53 Joan Richardson, Stevens I, 20.

54 Sanford Schwartz, The Matrix of Modernism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 22.

55 Allen, Whitman Handbook, 220.

56 Pearce, "Introduction," Whitman Critical Essays, 1. With respect to Stevens and Ashbery, Lynn Keller argues that their

poetry is a process in a constantly advancing present. . . . Ashbery has found striking ways to embody in his poetic techniques this conviction that, what most closely corresponds to truth can be mirrored only in the motion between one moment of consciousness and the next. (Re-Making It New, 25-26)

57 Feidelson, "Whitman As Symbolist," 88.

58 As Ashbery says in "A Wave," page 83: ". . . and then, self-abandoned, to build ourselves . . ."

59 Feidelson, "Whitman As Symbolist," 81. For Stevens this as a process will contribute to what he will call "The poem of the act of the mind," and the kind of poem he describes as having

To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
Of which, an invisible audience listens,
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
In an emotion as of two people, as of two
Emotions becoming one. The actor is
A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
Beyond which it has no will to rise.

(CP "Of Modern Poetry" 240)

- 60 Feidelson, "Whitman As Symbolist," 81.
- 61 ". . . if the thing sees that you are preoccupied, with even a mere particle of your interest, it shuts itself up again; it may perhaps give you a countersign, it may make a little faintly friendly sign (and even that is a good deal for a human being imprisoned among others obstinately pursuing a meaningless eloquence) but it refuses to give you its heart, to disclose to you its patient being, its sweet sidereal constancy that makes it so like the constellations! If a thing is to speak to you you must regard it for a certain time as the only one that exists, as the one and only phenomenon, which, thanks to your laborious and exclusive love, is now placed at the center of the Universe, and there, in that incomparable place, is this day attended by the Angels." Rainer Maria Rilke, Letter [1920], Letters to Merline, translated by Violet M. MacDonald, London, 1952, pp. 273-5; reprinted in The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature, ed. Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 47.
- 62 Lawrence Kramer, "'Syringa': John Ashbery and Elliott Carter," in Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery, ed. David Lehman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 268, 269.
- 63 Keller, Re-Making It New, 55.
- 64 G. J. Whitrow, What Is Time? (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1972), 14.
- 65 Whitrow, What Is Time? 103.
- 66 Whitrow, What Is Time? 171-172.
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- 69 Feidelson, "Whitman As Symbolist," 81.
- 70 Donoghue, Reading America, 91-93.
- 71 "The Art of Poetry XXXIII: John Ashbery," with Peter Stitt, Paris Review, 90 (1983), 55.
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- 74 Keller, Re-Making It New, 26.
- 75 Blake, The Complete Writings, 161.

76 Richard Poirier, The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 25-26.

77 Bloom, Climate, 152.

78 Bloom, Climate, 387.

79 Bloom, Climate, 12.

80 Bloom, Climate, 22.

81 Poirier, The Renewal of Literature, 92.

82 When Bloom says in Figures of Capable Imagination that it is the Whitman in Stevens that comes through most strongly in Ashbery, what we need to do is follow Gay Wilson Allen's finger as it points to the uninhibited way that Whitman's poetry "indicate[s] the path between reality and the soul." (W:P&P 10) And, of course, the poet is not just indicating but moving along these paths. The metaphysical "voyaging" which Charles Feidelson, Jr., describes as at the core of Whitman's aesthetic is--as Lynn Keller explains--also a prevailing presence in the work of Stevens and Ashbery:

Since both poets paradoxically identify flux as the only constant in the universe, both are intent on being true to ever-changing perceptions rather than trying to establish any fixed truths. Truth, for which they do search, is a relative matter, more locatable in the process of searching than in any point reached. . . . [What is important for Stevens and Ashbery is] the processes of voyaging and returning, of integrating imaginative experience into ordinary experience, and of relating the order established in art to the order or disorder of reality. The structure and style of the poem reflect the complexity and fluidity of these ideas and of the experiences from which they derive.

(Re-Making It New, 26, 30)

83 Feidelson, "Whitman As Symbolist," 88.

84 Poulin, Michigan Quarterly Review 20:3 (Summer 1981), 253.

85 Allen, Whitman Handbook, 209.

86 Keller, Re-Making It New, 26.

87 Poirier, The Renewal of Literature, 149.

88 Gustave Flaubert, Letter to Mlle. Leroyer de Chantepie [1857], Letters, ed. Richard Rumbold and translated from the French by J.M. Cohen, London, 1950, pp. 106-110; reprinted in The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature, ed. Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 71.

CHAPTER IV

Conclusion

You can see John Ashbery's work as part of an American tradition-- but, if left to speak for itself, the poetry would prefer to dismantle the tendency to think in terms of traditions. But then this is exactly what, from the first, America has been all about: the stepping outside of and going just beyond the reach of what had previously been conceived of as prevailing tradition. For the English Puritan of 1632 stepping into a boat headed for the new continent, the experience would be that of a desired physical displacement from outworn traditions and practices. For Emerson two hundred years later the journey was internalized but nonetheless challenging on its own terms: seeing the way that materialism and rationalism were coming to eclipse something he considered much more important, Emerson wrote that "People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them." (RWE "Circles" 413) In the way that within a given poem John Ashbery will change identity with a dizzying speed and frequency, he has made Emerson's "unsettled" the axis around which his poetry revolves. One

way he has done this is to pursue Emerson's dialogue with himself concerning whether the road to spiritual self-empowerment leads through a self-conscious imposition of control over the self or, rather, a conscious abandonment of control--as perverse as the latter may seem. As I discussed with respect to the poem "The Path To The White Moon," Ashbery's choice, like Emerson's, is to abandon control: to allow oneself to become in some essential way "unsettled." Also, as an extension of this abandonment, Ashbery, like Emerson, is an intellectual rhapsodist in the way that he, like Emerson, gives himself over to a spontaneous and inner logic of thought which constantly revitalizes itself as it makes discoveries along the way--ignoring as it goes the attempt of any prevailing rationally-conceived system to tyrannize over the alternate diving and surfacing which Emerson considered inherent to the process of our thought.

To see how this approach can contribute to an evolution of one's sensibility, it is useful to look at what happens to certain characters in a couple late novels by Henry James. In The Ambassadors, for example, Lambert Strether learns to relax rather than exercise control during moments of uncertainty. He learns, in fact, to keep "the sky of life clear" of "the clouds of explanation" and in this way we see him throwing over any preconceived, linear, rational "explanation" he may by habit wish to bring to his experience in favor of a "stitching together" of whatever information his senses provide him--a process which results in a reorganization for him of "the very conditions of perception, [and] the terms of thought." So it is, then, as if James gives us a lesson illustrating Emerson's ideas.

And for Maggie Verver, in The Golden Bowl, it is more a case of revolution than evolution: After she realizes something unusual and destructive is going on in her midst--and after a new emphasis upon the process of thought becomes an active force within the context of her relationships with Adam, Amerigo, and Charlotte--it becomes the way she sees what she sees (her shifting perspective or posture) that becomes central to her expanding awareness. She comes, finally, to place an emphasis not upon what seems to be a flawed objective reality, but upon her own subjective posture. Thus for Maggie the role one's consciousness plays in the complex setting of human relations goes from imagining her relationship to others as an exotic "tower" one cannot enter, to the point where the fixed physical object this "tower" has become--the golden bowl--must be smashed as a means to an all-important reliance upon a sense of one's own flexible mental attitude. Again Emerson is proved to be right.

Lambert and Maggie, given their experiences, are forced to re-think the way they think about their place in the universe--and as we read these novels and watch their thinking reform itself, we witness a concomitant transformation in the shape and texture of James' fiction. In turning away from the conventional narration of events in an objective world, James turned towards and developed in his novels a narrative of thought (which takes a certain impetus from what his brother called the "stream of consciousness"). And in an interesting way (as I mentioned in Chapter II as part of my readings of "Houseboat Days" and "Tapestry") it is almost as if Lambert Strether and Maggie Verver, given their extremely involved reflections, could have written

certain Ashbery poems since not only do Ashbery's concerns extend the same issues James has his characters explore--but also the texture of Ashbery's verse suggests that he is picking up stylistically where James left off. It is as if in Ashbery's poems (again, as in Maggie's and Lambert's thought) the language one uses as the medium for thought comes to be so thoroughly absorbed into the process of thinking that each poem becomes its own consciousness, receiving and expressing sentences in all the different ways a mind registers and becomes intertwined with language. Since Ashbery is indeed, as David Shapiro points out, the "great pluralist,"¹ we see him always absorbing and giving himself over to the myriad shapes taken on by his experience of the language within and all around him; this is why Ashbery often incorporates overheard snippets of conversation, or passages borrowed from popular culture (e.g. cartoon characters like Popeye and Daffy Duck), in his poems.

An example of how this last approach may work--plus some of the others I have mentioned--can be seen in "Down By The Station, Early In The Morning" (AW 14) where a remark someone makes in the course of an otherwise ordinary conversation induces a meditation (of sorts). As the poem opens: To the claim that if we do not agree on what it is then there is nonetheless something somewhere in the universe which is everlasting--the poem's opening sentence responds that no, "It all wears out." What usually "wears out," of course, are "things" like shoes, for instance; however this sentence would seem to implicate a much broader sweep of human experience, including even our ideas and cherished beliefs. Though other similarly cynical openings could be quoted (for example "I could say its the happiest period of my life. / It hasn't got

much competition!"--and "Obviously the guts and beauty are going to be denied again / This time around"), the unusual finality and hopeless tone of such an opening for an Ashbery poem is put in a slightly different light when we learn with the next words that in this dialogue with the self the poem's opening assertion is an idea the speaker has trouble believing but wants to convince himself that he should believe:

It all wears out. I keep telling myself this, but
I can never believe me, though others do. Even things do.
And the things they do.

So which is it: does it all wear out or not? If it does all wear out we would tend to look upon this as bad news--but would it be? Before these questions can be properly addressed, however, we stumble over a disjointedness apparent in the fact that the passage "Even things do" represents a seeming impossibility if "things" is meant to be interchangeable with "others" as among those who "believe me." And as part of any kind of logical progression the passage "And the things they do" adds to our confusion if we are expected to understand these lines as meaning: "I keep telling myself this, but I can never believe me even though not only other people believe me but also objects and the things objects do believe me."

The way to proceed at this point is not to panic but to realize that it is common in an Ashbery poem that a syntactic knot of this sort can only be unraveled after first taking careful note of what the knot looks like and then going through the entire poem to see if its shape is reproduced or extended elsewhere. What we usually want and expect in a situation like this are clues like pieces of a jig-saw puzzle which as

they grow in number and fit together also begin to open out like a vista that reaches into an entirely new dimension; but what we seem to get here is a break-down in the two dimensions we thought we could take for granted--thus our mind is invited to move in a new direction. We are like detectives inspecting the room in a house where a poet has mysteriously disappeared when suddenly we discover (create, really, for ourselves) a bookcase which swings out horizontally to reveal a secret passageway. Ashbery wants us to experience a break-down in the conventional logic which we use to move, intellectually, from one point to another; and if the willingness to experience an intellectual collapse and restructuring of this kind is not or does not become a part of our thought processes, then it will be difficult to continue reading. In a sense "negative capability"--as a way of letting unfamiliar structures reshape the formulas according to which we contemplate this or that dilemma--is a fundamental part of the experience of reading such poetry. If we miss this then we have missed a large part of what is going on in this poem.

Thus it will be only after traveling the entire circuit of the work and collecting evidence along the way (and then letting ourselves relax into the contours of the poem as we find them, no matter how screwball they may seem) that we will be able to look back and begin to see how this particular involution--by acting as a clue and later a confirmation--will have helped to advance the prevailing concerns of the poem. The next three sentences, for example, introduce material which adds to a growing sense of the significance associated with the word "things":

Like the rasp of silk, or a certain

Glottal stop in your voice as you are telling me how you
 Didn't have time to brush your teeth but gargled with Listerine
 Instead. Each is a base one might wish to touch once more

Before dying. There's the moment years ago in the station in Venice,
 The dark rainy afternoon in fourth grade, and the shoes then,
 Made of a dull crinkled brown leather that no longer exists.

In a way "things" now do seem to have taken on a life of their own in these sentences, which in fact suggests that they can either "believe me" when I say "It all wears out"--or not believe me. The paradox is that if they do come alive so as to "believe me" or not, then indeed this must mean that they do not wear out but--quite the opposite--come alive! The life they may (or may not) be seen as taking on is the one they enter into by joining forces with the human mind so as to form a state of consciousness which requires for its existence not only the subjective self but an objective world which can be taken in and experienced: neither, it would seem, can exist without the other.

For example it may be that two people are standing on a platform waiting for the train early in the morning when the first says to the other: "I didn't have time to brush my teeth so I gargled with Listerine"--but what resonates in the second person's mind is not so much the content of these words as the rustle of the other person's clothing and a "glottal stop" in his voice. In this way the sounds a body makes inside its clothing, and those sounds which when taken in as an unbroken series constitute another's voice, are noted and focused upon as the evidence of someone else's physical presence. The sentence "Each is a base one might wish to touch once more before dying" thus could be thought of as suggesting either the need physically to touch another person again (and the accompanying desire to go on hearing the

other's voice)--or "a base" in the sense of a sound incorporated into memory which can be kept alive there and returned to at will. "Touch," in other words, can imply physical contact or a metaphorical usage in the sense that memory may be thought of as the way we "touch" our past experience; this latter reading of "touch" is explored in the next lines:

And nothing does, until you name it, remembering, and even then
 It may not have existed, or existed only as a result
 Of the perceptual dysfunction you've been carrying around for years.

Adjectives like "dark rainy" and "dull crinkled brown" emphasize the role of one's senses as they mediate between our thoughts and the world we reflect upon--whereas the depiction of events taking place "years ago in the station in Venice" as a "moment" evokes the way impressions sometimes become distilled and absorbed into consciousness without there remaining any traces of the original sense experience. The odd part, however--as Ashbery points out--is that whether the awareness of our senses playing an important role is vivid or not, there is no proving that events really happened anyway given that our impression could have been caused by a "perceptual dysfunction." (Or, as Descartes thought it necessary to imagine as an appropriate starting point in his meditation: perhaps "some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me . . . [and] the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgement."²) And as we read in "When The Sun Goes Down" (AW 6), the degree to which we can trust that we are actually part of something going on outside ourselves makes a difference in the meaning we either

do or do not attribute to our experience:

Yet, to be strapped to one's mindset, which seems
 As enormous as a plain, to have to be told
 That its horizons are comically confining,
 And all the sorrow wells from there, like the slanting
 Plume of a waterspout: doesn't it supplant knowledge
 Of the different forms of love, reducing them
 To a white indifferent prism, a roofless love standing open
 To the elements? And some see in this a paradigm of how it rises
 Slowly to the indifferent heavens, all that pale glamour?

But what seems to continue to interest Ashbery most is not just our margin of free will in an otherwise determined and therefore mechanical environment, but specifically the qualities associated with whatever amount of elbow-room we do find inside consciousness. For example in "Down By The Station, Early In The Morning" even though a certain "dull crinkled brown leather . . . no longer exists"--and, in fact, "nothing does," in a sense--there is consolation in the way that certain "things" (and we should remember, by the way, how this word was used in the first three lines of the poem) do exist, and even have a kind of life of their own, when we "name" and "remember" them. To acknowledge this and at the same time the possible "perceptual dysfunction you've been carrying around for years" is also to encounter mixed emotions:

The result is magic, then terror, then pity at the emptiness,
 Then air gradually bathing and filling the emptiness as it leaks,
 Emoting all over something that is probably mere reportage
 But nevertheless likes being emoted on.

So the epistemological question wrestled with in previous lines seems to have established certain boundaries for consciousness within which a sexual-like encounter may take place--as suggested not only in the ultimate release of "magic, then terror, then pity," but also the way that the "air" is "Emoting all over something that . . . likes being

emoted on." "Emptiness" here could imply either spiritual "emptiness" (in the sense that if life has no meaning then it is "empty"³) or "emptiness" in the physical world where, for example, a room could be "empty" and still full of air. In this passage Ashbery, by swiveling from the first of these two possibilities to the second, suggests that a sense of spiritual emptiness may be seen as compensated for simply in our allowing a next breath (as evidence of our own unavoidable physicality) lead outward toward another person's physical presence (even though our link with the outside world may be "mere reportage").

And so each day
Culminates in merriment as well as a deep shock like an electric one,

As the wrecking ball bursts through the wall with the bookshelves
Scattering the works of famous authors as well as those
Of more obscure ones, and books with no author, letting in
Space, and an extraneous babble from the street
Confirming the new value the hollow core has again, the light
From the lighthouse that protects as it pushes us away.

That the day "Culminates in merriment" suggests that the meeting "early in the morning" has indeed ended with a sexual as well as a metaphysical coming together. "The works of famous authors as well as those / Of more obscure ones, and books with no author" suggests a vision of the mind related to Stevens' when he pointed out that "When the mind is like a hall in which thought is like a voice speaking, the voice is always that of someone else" (OP 168)--only in Ashbery's poem the voices are replaced by books suggesting our tendency to give an order to ideas corresponding to the orderly arrangement of books on shelves. That some books have "no author" implies a faith in the way at least part of who we become, ultimately (and inevitably), is derived from the randomness and absurdity of our experience--the way that, to some extent at least,

who we are is plucked out of "the extraneous babble from the street."

That the "wrecking ball" lets in "space" suggests that it isn't any sort of enlightenment we should expect, but simply psychological room within which to go on moving. "The light / From the lighthouse" implies that the call heard and responded to in sounds "Like the rasp of silk, or a certain / Glottal stop" in someone's voice, has for us an irresistible resonance all its own; but given doubts about whether anything in the objective world really "exists" or not, it "pushes us away" and back into our own thoughts and feelings at the same time that it draws us near and "protects" us from feeling hopelessly cut off from others. Thus "Down By The Station, Early In The Morning" seems to walk a fine line between, on the one hand, consolation found in some assurance that someone or something exists outside ourselves--and, on the other hand, the recognition that we really only know our own thoughts and feelings which may, ultimately, exist at a point completely remote from any popularly conceived sense of a world "out there." The "core" is "hollow" because it is necessary to the inherent character of consciousness that it keep itself "hollow" since the nature of experience is constantly to revitalize itself; even though indeed "It all wears out," the point is that this does not matter since the very next moment "the rasp of silk" interacts with us and we with it--although, as with everything, on a temporary basis. Like high-wire acrobats we are always letting go of one swing with this hand and grasping a second one with the other--and the fact that the second swing is always there at the right moment and that we do connect with it induces "the magic, then terror, then pity at the emptiness."⁴

This vision of human consciousness is also essential to our understanding of Whitman--particularly in "Song of Myself" where each succeeding experience he describes is like Ashbery's "wrecking ball" as it breaks through a preceding experience to both make way for itself and illustrate the way that it also will yield when a next one comes crashing through it, without there ever being in Whitman's mind any cause for alarm over this process. (Just as, over the years, each succeeding edition of Leaves of Grass--through seven editions--will replace its predecessor.) Similarly, in The Golden Bowl not only does James' thought use language to constantly disappear into itself and resurface at a new point--but also Maggie Verver sees her world (like the golden bowl itself) go smash right before her eyes, only to learn how to rebuild it herself along new lines. And equally, it is this description of the place of human consciousness in the scheme of things to which Stevens refers when in "The Noble Rider and The Sound of Words" he says

It is one of the peculiarities of the imagination that it is always at the end of an era. What happens is that it is always attaching itself to a new reality and adhering to it. (NA 22)

It is important, ultimately, to recognize how Ashbery, like Emerson, Whitman, James, and Stevens, experiments with the relationship between states of consciousness and the ability of literature to register and communicate a shifting sense of the boundaries separating one's ongoing thought, a text, and some sense of a larger universe beyond the self. Each of these writers, in his own way, invites the reader to leave behind certain habits of mind and involve himself in a meditation which begins with the premise that human consciousness is

analagous not so much to material reality but to the infusion of energy which Einstein describes as the primary constituent element of the universe. This new approach suggests that to see the world as essentially dualistic is to see a kind of metaphysical "closure" built into and reflected by all experience; but if we at a later point realize that this dualism and its implied closure is--as Einstein helps us to understand--a fiction which we have been believing for far too long, then myriad boundaries collapse and experience becomes fluid. Thus when reading Ashbery's poetry it is necessary to accept an aesthetic counterpart to the Einsteinian and quantum mechanical visions so that previously cherished distinctions between me, you, and her; between our physical, emotional, and intellectual selves; and between subject and object no longer apply. Any attempt to meet Ashbery's poetry on its own terms must accept as its starting point this revised understanding of the way our minds work.

In a recently published book, Roger Penrose, a British mathematician and physicist, suggests that as with time and space (and energy and matter) human consciousness and the events it considers to be happening outside itself (in the so-called "real" world) represent not distinct and separate categories but points along a continuum:

. . . the reality of the physical world itself seems more nebulous than it had seemed to be before the advent of the . . . theories of relativity and quantum mechanics. The very precision of these theories has provided an almost abstract mathematical existence for actual physical reality. Is this in any way a paradox? How can concrete reality become abstract and mathematical? This is perhaps the other side of the coin to the question of how abstract mathematical concepts can achieve an almost concrete reality in Plato's world. Perhaps, in some sense, the two worlds are actually the same?⁵

One implication of such an approach is that there are no boundaries setting consciousness apart from the environment through which it moves. When Bloom writes that it is the Whitman in Stevens that comes through most strongly in Ashbery, he wants us to look at the way Stevens sets aside the concern he shares with Emerson involving a felt conflict between reality and the imagination, and emphasize that part of Stevens which, like Whitman, allows him to be completely given over to observing the ongoing processes which constitute experience without making moral distinctions concerning their various elements. The important point to consider, of course, is that for Whitman, as with Ashbery, the concern is not, given the fact that matter and spirit represent separate realities, how can I move myself away from the one and toward the other-- rather the issue is given the fact that matter and the soul are bound up intimately one with the other in a unified form of consciousness, how can I give myself more fully to the experience. It was Whitman who first had the unique ability to relax and flow without hesitation into some always advancing version of his own identity, so that the processes of his mind--his perceptions and his involvement with these perceptions-- came to be an integral part of his poems; thus the emphasis upon a mind's ongoing processes, as embodied within the very texture of a poem's language, constitutes the fundamental element pervading the best poetry of Whitman, Stevens, and Ashbery.

In acknowledging, ultimately, that Ashbery is a post-Einsteinian transcendentalist, we must recognize what his poetry argues for, which is that we are our language and swim around in it as one would swim in an ocean; Ashbery is completely given over to the energy of his language

as it comes to abandon more fully than Emerson, Whitman, James or Stevens could some matter-bound sense of references beyond language. Thus for Ashbery's readers, discovering the ongoing processes which constitute what he refers to as "the movement of experiencing" will require that we re-situate ourselves inside our own thought. And as I mentioned in my introduction, Ashbery moves out ahead of us in this process, inviting us to keep up. Ashbery is always unwriting at the same time that he is writing himself: his text is the trail left by the ongoing negotiation with a no longer viable version of the self; in other words each moment in an Ashbery text is the trace left by his surfacing out of who he used to be into a next moment. A corollary is the way the Ashbery poem implicates readers intimately into its operations by requiring, for example, that we learn to abandon a habit of mind accustomed to following the logical development of an idea--and adapt ourselves to the alternate surfacing and diving of Ashbery's mind as it resumes or abandons a word, phrase, idea, or image: in the process we, too, learn to dive and re-surface. Ashbery's poems are meditations which the reader uses to exercise his or her consciousness while at the same time seeing described the process in which one participates. It must be this way since

By so many systems
 As we are involved in, by just so many
 Are we set free on an ocean of language that comes to be
 Part of us, as though we would ever get away.

(AW 71)

NOTES

¹ "Ashbery's work is a relentless tirade against systematics. For this reason, he is neither pure nor impure, neither art-for-art's-sake nor vulgarly mimetic. He is the great pluralist and combines pop art figuration with abstract expressionist dissolution. His poetry is a reconciliation, at its best, between the human subject and the inhuman workings of arbitrariness, between the fact of value and the value of fact. In a world too dominated by the psychological language of norms versus neuroses, Ashbery accepts the anomalous in himself and in language. He has made both his unhappiness and his ecstasy courageous topics in a world of topics. Unlike Stevens' lunatic of one idea, he is in love with permission and the earth and the earthiness of language and its unearthly arbitrariness." David Shapiro, John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 11-12.

² Rene Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy" in The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume I, trans. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 15.

³ "I been thinking," she [Mrs. Flood, the landlady] went on, watching him [Hazel Motes] as he went on with what he was doing, "and I see there's only one thing for you and me to do. Get married. I wouldn't do it under any ordinary condition but I would do it for a blind man and a sick one. If we don't help each other, Mr. Motes, there's nobody to help us," she said. "Nobody. The world is a empty place." Flannery O'Connor, Wise Blood (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1949), 227.

⁴ There are a couple points one should keep in mind which do not fit with my metaphor: There is not just one swing to grab onto but many; and it is often a matter of chance which one we grasp. William James is our best guide at this juncture: Consider for example the following from his "World of Pure Experience," (in Essays in Radical Empiricism [and] A Pluralistic Universe, Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1967), page 67:

As each experience runs by cognitive transition into the next one, and we nowhere feel a collision with what we elsewhere count as truth or fact, we commit ourselves to the current as if the port were sure. We live, as it were, upon the front edge of an advancing wave-crest, and our sense of a determinate direction in falling forward is all we cover of the future of our path.

Or this from A Pluralistic Universe, pages 283 and 289-290:

The rush of our thought forward through its fringes is the everlasting peculiarity of its life. We realize that life as something that shoots out of a darkness through a dawn into a brightness that we feel to be the dawn fulfilled. In the very midst of the continuity our experience comes as an alteration. . . .

.
Every bit of us at every moment is part and parcel of a wider self, it quivers along various radii like the wind-rose on a compass, and the actual in it is continuously one with possibles not yet in our present sight.

⁵ Roger Penrose, The Emperor's New Mind (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 430.

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