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**Meaningless or Meaningful as Architecture
The Built Environment in the Poetry of John Ashbery**

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**Meaningless or Meaningful as Architecture:
The Built Environment in the Poetry of John Ashbery**

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Thesis Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

20th December 2021

To Dr Alan Marshall, who went above and beyond in supervising this thesis.

Abstract:

This thesis examines the built environment in the work of John Ashbery, investigating the wide-ranging and multi-faceted role of space and place in his writings. With this purpose in mind, the analysis considers the poet's writings in relation to a variety of theories and intellectual disciplines, all of which are concerned with different aspects of the built environment. These include American architectural history (Lewis Mumford), urban theory and planning (Rem Koolhaas, Jan Gehl), and Phenomenology (Gaston Bachelard) as well as literary criticism. The analysis is equally concerned, however, to show that architectural imagery and ideas and metaphors of space and place repeatedly serve an emblematic or meta-poetic function in Ashbery's writings, through which he develops and expresses many of the major, sometimes more metaphysical themes traditionally associated with his poetry.

Ashbery uses the built environment, I argue, as a means to explore more abstract ideas of time, identity, art and culture in a profound imaginative responsiveness to the man-made world, combining literal and figurative apprehensions of space. The thesis argues that by attending to the centrality of space in Ashbery's poetry we can also establish an entry-point through which to approach his work as a whole. Although it focuses predominantly on Ashbery's poetry, it also takes into account other aspects of his oeuvre, including his criticism, prose, essays and collages.

The thesis is divided into two parts, each consisting of three chapters which have been grouped together according to theme and the overarching genre of space under consideration. Part one covers chapters exploring aspects of the metropolitan built environment in the poet's work, whilst part two focuses on Ashbery's portrayal of domestic, residential, or private space. Chapter one explores Ashbery's characterisation of cities and cityscapes through the lens of a single poem, "Grand Galop" from *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975). Chapter two focuses on Ashbery's depiction of skyscrapers, towers and tall buildings in order to

consider how the poet portrays the giants of the urban built environment as dual emblems of the temporal and the spiritual. Chapter three investigates Ashbery's cityscapes from street-level, considering Ashbery's "Litany" (*As We Know*, 1979), through the imagery of streets, sidewalks and related concepts of public space and place. Chapter four examines Ashbery's depiction of the house or home, exploring the link between Ashbery's real-life experience of home and the house as a poetic construct, to suggest how houses may serve as unique emblems of autobiography in his poetry. Chapter five investigates Ashbery's portrayal of hotels and apartments in relation to ideas of community, commonality and identity, suggesting how Ashbery approaches the impact of mass or "multi-unit" accommodation on the individual occupant. Finally, chapter six explores Ashbery's depiction of suburbia to suggest how the poet frames suburban space to address themes of centre and periphery, both spatial and cultural.

This thesis has been prepared with reference to *The Chicago Manual of Style* (17th ed.), USA: U of Chicago P, 2017.

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0. Introduction: “Thoughts on construction”.

Speaking on the topic of “poetic space in contemporary painting” during a 1989 lecture in Tokyo, John Ashbery summed up the “all-consuming but seemingly impossible-to-satisfy” impulse which he viewed to be “the primal concern” of art as a whole: the “desire to communicate a sense of space”.¹ “In my life”, the poet continued, “poetry followed painting”, and “what strikes us all immediately in painting is space”, “or rather the illusion of space” and what it attempts to communicate.² The relationship between art and poetry in Ashbery’s work has been covered exhaustively by critics. However, just as there is a natural analogy between “spaces in painting” and “spaces in poetry”,³ Ashbery suggested that, when it comes to “observations on the character of space”, “poetry has to ballast itself using the discoveries the artists have made”.⁴ Seeking a model for a more “poetical space”, the poet draws on the work of the Italian modernist artist, Giorgio di Chirico, whose painting *The Double Dream of Spring* (1915) inspired the title of Ashbery’s 1970 book of the same name.⁵ In considering di Chirico’s artwork and Ashbery’s poetry collection together, David Herd writes that, for Ashbery, the allusion “rests on the artist’s handling of space”.⁶ If we are looking to characterise “the basic topography of an Ashbery poem”, the critic indicates, then the poems contained within *The Double Dream of Spring* would therefore seem to be a natural place to start, with Herd’s study drawing particular attention to “The Bungalows”:

They are the same aren’t they,

¹ John Ashbery, “Poetical Space”, *Selected Prose*, ed. Eugene Richie (USA: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 212. (Hereafter cited as *SP*).

² Ashbery, “Poetical”, 215; 215; 212; 212,

³ Scott Krane, *Like Clocks Out of Control* (Unknown: Createspace Independent Pub, 2013), 19.

⁴ Ashbery, “Poetical”, 212.

⁵ Ashbery, “Poetical”, 212.

⁶ David Herd, “John Ashbery’s Humane Abstractions”, *Cordite Poetry Review* (2018), available at *Kent Academic Repository*: kar.kent.ac.uk/66802/ (Accessed 02/11/2021), 13.

The presumed landscape and the dream of home
Because the people are all homesick today or desperately sleeping,
Trying to remember how those rectangular shapes
Became so extraneous and so near
To create a foreground of quiet knowledge⁷

This, Herd writes, is “what space is like in Ashbery”: a terrain of shifting perspectives and “unexplained [...] human constructions”, which linger just far enough away to offer us no comfort within this uncertain landscape, yet are too “near” to free us from our “knowledge” of their existence.⁸ Herd attributes this topography to Ashbery’s habit of “locating poetry in environments where it is likely to be met with resistance”, resulting in “poetry which is sieve like (not spongelike) in its relation to its environment”.⁹ In such a context, space and place could serve as “obstacles” to poetic expression, through which the poet may “raise doubts about the value of the act of writing poetry”, or at the very least what that “poetry ought to be about”.¹⁰ However, as the poem nears its conclusion, Ashbery’s speaker moves away from surveying this “presumed landscape” in favour of contemplating their own “thoughts on construction”.¹¹

For it all builds up into something, meaningless or meaningful
As architecture, because planned and then abandoned when completed,
To live afterwards, in sunlight and shadow, a certain amount of years.
Who cares about what was there before? There is no going back,

⁷ John Ashbery, “The Bungalows”, *Collected Poems, 1956-1987*, ed. Mark Ford (UK: Carcanet, 2001), 223-224. (Hereafter cited as *CP*).

⁸ Herd, “John Ashbery’s”, 15; 14; 14.

⁹ David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (UK: Manchester UP, 2009), 118; 116.

¹⁰ Herd, *John Ashbery*, 118; 118; 116.

¹¹ Ashbery, “Bungalows”, 224.

For standing still means death, and life is moving on.¹²

Architecture, the poet suggests, is semiotic, serving as a concrete repository for a more abstract significance. Yet, as a simile for that which may be either “meaningful” or “meaningless”, Ashbery’s imagery of “construction” moves beyond reflecting the simple capacity for “spaces to generate meaning”, standing as a metaphor not only for the ways in which humanity seeks to establish significance and signification, but also the more abstract nature of meaning itself.¹³

0.1. Ashbery’s architecture.

Approaching the landscape of “The Bungalows” as a blend of “architectural oeuvre” and “cultural milieu”, Jo Gill suggests that the poem demonstrates that “Ashbery is sensitive to the built environment”, even (or perhaps especially) when that environment “defies straightforward categorization”.¹⁴ This indicates that his “work is receptive to the intangibility of place and to the contingency of subjectivity”, something which the critic attributes to Ashbery’s experience “as a curator and art critic” from the 1950s to the 1980s.¹⁵ Ashbery’s architecture criticism and the role it plays within my analysis will be discussed below. However, much as “The Bungalows” encourages us to explore the poet’s “thoughts on construction”, Ashbery’s architectural writings feasibly offer a starting point for considering his poetry in a spatial theory context. A key example in this regard is an article the poet wrote on a 1979 exhibition of drawings by the Italian architect Aldo Rossi at New York’s Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies, in which Ashbery not only compared the acts of artistic

¹² Ashbery, “Bungalows”, 225-226.

¹³ Jo Gill, *The Poetics of the American Suburbs* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 116.

¹⁴ Gill, *Poetics*, 115.

¹⁵ Gill, *Poetics*, 115.

and architectural creation but sought to question the relationship between the two. Citing the architect Peter Eisenmann's assertion that Rossi's drawings are not "metaphors 'of' architecture, they are architecture, they do not demand to be built", Ashbery transitioned into a more conjectural consideration on the nature of architecture as "a concept", one which he suggested was grounded in "abstract feelings" as much as "concrete".¹⁶ "If drawings can be equated with architecture", he wrote, "then architecture itself must be something quite different from what we commonly take it to be".¹⁷ Specifically, it must be as much "imaginary proposition" as it is tangible "reality", capable of existing in states "both physical and metaphysical" or, to use the terminology of the built environment, "built and unbuilt".¹⁸

All architecture, Ashbery suggests, exists in dual terms, with the built environment serving as a "physical plant" to which more abstract "concepts" of space and place are tethered.¹⁹ Yet whilst "never completely visible or measurable" in its influence, this "unbuilt" aspect has "a function no less important than what is actually there".²⁰ In order to gain a true "perspective" on our surroundings, we must bridge the gap between "the idea [of] architecture" and its brick and mortar reality, approaching the built environment as something which must equally be "perceived by the mind" as it is "conceived by the eye".²¹ The conceptual aspect of architecture was not a new idea for Ashbery, who had previously explored the relationship between "visionary or 'paper'" buildings and "built architecture" in "Visionary Drawings of Architecture and Planning" (1979).²² Contrasting the architect's vision with that of the artist, Ashbery found little to differentiate the two. Instead, he suggested that whilst "the talent for depicting their visions [perhaps] comes [more] naturally

¹⁶ John Ashbery, "Aldo Rossi", in *RS*, 344; 365; 366; 366.

¹⁷ Ashbery, "Aldo Rossi", 334.

¹⁸ Ashbery, "Aldo Rossi", 335.

¹⁹ Ashbery, "Aldo Rossi", 335.

²⁰ Ashbery, "Aldo Rossi", 335.

²¹ Ashbery, "Aldo Rossi", 336; 336; 335; 335.

²² John Ashbery, "Visionary Drawings of Architecture and Planning", *RS*, 331; 332.

to architects”, both figures balance reality and fantasy, or the possible and the impossible, to create a “record of a moment” in time, which may serve as a reflection of “the world and our lives”.²³ Both “branches of the arts” rely on “their own notion of monumentality” and therefore, much like the built environment itself, are frequently subject to “misuse or misunderstanding”.²⁴ As such, the poet suggested, architecture could be equally “construe[d] [or] misread as art” or vice versa.²⁵

In the most fundamental sense, Ashbery concluded, all “architecture is ‘construction’, and construction itself is a broad heading that covers many kinds of activity”.²⁶ Just as poets or artists could be categorised as “architects who never built a building”, a “poem” or work of “art” may constitute architecture, even if it cannot “conceivably be built”.²⁷ Given that it draws on the idea of “construction” as the simple “putting together of parts”, Ashbery’s definition of architecture bridges the gap between the “action of [...] building” and that of a more “mental building up”, being applicable both to a “formation of the mind” and to a physical structure.²⁸ It blurs the line between not only what the poet terms “activity” and “object” (or the act of constructing and that which is actually being constructed) but between where art ends and architecture begins.²⁹ “Construction might be cinema”, Ashbery writes, or, “literature”, or the “development of an idea”.³⁰ Alternatively, and perhaps particularly poignantly in the context of both “The Bungalows” and my analysis as a whole, construction may refer to the processes through which one seeks to establish “meaning”, specifically through the “analysing”, “explaining, or interpreting of a text or

²³ Ashbery, “Visionary”, 321; 322; 322.

²⁴ Ashbery, “Aldo Rossi”, 335.

²⁵ Ashbery, “Visionary”, 332.

²⁶ Ashbery, “Aldo Rossi”, 334.

²⁷ Ashbery, “Visionary”, 332; 332; 332; 333.

²⁸ “construction”, n. 1-2, *OED Online* (October 2021) Oxford UP, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/39899?redirectedFrom=construction#eid> (Accessed 03/11/2021) (Hereafter cited as *OED*).

²⁹ Ashbery, “Aldo Rossi”, 335.

³⁰ Ashbery, “Aldo Rossi”, 335.

statement”.³¹ In exploring the poet’s “thoughts on construction”, the present thesis could be construed as an act of construction in and of itself: a piecing together of parts or “building up of materials”, presented in an effort to explore potential meaning, or, indeed, “meaninglessness”.³² Regardless of how we choose to “interpret” it, Ashbery frames construction not just as an effective “model for the architect’s activity” but for the “poet’s”, too, for just as a poem may constitute architecture, construction is perhaps best understood as “somewhat like the act of writing”.³³ This recalls Ashbery’s “Syringa” from *Houseboat Days* (1977), in which the imagery of construction serves as a metaphor for the “invention and reinvention of the poet and poetry”.³⁴

The singer thinks

Constructively, builds up his chant in progressive stages

Like a skyscraper³⁵

Orpheus, the legendary poet and musician, is depicted as a builder who “Rends/ Rocks into fissures” with the power of his art.³⁶ He “builds up” the layers of his “song” or “poem” just as he “builds up” the “skyscraper” itself, the two becoming interwoven until they are inseparable: a single act of construction.³⁷ In the same way that a poem may be an act of architecture, so too architecture is a form of poetry, with Donald Revell stating that such structures became a symbol of “the medium of poetry” or “poetics” in the sense of a “poet’s concept of how poems are made”.³⁸ Ashbery’s construction therefore not only represents the

³¹ “construction”, n. 7, *OED*.

³² “construction”, n. 2.b, *OED*.

³³ Ashbery, “Aldo Rossi”, 335; 335; 336; 335.

³⁴ James McCorkle, *The Still Performance* (Charlottesville: U Virginia P, 1989), 81-82.

³⁵ John Ashbery, “Syringa”, *CP*, 536.

³⁶ Ashbery, “Syringa”, 534.

³⁷ Ashbery, “Syringa”, 536.

³⁸ Donald Revell, “Purists Will Object: Some Meditations on Influence,” in *The Tribe of John*, ed. Susan Schultz (Tuscaloosa: U Alabama P, 1995), 97-98.

“subject” or “Material for a poem” but is made of the materials of a poem itself:

“language”.³⁹

Poet and architect, Ashbery indicated, are closer roles than we have previously imagined, to the extent that the poet once stated that he liked “poems you can tack all over with a hammer”, feeling out a text’s “hollow places” the way one would test a piece of stone.⁴⁰ To this end, he routinely referred to his poetic process as a form of linguistic de- and re-construction, through which he experimented with “taking language apart so [he] could look at the pieces that made it up”, before “putting it back together again”⁴¹ so that it “would be ‘the same only different’”.⁴² During his 2003 interview with Ashbery, Mark Ford described the poet’s method of composition as akin to an “improvisational” form of “building”, as though Ashbery was engaged in “putting together a poem with bits and pieces that happen to be lying around”.⁴³ Ashbery’s response drew on the writings of the 20th-century French anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, who used the language of “the building trades” as a metaphor for patterns of thought in *The Savage Mind*.⁴⁴ As Ashbery explained to Ford, “I’m certainly one of the *bricoleurs*, someone who patches things together”,⁴⁵ alluding to Lévi-Strauss’ concept of “intellectual *bricolage*”: a mental process similar to the “technique of construction”, whereby a person “builds structures by putting [things] together”.⁴⁶ Much as “The Bungalows” frames architecture as alternately meaningful and

³⁹ Ashbery, “Syringa”, 536.

⁴⁰ John Ashbery, quoted in Pritha Paul, “John Ashbery: Pulitzer Prize Winning Poet Dies At 90”, *International Business Times* (09/03/17), <http://www.ibtimes.com/john-ashbery-quotes-pulitzer-prize-winning-poet-dies-90-2585826> (accessed 09/09/2017).

⁴¹ John Tranter, “John Ashbery in Conversation with John Tranter”, *Jacket2* (May 1988), <http://jacketmagazine.com/02/jaiv1988.html> (Accessed 12/10/2021).

⁴² Rich Kelly, “Library of America Interviews: John Ashbery”, *Library of America e-Newsletter* (2008), https://loa-shared.s3.amazonaws.com/static/pdf/LOA_Ashbery_interview_on_Collected_Poems.pdf (Accessed 02/10/2021).

⁴³ Mark Ford, *John Ashbery in Conversation*, (UK: Between the Lines, 2003), 66.

⁴⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Wild Thought: A New Translation of La Pensée Sauvage*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and John Leavitt (USA: U of Chicago P, 2021), 21.

⁴⁵ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 66.

⁴⁶ Lévi-Strauss, *Wild*, 20; 30; 25.

meaningless, the “bricoleur” “understands meaning not as something eternal and immutable, but as something provisional, something shifting”, whereby “whatever is at hand” is repurposed and “recombin[ed] to create something new”.⁴⁷ Poetry and architecture, Ashbery suggests, are “merely” alternative “techniques” employed in the same process.⁴⁸ Consequently, both should be viewed as just different “ways of doing *something*: none is more valid than the other”.⁴⁹

0.2. “The architecture of the argument”:

This thesis examines the built environment in Ashbery’s work, investigating the wide-ranging and multi-faceted role of space and place in his writings. Just as he describes the built environment as the “concrete basis [for] the partly imaginary proposition that all architecture is”, so my analysis investigates how the poet’s portrayal of the built environment serves as an anchor for many of the major, often more metaphysical themes traditionally associated with his poetry.⁵⁰ Although I focus predominantly on Ashbery’s poetry, my analysis takes other aspects of his oeuvre into account, including his criticism, prose, essays and collages. It explores potential connections between his use of architectural imagery and his wider perception of space and place. In taking this approach, my aim is not only to demonstrate the central role which the built environment and associated concepts of space and place play in Ashbery’s work, but also to consider, within a precise philosophical and critical context, a figure who is often viewed to be amongst the most “difficult” or outright “impenetrable” of

⁴⁷ Nasrullah Mambrol, “Claude Levi Strauss’ concept of Bricolage”, *Literariness* (21/03/2016), <https://literariness.org/2016/03/21/claude-levi-strauss-concept-of-bricolage/> (Accessed 04/11/2021).

⁴⁸ Ashbery, “Aldo Rossi”, 335.

⁴⁹ Ashbery, “Aldo Rossi”, 335.

⁵⁰ Ashbery, “Aldo Rossi”, 336.

contemporary American poets.⁵¹ To this end, I explore Ashbery's writings within an overarching framework of architectural and spatial theory which is outlined later in this section, together with a variety of related theories and intellectual disciplines, all of which are concerned with different aspects of the built environment. Ashbery's architectural imagery, I argue, repeatedly serves an emblematic or metapoetic function in his writings, through which he merges not just literal and figurative concepts of place and space, but more abstract ideas of time, identity, art, and culture. In doing so, I suggest how, by focusing on the centrality of space, place and the built environment in Ashbery's poetry, we may also establish an entry-point through which to approach his work as a whole.

0.2.1. The art reviews.

As David Bergman writes in his introduction to Ashbery's selected "art chronicles", the poet routinely wrote pieces on "architecture and environments" during his time as an art critic, with Bergman listing both "architecture" and "building" amongst "the wide range of Ashbery's interests", both critical and poetic.⁵² Though he "wrote not as an expert but as an informed observer", Ashbery's eclectic publishing record on this topic ranges from a retrospective on the renowned American architect Frank Lloyd Wright to a feature story on the architectural curiosities of California's Winchester Mystery House.⁵³ In his writings "concerned with building", Ashbery repeatedly characterises the built environment as "central to our understanding of American art and culture".⁵⁴ After all, as the poet writes, "although all artists are visionaries in some sense, architects are perhaps the most radically

⁵¹ Richard Kostelanetz, "How to be a difficult poet", *The New York Times* (23/05/1976), <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/05/23/archives/how-to-be-a-difficult-poet-john-ashbery-has-won-major-prizes-and.html?auth=login-google1tap&login=google1tap> (Accessed 21/11/2021).

⁵² David Bergman, "Introduction", 319; xxii; quote from blurb.

⁵³ Bergman, "Introduction", xiii.

⁵⁴ Bergman, "Introduction", xxi; xxii.

visionary, since their aim is to alter the world and our lives”.⁵⁵ In this respect, Ashbery uses his architectural criticism to reflect on the “substantial legacy” of what he terms “realized” or “built architecture”, namely the “skyscrapers”, “streets” and myriad other concrete constructions which make up the real-world built environment.⁵⁶ However, his articles also gave voice to a more abstracted, philosophical understanding of space and place as a potential vehicle for meditation, speculation and re-evaluation.

Although Ashbery’s architecture writings have often been overlooked by critics, his partner David Kermani argues that the “art reviews [...] were actually a key to understanding the poetry, because although Ashbery always refused to explain his poems, many of the things he said about other people’s work could be applied to his own”.⁵⁷ The reviews served as a “halfway point between the visual and the linguistic”, or the abstract and the concrete, with Ashbery using his criticism as a “place to explore ideas that make their way into the poems”.⁵⁸ Since Kermani suggests that Ashbery’s reviews may help the reader “understand the poetry better”, the poet’s critical writings have been a key source for this thesis, one which I have routinely drawn on to foster “connections” between his use of architectural imagery and his wider understanding of space and place.⁵⁹

0.2.2. Methodology and Spatial Theory.

Just as Ashbery viewed architecture to be “both physical and metaphysical”, “built and unbuilt”, I have approached his portrayal of the built environment in similar terms. To this end, my analysis considers Ashbery’s work in relation to a number of different critical

⁵⁵ Ashbery, “Visionary”, 332.

⁵⁶ Ashbery, “Visionary”, 332.

⁵⁷ Larissa MacFarquhar, “Becoming John Ashbery” *The New Yorker* (31/10/2005) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/11/07/present-waking-life> (Accessed 10/03/2020).

⁵⁸ Bergman, “Introduction”, xii.

⁵⁹ MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

disciplines and theories of space and place, combining aspects of spatial theory, architectural history, and literary criticism. Relevant critical context is provided in the opening section of each chapter, in which I outline my specific strategy for considering Ashbery's treatment of the form of space in question and my rationale for doing so. Broadly speaking, my methodology for exploring Ashbery's poetry in the context of spatial theory can be outlined according to two main theoretical frameworks.

The first of these frameworks encompasses more philosophical, psychological and, in particular, phenomenological readings of space and the built environment, informed by the work of key thinkers on space and place including Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Christian Norberg-Schulz and, especially, Gaston Bachelard. Phenomenology refers to "a philosophy of experience" which first came to prominence in the first half of the 20th-century through proponents such as the German philosopher Martin Heidegger.⁶⁰ Primarily concerned with examining structures of experience, perception, and consciousness, it outlines a method of thought which seeks to establish "meaning" through the "lived world", approaching the physical realm of objects and subjective, sensory experience as a "foundation on which philosophers could ground their knowledge".⁶¹ Just as phenomenology advocated for a "return to the study of things", Bachelard's seminal work, *The Poetics of Space* (1958), advocated for a more phenomenological, experientially based approach to architecture, applying philosophical concepts of perception and experience to the study of space and place.⁶² "Experienced" space, Bachelard argues, "transcends geometrical space", with the built environment having a "double life", architectural and emotional.⁶³ In turn, although

⁶⁰ Paul Armstrong, "Phenomenology", in *John Hopkins Guide for Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Michael Groden et al. (2005), available at *Brown University, Juokowsky Institute Online*, https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Juokowsky_Institute/courses/architecturebodyperformance/1065.html (Accessed 15/11/2021).

⁶¹ Armstrong, "Phenomenology".

⁶² David Woodruff-Smith, "Phenomenology", in *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta (2018) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology/> (Accessed 12/05/18).

⁶³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (USA: Beacon Press, 1994), vii.

Bachelard's theories are often considered in relation to architecture and material space, his work looked beyond the real-life built environment to consider the depiction of space in literature and poetry, drawing parallels between the structures of our imagination and those we build and inhabit. There is, however, an additional rationale for considering Ashbery's poetry specifically through such a "phenomenological eye".⁶⁴ Having "owned [*The Poetics of Space*] since it was published", Ashbery voiced his interest in both phenomenology and Bachelard's work in his 1989 lecture "Poetical Space", something which Karin Roffman indicates may seem unusual considering the apparent "abstraction from experience" which she suggests characterises his depiction of space and place.⁶⁵ Like the architect and the artist before him, Ashbery suggested, the poet has to reconceptualise "received notions of what space actually looks like [...] in order to express something, a feeling [or] idea".⁶⁶

The second framework incorporates the more practical side of construction, addressing the built environment in relation to concepts of urban planning, urban theory, and architectural design. This approach is based on less figurative notions of space and place, incorporating sociological and historical studies of the built environment by writers such as Jane Jacobs and Lewis Mumford alongside the work of notable architects and urban theorists including Jan Gehl and Rem Koolhaas. Urban planning, architectural design and associated fields often encompass what Gehl terms the "human dimension" of the built environment, in the sense that they explore connections between the layout of a given space and concepts of human behaviour.⁶⁷ In *Urban Planning Theory since 1945*, Nigel Taylor describes these disciplines as representing a "physicalist' conception" of architecture, given that they are primarily "concerned with the 'physical environment' [...] buildings, roads, land, etc (i.e.

⁶⁴ Roger Shattuck, "Reviewed: 'Houseboat Days' by John Ashbery", *The New York Review of Books* (23/03/1978), <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1978/03/23/poet-in-the-wings/> (Accessed 12/11/2021).

⁶⁵ Karin Roffman, "John Ashbery's Houses", *Raritan* (Summer 2012), 158.

⁶⁶ Ashbery, "Poetical", 212.

⁶⁷ Jan Gehl, *Cities for People* (USA: Island Press, 2010), 3.

with physical *objects*)” rather than more psychological aspects of space and place.⁶⁸

Consequently, this aspect of my analysis encompasses what Ashbery refers to as the “built” or “concrete basis” upon which abstract understandings of space are founded, much as Jacobs differentiates between theoretical concepts of architecture and her own intention of “writing about how cities work in real life”.⁶⁹

As previously explored, the poet repeatedly differentiated, in his critical writings, between the “idea of [...] architecture”⁷⁰ and the physical reality, with even the “unbuilt” dimensions of the built environment remaining tethered to the “stone and masonry”⁷¹ of its constructions. In a similar fashion, I seek to build a bridge between what Ashbery terms the “metaphysical” and “physical” aspects of architecture, combining theoretical and practical understandings of space, place, and the built environment in order to provide a comprehensive reading of Ashbery’s spatial poetics. Whilst my choice of which genres of space to focus on was informed by spatial theory, it was primarily led by the major forms of architectural imagery which I found to be recurrent in Ashbery’s work, or which served an important function in his portrayals of the built environment. To this end, I focused my chapters around broad, concrete categories of architectural space rather than more abstract concepts of place. My intention was not only to cover the widest possible terrain, literal and metaphorical, within the poet’s work, but to suggest how Ashbery evokes concepts of spatial significance through the structures of the everyday built environment.

⁶⁸ Nigel Taylor, *Urban Planning Theory since 1945* (UK: Sage, 2009), 4; 6.

⁶⁹ Jane Jacobs, *The Life and Death of Great American Cities* (USA: Random House, 1993), 5.

⁷⁰ Ashbery, “Aldo Rossi”, 336.

⁷¹ John Ashbery, “Fantastic Architecture”, *RS*, 326.

0.3. The critical debate.

Previous studies relevant to Ashbery's depiction of specific aspects of the built environment are covered in the opening section of each chapter, in which I go into more depth about how such forms of imagery may or may not have been addressed in past criticism of his poetry. While there has, as yet, been no comprehensive critical work done on the place of the built environment in Ashbery's poetry, the prevalence of architectural imagery in his work has been noted by critics, suggesting the potential for such a study. In 2008, for example, Micaela Morrisette, trustee of The Flow Chart Foundation and the former managing director of The Ashbery Resource Center, released a list of "references to architecture [...] in John Ashbery's poetry" in conjunction with the literary review *Rain Taxi*, featuring extensive examples of the poet's architectural imagery spanning from *Some Trees* (1956) to *A Worldly Country* (2007).⁷² Despite stressing "the haphazardness and subjectivity of this collection of lines",⁷³ Morrisette compiled the list as a simple yet effective way to demonstrate the poet's ongoing preoccupation with the built environment, suggesting that "Ashbery is an ideal candidate for such a dissection".⁷⁴ Houses, for example, are one form of architecture which have received considerable attention in Ashbery criticism. However, the majority of studies which consider Ashbery in relation to concepts of house and home have, to date, focused less on dissecting the houses of his poetry than on documenting his real-life dwelling places. I address this matter in more depth in chapter four of the thesis, in which I explore Ashbery's use of house imagery as a means to suggest how critical attention often focuses upon his home in Hudson, New York, rather than the portrayal of houses themselves

⁷² Micaela Morrisette, "References to Architecture and Domestic Interiors in John Ashbery's Poetry", *Rain Taxi* (Summer, 2008), <https://raintaxi.com/ashbery/ARCreferences.htm> (Accessed 16/11/2021).

⁷³ Morrisette, "References".

⁷⁴ Micaela Morrisette, "The Little House of Our Desire", *Rain Taxi* (Summer, 2008) <https://www.raintaxi.com/literary-features/john-ashbery-created-spaces/editors-introduction/> (Accessed 16/11/2021).

in his work. One example of this critical focus is the ASHLAB project which ran at New York's New School in 2013 and sought to create "a digital mapping of [Ashbery's] work via [the] Hudson house", as a means of suggesting a network of connections between the poet's principal home environment and his poetry.⁷⁵ My thesis is inevitably informed by such studies, but I have tried in what follows to build on their foundations.

The majority of past studies of space and place in Ashbery's poetry can be broadly characterised according to a number of generalised categories. Given the widespread view that Ashbery's poetry tends "to move away from referentiality and towards abstraction",⁷⁶ there are those who have sought to frame his spatial poetics in similarly abstract terms. Similarly, there are also those who approach the environments of Ashbery's work as primarily "evoking a mental space" or "intellectual landscape" rather than an architectural one (specifically as a metaphor for a more abstract "human consciousness").⁷⁷ These are both valid and valuable approaches to Ashbery's spatial poetics, and ones which I routinely consider in connection with my own exploration of his portrayal of the physical built environment. However, given the purview of my thesis, I primarily reference those critics who address the various "environments" of his poetry as "firmly rooted in the real world", and who consider Ashbery's concept of space and place first and foremost in "physical" terms.⁷⁸ In this area, there are those who remain divided over whether Ashbery should be viewed mainly as a "rural" or as a "city poet", in terms of whether they frame his poetry as chiefly "elicit[ing] country images" or images associated with the urban landscape.⁷⁹ As I explore in chapter one, this debate is demonstrative of a wider trend in Ashbery criticism,

⁷⁵ The New School, "An Evening with ASHLAB on John Ashbery's poetry", *The New School* (2013), https://events.newschool.edu/event/an_evening_with_ashlab (Accessed 12/09/2021).

⁷⁶ Gill, *Poetics*, 115.

⁷⁷ Kacper Bartczak, *In Search of Communication and Community* (Germany: Peter Lang, 2006), 46; page number not given; 157.

⁷⁸ David Kermani, "'Created Spaces' as a New resource in Ashbery studies", *Lit 12* (Spring, 2007. Reprinted by *The Flow Chart Foundation*, <https://www.flowchartfoundation.org/created-spaces-kermani> (Accessed 12/03/2021).

⁷⁹ Willard Spiegelman, *How Poets See the World* (UK: Oxford UP, 2005), 1890, Kindle.

whereby his spatial poetics are often approached principally according to this rural/urban dichotomy. In turn, as I address in my own analysis of his cityscapes, those who argue that “Ashbery is an urban poet”⁸⁰ frequently focus on the so-called “poetic cosmopolitanism”⁸¹ of his writings, with the actual depiction of the spaces in question often remaining secondary or even largely overlooked. To this end, although Stephen Ross prioritises examples of “nature imagery” in readings of Ashbery’s poetry, he acknowledges that the poet’s “work also partakes of a rich ambiguity”, oscillating between the concrete and the abstract, or the architectural and the natural.⁸² As a result, “stymied by his intentions, many critics have been tempted to call [Ashbery simply] a ‘landscape poet,’ a label that aptly encompasses the painterly and the natural” (or, indeed, the rural and the urban).⁸³ A good example in this context is Bonnie Costello’s essay, “John Ashbery’s Landscapes”, in which the critic explores how landscapes and associated concepts of space and place resist stable definition throughout the poet’s work. Costello bridges many of the approaches previously outlined in this overview, in the sense that she suggests that the spaces of Ashbery’s poetry exist in states equally “mental” and “environmental”, “abstract” and “empirical”, or “pastoral” and “urban”, with the poet integrating what appear to be real-life locations within a more “unmappable, metamorphic terrain”.⁸⁴ The idea of place, she indicates, “is a deliberately porous one for Ashbery”.⁸⁵

There is a select number of critics who have carried out more sustained studies of Ashbery’s architectural imagery, or who explore his depiction of space, place, and the built environment in more architectural terms. I mention two briefly here as they served as key

⁸⁰ Marit MacArthur, *The American Landscape* (USA: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2008), 23.

⁸¹ David Greenberg, “In Memoriam”, *Public Seminar* (11/12/2017), <https://publicseminar.org/2017/12/in-memoriam/> (Accessed 12/03/2021).

⁸² Stephen Ross, *Invisible Terrain* (UK: OUP, 2017), 32. Kindle.

⁸³ Ross, *Invisible*, 32.

⁸⁴ Bonnie Costello, “John Ashbery’s Landscapes” in *Tribe of John*, 63.

⁸⁵ Costello, “John Ashbery’s”, 63.

references for this thesis. The first is Timothy Gray, whose book *Urban Pastoral* is particularly significant in showcasing how Ashbery's poetry interweaves "natural currents [with] urban environments", considering the "fundamental interdependency" of the landscapes most often associated with the poet's work.⁸⁶ Though his analysis remains heavily weighted in favour of Ashbery's natural imagery, Gray's study helps bridge the gap between rural and urban understandings of the poet's depiction of space and place, exploring how natural themes cross over into Ashbery's depiction of the urban built environment. The second is Marit MacArthur, whose book *The American Landscape in the Poetry of Frost, Bishop, and Ashbery* offers the most in-depth analysis to date of Ashbery's house imagery. Whilst criticism often focuses on the poet's real-life dwelling places, MacArthur's study is an exception in this regard, with the critic considering "the central image of the abandoned farmhouse" across the entire Ashbery canon, as an emblem of the poet's kinship with "earlier American authors with rural roots".⁸⁷ Although MacArthur stresses that she does not consider Ashbery's house imagery in a spatial theory context and has, as far as possible, "avoided the idea of 'poetry of place'", her study arguably remains the most thorough consideration of any form of architectural imagery in Ashbery's work to date and was instrumental in helping me formulate my own response to the poet's portrayal of the built environment.⁸⁸

0.4. The question of the New York School.

Although I occasionally explore Ashbery's poetry in relation to that of contemporaries such as Frank O'Hara, I do not specifically consider Ashbery as a member of what is known as The New York School of Poets. The New York School is a slightly

⁸⁶ Timothy Gray, *Urban Pastoral* (USA: U of Iowa P, 2010), 12; 68.

⁸⁷ MacArthur, *American*, 2; 24.

⁸⁸ MacArthur, *American*, 8.

polarizing issue in Ashbery criticism, with Harold Bloom in particular being adamant that Ashbery's "association" with the group has led to his poetry being "misunderstood".⁸⁹ However, my own reasons for considering Ashbery outside of this framework are somewhat different. First, those critics who do touch on matters of space and place in his work often do so mainly in connection with the writings of other New York School poets, and this is therefore already well-trodden ground in Ashbery criticism. Both Geoff Ward's *Statutes of Liberty* and Gray's *Urban Pastoral*, for example, (both of which are key sources for this thesis) explore the poet's work alongside that of his New York School contemporaries, with both incorporating some aspect of Ashbery's spatial poetics into their analysis.⁹⁰ Whilst I do reference the New York School as and when appropriate, I have focused more on how the major poets who Ashbery listed as specific influences on his work (such as W.H. Auden and Elizabeth Bishop) may have impacted his portrayal of the built environment.

The main reason I do not approach Ashbery specifically through the lens of the New York School, however, is the poet's own resistance to being classified in such terms. In his interview with Ford, Ashbery acknowledged that "meeting Frank O'Hara", Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler et al had a marked "affect [on his] work", as being around other poets and "their ways of writing [pushed him] in new directions".⁹¹ However, in his lecture "The New York School of Poets" at New York's 1968 "Poetry Now" symposium, he nonetheless expressed unease about framing those involved as part of a specific "poetic movement" or "anything like a program".⁹² Rather, he suggested, the group simply "happened to be friends" brought together by their "common enthusiasms".⁹³

⁸⁹ Harold Bloom, *Modern Critical Views: John Ashbery* (NY: Chelsea House, 1985), 6.

⁹⁰ Geoff Ward, *Statutes of Liberty* (UK, Palgrave, 2001).

⁹¹ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 34.

⁹² John Ashbery, "The New York School of Poets", *SP*, 113; 114; 113.

⁹³ Ashbery, "New York", 114.

0.5. A note on Ashbery's speakers.

Throughout my analysis, I have referred to Ashbery's speakers in the third person plural. The primary rationale for this is that I wished to establish a degree of separation between the figure(s) of the speaker in Ashbery's poetry and that of the poet himself. Though he once reportedly said that he tended to think of himself as "'John' and of the voice of [his] poems as 'Ashbery'",⁹⁴ he sought, more often than not, to differentiate himself from the voices of his work, stating that he wanted to encapsulate a "generalized transcript"⁹⁵ of experience. As such, he suggested that the "pronouns" in his work were best approached as "variables in an equation":⁹⁶

I guess I don't have a very strong sense of my own identity and I find it very easy to move from one person in the sense of a pronoun to another and this again helps produce a kind of polyphony [...] which I again feel is a means towards a greater naturalism.⁹⁷

Regardless of how one chooses to frame them, I would argue that the majority of Ashbery's speakers exhibit few, if any, stable indicators of identity. I therefore wished to approach them in similar terms, viewing this to be part and parcel of Ashbery's form of poetic expression. Unless otherwise stated, I have sought to address the speaker or speakers of Ashbery's work in as neutral terms as possible, allowing also for the possibility that certain poems may also

⁹⁴ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 67.

⁹⁵ A. Poulin, Jr. "The Experience of Experience", *Michigan Quarterly Review* (1981), 245.

⁹⁶ Janet Bloom and Robert Losada, "Craft Interview with John Ashbery", *New York Quarterly* (Winter 1972), 24-25.

⁹⁷ Bloom and Losada, "Craft", 24-25.

feature multiple different voices, either speaking simultaneously or at different points throughout the narrative.

0.7. Ashbery's later poetry.

Given the vastness of the Ashbery canon, my analysis focuses primarily on his poetic output up to and including *Hotel Lautréamont* (1992). Although examples of architectural imagery in Ashbery's later collections held intriguing implications for his wider depiction of the built environment, these often took the form of isolated references or images within individual poems rather than sustained or recurring themes throughout the given collection as a whole. This may be in part due to Ashbery's increasing tendency to focus on shorter, more lyrical poems over the latter decades of his career, which critics including John Emil Vincent have suggested makes it difficult to relate his later poetics to his earlier work.⁹⁸ Consequently, although this is a topic that I would be interested in pursuing in the future, it proved to be one which I could not cover effectively within the purview of this thesis.

0.8. Chapter overview.

Given the scope of my thesis, I have adopted a thematic, rather than a chronological or diachronic structure for my argument. The thesis is divided into two parts, each consisting of three chapters which have been grouped together according to theme and the overarching genre of space under consideration. Part one covers chapters exploring aspects of the metropolitan built environment in the poet's work, whilst part two focuses on Ashbery's portrayal of domestic, residential, or private space.

⁹⁸ See John Emil Vincent, *John Ashbery and You* (USA: U of Georgia P, 2007), 1-25.

Section 1: The urban built environment

- Chapter 1: Cities and cityscapes.
- Chapter 2: Skyscrapers, towers and tall buildings.
- Chapter 3: Public space and place.

Section 2: Residential or domestic environments

- Chapter 4: Houses and homes.
- Chapter 5: Hotels, apartments and mass-accommodation.
- Chapter 6: Suburbia and suburban space.

Each of these spaces, I argue, is key to establishing an understanding of Ashbery's vision of the built environment. Yet, in mapping out the complex and often interconnected roles such places serve across the Ashbery canon, we may equally discover a set of tools for navigating the more nebulous terrain of his work as a whole.

Chapter one explores Ashbery's cityscapes as the first of three chapters dedicated to the poet's depiction of various forms of metropolitan space. I consider his characterisation of cities through the lens of a single poem, "Grand Galop" from *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), which, despite containing almost no direct references to the built environment, is often framed by critics as detailing a "vision of the city"⁹⁹ or distinctly "urban scene".¹⁰⁰ This could be viewed as an example of how even critics who approach Ashbery as a specifically "urban poet" may tend to overlook his portrayal of "the city" in architectural terms, in favour of exploring more abstract concepts of "poetic cosmopolitanism" or "urban energies" in his work.¹⁰¹ In approaching the largely nebulous

⁹⁹ David Bromwich, *Skeptical Music* (USA: Chicago UP, 2001), 194.

¹⁰⁰ Peter Monacell, "John Ashbery and Hyperpastoral Suburbia", *Contemporary Literature* (Spring, 2015), 100.

¹⁰¹ Greenberg, "In Memoriam".

terrain of “Grand Galop” as a reflection of urban space and place specifically, the chapter addresses a question which runs throughout the thesis as a whole, namely, how do we discuss Ashbery’s poetry in relation to the built environment when, in the words of Roger Gilbert, it often appears to be both prone to abstraction and deeply mistrustful of “representation”?¹⁰² My analysis addresses how Ashbery frames “Grand Galop” not only as a contemplation on how we interpret and perceive urban space but as a commentary on the nature of poetry itself and how the poet uses the poem’s so-called cityscape as a means to consider concepts of ephemerality, fragmentation and abstraction.

Chapter two focuses on Ashbery’s depiction of skyscrapers, towers and tall buildings in order to consider how the poet portrays the giants of the urban built environment as dual emblems of the temporal and the spiritual. I examine Ashbery’s skyscrapers in relation to two discursive categories, both of which are central to the poet’s depiction of architectural height: first, spirituality and faith, and second, commerce and advertising. The chapter does not approach Ashbery as a religious or moralistic poet. Rather, it suggests how he uses the specific imagery of architectural height not only as a unique emblem through which to explore spiritual themes, but also their antithesis, in the form of man’s materialism and greed. I focus on a selection of key poems: “The New Spirit” and “The System” from *Three Poems* (1972), “Fantasia on ‘The Nut-Brown Maid’” and “On the Towpath” from *Houseboat Days* (1977), and the titular poem from *A Wave* (1984). Through these texts, the chapter maps the evolution of Ashbery’s skyscrapers, from emblems of faith to a means to replace the very gods themselves, and finally as symbols of man’s avarice and hubris.

Chapter three investigates Ashbery’s cityscapes from street-level, considering Ashbery’s “Litany” (*As We Know*, 1979), through the imagery of streets, sidewalks and related concepts of public space and place. As I suggest, the 65-page, double-columned poem

¹⁰² Roger Gilbert, *Walks in the World* (USA: Princeton UP, 1991), 250.

demonstrates a preoccupation with both the imagery and wider themes of public space. However, the rationale for this pairing of space and poem is equally based on more abstract qualities, namely the experience which Ashbery sought to encapsulate when writing “Litany”. Composed of two “independent” but, according to the poet, “simultaneous” columns,¹⁰³ Ashbery suggested that “Litany” was intended to simulate the experience of “eavesdropping on two different conversations” concurrently, with the poem’s dual form requiring the reader “to pay attention to two separate poems at the same time”.¹⁰⁴ In characterising “Litany” as “something that you are immersed in but cannot possibly be conscious of the whole of”,¹⁰⁵ Ashbery stated that he primarily “consider[ed] the poem as a sort of environment”,¹⁰⁶ connecting such forms of poetic expression to his own habit of seeking creative inspiration through the medium of public space. I explore the poem in connection with Ashbery’s writings on “public” or “environmental art”, suggesting how the poet employs the imagery of public space and place as a metaphor for a more immersive, experiential form of poetic expression.¹⁰⁷ I also address this imagery vis-à-vis ideas of what Ashbery terms “form as subject matter”, to suggest how the shifting relationship between the poem’s structure and content influences how we as readers navigate the text.¹⁰⁸

Chapter four examines Ashbery’s depiction of the house or home, as the first of three chapters considering private or domestic places in his work. More specifically, I explore the link between Ashbery’s real-life experience of home and the house as a poetic construct, to suggest how houses may serve as unique emblems of autobiography in his poetry. My analysis focuses on two specific collections: *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970) and *Flow*

¹⁰³ John Ashbery, “Litany”, *CP*, 553.

¹⁰⁴ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 61.

¹⁰⁵ MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

¹⁰⁶ Peter Stitt, “The Art of Poetry”, *Paris Review* (Winter 1983), <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3014/the-art-of-poetry-no-33-john-ashbery> (Accessed 20/01/2021).

¹⁰⁷ John Ashbery, “Environmental Art”, *RS*, 342.

¹⁰⁸ Ashbery, “Litany”, 646.

Chart (1991). These texts were in part chosen due to their preoccupation with house imagery which, by Ashbery's own admission, serves as a "recurring theme in [his] poetry".¹⁰⁹ However, these collections also hold a key place in the poet's biography, having arguably been inspired by the two major homecomings of his adult life. In writing these collections, I suggest that Ashbery sought to renegotiate his bond with home over the distances of time and adult experience, using the imagery of space, place, and, in particular, houses, as a means to consider concepts of self, identity and childhood. Given this focus, the chapter places a greater emphasis on Ashbery's biography than the rest of my thesis, in part due to the role houses play as not only architectural but psychological constructions. However, although my analysis is informed by the critical work done to consider the poet's real-life home environment in relation to concepts of "poetic imagination", I do not seek to frame Ashbery's portrayal of houses as explicitly autobiographical. I do aim, however, to build upon the existing critical framework, using close readings of *Flow Chart* and selected poems from *The Double Dream of Spring* to suggest how Ashbery employs the imagery of house and home as a means to engage with concepts of autobiography, with such spaces serving as an external representation of selfhood in his work.

Chapter five investigates Ashbery's portrayal of hotels and apartments, building on my previous analysis of the poet's residential imagery to explore his depiction of structures designed to accommodate the many, not the few. My analysis focuses on three key texts: "The Skaters" and "Clepsydra" from *Rivers and Mountains* (1966), and the titular poem of *Hotel Lautréamont* (1992). Through close readings of these works, I consider how Ashbery approaches the impact of mass or "multi-unit" accommodation on the individual occupant, with the poet using the imagery of hotels and apartments to explore questions of community, commonality and identity. However, I equally address how Ashbery evokes the idea of such

¹⁰⁹ John Ashbery, "Letter to R.B. Kitaj", (07/12/1976), quoted in MacArthur, *American*, 29.

spaces as a means to explore related concepts of architectural and poetic structure. Just as *Hotel Lautréamont* was inspired by a hotel's ability to accommodate "many different kinds of people all doing different things" simultaneously within its "many rooms",¹¹⁰ I explore Ashbery's use of the "hotel metaphor"¹¹¹ to explore the relationship between the part and the whole, or the individual and the community.

Chapter six explores Ashbery's depiction of suburbia to suggest how the poet frames suburban space not just to address themes of centre and periphery, both spatial and cultural, but associated concepts of significance and signification. Unlike the other chapters in the thesis which concentrate on Ashbery's poetry, here the analysis focuses on Ashbery and James Schuyler's frequently overlooked novel on "America and her tragic suburbs!", *A Nest of Ninnies* (1969).¹¹² Described as "the book that Ashbery's critics speak the least about",¹¹³ *A Nest of Ninnies* has traditionally been characterised, when it has been considered at all, as a portrait of "suburban Americana".¹¹⁴ Yet because it is often dismissed as being only "marginally attached to Ashbery's oeuvre", neither its treatment of suburbia nor its potential relationship to the suburban imagery of Ashbery's poetry (itself largely mentioned only in passing by critics) have been addressed.¹¹⁵ I consider the novel in connection with Ashbery's depiction of suburbia in two specific poems, "The One Thing That Can Save America" (*Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, 1975) and "Pyrography" (*Houseboat Days*, 1977), in order to suggest how the suburbs operate as a discursive landscape for Ashbery, through which he explores concepts of significance, culture and meaning.

¹¹⁰ David Herd, "In Conversation with John Ashbery", *P.N. Review* (September-October 1994) https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=2216;hilite=david%20herd (Accessed 12/11/19).

¹¹¹ Krystyna Mazur, "The 'Unfamiliar Stereotype'", in *Poetry and the Sense of Panic*, ed. Lionel Kelly (Netherlands: Rodopi, 2000), 111.

¹¹² John Ashbery and James Schuyler, *A Nest of Ninnies* (USA: Dalkey, 2008), 79.

¹¹³ Brian Evenson, "The Art of Curling", *Conjunctions* (2007), 275.

¹¹⁴ Dalkey Archive, "A Nest of Ninnies", *Dalkey Archive Press*, <https://www.dalkeyarchive.com/product/a-nest-of-ninnies/> (Accessed 10/04/20).

¹¹⁵ Evenson, "Art", 275.

In his book *Walks in the World*, Roger Gilbert argues that the “primary motif of American poetry” is a “heightened attention to the particulars of time and place”.¹¹⁶ American poetry, he argues, “has always located itself in particular landscapes with present-tense immediacy”, using this “emphasis on the importance of place” “to anchor thought in the world, [whilst providing] the mind with a continuous yet ever-changing point of reference”.¹¹⁷ The result is a joint spatialisation and “poeticization of experience”, in which the poet’s desire to both “locate the poem in the world” and transcribe the world through the poem leads them to oscillate “between descriptions of an outer landscape and reflections prompted by that landscape”.¹¹⁸ As the “poem proceeds through both time and space”, both reader and poet are “continually stimulated to new observations, reactions, associations”, all “rising directly from the phenomena of the landscape”.¹¹⁹ In broad terms, Gilbert indicates that “landscape poems” tend to “center on natural phenomena”, exhibiting the poet’s desire to be “closer to nature” by communing with spaces traditionally “associated with the natural beauty and comfort of Eden”.¹²⁰ In his analysis, however, he singles out two figures in modern American poetry who he suggests employ this same “totalizing spatial perspective” to explore specific ideas of “urban existence”: Frank O’Hara and John Ashbery.¹²¹

Despite suggesting that both poets frequently evoke the same urban “subject matter” and “ambience” in their work, Gilbert’s study principally focuses on O’Hara, largely refraining from directly considering “the city” in Ashbery’s poetry.¹²² This, the critic reasons,

¹¹⁶ Roger Gilbert, *Walks in the World* (USA: Princeton UP, 1991), 12; 6.

¹¹⁷ Gilbert, *Walks*, 15; 13; 210.

¹¹⁸ Gilbert, *Walks*, 6; 23; 7.

¹¹⁹ Gilbert, *Walks*, 31; 9; 15.

¹²⁰ Gilbert, *Walks*, 15; 210; 35.

¹²¹ Gilbert, *Walks*, 9; 236.

¹²² Gilbert, *Walks*, 210; 210; 236.

is because, though they may “confront [the] same realms” or “external conditions” in their writings, the two remain “markedly different poets”.¹²³ With O’Hara, “everything he writes is bathed in the ambience of Manhattan, not just its landscape [...] but its tone, its rhythm, its cultural density and diversity”.¹²⁴ Yet if O’Hara is the “quintessential New York poet”, the “fundamental object” of Ashbery’s work, by contrast, “is simply the world; not, that is, some particular segment of the world”.¹²⁵ Gilbert bases this on the idea that “Ashbery is not a poet greatly given to description”, especially regarding the “representation of external objects or phenomena”.¹²⁶ Much of his poetry appears resistant to being considered in terms of a “specific [sense of] place or category of places”, as this would require an awareness of “externality that most critics find lacking in his work”.¹²⁷

If O’Hara’s landscape poetry is one of “mimesis or transcription”, then Ashbery’s is of a more “introspective” or “meditative mode”, with the poet’s surroundings serving “primarily as grounds [to explore abstract ideas of] consciousness” rather than concrete notions of space and place.¹²⁸ In this context, it may seem unclear why Gilbert references Ashbery in relation to the imagery of urban space at all, given that he states that many of his “poems center on natural phenomena” rather than those associated with city life.¹²⁹ Despite stressing Ashbery’s tendency towards abstraction, however, there is one poem which Gilbert singles out to suggest that, much like “his close friend Frank O’Hara”, the “ambience” of Ashbery’s poetry may conceivably be “epitomized by New York City”: “Grand Galop” (*Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, 1975).¹³⁰

¹²³ Gilbert, *Walks*, 210; 210; 174.

¹²⁴ Gilbert, *Walks*, 174-175.

¹²⁵ Gilbert, *Walks*, 174; 252; 252.

¹²⁶ Gilbert, *Walks*, 233.

¹²⁷ Gilbert, *Walks*, 252; 234.

¹²⁸ Gilbert, *Walks*, 210.

¹²⁹ Gilbert, *Walks*, 210.

¹³⁰ Gilbert, *Walks*, 210.

Gilbert's choice of text is unusual, if unsurprising. Characterised as an intrinsically "spacious lyric",¹³¹ the poem exhibits clear "spatial"¹³² elements, leading John Shoptaw to suggest that "the topos or spread of 'Grand Galop'"¹³³ is "a journey through American space"¹³⁴ (combining abstract ideas of the "literary" or "rhetorical commonplace" with literal concepts of space and place).¹³⁵ This description recalls another key text from *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, "The One Thing That Can Save America", in which the speaker journeys through "rustic plantations", "suburbs" and "urban forests", in search of a "central" model of American "place".¹³⁶ In "Grand Galop", however, this space is traditionally held to depict a "vision of the city" specifically, to the extent that David Bromwich concludes that "the premise of this marvellous poem is a walk around New York City", likening its narrative to an "inscription on the landscape" of the city itself.¹³⁷ This would seem to suggest that "Grand Galop" is a natural candidate for a consideration of Ashbery's urban imagery. After all, studies to date have tended to frame it as a depiction of a distinctly "urban scene",¹³⁸ with its speaker suggested to embody a specifically "urban standpoint".¹³⁹ This in itself holds intriguing implications for Ashbery's cityscapes, given that the poem contains almost no direct references to the built environment, its largely nebulous landscape characterised by the fact that it "lacks true distinction".¹⁴⁰ In turn, whilst the general consensus remains that "the

¹³¹ John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out* (USA: Harvard, 1994), 163; 166.

¹³² Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 166.

¹³³ Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 163.

¹³⁴ Peter Monacell, "John Ashbery and Hyperpastoral Suburbia", *Contemporary Literature* (Spring, 2015), 96.

¹³⁵ "topos", n. *OED Online* (06/2020) Oxford UP.

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/203433?redirectedFrom=topos&> (Accessed 06/06/20) (Hereafter cited as *OED*).

¹³⁶ John Ashbery, "The One Thing That Can Save America", in *Collected Poems, 1956-1987*, ed. Mark Ford (UK: Carcanet, 2001), 457. (Hereafter cited as *CP*).

¹³⁷ David Bromwich, *Skeptical Music* (USA: Chicago UP, 2001), 194.

¹³⁸ Monacell, "John Ashbery", 100.

¹³⁹ Monacell, "John Ashbery", 100.

¹⁴⁰ John Ashbery, "Grand Galop", *CP*, 436-437. (Hereafter cited as "GG").

poem includes as one of its elements a walk in the city”, the precise significance of this supposedly urban setting has rarely been discussed in depth.¹⁴¹

“Grand Galop” embodies a paradox for those seeking to explore Ashbery in terms of spatial theory, as it represents both a logical starting point and, given the absence of concrete architectural references, a challenge for those considering his depiction of urban space. However, the relative critical neglect of the poem’s setting could be viewed as an example of how even critics who approach Ashbery as a specifically “urban poet” often overlook his portrayal of “the city” in architectural terms, bypassing his depiction of the metropolitan built environment in favour of exploring more abstract concepts of “poetic cosmopolitanism” or “urban energies”.¹⁴² In the case of “Grand Galop”, this oversight is compounded by the lack of focused analytical attention which the poem has received. As Frank Lepkowski concludes, whilst the poem “has attracted praise” from critics, this has largely been in the form of “asides from studies primarily devoted to other topics” and “not sustained examination” of the poem itself.¹⁴³

This lack of in-depth critical coverage may seem anomalous, given that *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* was not only the “first [of Ashbery’s books] to receive considerable attention”, but remains his “most well-known work”.¹⁴⁴ As the first book to win the trifecta of The Pulitzer Prize, The National Book Award and The National Book Critics Circle Award, it is often cited as having “played an important role in establishing Ashbery’s reputation in the mid-1970s” or, as Mark Ford describes it, “catapulting him to stardom”.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ Frank Lepkowski, “John Ashbery’s Revision of the Post-Romantic Quest”, *Twentieth Century Literature* (1993), 252.

¹⁴² David Greenberg, “In Memoriam”, *Public Seminar* (11/12/2017), <https://publicseminar.org/2017/12/in-memoriam/> (Accessed 12/03/2021).

¹⁴³ Lepkowski, “John Ashbery’s”, 251.

¹⁴⁴ Montserrat Ribas, “John Ashbery’s Self-Portraiture in a Convex Mirror”, *Flow Chart Foundation* (16/09/19) <https://www.flowchartfoundation.org/news/2019/9/16/now-beautifully-translated-into-catalan-self-portrait-in-a-convex-mirror> (Accessed 01/05/20).

¹⁴⁵ Mark Ford, “John Ashbery”, *The Guardian* (04/09/2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/sep/04/john-ashbery-obituary> (Accessed 10/04/20).

The collection has received a great deal of academic interest. Yet, “such has been the undeniable attraction” of the book’s titular poem, Lepkowski observes, that what attention the other poems in the collection have received has been “utilitarian” by comparison.¹⁴⁶ Works which would otherwise be considered “central [...] in Ashbery’s canon” have tended to be “treated as essentially [...] secondary”, with Lepkowski emphasising that “what attention ‘Grand Galop’ has received has been cursory”.¹⁴⁷

This places “Grand Galop” in an unusual position in the Ashbery canon, in that it has seldom been the subject of direct critical focus yet is repeatedly favoured by critics as a potential “starting point” for broader studies of the poet’s work.¹⁴⁸ As Joanne Huybensz suggests, “it can be seen as a hinge, an opening into, or a clue to some deconstructed understanding of many of the other poems in *Self-Portrait* as well as into the title poem itself”.¹⁴⁹ Rather than approaching “Grand Galop” as an interpretative introduction to *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, however, the present analysis explores the poem in a context which is at once both broader and more specific, namely as the basis for a consideration of Ashbery’s urban imagery. The chapter explores Ashbery’s poetry through the specific imagery of cityscapes, as the first of three chapters considering the representation of the urban built environment in his work. Chapter two considers skyscrapers, towers and tall buildings, exploring the individual, constituent edifices which make up the poet’s cityscapes. Chapter three looks at Ashbery’s poetry in relation to public space and place, navigating his cities from the more diffuse perspective of pavement level. The second half of the thesis considers Ashbery’s representation of domestic or residential space, focusing on houses, genres of mass accommodation and, finally, the poet’s treatment of suburbia.

¹⁴⁶ Lepkowski, “John Ashbery’s”, 251.

¹⁴⁷ Lepkowski, “John Ashbery’s”, 251-252.

¹⁴⁸ Lepkowski, “John Ashbery’s”, 252.

¹⁴⁹ Joanne Huybensz, “‘Grand Galop’ Through a *Convex Mirror*”, *Structuralist Review* (1979), 45-46.

Considering Ashbery's poetry in relation to the idea of the city holds a somewhat complicated place in Ashbery criticism. According to Willard Spiegelman, this is largely due to the fact that many critics remain divided over whether Ashbery should be viewed primarily as a "rural" or "city poet", in terms of whether his poetry chiefly "elicits country images" or an urban landscape.¹⁵⁰ This debate reflects a wider trend in Ashbery criticism, whereby his spatial poetics are approached principally according to this rural/urban dichotomy. Whilst there are some who argue that "Ashbery is an urban poet", with a predominantly "urban reputation", others suggest that the "cosmopolitan" nature of his work "has been over-emphasised".¹⁵¹ Marit MacArthur states that Ashbery's "urban, cosmopolitan reputation has led us to make narrow assumptions about his biography and his poetry", specifically regarding his use of natural imagery.¹⁵² Yet the reverse is arguably equally true. Those who seek to "*dissolve* the urban" in Ashbery's work risk undervaluing the possibilities for interpretation to which a study of his urban imagery may lead.¹⁵³

In trying too hard to fit Ashbery into one camp we may indeed, as MacArthur suggests, "fail to notice" other currents in his work.¹⁵⁴ By contrast, the present study is concerned less with whether or not Ashbery should be classified as a city poet than with an exploration of "Grand Galop" itself, using the poem to consider Ashbery's urban imagery, whilst also employing that same urban imagery as a tool to explore the poem. However, in considering the mostly indistinct landscape of "Grand Galop" through the specific lens of urban space and place, the chapter also explores a question which lies at the heart of the thesis as a whole: how to approach Ashbery's built environment when, in the words of Jo

¹⁵⁰ Willard Spiegelman, *How Poets See the World* (UK: Oxford UP, 2005), 1890, Kindle.

¹⁵¹ Marit MacArthur, *The American Landscape* (USA: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2008), 23.

¹⁵² MacArthur; *American*, 25-26.

¹⁵³ Greenberg, "Memoriam".

¹⁵⁴ MacArthur, *American*, 148.

Gill, his poetry tends “to move away from referentiality and towards abstraction”, frequently embodying the “intangibility of place” rather than its physical particulars.¹⁵⁵

My analysis is divided into four sections. Section one establishes a contextual framework relevant to our understanding of Ashbery’s urban imagery. Section two addresses “Grand Galop” itself, to suggest how Ashbery metapoetically frames the poem’s cityscape as a contemplation on how we perceive and interpret urban space. Section three explores the poem’s urban imagery in relation to ideas of ephemerality, fragmentation and abstraction. Finally, section four approaches the poem’s landscape as a commentary on the nature of poetry itself, suggesting how Ashbery employs ideas of urban space and place to meditate on literary tradition.

1.1. The context of Ashbery’s cityscapes.

In *The City in History*, the architectural historian Lewis Mumford begins with a simple disclaimer: when seeking to ascertain “what is the city”, there will forever be more questions than answers.¹⁵⁶ “It has taken over five thousand years to arrive at even a partial understanding of the city’s nature”, and it “may take [even longer] to exhaust [its] unrealized potentials”.¹⁵⁷ Though we may “attempt to achieve a better insight into the present state of the city”, “no single definition” or “description will cover all its manifestations”.¹⁵⁸ In *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*, Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift summarise some of the inherent obstacles to approaching the urban landscape in terms of spatial theory. “Cities have become extraordinarily intricate”, and, for this reason, “difficult to generalize”, to the extent that spatial theory as a discipline “can no longer even agree on what counts as a city”, let alone

¹⁵⁵ Jo Gill, *The Poetics of the American Suburbs* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 115.

¹⁵⁶ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (USA: Harcourt, 1989), 3.

¹⁵⁷ Mumford. *City*, 3-4.

¹⁵⁸ Mumford, *City*, 3.

“what makes the city a spatial formation”.¹⁵⁹ Granted, there are certain commonly agreed technical criteria for how to “distinguish cities as spaces”, ranging from “concentrations of people, things, institutions and architectural forms” to the “heterogeneity of life they juxtapose in close proximity”.¹⁶⁰ Yet there remains a certain *je ne sais quoi* inherent in the “‘spatiality’ of cities” themselves.¹⁶¹ This, Amin and Thrift suggest, is not only due to the “extraordinary variety and complexity” of urban space but because the idea of “‘citiness’” has come to encompass a myriad of abstract cultural and sociological considerations, beyond the purely architectural.¹⁶²

To establish how we should approach such places in the context of Ashbery’s poetry, my analysis begins with a consideration of his writings on space and cities. As John Yau writes in “The Poet as Art Critic”, throughout the 1950s to 1980s, Ashbery routinely wrote architecture pieces, working as a critic for a variety of publications.¹⁶³ Of the over four hundred and fifty articles that Ashbery penned, he stated that “some were written for money to help subsidize [his] poetry habit”.¹⁶⁴ Critics have therefore often been slow to consider the implications of these writings for his poetry, viewing them as “strictly work for hire”.¹⁶⁵ However, as Yau makes clear, it is also “true that many were written because [Ashbery] was commissioned to write about a subject he ‘was interested in’”, allowing him to explore ideas which would later be developed in his poetry.¹⁶⁶ Ashbery’s partner, David Kermani, suggested that “the art reviews” offer “a key to understanding the poetry, because although Ashbery always refused to explain his poems, many of the things he said about other people’s

¹⁵⁹ Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Cities* (UK: Polity, 2009), 1; 1; 2.

¹⁶⁰ Amin and Thrift, *Cities*, 2; 3.

¹⁶¹ Amin and Thrift, *Cities*, 2.

¹⁶² Amin and Thrift, *Cities*, 2.

¹⁶³ Jon Yau, “The Poet as Art Critic”, *The American Poetry Review* (May/June 2005), 45.

¹⁶⁴ John Ashbery, quoted in Yau, “Poet”, 45.

¹⁶⁵ Larissa MacFarquhar, “Becoming John Ashbery” *The New Yorker* (31/10/2005) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/11/07/present-waking-life> (Accessed 10/03/2020).

¹⁶⁶ John Ashbery, quoted in Yau, “Poet”, 45.

work could be applied to his own”.¹⁶⁷ Yau specifically relates this to the poet’s treatment of “received notions of realism” across various art forms, suggesting that, much as “Ashbery has consciously rejected transparency” in his own work, his critical writings frequently concern the ““dualistic conflict [which the poet identified] between inner and outer reality””.¹⁶⁸ For Ashbery, all art deals with “the question of deciding how much the outer reality is our reality, how far we can advance into it and still keep a toe-hold on the inner, private one”.¹⁶⁹ He explored this idea in his lecture “Poetical Space”, suggesting that conceptual or subjective characterisations of the external landscape may be “all the more meaningful for being imprecise”.¹⁷⁰ In “grappling with an urge to express space more accurately”, he explained, it is inevitable that “space becomes distorted, not out of an urge for more exact description but in order to express something [...] about how the visible world feels, if not how it looks”.¹⁷¹

Ashbery’s writings on space and place voice aspects of the same mistrust of “representation” which Gilbert identifies with his poetry as a whole.¹⁷² A potential starting point for considering such ideas in relation to the poet’s vision of the city is a 1979 article which Ashbery wrote for *New York* magazine, covering an exposition on the Italian architect Aldo Rossi at NYC’s Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies. As the author of *The Architecture of the City*, Rossi envisaged a more “comprehensive way of analyzing” urban space, which he viewed as an ever-evolving cultural “artifact”.¹⁷³ Given Rossi’s centrality to contemporary urban studies, Ashbery indicates, it is only natural to approach the idea of “the city itself as a model for the architect’s activity”, much as Rossi himself framed cities as

¹⁶⁷ MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

¹⁶⁸ Yau, “Poet”, 46.

¹⁶⁹ John Ashbery, “Throughout Is This Quality of Thing-ness: Elizabeth Bishop”, in *Selected Prose*, ed. Eugene Richie (USA: Michigan UP, 2005), 121 (Hereafter cited as *SP*).

¹⁷⁰ John Ashbery, “Poetical Space”, *SP*, 215.

¹⁷¹ Ashbery, “Poetical”, 213.

¹⁷² Gilbert, *Walks*, 250.

¹⁷³ Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* (USA: MIT, 1984), 21.

“metaphors ‘of’ architecture”.¹⁷⁴ The poet progresses from discussing Rossi’s vision to a more philosophical contemplation of the metropolitan landscape “as it is continuously coming into being – a concept perpetually modified by the exigencies of everyday reality, where what is unbuilt or incomplete has a function no less important than what is actually there, as part of a never completely visible or measurable totality. For the city [...] is both physical and metaphysical”.¹⁷⁵

As an architectural repository for “metaphysical” meaning, the city does not exist in purely “physical” terms, but rather as a blend of concrete construction and a more abstract symbolism. This also means that cities “can never be experienced as complete in themselves”, because of the intrinsically “ephemeral” or “fragmentary character” of urban space.¹⁷⁶ As places which are “continuously coming into being”, cities exist, Ashbery suggests, in a constant cycle of what the architectural critic, Paul Goldberger terms “building up and tearing down”.¹⁷⁷ Ashbery developed this characterisation in a 1978 article on the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright for *New York* magazine, where he suggests that the primary attribute of urban space is “evanescence”.¹⁷⁸ “We tend to shrug off this situation and are even [...] a little proud of it. New York never stands still but is constantly rising and falling – ‘a fountain of bricks and mortar,’ [...] We pride ourselves on scarcely noticing the gaps in the city’s skyline that weren’t there yesterday”.¹⁷⁹ Ashbery relates New York City’s transient character to the “short-lived” nature of American metropolitan space in general.¹⁸⁰ Even cities renowned for their “encouragement and preservation of modern architecture”, he stresses, “haven’t had an impressive survival record”, their edifices often lasting “scarcely a

¹⁷⁴ John Ashbery, “Aldo Rossi”, in *Reported Sightings*, ed. David Bergman (USA: Harvard, 1991), 336; 335. (Hereafter cited as RS).

¹⁷⁵ Ashbery, “Aldo Rossi”, 335.

¹⁷⁶ Ashbery, “Aldo Rossi”, 323.

¹⁷⁷ Paul Goldberger, *Building Up and Tearing Down* (USA: Monacelli, 2009).

¹⁷⁸ John Ashbery, “Frank Lloyd Wright”, RS, 323.

¹⁷⁹ Ashbery, “Frank”, 321-322.

¹⁸⁰ Ashbery, “Frank”, 322.

dozen years before succumbing to progress”.¹⁸¹ Ashbery relates this view of urban “evanescence” to that espoused in the architectural theorist Nathan Silver’s *Lost New York*, which maps the metropolis through what the poet terms its “vanished architectural patrimony”.¹⁸²

1.1.1 “A logarithm of other cities”: Ashbery and New York.

MacArthur suggests that the primary reason that “some readers concluded Ashbery must be, first and foremost, a poet of urban sensibilities” is because they assumed “a close association between New York City and the New York School poets”.¹⁸³ However, even when specifically considering Ashbery’s urban imagery, we should not rush to automatically “connect the New York in the New York School with the city itself”.¹⁸⁴ This is not to say that the poet never explicitly connects his poetry to New York. “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”, for example, directly ties “the city” of the poem’s landscape to “New York/ Where I am now”, even if the city is depicted as an indeterminate “logarithm of other cities”.¹⁸⁵ Nonetheless, as Marjorie Perloff observes, Ashbery seldom gives us cause to consider his cityscapes in real-life terms. In contrast to the “Unreal City” of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, for example, which is “first and foremost, a very real fog-bound London” (so Perloff claims), Ashbery’s urban imagery traditionally exhibits “no definable referents” outside of the poem itself.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸¹ Ashbery, “Frank”, 322.

¹⁸² Ashbery, “Frank”, 322.

¹⁸³ MacArthur, *American*, 23.

¹⁸⁴ Maggie Nelson, *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (USA: Iowa UP, 2007), 210.

¹⁸⁵ John Ashbery, “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”, *CP*, 480.

¹⁸⁶ Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (USA: Northwestern, 1999), 11; 13.

Whilst “cosmopolitan interests are very important to his poetry”, MacArthur states that “we should not think of Ashbery only as a New York City poet”.¹⁸⁷ Indeed, it is arguable that we should not consider Ashbery as a New York City poet *at all*. Speaking at the 1968 “Poetry Now” symposium, Ashbery stated that one of the major issues he had with “The New York School of Poets” label was its implied affiliation to New York itself.¹⁸⁸ “If you live in New York [...] you are probably not doing it because you like it or you feel it expresses you, but because it’s the most convenient place [...] one has no feeling of living *somewhere*. That is another reason I dislike the New York School term – because it seems to designate a place, whereas New York is really an anti-place, an abstract climate, and I am not prepared to take up cudgels to defend such a place”.¹⁸⁹

This places Ashbery in a somewhat uneasy position, in that he is seen as “integral to an account of New York poetry” and “the city’s poetic culture”, yet asserts that his poetry had “little to do with New York”, which he viewed as “merely a convenient place to live [...] rather than a specific place whose local color influences the literature produced there”.¹⁹⁰ Although he largely dismissed connections between New York and the New York School, however, Ashbery saw O’Hara as the exception. In his introduction to *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, he wrote that “Frank is certainly a New York poet. The life of the city [hums] through his poetry; a scent of garbage, patchouli and carbon monoxide drifts across it, making it the lovely, corrupt, wholesome place New York is”.¹⁹¹ However, when asked by Herd “how important has New York been as an occasion and setting for your poetry?”, Ashbery responded “it certainly isn’t in the Frank O’Hara sense”.¹⁹² For him, the city’s

¹⁸⁷ MacArthur, *American*, 148.

¹⁸⁸ John Ashbery, “The New York School of Poets”, *SP*, 113.

¹⁸⁹ Ashbery, “New York School”, 114.

¹⁹⁰ Geoff Ward, *Statutes of Liberty* (UK: Palgrave, 2001), 5,

¹⁹¹ John Ashbery, “Introduction”, in *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (USA: UP California, 1995), x. (Hereafter cited as *CPFO*).

¹⁹² David Herd, “In Conversation with John Ashbery”, *P.N. Review* (1994) https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe?item_id=2216 (Accessed 03/01/2021).

particular poetic appeal lay in its overarching lack of distinctiveness. “I find it a good place to write poetry in because it is such a large space. There is not too much to distract the eye [...] It’s a sort of benignly neutral place to write in [...] a sort of disposable environment”.¹⁹³

1.1.2. “The city of our starting out”: Ashbery and cities in an autobiographical context.

In *The American Landscape in the Poetry of Frost, Bishop and Ashbery*, MacArthur stresses that those who view Ashbery as a “poet of urban sensibilities” do so only by making “narrow assumptions about his biography”.¹⁹⁴ She relates this to the “anti-biographical stance of most Ashbery criticism”,¹⁹⁵ by which critics exhibit a certain “disinclination to draw links between the poems and the life of Ashbery himself”.¹⁹⁶ However, although MacArthur stresses that she “would never advocate biographical reading as the most important approach to Ashbery”,¹⁹⁷ she also argues that the fact that he is often cast as an explicitly “anti-autobiographical poet”¹⁹⁸ can be attributed to the “assumption that Ashbery is an urban poet”.¹⁹⁹ “When we focus on Ashbery’s urban association and lack of awareness of the poet’s rural [roots]”, she concludes, “we may assume that [...] Ashbery’s poetry lack[s] personal significance”.²⁰⁰

MacArthur presents the poet’s depiction of natural “themes as biographical”, with the critic referencing such themes to counter the poet’s urban reputation within critical circles and framing instances of urban imagery in Ashbery’s poetry as “anti-biographical”.²⁰¹ As a

¹⁹³ Herd, “Conversation”.

¹⁹⁴ MacArthur, *American*, 23.

¹⁹⁵ MacArthur, *American*, 23.

¹⁹⁶ MacArthur, *American*, 25.

¹⁹⁷ MacArthur, *American*, 27.

¹⁹⁸ Geoffrey O’Brien, “Hymns to Possibility”, *Bomb* (08/09/2017) <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/hymns-to-possibility/> (Accessed 10/03/20210).

¹⁹⁹ MacArthur, *American*, 23.

²⁰⁰ MacArthur, *American*, 25.

²⁰¹ MacArthur, *American*, 25; 161.

critic who favours “integrating” autobiographical considerations “with other approaches” to Ashbery’s poetry, MacArthur’s study counters what have arguably been “critical blindspots” in interpretations of his work.²⁰² Nonetheless, to suggest that his “cosmopolitan” landscapes invariably “lack personal significance” risks discrediting the role that both abstract ideas of the city and actual urban spaces played throughout Ashbery’s early development and later creative life.²⁰³

MacArthur argues, for example, that those who cast Ashbery as a poet of urban sensibilities fail to take into account his “evolving meditations on his childhood landscape”.²⁰⁴ Yet, as Ashbery explained in his 2003 interview with Mark Ford, “until I was about seven I lived mainly with my grandparents”, not in rural Sodus but in nearby Rochester, “which I much preferred, since it was in the city”.²⁰⁵ “Living in the city”, Ashbery indicated, “represented for me the happiest part of my childhood”, arguably intensifying his growing disenchantment with rural life and leading him to increasingly idealise the city once he moved to his parents’ farm.²⁰⁶ To this end, Robert Crawford writes that “even when (as he often does) Ashbery writes of rural America, [his identity] is one moulded by and articulated by urban perceptions”.²⁰⁷

After his grandparents retired to more rural Pultneyville in 1942, Ashbery’s childhood longing to “live in a metropolis” refocused on New York, largely because it was “the closest” urban hub.²⁰⁸ It became the lodestar of the young poet’s burgeoning intellectual, artistic and literary aspirations, with Ashbery viewing cities in general, and New York in particular, as “the place to be for an artist”.²⁰⁹ “When he first arrived at Harvard and New York City”,

²⁰² MacArthur, *American*, 27.

²⁰³ MacArthur, *American*, 23.

²⁰⁴ MacArthur, *American*, 23.

²⁰⁵ Mark Ford, *John Ashbery in Conversation* (UK: Between the Lines, 2003), 21.

²⁰⁶ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 65.

²⁰⁷ Robert Crawford, *Identifying Poets* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1993), 119.

²⁰⁸ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 30.

²⁰⁹ Karin Roffman, *The Songs We Know Best* (USA: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2017), 6.

Ashbery "helped create his urban reputation", cultivating many of the more urban sensibilities associated with his poetry.²¹⁰ Nonetheless, his "attitude toward city life as an adult [was] more ambivalent", and he increasingly "found most urban centers to be blandly interchangeable".²¹¹ It is therefore arguable that the "nostalgia for the city" which runs throughout Ashbery's poetry is tied more to the *idea* of the city, and that the cityscapes of his work form an abstract portrait akin to the urban "logarithm" of "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror".²¹²

1.1.3. "The Published City": the idea of influence.

Given that she explores Ashbery through his connection "to earlier American authors with rural roots", MacArthur largely dismisses "urban" influences on his work in favour of considering him "firmly in the line of American romanticism".²¹³ However, critics in general have arguably been slow to consider influences on Ashbery's cityscapes, even with regard to those writers whose work is frequently considered in connection to urban themes and widely established as having a significant impact on his poetry.

One example is the 20th-century Anglo-American poet, W.H. Auden, who, as Ashbery acknowledged, is often seen as "the first and therefore the most important influence" on his work.²¹⁴ "The symbol of the City" is often stressed to be amongst the "central imagery" of the Auden canon, with Monroe Spears labelling cities as the "dominant symbol in most of Auden's [...] poems since 1945".²¹⁵ Whilst "the City has always been a feature of Auden's moralized landscape", Spears suggests that perhaps Auden's most "elaborate use of the city

²¹⁰ MacArthur, *American*, 23.

²¹¹ Timothy Gray, *Urban Pastoral* (USA: Iowa UP, 2010), 43.

²¹² Herd, "John Ashbery".

²¹³ MacArthur, *American*, 24.

²¹⁴ John Ashbery, "John Clare", in *Other Traditions* (USA: Harvard UP, 2000), 4.

²¹⁵ Monroe Spears, "The Dominant Symbols of Auden's Poetry", *Sewanee Review* (1951), 424; 414; 413.

symbol” runs throughout ‘Memorial for the City’” (1949),²¹⁶ in which the “Metropolis”²¹⁷ is a metaphor for the conflicting, metaphysical drives at the heart of human civilization. As the poem informs us, “The facts and acts of the City bore a double meaning”, there being, amongst others, the “Rational City” of ideas, the “Conscious City” of “faith”, the “Glittering City” of “pride” and, underneath it all, the possibility that all such cities are one and the same.²¹⁸ Much as Ashbery’s urban imagery fluctuates between the abstract and the concrete, Auden employs the imagery of the physical built environment as an architectural tether for more metaphysical concepts. Nonetheless, urban space in Auden’s work has seldom been explored as something from which Ashbery may have “learned”, despite the fact that Ashbery characterised the “landscape” of his and Auden’s poetry as embodying a “similar way of personifying and of making things concrete”.²¹⁹ Although the poet reflected that “not many people see this [connection] in my work”, one exception is Perloff.²²⁰ In her wider study of the “unreal city” in modern American poetry, she suggests that Auden may “have been Ashbery’s model when he wrote ‘These Lacustrine Cities’” (*Rivers and Mountains*, 1966).²²¹ The poem is often cited by those seeking to affirm Ashbery’s urban affinities, echoing the same themes of multiplicity, “time” and mankind’s “imperfections” which Spears identifies in Auden’s cityscapes.²²²

These lacustrine cities grew out of loathing

Into something forgetful, although angry with history.

They are the product of an idea: that man is horrible, for instance,

²¹⁶ Spears, “Dominant”, 413; 416; 416.

²¹⁷ W.H. Auden, “Memorial for the City”, *Horizon* (Nov. 1949), 291.

²¹⁸ Auden, “Memorial”, 288; 289; 289; 289; 289; 289.

²¹⁹ Remnick, “John Ashbery”.

²²⁰ Remnick, “John Ashbery”.

²²¹ Perloff, *Poetics*, 23.

²²² Spears, “Dominant”, 400.

Though this is only one example.²²³

Another figure worth considering in relation to the concept of urban influence is the early 20th-century American poet, Hart Crane, who is often cited as having created a thoroughly lyrical “rendition of the modern cityscape”.²²⁴ Many of Crane’s best known poems are centred around “imagining [or ‘re-imagining’] the city”, blending a more generalised “abstraction of city space” with “readily recognizable New York locations”.²²⁵ Perhaps the most fully realised example is the epic poem *The Bridge* (1930), which uses Brooklyn Bridge as a form of poetic landmark around which to construct a “mystical synthesis of ‘America’”.²²⁶ As Crane reflected, “history and fact, location, etc., all have to be transfigured into abstract form”.²²⁷ Crane’s vision of the city is often viewed as a model for understanding urban space in poetic terms, especially regarding “the modern subject’s relationship to the city and the modernist poet’s relationship to the literary past”, but his possible influence on Ashbery is seldom considered.²²⁸ In his interview with Ford, Ashbery stated that he was “interested in the work of Hart Crane”, particularly “the small lyrics in *White Buildings*” (1926) and sections of *The Bridge* in which he “mimics the cacophony of Manhattan”.²²⁹ In turn, Crane’s technique of interweaving real and imagined urban landscapes was a concept which Ashbery himself explored in his work, melding the lyrical and the architectural to fashion the endlessly “ambiguous cities” of his own poetry.²³⁰ To this

²²³ John Ashbery, “These Lacustrine Cities”, *CP*, 125.

²²⁴ David Ward, “Aeolian Hart”, *PN Review* (03/2002), https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe?item_id=1180 (Accessed 06/04/2021).

²²⁵ Sunny Stalter, “Subway Ride and Subway System in Hart Crane’s ‘The Tunnel’”, *Journal of Modern Literature* (2010), 73.

²²⁶ Hart Crane, “Letter to Gorham Munson” (1923), reprinted in Langdon Hammer “Hart Crane’s View From Bridge” *The New York Review* (24/11/2017) <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/11/24/hart-cranes-view-from-the-bridge/> (Accessed 06/04/2021).

²²⁷ Crane, “Letter”.

²²⁸ Stalter, “Subway”, 71.

²²⁹ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 33.

²³⁰ John Ashbery, *A Worldly Country* (UK: Carcanet, 2007), quote from blurb.

end, Bonnie Costello likens the “changing landscapes” of Ashbery’s poetry to Crane’s, suggesting that both prioritise “spatial” dynamics, even if the resulting scenes “confound narrative logic”.²³¹

1.1.4. An overview of criticism on Ashbery cities.

As Costello mentions in “John Ashbery’s Landscapes”, few readers who undertake a thorough consideration of Ashbery’s poetry would conclude that he has committed himself to a “completely urban reality” (despite the frequency with which the “so-called New York City poet” integrates metropolitan images into his work).²³² This said, those who consider Ashbery in terms of his urban imagery tend to divide into two camps. First, there are those who link Ashbery to the real-life built environment of NYC or frame his city imagery as a reflection of his New York School ties. Second, there are those who suggest that he holds specifically urban sensibilities, many of whom use this language as a metaphor for “Ashbery’s poetic cosmopolitanism”.²³³ Gilbert, for example, asserts the metropolitan nature of Ashbery’s poetics based on the view that his work “is overwhelmingly preoccupied with the [...] ambience of cultural density, geographically epitomized by New York City”.²³⁴ Crawford demonstrates aspects of both approaches, using the image of “modern New York” to express Ashbery’s inherent contemporaneity as a poet.²³⁵ By “using urban material”, Crawford suggests, Ashbery underscores his preoccupation with the “now”, with the critic using the image of the city as a means to situate Ashbery in relation to his poetic

²³¹ Bonnie Costello, “John Ashbery’s Landscapes”, in *The Tribe of John*, ed. Susan Schultz (USA: Alabama UP, 1995), 69.

²³² Costello, “John Ashbery’s”, 63; 62.

²³³ Greenberg, “Memoriam”.

²³⁴ Gilbert, *Walks*, 210.

²³⁵ Crawford, *Identifying*, 115.

predecessors.²³⁶ “Where Whitman sang of the open road, Ashbery constructs a poetry for and of the age of the multi-lane highway [...] a poetry of later twentieth-century media-saturated America, particularly metropolitan New York”.²³⁷

Beyond such attestations of Ashbery’s “urban sensibilities”, perhaps the most notable study of Ashbery’s cityscapes is *Urban Pastoral* by Timothy Gray, which considers “urban/pastoral” themes in the work of the New York School.²³⁸ Gray suggests how “members of the New York School found in their city a charged atmosphere conducive to their ambitions”.²³⁹ Nonetheless, despite explicitly framing the poets of the New York School (including Ashbery) as “city writers”, Gray suggests that their use of urban imagery primarily demonstrates their “natural sensibilities”.²⁴⁰ “Members of the School”, he argues, “were, at heart, nature writers”, allowing “the wonders of nature to shape their appreciation of city life”.²⁴¹ Whilst he explores how Ashbery interweaves “natural currents [with] urban environments”, Gray suggests that cities play a largely semiotic role in Ashbery’s poetry, with the “openness of the metropolis” allowing him to dwell on pastoral images within the confines of urban space.²⁴²

A final critic of note is Perloff, as previously mentioned, who, in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, considers how the specific imagery of “Ashbery’s mysterious ‘lacustrine cities’ relate[s] to Eliot’s ‘Unreal City’”.²⁴³ Perloff does not reference “Grand Galop” in her analysis. Nonetheless, as the only critic who has sought to consider how we should explore Ashbery’s cityscapes when faced with an apparent absence of solid architectural imagery, her consideration of Ashbery’s “enigmatic” cities remains a key reference for this chapter.²⁴⁴

²³⁶ Crawford, *Identifying*, 110.

²³⁷ Crawford, *Identifying*, 102-103.

²³⁸ Gray, *Urban*, 43.

²³⁹ Gray, *Urban*, 43.

²⁴⁰ Gray, *Urban*, 2-3.

²⁴¹ Gray, *Urban*, 7.

²⁴² Gray, *Urban*, 12; 61.

²⁴³ Perloff, *Poetics*, 11.

²⁴⁴ Perloff, *Poetics*, 9.

She primarily considers Ashbery's own "unreal" cities as "verbal [rather than architectural] landscapes", in the sense that she suggests that they ultimately "exist nowhere outside of the text itself. For how are we to understand cities that have no streets or buildings [...] indeed, cities located in a semantic field that also contains desert and mountain"?²⁴⁵ In making this distinction, Perloff seems to be taking a Barthesian approach, in that she suggests Ashbery's urban imagery denotes less "recognizable" cities than semiotic ones".²⁴⁶ Although I reference Perloff throughout my analysis, I do not approach the cityscape of "Grand Galop" in the same terms. Instead, I address the poem's imagery of space and place as a response to a concrete built environment which, despite being "never completely visible or measurable" within the text, is nonetheless presumed to exist, and not only *inside* the text. Though Perloff and I may explore Ashbery's cities in different terms and come, ultimately, to different conclusions, we are nonetheless concerned with the same question. To paraphrase Perloff, how are we to approach a poem which supposedly takes place in the city yet contains almost no direct references to the built environment?

1.2. "The sights of our/ town": "Grand Galop" and the journey across urban space.

When Ashbery was awarded the National Humanities Medal for his contribution to "contemporary American poetry" in 2011, a brief overview of his life and career was published on the National Endowment for the Humanities website.²⁴⁷ The piece was aimed at a more "general audience", largely unfamiliar with Ashbery as a poet.²⁴⁸ "The primary reason Ashbery is held to be "enigmatic", the author, Steve Moyer wrote, is because he seldom tries

²⁴⁵ Perloff, *Poetics*, 14; 11; 9.

²⁴⁶ Ashbery, "GG", 437.

²⁴⁷ Steve Moyer, "John Ashbery", *National Endowment for the Humanities* (2011)

<https://www.neh.gov/about/awards/national-humanities-medals/john-ashbery> (Accessed 17/05/2020).

²⁴⁸ Moyer, "John Ashbery".

to establish meaning “conventionally”.²⁴⁹ Rather, “an Ashbery poem can be one great romp through time and space, starting nowhere in particular and leaving [...] nothing more certain” to hold onto than the vague impression that “all things connect”, albeit in ways we have yet to ascertain.²⁵⁰ This paints Ashbery’s work as a quasi-spatial experience akin to poetic orienteering, in which we must navigate our way through an unknown and often nebulous landscape with few topographical signposts. Yet the poet remains with us as a form of tour guide, subtly guiding the reader through an ever-shifting terrain of narrative possibilities. “With Ashbery as cicerone”, Moyer writes, “readers travel to exotic realms embedded in the everyday [...] adding up to compositions that become comprehensible only as a whole”.²⁵¹ This concept of Ashbery’s poetry as “an unmappable, metamorphic terrain” is not unique within Ashbery criticism.²⁵² For Moyer, however, this characterisation leads him to single out one poem which, with its depiction of “space” and “place”, offers a “way to gain entry” to Ashbery’s poetry as a whole.²⁵³ Given that his poems often appear to “omit” just as much as they “include”, Moyer writes, “a good place to start for those getting acquainted with Ashbery is ‘Grand Galop’: ‘All things seem mention of themselves/ And [...] branch out to other referents’”.²⁵⁴

These opening lines from the poem are representative of what Moyer suggests is the discursive nature of Ashbery’s work. From the outset, the speaker undermines any possibility of establishing certainty, just as “all things” within the world of the poem will inevitably lead to an exponential number of possible paths for the reader to travel down. Yet, whilst Moyer employs the image of a labyrinthine landscape as a metaphor for approaching the “enigmatic” nature of Ashbery’s poetry, the unknowable environment which readers are shepherded

²⁴⁹ Moyer, “John Ashbery”.

²⁵⁰ Moyer, “John Ashbery”.

²⁵¹ Moyer, “John Ashbery”.

²⁵² Costello, “John Ashbery’s”, 72.

²⁵³ Moyer, “John Ashbery”.

²⁵⁴ Moyer, “John Ashbery”.

through in “Grand Galop” is equal parts figurative and literal. Given that the narrative blends an emblematic climate of apparent “abstractions” with the more concrete “sights of our/town”, to read the poem is ultimately to evoke the speaker’s route through the built environment, down streets which offer no real destination, just an ever-increasing “variety of directions to the foot”.²⁵⁵

The poem opens in the more “meditative mode” which Gilbert suggests is characteristic of Ashbery, appearing to deal with the “*experience* of reflection” rather than the concrete reality of its supposedly urban setting.²⁵⁶ This appears to support the theory that Ashbery’s poetry “functions primarily as an exercise in abstraction”, with his depictions of space and place operating in equally abstract terms.²⁵⁷ However, such meditations begin to spill over into the external world as we obtain our first glimpse of the landscape.

All things seem mention of themselves

And the names which stem from them branch out to other referents.

Hugely, spring exists again. The weigila does its dusty thing

In fire-hammered air. And garbage cans are heaved against

The railing as the tulips yawn and crack open and fall apart.²⁵⁸

Before its vague setting has come into focus, “Grand Galop” alerts us that we are entering a poetic landscape ripe with the potential for allusion and inference. The initial evocation of “all things” could be viewed as a reference to the oft-noted “inclusive temperament” or

²⁵⁵ John Ashbery, “Grand Galop”, *CP*, 436; 436; 440. (Hereafter cites as “GG”).

²⁵⁶ Gilbert, *Walks*, 210; 209.

²⁵⁷ Lepkowski, “John Ashbery’s”, 251; 250-251.

²⁵⁸ Ashbery, “GG”, 436.

“porousness” of Ashbery’s poetry which, James McCorkle writes, aims to “saturate space” practically to the point of “overflowing”.²⁵⁹ This argument makes sense if, as Gilbert proposes, “Grand Galop” is essentially the type of landscape poem which seeks to transcribe elements of space and place, with such plurality being “built into” the “climate” of the poem itself.²⁶⁰ Yet the language serves equally as an acknowledgement of the constructive or discursive nature of poetry. “All things”, Ashbery stresses, are more than just “themselves”, being inseparable from a wider context of meaning and connective “referents”. Shoptaw interprets this as Ashbery’s “philosophically and syntactically labored” way of expressing his desire to be “representative”, just as language is a “referential system” which essentially “democratizes” meaning in order to contain “every thing”, whether significant or insignificant.²⁶¹ However, in emphasising the poem’s nature as a so-called “cryptographic word chain”, the poet also presents “Grand Galop” as an inherently self-reflexive or metapoetic experience.²⁶² He begins the poem by reminding readers that even words themselves may be “other” than they “seem”.

The poem opens with what initially appears to be an image of the natural world, the advent of spring signifying the prospect of renewal. As the first description of the poem’s setting, this subtly encourages us to form an initial impression of the physical environment. The quasi-bucolic imagery is abruptly recontextualised by the crash of garbage cans and the encroaching, “unassimilable debris of urban existence” that they represent.²⁶³ This, Ashbery indicates, is just the first instance of the “endless bathos” which “Grand Galop” engenders, with our widening perspective on the poem’s opening scene leading to an equally drastic shift

²⁵⁹ James McCorkle, quoted in Susan Schultz, Introduction, in *The Tribe of John*, ed. Susan Schultz (Tuscaloosa: U Alabama P, 1995), 9.

²⁶⁰ Ashbery, “GG”, 436.

²⁶¹ Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 163.

²⁶² Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 164.

²⁶³ Gilbert, *Walks*, 236.

in our understanding of the landscape in which it is set.²⁶⁴ What at first appears as a microcosmic depiction of the natural world is revealed to be simply an urban flowerbed, sectioned off from the surrounding built environment by battered “railings” and producing “garbage” as well as plants. This could be read as a reference to the forms of “urban nature” which Gray suggests infuse Ashbery’s cityscapes.²⁶⁵ However, as this mirage of the natural world “fall[s] apart”, followed shortly by the crumbling, “dusty” buds which first inspired it, the poem’s setting could equally be read to mirror the message of Ashbery’s “At North Farm” (*A Wave*, 1984): “Hardly anything grows here”.²⁶⁶

From the outset, “Grand Galop”, raises the possibility that we are not being given a whole view, intimating that our impressions of space and place may be subject to unexpected subversion at any time. As we try to orient ourselves within the poem’s landscape, we begin to suspect that there may be more to our surroundings than meets the eye, just as Ashbery suggested that it was necessary to move beyond purely visual forms of representation to “express space more accurately”. Seeking to fill in the gaps in our perspective, we are also primed to try and place those surroundings within a larger referential framework, one which is spatial as well as semiotic.

1.2.1. Non-descriptive description.

Despite voicing scepticism about considering Ashbery’s poetry in anything resembling “objective spatial terms”, Gilbert nonetheless frames “Grand Galop” to be “essentially a poem grounding itself in a particular landscape”.²⁶⁷ However, although he interprets that landscape to be “like Manhattan” specifically, his decision to classify the

²⁶⁴ Ashbery, “GG”, 442.

²⁶⁵ Gray, *Urban*, 2-3.

²⁶⁶ John Ashbery, “At North Farm”, *CP*, 733.

²⁶⁷ Gilbert, *Walks*, 222; 256.

poem's setting as a cityscape is based on the fact that its setting is chiefly "described in terms of [...] urban ephemera".²⁶⁸ Rather than the architecture of Manhattan itself, it is these shifting ephemera which place the poem, much as Ashbery classified cities as "ephemeral" spaces in his art criticism. For Gilbert, non-aesthetic "ephemera" symbolise the "banality", and "undifferentiated texture" of urban space, both architectural and cultural, with the poem mapping Ashbery's journey as he "confronts the flux of phenomena assailing him on the streets of the city, and tries desperately to assimilate and somehow redeem that flux in all its trashiness".²⁶⁹ In this context, the city is one step removed from the poem itself, in the sense that it is chiefly conveyed through its association with abstract concepts of metropolitan identity which are suggested to be as "infested with trash and glop" as the poem's splattered pavements.²⁷⁰ This results, Gilbert indicates, in a "bleakly reductive vision" of urban space, with Ashbery using the urban built environment to embody ideas of "frustration, disgust, paralysis, and anxiety" (to the extent that he proposes the poem should be retitled "Grand Glop" due to the unappealing nature of its cityscape).²⁷¹

Despite the lack of detailed attention which the poem has received, Gilbert appears to be far from alone in viewing Ashbery's characterisation of the city as "overwhelmingly negative".²⁷² Bromwich, for example, characterises the city of "Grand Galop" as a "monstruous spectacle",²⁷³ whilst Joseph Hollander reflects that the poem ultimately catalogues "a great walk though urban dreck".²⁷⁴

²⁶⁸ Gilbert, *Walks*, 260; 256.

²⁶⁹ Gilbert, *Walks*, 237; 236

²⁷⁰ Gilbert, *Walks*, 248.

²⁷¹ Gilbert, *Walks*, 250; 237.

²⁷² Gilbert, *Walks*, 250.

²⁷³ Bromwich, "John Ashbery", 195.

²⁷⁴ Joseph Hollander, *The Work of Poetry* (USA: Colombia, 1997), 51.

Water

Drops from an air conditioner

On those who pass underneath. It's one of the sights of our

town.

Puaagh. Vomit. Puaaaagh. More vomit.²⁷⁵

With its descriptions of “garbage”, “vomit” and dripping condensation, this landscape is potentially reminiscent of the “scent of garbage, patchouli and carbon monoxide” which Ashbery suggested emanated from O’Hara’s poetry. What serves, in the context of O’Hara’s work, as “the life of the city”, is also here indicated to constitute the everyday sounds, “smell”, and “sights of our town”.²⁷⁶ Rather than the more abstract cognitive or meditative processes which Gilbert suggests Ashbery’s poetry usually embodies, this is more in line with the sensory or phenomenal nature of O’Hara’s walk poems, through which he “directly engages the walker’s sensibility and body through its sensuous particulars”.²⁷⁷ “Grand Galop” opens by evoking certain specifics of time and place (“Today is Monday. Today’s lunch is”)²⁷⁸ with Ashbery “deliberately, if affectionately, subverting his friend’s sense that a given day can be defined and evoked through such particulars”.²⁷⁹ Even the inclusion of the “lunch” menu feasibly alludes to O’Hara’s own *Lunch Poems* (1964). This leads Gilbert to frame “Grand Galop” as a response to “some of O’Hara’s walk poems”, suggesting that “Grand Galop” “owes much” to the cityscapes of O’Hara’s work even to the extent that much of its imagery “could easily appear in an O’Hara poem”.²⁸⁰ Parody or not, the value of transcribing these details soon becomes unclear, as the poet questions the impulse to

²⁷⁵ Ashbery, “GG”, 436.

²⁷⁶ Ashbery, “Introduction”, x.

²⁷⁷ Gilbert, *Walks*, 252.

²⁷⁸ Ashbery, “GG”, 436.

²⁷⁹ Gilbert, *Walks*, 237.

²⁸⁰ Gilbert, 250; 237; 237.

represent or record experience which traditionally characterises landscape poetry. The speaker breaks away from cataloguing the surrounding environment to ask “What time of day is it?/ Does anything matter?” as though beginning to doubt the usefulness of such “minor” details in establishing a true sense of the cityscape.²⁸¹

What precisely is it

About the time of day it is, the weather, that causes people to

note it painstakingly in their diaries

For them to read who shall come after?

Surely it is because the ray of light

Or gloom striking you this moment is hope

In all its mature, matronly form, taking all things into

account

And reapportioning them according to size²⁸²

This passage is reminiscent of Ashbery’s “Pyrography” (*Houseboat Days*, 1977), which stresses that “to be able to write the history of our time”, it is “necessary to model all these unimportant details” to prevent the “narrative” from being “flat” or incomplete.²⁸³ In “Grand Galop”, however, the inclusion of such insignificant particulars has the reverse effect,

²⁸¹ Ashbery, “GG”, 436; 438.

²⁸² Ashbery, “GG”, 439.

²⁸³ John Ashbery, “Pyrography”, *CP*, 496-497.

making the speaker's account more "lackluster [and] disorganized" rather than truly comprehensive.²⁸⁴ In allowing such minutiae to "take on an importance out of all proportion to the story", the speaker suggests, we risk substituting for what matters that which is simply "meaningless", to the extent that the original "point" or "goal" of the narrative can become lost in the face of this endless drive to transcribe.²⁸⁵ This argument is reminiscent of the article "Poetical Space", in which Ashbery stated that the poetry of place may in fact be more "meaningful for being imprecise", suggesting that the secret to "express[ing] space more accurately" lay in conveying "how the visible world feels" rather than trying to create an "exact description" of how it "looks". Rather than a means of approaching space "meaningfully", the speaker likens the poetic transcription of place to being "forced to fret over insufficient details" which have no hope of truly encapsulating what are ultimately "large/ Unfinished concepts".²⁸⁶ Outside of their original context, spatial or experiential, such specifics may as well be abstractions, being either too "general" to convey any true sense of place or too pedantically "precise" to hold any actual import for those "who shall come after".²⁸⁷ The poem blurs the line between representation and obfuscation, since such precise descriptions and the "imperfect knowledge" they convey are depicted as, paradoxically, an ineffective method of articulating what a given scene or place "is really like".²⁸⁸ This feeds into the poem's cityscape, or lack thereof, which is portrayed in terms equally "flat" or "empty".²⁸⁹ In using the imagery of space and place as a means to obstruct our view of the poem's supposedly urban setting, Ashbery ultimately questions the validity of approaching such spaces in descriptive terms in the first place, with the narrative repeatedly trailing off with an "etc", as though calling on the reader to just extrapolate the remaining details based

²⁸⁴ Ashbery, "GG", 438.

²⁸⁵ Ashbery, "GG", 438; 440.

²⁸⁶ Ashbery, "GG", 438.

²⁸⁷ Ashbery, "GG", 438.

²⁸⁸ Ashbery, "GG", 438; 436.

²⁸⁹ Ashbery, "GG", 438.

on what information is available. Representation is not just an afterthought, but actively sidestepped, with the speaker stating “if it turns out to be not worth doing, I haven’t done it”.²⁹⁰ The result is a landscape poem to which the actual landscape in question feels increasingly incidental, as the speaker increasingly appears disaffected not just from descriptive models of experience, but with the particulars of space and place themselves.

So that it finally made no difference

Whether this were the end or if it was somewhere else:

If it had to be somewhere it might as well be

Here, on top of one. Here, as elsewhere²⁹¹

In outlining “a process of description and classification that succeeds in its twin tasks precisely by shirking them”, “Grand Galop” is again reminiscent of Ashbery’s “Poetical Space”, in which he described his own “poetical phenomenology” as reflecting “the kind of anti-descriptiveness [which is] forced to do the work of description”.²⁹² This could be read as a parody of the kind of landscape poetry which “builds” itself “around a single experiential center” as a means of meditating on the abstract nature of experience.²⁹³ Gilbert speaks of “Ashbery’s radical stance toward experience”, which demonstrates a “profound distrust of representation” and the significance of particular perceptions.²⁹⁴ Rather than “taking all things into/ account” in order to transcribe the most “minor” details of the urban built environment, Ashbery elects to portray the city solely through what he suggests “doesn’t matter”.²⁹⁵ Instead of citing familiar architectural images, “Grand Galop” asks, “what if all

²⁹⁰ Ashbery, “GG”, 439.

²⁹¹ Ashbery, “GG”, 440.

²⁹² Ashbery, “Poetical Space”, 215.

²⁹³ Gilbert, *Walks*, 21.

²⁹⁴ Gilbert, *Walks*, 246; 250.

²⁹⁵ Ashbery, “GG”, 438.

moments and places are equally confining and opaque”, blending into a homogenous pulp like the landscape of “glop” with which the poem opens?²⁹⁶

1.3. “Vacant lots” and “certain buildings”: Abstraction, indecision and insignificance.

The speaker calling our attention to the so-called “sights” of the built environment recalls Moyer’s description of Ashbery as a “cicerone” or tour guide, leading us through a poetic landscape in order to point out places of interest. Hollander reflects that “Grand Galop” traverses a distinctly “urban” landscape “in an almost cinematic movement” between snapshot scenes of the metropolis.²⁹⁷ However, as we survey our newfound surroundings, these spaces appear equally nondescript, being consistently characterised by “banalities rather than beauties”.²⁹⁸

The early night is cool, but not
Too anything. People parading with their pets
Past lawns and vacant lots, as though these too were
somehow imponderables.²⁹⁹

Here the “sights of our town” are represented not by sites of significance but by literal gaps in the built environment – those blank spaces which symbolise nowhere and nothing. As “vacant” places they can neither incite interest nor be important on their own terms, instead existing solely to be wandered “past” en route to some other, apparently equally undefined destination. The result is an urban setting primarily characterised by architectural absence.

²⁹⁶ Gilbert, *Walks*, 245.

²⁹⁷ Hollander, *Work*, 51.

²⁹⁸ Gilbert, *Walks*, 236.

²⁹⁹ Ashbery, “GG”, 437.

Any structures we encounter appear actively resistant to sustained contemplation, with the speaker's attention simply sliding off them. The edifices of the urban built environment are indicated to be indeterminate, representing an enigmatic landscape which we do not and cannot comprehend. As "imponderables" there is also, etymologically speaking, the sense of their "having no weight" or "material substance", not just metaphorically but architecturally.³⁰⁰ That which is traditionally concrete is revealed to be insubstantial or immaterial, with those buildings we do see conveyed as "weightless" or "hollow".³⁰¹

The cityscape appears like an architectural mirage sustained solely by the unquestioning acceptance of those who passively behold it, as if deciphering the urban built environment risks ruining the illusion which allows it to exist in the first place. Rather, in order for the city to remain in a state of "still-perfect possibility", we must simply accept that it exists.³⁰² This makes cities akin to an architectural Schrödinger's Cat, in the sense that they are able to exist only under such extreme conditions of uncertainty that to gaze directly upon them risks negating their existence (much as the speaker takes in the "sight" of the city only to conclude that they "have seen nothing").³⁰³ In this scenario, the fact that Ashbery's "walk in the city" contains so few "definable referents" becomes an active part of his characterisation of urban space. If, as he indicates, the city is truly imponderable, then any attempt to pin it down is basically futile, as to do so would require reducing our understanding of cityscapes as complex, mutable, quasi-"abstractions" in favour of more stable yet simplistic "easy-to-grasp/ entities".³⁰⁴

To portray the city directly risks sacrificing the quality of mutability which makes it a city in the first place. As such, "Grand Galop" depends instead on a "series of synecdoches"

³⁰⁰ "Imponderables", adj. *OED*, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/92536?redirectedFrom=imponderables#eid> (Accessed 04/06/21)

³⁰¹ Ashbery, "GG", 437; 339.

³⁰² Ashbery, "GG", 440.

³⁰³ Ashbery, "GG", 439.

³⁰⁴ Ashbery, "GG", 436.

and “fragmented images” to establish a sense of setting, like glimpses of otherwise unacknowledged surroundings caught out of the corner of one’s eye.³⁰⁵ In attempting to “‘mention’ everything”, it is inevitable that “direct perception of the particular must always give way to abstraction”.³⁰⁶ In a similar fashion, the speaker’s model of urban reflection remains “partially incomplete”, consisting chiefly of “abstractions” untethered to the actual places which inspired them, places which nevertheless remain “built into” the narrative at a fundamental level.³⁰⁷ We are therefore only being shown one half of the equation, in the sense that we are allowed to witness the ruminations which the city triggers in the speaker and yet not the specific architectural stimuli which such musings “stem from”, before “branch[ing] out to other /referents”. Bromwich touches on this idea in his description of Ashbery’s cities as “half visible landscapes”.³⁰⁸ Yet, as the poem continues, the cityscape’s indeterminate character blends into the hazy, “abstractionist” quality of the narrative itself, with the speaker directly attributing their own inability to be definitive to the surrounding built environment.³⁰⁹

are we never to make a statement?

And certain buildings we always pass which are never

mentioned –

It’s getting out of hand.

As long as one has some sense that each thing knows its place

All is well, but with the arrival and departure

Of each new one overlapping so intensely in the semi-darkness

³⁰⁵ Perloff, *Poetics*, 10.

³⁰⁶ Gilbert, *Walks*, 242-243.

³⁰⁷ Ashbery, “GG”, 436.

³⁰⁸ Bromwich, “John Ashbery”, 191.

³⁰⁹ Bromwich, “John Ashbery”, 191.

It's a bit mad. Too bad, I mean, that getting to know each
just for a fleeting second
Must be replaced by imperfect knowledge of the featureless
Whole³¹⁰

Ashbery first draws attention to the specific edifices of the cityscape, pointing out “certain buildings” in a manner reminiscent of the “sights of our town”. However, he then conspicuously deflects that attention, with any significance such structures may have being immediately counterbalanced by the fact that they are emphasised to be something which we do not, and must “never[,] mention”. This shifting dynamic is feasibly encoded in the poet’s use of the adjective “certain”, which would initially seem to promise fixity and significance, much as each building has and “knows its place” within the wider cityscape. However, as a descriptor which equally implies specificity and generalisation, it also falls short of the outright “statement” which the speaker seeks. This may be the reason for “the poem’s supposed opacity”, which Huybensz attributes to its “refusal to admit the reader into its individual context”.³¹¹ By using the plural form of “buildings”, Ashbery evokes a contradictorily plural sense of specificity, blurring the line between the singular and the multiplicitous, or the “meaningful[I]” and the “meaningless”.³¹² If “certain buildings” ultimately hold no more inbuilt significance than “vacant lots”, then this places the focus not on the particulars of the built environment but rather on the overall cycle of demolition and construction which characterises urban space as a whole. This may be why Ashbery’s city contains so few architectural references, the poet depicting a “walk in the city” without “mentioning” the city itself. With all specifics removed, it is left to the reader to fill in the

³¹⁰ Ashbery, “GG”, 437-438.

³¹¹ Huybensz, ““Grand Galop””, 45.

³¹² Ashbery, “GG”, 438; 440.

gaps, literal and figurative, which constitute the poem's landscape. This feasibly represents a one-size-fits-all model for transcribing urban space, creating an urban "logarithm" rather than a singular vision of the metropolis.

Ashbery seems to outline two possible models for how we experience urban space and place. Either we attain a thorough familiarity with an isolated fraction of the cityscape, knowing all the while that any such attachment must be short-lived ("getting to know each just for a fleeting second"), or we gain a vague impression of the city in its entirety. One approach leads the viewer to focus solely on transitory particulars, such as "certain buildings" or given "streets", and in doing so lose all sense of the larger picture. The other embodies the opposite extreme, with the cityscape being rendered "featureless" as we attempt to ascertain an impression of the "whole". Both visions are inherently incomplete. Yet, due to the nature of cities, such partial views are the best we can hope for. This, the poet indicates, is not just because obtaining a true image of the city as a "whole" is impossible, but because the urban landscape is never technically complete in any case.

Two main grounds for this characterisation emerge over the course of "Grand Galop". One concerns Ashbery's vision of the city as a landscape which "never stands still", meaning that any vision of the urban built environment will be rendered "obsolete" almost as soon as it has been established. A second, related interpretation is that cities remain incomplete because their ephemerality renders them "foreign/ To our concept of time".³¹³ This is in part due to architecture, traditionally a symbol of permanence, becoming an essentially transient phenomenon within the ephemeral cityscape. Constructions are as dependent on the "share of time" they take up in the built environment as they are on the actual materials from which they are constructed, existing under conditions equally temporal and spatial.³¹⁴ As such, cities

³¹³ Ashbery, "GG", 436.

³¹⁴ Ashbery, "GG", 436.

are spaces in which time itself functions differently, where a single second may witness the rise and fall of an entire landscape, which “changes the minute to an hour” and reduces “days” or even “months” to mere hypothetical “abstractions”.³¹⁵ A “whole” version of the city can, by default, never exist in any one moment. Instead, the landscape of “Grand Galop” is the result of different visions of the city at different times, “each new one overlapping”. Each construction is overshadowed not just by that which was demolished to make room for it but by what will eventually replace it. This frames the city as a culmination of all the structures which have contributed to it at different points in time and space, a concept stressed in Ashbery’s article on Rossi: “what is unbuilt or incomplete has a function no less important than what is actually there, as part of a never completely visible or measurable totality”.

1.4. “The work is redeemed in the end”: the metapoetic metropolis.

In her discussion of “real” vs. “unreal” cities in American poetry, Perloff indicates that Ashbery’s “These Lacustrine Cities” demonstrates how his poetry “frustrat[es] our longing for certainty” through its “refusal to ‘mean’ in conventional ways”.³¹⁶ She attributes this specifically to the absence of those “referential signposts” that she suggests traditionally characterise the poetry of urban space and place, namely “streets”, “buildings” or other material signifiers of the built environment.³¹⁷ In withholding these expected “points on the map”, the critic writes, “the poem blocks all attempts to rationalize its imagery [or] make it conform to a coherent pattern”.³¹⁸ Perloff concludes that Ashbery’s “These Lacustrine Cities” consists of “verbal” rather than architectural constructions, in the sense that the poem’s

³¹⁵ Ashbery, “GG”, 436.

³¹⁶ Perloff, *Poetics*, 13.

³¹⁷ Perloff, *Poetics*, 13.

³¹⁸ Perloff, *Poetics*, 10.

landscape is chiefly characterised according to the “intertextual relationships” it forges with other “unreal” cities throughout poetic tradition.³¹⁹ Nonetheless, this proposed correlation between the establishment of setting and the construction of a more abstract poetic meaning holds intriguing implications for “Grand Galop”, in which the speaker’s “characterization” of urban space paradoxically only emphasises that the cityscape “lacks true distinction”.³²⁰ Neither poem aims to “depict a coherent, recognizable landscape”, though “These Lacustrine Cities” at least references the cities of its title, albeit as an “unanchored image, whose evocations are indeterminate”.³²¹ In turn, both feature “temporal and spatial dislocations”, “oscillati[ng] between representational reference” and a more symbolist style in order to imbue what sense of place they do convey with collage-like aspects.³²² Gill touches on this concept, suggesting that Ashbery’s speakers may portray suburban space by “gestur[ing] towards its component elements”, even when they appear “unable to name” the space itself.³²³ However, rather than an immersive transcription of a given environment, the landscape of “Grand Galop” is arguably more akin to a “meeting place between the discursive and the phenomenal”, or the poetic and the architectural.³²⁴

The difficulty we face in charting the poem’s landscape is a dual one. The routes we take both spatially and interpretatively are suggested to run largely side by side, with the foundering of one inevitably leading to a parallel breakdown in the other. Streets which only moments before led in a “variety of directions” are suddenly rendered “impassable”, the speaker succumbing to “nervous paralysis” whilst their surroundings crumble to “dust” and “fragments”.³²⁵ This is in keeping with the poem’s characterisation of a city which “def[ies]/

³¹⁹ Perloff, *Poetics*, 12; 34.

³²⁰ Ashbery, “GG”, 436; 437.

³²¹ Perloff, *Poetics*, 12; 15.

³²² Perloff, *Poetics*, 13; 34.

³²³ Gill, *Poetics*, 116.

³²⁴ Perloff, *Poetics*, 10.

³²⁵ Ashbery, “GG”, 442; 441.

Any notion of continuity”, as though resisting all attempts to use it as a foundation.³²⁶

Ashbery develops this theme further in “Fantasia On ‘The Nut Brown Maid’” (*Houseboat Days*), which describes cities as the “kind of environment” in which “there is/ nothing solid, nothing one can build on”, whether architecturally or interpretatively.³²⁷ As such, in order for urban space to be fully realised, “Grand Galop” indicates, it must first “harden meaningfully”, evolving beyond an unstable amalgamation of construction and abstraction in favour of a more “mature, matronly form”.³²⁸ This evokes the transitional image of a chrysalis, representing the need for the city to stabilise culturally and architecturally to achieve so-called “true distinction”. However, “the groans of labor pains” represent not only the comparative infancy of urban space (as a space forever “brand-new”) but its role as potential midwife for a more creative, poetic muse.³²⁹ Shoptaw suggests that the poem chiefly concerns the “literary topic of self-reflexivity”,³³⁰ in which the speaker’s journey represents their quest to “try and write poetry” and, by extension, our own quest to read or interpret it.³³¹ Our route through the poem is presented in terms both abstract and architectural, with the narrative breaking the fourth wall to address its landscape as a mere “characterization” of urban space, forged from “words” and abstractions rather than the expected “stone” or “marble”.³³² Much as “all things [...] branch out to other referents”, however, those seeking to place the poem in a metapoetic context chiefly stress the aforementioned network of “intraliterary allusiveness” which suffuses “Grand Galop” as a whole.

Lepkowski addresses what is arguably the most prominent of these allusions, framing the poem’s final section as an “ironic rendition of Robert Browning’s great poem ‘Childe

³²⁶ Ashbery, “GG”, 438.

³²⁷ John Ashbery, “Fantasia On ‘The Nut-Brown Maid’”, *CP*, 537; 538.

³²⁸ Ashbery, “GG”, 439.

³²⁹ Ashbery, “GG”, 440

³³⁰ Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 163.

³³¹ Ashbery, “GG”, 440.

³³² Ashbery, “GG”, 441; 442; 437.

Roland to the Dark Tower Came”, the journey of Browning’s quester conveyed through an unremarkable “walk around New York City”.³³³ In Browning’s narrative, “a driven searcher passes through a shifting land of perverse and diminished forms on his way to a heroic confrontation which turns out to be diminished as well”.³³⁴ Like its predecessor, Ashbery’s version also features a protagonist traversing a nebulous landscape, Browning’s waste land replaced by a sea of “urban dreck”. “Ashbery’s version of the legend”, Lepkowski suggests, addresses the poet’s growing awareness of the “unpropitiousness of his cultural moment [and] inability to believe completely in what he is doing”.³³⁵ As such, “the allusion is not named”, nor has the purpose of the speaker’s wanderings been foreshadowed before this point, with concepts of direction and destination having previously been dismissed as irrelevant.³³⁶ Rather, the image of the symbolic “tower” appears unexpectedly for us as readers, popping up unannounced within the narrative much as it unexpectedly emerges within the poem’s landscape. This reinforces our inability to establish a sense of place, not just within the poem’s built environment but also within its narrative. From a modern-day landscape of nondescript urban streets, we suddenly come face to face with a structure akin to the “high tower of romance” from Arthurian legend, directly in the centre of the supposed cityscape.³³⁷ As Lepkowski writes, “the symbolic tower” usually stands as a “symbol of inspiration” throughout poetic tradition, seeming to represent the polar opposite of the nondescript buildings which have peppered the built environment up to this point.³³⁸

This could be read as a further commentary on the relation of the city to concepts of history, architectural or otherwise, with their being “no world, no whole to which these parts

³³³ Lepkowski, “John Ashbery’s”, 261.

³³⁴ Lepkowski, “John Ashbery’s”, 262.

³³⁵ Lepkowski, “John Ashbery’s”, 263.; 261.

³³⁶ Lepkowski, “John Ashbery’s”, 262.

³³⁷ Lepkowski, “John Ashbery’s”, 262.

³³⁸ Lepkowski, “John Ashbery’s”, 264.

may be said to belong”.³³⁹ However, the emergence of Browning’s tower also operates as a spatialised metaphor for what Fred Moramarco calls the struggle of “the twentieth century poet” to escape the weight of poetic tradition.³⁴⁰ The fact that “everything sounds like a citation” has been highlighted by Perloff as “one of the main features of Ashbery’s poetic”, through which he creates a sense that his work stems from a place or time “so permeated by the discourses that endlessly impinge on it” that we can seldom tell the difference between “citation and invention”.³⁴¹ As the speaker of “Grand Galop” nears the end of their journey, however, the built environment increasingly serves not just as an emblem of poetic influence, but as an architectural meditation on the nature of the poetry of the city itself.

But I was trying to tell you about a strange thing
That happened to me, but this is no way to tell about it,
By making it truly happen. It drifts away in fragments.
And one is left sitting in the yard
To try and write poetry
Using what Wyatt and Surrey left around,
Took up and put down again
Like so much gorgeous raw material,
[...]
So there is whirling out at you from the not deep
Emptiness the word “cock” or some other, brother and sister
words

³³⁹ Perloff, *Poetics*, 10.

³⁴⁰ Fred Moramarco, “John Ashbery’s Self Portrait”, *American Poetry Review* (1975), 44.

³⁴¹ Marjorie Perloff, “Normalizing John Ashbery”, (1997) *Jacket*, <http://jacketmagazine.com/02/perloff02.html> (Accessed 10/05/2021).

With not much to be expected from them.³⁴²

With its Elizabethan references, the passage is arguably redolent of *The Waste Land*. Ashbery sifts the city for “raw material” much as the speaker of Eliot’s “Fire Sermon” walks the banks of the Thames, seeking out “testimony” of those who have long “departed” through “empty bottles, sandwich papers,/ Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends” and other urban detritus.³⁴³ Eliot’s city dwellers are depicted as the “loitering heirs” of history, their mythological ancestors not only being long “departed” from the poem’s urban climes but having “left no addresses” which would allow us to follow in their wake.³⁴⁴ Ashbery evokes the “herbage of pre-Elizabethan songs and sonnets drifting through late-twentieth-century New York”, with the figure of the “prospective poet” looking “back across more than four hundred years” of literary history to contemplate his relationship with the poetry of the past.³⁴⁵ Ashbery portrays his connection to his poetic predecessors as akin to the cityscape’s relationship with the pastoral “garden”, forging a parallel between the poetic landscape of “Grand Galop” and his own identity as a poet. This parallels elements of O’Hara’s “Meditations in an Emergency” (1957), in which the city-dwelling speaker evokes the natural world to reflect on his relationship to more “pastoral” models of space and poetry.³⁴⁶ In the same way that the speaker-poet of “Grand Galop” attempts to connect to that “still-moist garden” through the scant “greenery” of their urban yard, however, O’Hara emphasises that such meditations are only worthwhile as long as they do not require him to “leave the

³⁴² Ashbery, “GG”, 440-441.

³⁴³ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (1922), *The Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land> (Accessed 02/06/2021).

³⁴⁴ Eliot, *Waste Land*.

³⁴⁵ Peter Sacks, “The Face of the Sonnet”, in *Green Thoughts, Green Shades*, ed. Jonathan Post (USA: California UP, 2002), 17.

³⁴⁶ Frank O’Hara, “Meditations in an Emergency”, *CPFO*, 197.

confines of New York”.³⁴⁷ “I have never clogged myself with the praises of pastoral life, [...] I can’t even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there’s a subway handy”.³⁴⁸

With its rejection of “pastoral” inspiration, Gray describes the poem as an act of “metropolitan triumphalism”, with O’Hara “taking on the physical features of Manhattan” as a way of “naming what shapes his life as a city poet”.³⁴⁹ Similarly, Ashbery’s speaker-poet uses their urban standpoint as a metaphor for the nature of poetic influence, with their connection to a more rural, poetic past being portrayed in spatial terms. However, unlike O’Hara, Ashbery’s speaker appears far from certain about planting their poetic roots within the confines of urban space. If the architecture of the city renders its inhabitants unable to “make a/ statement”, the poem queries, then how can it provide us with the necessary “raw materials” to make art? Furthermore, in anchoring our poetry in such a landscape, do we not risk producing work which will inevitably, like the city itself “lac[k] true distinction”? Again the cityscape is characterised by “emptiness” and an overwhelming lack of depth, creative, cultural and architectural, with the entire metropolis rendered “flat” as a reflection of the supposedly shallow nature of its inspiration. There is “not much to be expected from” such a “hollow”, vulgar landscape, the speaker indicates. The difficulty the speaker faces in “try[ing] to write poetry” is indicated to be a direct result of their “location”, from which they find themselves “trying to tell” about their experience but finding “no way” (or place) to do so. This feeds into Huybensz’s suggestion that the protagonist of “Grand Galop” is “incapable of understanding his own experience”, to the extent that his attempts in “communicating about it to others” only serve to convey his disorientation.³⁵⁰ “The words

³⁴⁷ O’Hara, “Meditations”, 197.

³⁴⁸ O’Hara, “Meditations”, 197.

³⁴⁹ Gray, *Urban*, 25; 30; 25.

³⁵⁰ Huybensz, “Grand Galop”, 45.

had a sort of bloom on them/ But were weightless”, as imponderable as the architecture of the city and equally unable to “bring themselves to the/ point” of being meaningful.³⁵¹

Compared to the “gorgeous” landscape of the “garden”, a creative foothold within the cityscape offers only the poetic equivalent of profanities scrawled in public restrooms, which serves only to add to the “already all-but-illegible scrub forest of graffiti on/ the shithouse wall”.³⁵² In this scenario, the poetry of the city is reduced to just another example of “urban ephemera”, indecipherable amidst the “sloppy”, “disorganized” character of metropolitan space. Gilbert interprets this to mean that, as a “barren allegorical landscape informed by cultural trash”, the city is an unsuitable medium or muse for creative inspiration, meaning that it ultimately “cannot suffice as a basis for new poetry”.³⁵³ Rather, if the cityscape of “Grand Galop” represents a metaphorical toilet rather than a pastoral garden, “wholly devoid of substance” and “robbed of all aesthetic dignity”, then it would appear that any poetry which “stems” from this environment will inevitably be the literary equivalent of the effluvium littering the city’s streets.³⁵⁴

Gilbert consequently concludes that the cityscape of “Grand Galop” offers only the poetic equivalent of debilitation, that which he terms the “paralysis of the present” and the “blankness of the future”.³⁵⁵ Yet, as we continue through the poem, it is not Ashbery’s speaker-poet who finds themselves paralysed by their urban environment, but rather the poets of the past.

Surrey, your lute is getting an attack of nervous paralysis

But there are, again, things to be sung of

³⁵¹ Ashbery, “GG”, 437; 438.

³⁵² Ashbery, “GG”, 439.

³⁵³ Gilbert, *Walks*, 249; 247.

³⁵⁴ Gilbert, *Walks*, 250; 248.

³⁵⁵ Gilbert, *Walks*, 249.

And this is one of them, only I would not dream of

intruding on

The frantic completeness, the all-purpose benevolence

Of that still-moist garden where the tooting originates³⁵⁶

In referencing “that still-moist garden”, Ashbery acknowledges both the natural landscape and the poetic tradition it represents as a still fecund source of poetic inspiration. Yet rather than striving for “completeness”, Ashbery’s speaker-poet deliberately eschews the finality which such poetry of the past purportedly signifies. Rather than intrude on the territory of their poetic predecessors, they favour a more indeterminate form of creative expression, one more in tune with the amorphous setting of “Grand Galop” itself. Ashbery’s city is, by its very design, built to remain incomplete, akin to “Pyrography”, in which the landscape of America itself is “never completed/ And only partially designed”.³⁵⁷ In “Pyrography”, this symbolises that “the land wasn’t immediately appealing, we built it”, the speaker constructing something new and unrestricted by the architecture of the past even whilst acknowledging the history it represents.³⁵⁸ Similarly, “Grand Galop” expresses the need for modern American poetry to forge its own path, acknowledging the rich heritage of the poetry of the past whilst building upon it to create something new.

In traversing the urban built environment of “Grand Galop”, we are also therefore tracing Ashbery’s figurative footsteps across a more metapoetic landscape: mapping his abstract journey to situate his art in relation to that of his poetic predecessors, acknowledging

³⁵⁶ Ashbery, “GG”, 441.

³⁵⁷ Ashbery, “Pyrography”, 496.

³⁵⁸ Ashbery, “Pyrography”, 496.

his debt to the poetry of the past, yet also his distance from it. Whilst his description of “using” the “raw material” left behind by other poets alludes to the nature of poetic influence, it could also symbolise the unprocessed potential for inspiration which renders cities ripe with “new suggestions”.³⁵⁹ “Falling true of a perverse judgement”, the speaker states, “you forget how there could be a gasp of a new air/ Hidden in that jumble”,³⁶⁰ perhaps one akin to the “scent of garbage, patchouli and carbon monoxide” which Ashbery believed suffused O’Hara’s “remarkable new poetry” of the city.³⁶¹ “Poetry does sometimes occur” in urban space.³⁶² However, it must happen on its own terms, not by picking through the scraps “left around” by others, but rather by working towards something as “brand-new” as the cityscape itself. It may be “a sort of disposable environment”. Yet, as he reflected in his interview with Herd, rather than detract from its capacity to serve as a medium or subject for art, this was the very thing that Ashbery believed made the city such “a good place to write poetry” in the first place. Because “it’s always changing. [...] People are always bemoaning the fact that everything in New York is so transitory [...] but on the other hand that’s the way life is, and poetry has to keep changing”.³⁶³ And, through such means, “the work is redeemed in the end”.³⁶⁴

³⁵⁹ Ashbery, “GG”, 440.

³⁶⁰ Ashbery, “GG”, 441.

³⁶¹ Ashbery, “Introduction”, x.

³⁶² Ashbery, “GG”, 441.

³⁶³ Ashbery, “New York”, *SP*, 114.

³⁶⁴ Ashbery, “GG”, 437.

Chapter 2. “Anthem to perpendicularity”: skyscrapers, towers, and tall buildings.

In 2008, John Ashbery held his first art exhibition at New York’s Tibor de Nagy Gallery, which, five decades earlier, had published his first collection, *Turandot and Other Poems*. The showcase featured what the art critic Holland Cotter termed “a modest but polished” selection “of two dozen small collages”.³⁶⁵ The poet had experimented with the collage medium since the 1940s. However, it was a piece from 1972 which caught Cotter’s attention as “particularly distinctive”: *The Acrobats* (appendix 1).³⁶⁶ Framed as a close-up shot of New York City, the postcard-sized artwork looks down on the metropolis below. Against a background thick with skyscrapers, three children are perched amongst the peaks of the city. The skyline has become a veritable playground. The straight lines of the climbing frame the children cling to merge with the geometry of the underlying buildings to create the impression of scaffolding. It is as though they are clambering over the skyscrapers themselves. The scene is reminiscent of the iconic *Lunch atop a Skyscraper* (1932, photographed during the construction of the Rockefeller Center) (appendix 2). In both scenes, figures dangle over the urban landscape in what the museum curator Mystelle Brabbee terms a “love letter” to that most imposing structure of the built environment: the skyscraper.³⁶⁷

Since the erection of the first skyscraper in 1880s Chicago, America had been swept with what the historian Merrill Schleier terms “skyscraper mania”.³⁶⁸ High-rise buildings offered a solution to the increasingly cramped conditions of the nation’s urban centres.

³⁶⁵ Holland Cotter, “The Collages of John Ashbery”, *New York Times* (12/09/08) <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/14/arts/design/14cott.html> (accessed 12/08/17).

³⁶⁶ Cotter, “Collages”.

³⁶⁷ Mystelle Brabbee, quoted in John Anderson, “How a Galway Pub Led to a Skyscraper”, *New York Times* (8/11/12) <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/11/movies/lunch-atop-a-skyscraper-uncovered.html?mcubz=0> (accessed 10/09/17).

³⁶⁸ Merrill Schleier, *The Skyscraper in American Art* (NY: DaCapo, 1986), 10.

However, they were also to become icons of a new age of architecture; one in which the sky was no longer the limit. The result, the historians Christopher Tunnard and Henry Hope-Reed write, was that the quest to “raise our skyscrapers still higher” became the dominant architectural quest of the 20th-century.³⁶⁹ *Lunch atop a Skyscraper* became an emblem of society’s obsession with building tall. In 2016, *Time* magazine selected it as one of “The 100 Most Influential Images of All Time”, citing the photograph’s role in the emergence of the skyscraper as an “iconic emblem” of American architecture.³⁷⁰

Ashbery’s collage reflects the same fascination with the giants of the built environment. However, what *The Acrobats* conveys is not only America’s preoccupation with the skyscraper, but also that of the poet himself. Commentators such as David Coen regularly stress the “notoriously difficult” nature of Ashbery’s poetry.³⁷¹ Though often overlooked in studies of the poet’s canon, Ashbery’s collages perhaps represent him at his most “accessible” and “transparent”.³⁷² As such, they arguably operate as a key to the decoding of his poetry. They allow him to experiment with the same themes in a more accessible medium. In conversation with Cotter, Ashbery suggested that his artwork and poetry operate in direct correlation: “I can see how this completes the circle”.³⁷³ The landscapes of the poet’s writings are engaged in the same journey upwards which captivated the American built environment, as man’s “skyscrapers grew taller and taller”.³⁷⁴ The “horizon” of “Fantasia on ‘The Nut-Brown Maid’” (*Houseboat Days*) rises until a plethora of

³⁶⁹ Christopher Tunnard and Henry Hope-Reed, *American Skyline* (USA: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), 154.

³⁷⁰ Ben Goldberger, “Lunch atop a Skyscraper”, *Time 100 Photos*, <http://100photos.time.com/photos/lunch-atop-a-skyscraper> (accessed 12/09/17).

³⁷¹ David Coen, “Poetry by Other Means”, *Artcritical* (17/09/17) <http://www.artcritical.com/2017/09/17/david-cohen-on-john-ashbery-mario-naves-and-trevor-winkfield/> (accessed 17/09/17).

³⁷² Coen, “Poetry”.

³⁷³ John Ashbery, quoted in Holland Cotter, “The Poetry of Scissors and Glue”, *New York Times* (12/09/08) http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/14/arts/design/14cott.html?_r=1 (Accessed 29/08/10).

³⁷⁴ John Ashbery, *The Vermont Notebook* in *Collected Poems, 1956-1987*, ed. Mark Ford (UK: Carcanet, 2001), 391. (Hereafter cited as *CP*).

“tall buildings” stands in its place.³⁷⁵ As the speaker reveals, in the age of the skyscraper, “Ballast barely holds back the rising landscape”.³⁷⁶

Whilst the previous chapter considered Ashbery’s depiction of the city in its entirety, the present chapter takes a closer look at what the architectural historian Roberta Moudry describes as the true “urban icon” of the American built environment: the skyscraper.³⁷⁷ More specifically, the analysis considers Ashbery’s depiction of skyscrapers, towers and tall buildings as poetic themes associated with the poet’s portrayal of architectural height. As section one suggests, the exact criteria for what counts as a skyscraper are increasingly disputed in both spatial and architectural theory. However, for the purposes of my argument, this chapter follows the definition provided in “Why the Skyscraper?” by Jean Gottman: “a freestanding, multi-storey building of considerable height”.³⁷⁸ Chapter 3 will study Ashbery’s cities from street-level, to explore his depiction of public or communal space.

The present chapter focuses on three collections: *Three Poems* (1972), *Houseboat Days* (1977) and *A Wave* (1984). Particular attention is paid to a selection of key texts: “The New Spirit” and “The System” from *Three Poems*, “Fantasia on ‘The Nut-Brown Maid’” and “On the Towpath” from *Houseboat Days*, and “A Wave” from *A Wave*. These volumes were chosen due to their shared preoccupation with the imagery of architectural height. As the chapter suggests, in these texts Ashbery presents the reader with his most comprehensive treatment of the giants of the built environment: from the “skyscraper” of art which forms the pivotal metaphor of “Syringa” (*Houseboat Days*), to the more subtle iconography of towers which pervades *Three Poems*.³⁷⁹ Written over the same decade, these collections allow us to examine a specific era in Ashbery’s poetry. Ashbery’s art criticism from this period (the late

³⁷⁵ John Ashbery, “Fantasia on ‘The Nut-Brown Maid’”, *CP*, 541.

³⁷⁶ Ashbery, “Fantasia”, 541.

³⁷⁷ Roberta Moudry, Introduction, in *The American Skyscraper*, ed. Roberta Moudry (USA: Cambridge UP, 2005), 3.

³⁷⁸ Jean Gottman, “Why the Skyscraper?”, *Geographical Review* (04/1966), 190.

³⁷⁹ John Ashbery, “Syringa”, *CP*, 536.

1960s to the mid 1980s), is also taken into account, together with a small selection of his collages.

Although the three collections covered in this chapter have received critical attention individually, the possible connections between them have not yet been addressed in Ashbery criticism. Furthermore, not only has Ashbery's portrayal of skyscrapers in these specific works not been studied, but the theme of tall buildings in the poet's work in general has seldom been considered. As I suggest in section one, whilst Ashbery's more prominent uses of skyscraper imagery have periodically been commented on by critics, these comments have largely consisted of isolated or secondary references rather than in-depth analysis. As the architect Scott Johnson writes, "skyscrapers have become semiotic things".³⁸⁰ Much as tall buildings have a shifting cultural symbolism, their imagery performs a myriad of functions in Ashbery's work. For the purpose of this study, the chapter identifies two discursive categories central to the poet's depiction of tall buildings: first, spirituality and faith, and second, commerce and advertising. This thematic pairing may initially appear somewhat incongruous to those familiar with Ashbery's poetry. Whilst Ashbery's interest in the language of advertising has been well documented, the role of religion in his poetry has rarely been considered in a critical context. As the president of the *Poetry Foundation*, Robert Polito states, critics "don't ordinarily approach John Ashbery as a 'religious' poet" and, indeed, "Ashbery himself steadfastly resists the notion".³⁸¹ Whilst Ashbery's use of religious imagery has occasionally been noted, it has not been explored in any critical depth.

This chapter does not seek to approach Ashbery as a religious or moralistic poet, nor does it provide or advocate for an exclusively religious reading of Ashbery's work. Rather, it

³⁸⁰ Scott Johnson, quoted in Jonathan Shaw, "Skyscrapers as Symbols", *Harvard Magazine* (May-June 2010), <https://dev.harvardmagazine.com/2010/05/skyscraper-as-symbol> (accessed 29/08/17).

³⁸¹ Robert Polito, "Notes from the President of the Poetry Foundation", *Poetry Foundation* (04/06/14) <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2014/06/notes-from-the-president-of-the-poetry-foundation> (accessed 12/08/18).

seeks to suggest how the poet uses the specific imagery of architectural height not only as a unique emblem through which to explore spiritual or religious themes, but also their antithesis, in the form of man's materialism and greed. The chapter examines how these themes overlap and unite in Ashbery's depiction of tall buildings as dual emblems of the temporal and the spiritual. The evolution of man's quest to build upwards is explored, from the symbol of the tower (which Ashbery terms the "simplest structure"³⁸² of architecture) to the "world-envy/ Of skyscrapers"³⁸³ which form the modern built environment. The chapter is divided into three sections. Section one studies the broader critical and cultural context underlying Ashbery's depiction of skyscrapers, towers and tall buildings. Section two explores the connection between the skyscraper and spirituality in the poet's work, to suggest how Ashbery uses the specific trope of tall buildings to explore concepts of religious sentiment. Section three contemplates the role of the skyscraper as a symbol of business and materialism in Ashbery's poetry, particularly through its association with advertising and consumerism. This chapter maps the evolution of Ashbery's skyscrapers; from emblems of faith, to a means to replace the very gods themselves, and finally as symbols of man's avarice and hubris.

2.1. Building up: the critical and cultural context of Ashbery's skyscrapers.

In 2008, John Ashbery became the first living poet to have his collected works published by the *Library of America* and become part of what that esteemed institution termed "the definitive collection of American writing".³⁸⁴ Covering the release, the journalist Giles Harvey described the poet's prominence through the imagery of architectural height, to

³⁸² John Ashbery, "The Thousand Islands", *CP*, 138.

³⁸³ John Ashbery, "The Adirondacks", *CP*, 927.

³⁸⁴ Library of America, "About", *Library of America*, <https://www.loa.org/about> (Accessed 08/08/19).

suggest that Ashbery had become a literal giant of American poetry. “For better or worse, John Ashbery looms over the downtown of contemporary American poetry like a gaudy skyscraper: Wherever you wander, it’s impossible to lose sight of him”.³⁸⁵ Harvey’s choice of simile holds interesting implications for both Ashbery scholars and students of spatial theory. “Skyscraper”, writes the architect and designer Edwin Heathcote, is one of the “most evocative words in architecture”.³⁸⁶ It not only represents a “powerful image” in its own right, but has come to stand as a “metaphor for [the] city” as a whole.³⁸⁷ Harvey’s description trades on this iconic status and compares Ashbery’s stature within the literary community to the skyscraper’s prominence within the modern built environment. Just as the skyscraper has come to dominate the skyline of “downtown” America, Harvey suggests, Ashbery has come to occupy a central place in the landscape of modern American poetry.

Harvey’s article concludes with a reference to “one downbeat verse”, which he suggests encapsulates Ashbery’s attitude towards “writers of past ages”.³⁸⁸ The poem in question, “Syringa”, from *Houseboat Days*, is a meditation on the story of Orpheus, the legendary poet and musician of Ancient Greek mythology. Alexander Broquet recounts that, as the historical emblem of the inspired artist, “Orpheus commanded incredible powers over nature [...] even moving [...] stones through the power of his music”.³⁸⁹ Similarly, Ashbery’s Orpheus “rends/rocks into fissures” with his song, as every note causes “stone” to “burst forth” from the ground in a surge of creative force.³⁹⁰ However, as the music reaches its

³⁸⁵ Giles Harvey, “John Ashbery Makes his Elliptical Way into Library of America”, *The Village Voice* (04/09/2008) <https://www.villagevoice.com/2008/09/04/fall-preview-poet-john-ashbery-makes-his-elliptical-way-into-library-of-america/> (Accessed 08/08/19).

³⁸⁶ Edwin Heathcote, “Metaphor for a Metropolis”, *Financial Times* (07/20/09) www.Ft.com/content/ab86545c-7545-11de-9ed5-00144feabdc0 (accessed 09/08/19).

³⁸⁷ Heathcote, “Metaphor”.

³⁸⁸ Harvey, “John Ashbery”.

³⁸⁹ Alexander Broquet, “Orpheus Remembered”, *Rosicrucian Digest* (2008), 28.

³⁹⁰ Ashbery, “Syringa”, 534; 535; 535.

crescendo, a new structure appears on the horizon: not only the culmination of Orpheus' art, but the embodiment of it.

The singer thinks
Constructively, builds up his chant in progressive stages
Like a skyscraper³⁹¹

If, as David Schiff writes, the "Orpheus of Ashbery's poem appears as a self-portrait of the poet", then the skyscraper is a metaphor for the poet's craft.³⁹² Orpheus "builds up" the layers of his song just as he "builds up" the skyscraper itself, the two becoming interwoven until they are inseparable: a single act of "constructi[on]". The result is a "poem" forged from "rocks" and "gray stone", whilst the "skyscraper" represents not only the "material for a poem" but is constructed out of pure "language".³⁹³ Just as Harvey uses the simile of a skyscraper to depict Ashbery's place within modern American poetry, Ashbery employs the same image to explore concepts of *ars poetica*. The skyscraper of "Syringa" is a symbol of the creative process but also of "the medium of poetry" itself, or "'poetics' in the sense of a poet's concept of how poems are made".³⁹⁴ "Notes mount straight up", as both song and skyscraper unite in a quest towards "heaven", whilst the entire built environment rises as part of Orpheus' "performances" until the landscape ends just "beneath the sky".³⁹⁵ Ashbery foregrounds what the American writer Edgar Saltus terms the "mental process that skyscrapers engender": the concept that "as buildings ascend so do ideas".³⁹⁶ It is this joint

³⁹¹ Ashbery, "Syringa", 536.

³⁹² David Schiff, *The Music of Elliott Carter*, (USA: Cornell UP, 2018), 180.

³⁹³ Ashbery, "Syringa", 536.

³⁹⁴ Donald Revell, "Purists Will Object: Some Meditations on Influence," in *The Tribe of John*, ed. Susan Schultz (Tuscaloosa: Alabama UP, 1995), 97-98.

³⁹⁵ Ashbery, "Syringa", 535; 535; 534; 534.

³⁹⁶ Edgar Saltus, "New York from the Flatiron," *Munsey's Magazine* (06/1905), 189.

journey “up” which characterises “Syringa”: an attempt to transcend not only through architecture, but via the medium of art itself.

Before I conduct an in-depth study of Ashbery’s depiction of skyscrapers it is helpful to outline what constitutes a skyscraper for the purpose of this analysis. Despite its iconic status in American culture, the skyscraper remains notoriously difficult to define in architectural terms. As the architectural historian Winston Weisman writes, specialists remain divided over “different conceptions of what a skyscraper is” and there has been “little agreement on this controversial subject”.³⁹⁷ Disagreement centres on the architectural criteria for a building to be classified as a skyscraper, including minimum height requirements and the methods and materials used in construction. Such specifications, critics state, are what set the “true skyscraper” apart from other tall buildings, as well as from its architectural predecessor: the tower.³⁹⁸ However, although these technical criteria may be central to defining what a skyscraper is from an architectural theory perspective, that is not this chapter’s purview, and arguably does not inform our understanding of Ashbery’s skyscraper imagery. Rather, this chapter is grounded in a more generalised interpretation of what a skyscraper is, such as that given in the architect Henry Saylor’s *Dictionary of Architecture*: “a very tall building”.³⁹⁹

This description reduces the skyscraper to its most fundamental, and arguably most important, characteristic: its height. Indeed, Weisman concludes, whatever their other differences, all major architectural definitions of a skyscraper “make the element of height the distinctive feature”.⁴⁰⁰ This is not only an architectural consideration, but one rooted in human history. In “The Diffusion of the Skyscraper as an Urban Symbol”, Larry Ford traces

³⁹⁷ Winston Weisman, “New York and the Problem of the First Skyscraper”, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (03/1953), 13.

³⁹⁸ Weisman, “New York”.

³⁹⁹ Henry Saylor, *Dictionary of Architecture* (USA: John Wiley & Sons, 1994), 158.

⁴⁰⁰ Weisman, “New York”, 13.

the origins of the contemporary skyscraper to man's longstanding fascination with architectural height. "From the Tower of Babel and the gothic cathedrals to the extreme height competitions of [the] 14th century [...] Man has always equated towering structures with importance and prestige".⁴⁰¹ Despite its reputation as a symbol of modernity, the skyscraper is far from a recent architectural phenomenon. Rather, it is simply "a new type of tower": the modern incarnation of a tradition which Ford suggests has existed since biblical times.⁴⁰² This informs our understanding not only of Ashbery's imagery of skyscrapers, but also his use of the wider image of towers and tall buildings, these all being variations on the common theme of height.

Height is not only what gives the skyscraper its architectural distinctiveness, but also its symbolic status. The architectural theorist Rem Koolhaas, widely considered to be one of the foremost "skyscraper theorists" of our time, attributes the skyscraper's iconic cultural status almost entirely to the "emanation of its physical presence".⁴⁰³ Although there is no evidence that Ashbery and Koolhaas had a direct connection, Herbert Blau has suggested a link between Koolhaas' theories on "urban spaces" and Ashbery's depiction of communal or "public space", specifically in regards to the titular poem of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975).⁴⁰⁴ Koolhaas coined the term "skyscraper theory" in his seminal work, *Delirious New York*, which examines the relationship between "indigenous American Architecture" and American culture.⁴⁰⁵ Due to their "size alone" he suggests, skyscrapers represent an entire "series of metaphoric models".⁴⁰⁶ "It merely is itself and through sheer volume cannot avoid being a symbol [...] available for meaning as a billboard is for advertisement".⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰¹ Larry Ford, "The Diffusion of the Skyscraper as an Urban Symbol", *YAPCG* (1973), 49.

⁴⁰² Ford, "Diffusion", 49.

⁴⁰³ Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York* (Italy: Monacelli Press, 1994), 110.

⁴⁰⁴ Herbert Blau, "Who's There? Community of the Question", *PAJ* (05/2006), 10; 7.

⁴⁰⁵ Koolhaas, *Delirious*, 110.

⁴⁰⁶ Koolhaas, *Delirious*, 110; 125,

⁴⁰⁷ Koolhaas, *Delirious*, 100.

Koolhaas stresses the “overlapping” and “accumulated [...] meanings” which skyscrapers have come to hold in our culture.⁴⁰⁸ A selection of these meanings will be explored in relation to Ashbery’s poetry throughout this chapter. However, the present analysis also builds upon the “traditional” interpretation of tall buildings as “purposeful symbols of wealth and power”.⁴⁰⁹ Much as Ford suggests that the towers of old were perceived as symbols of prestige due to their size, notions of architectural height continue to be directly associated with status. Ashbery echoed this connection in his 1978 article on the renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright for *New York* magazine. Wright, who Ashbery terms “the greatest architect America has yet produced”,⁴¹⁰ apprenticed under the architect and “father of skyscrapers”⁴¹¹ Louis Sullivan, and famously came up with his own design for a mile-high skyscraper in the 1950s. Although the project never materialised, the art critic Jonathon Keats states that the concept became a key part of Wright’s “legacy”, and a catalyst in moving American architecture “from horizontal to vertical” design.⁴¹² As Ashbery writes, “we feel a secret admiration, mixed with terror, for the giant who does things in such a big way, and we pride ourselves on [...] the city’s skyline”.⁴¹³ In this description, Ashbery acknowledged not only Wright’s status within American architecture but the iconic status of the skyscraper itself. The “dizzying heights” of tall buildings, Ashbery suggests, can serve not only as cultural symbols of importance, but as metaphors for the reputation of the

⁴⁰⁸ Koolhaas, *Delirious*, 119; 117.

⁴⁰⁹ Aaron Betsky, “Symbolism of Skyscrapers”, *The Journal of The American Institute of Architects* (21/07/2014) <https://www.architectmagazine.com/design/symbolism-of-skyscrapers-the-meaning-of-high-rises-around-the-world0> (Accessed 10/08/19).

⁴¹⁰ John Ashbery, “Frank Lloyd Wright”, *New York* (10/78), in *RP*, 321.

⁴¹¹ Mervyn Kaufman, *Father of Skyscrapers* (USA: Little, Brown, 1969). Page number not given.

⁴¹² Jonathon Keats, “Was this Mile-High Skyscraper Frank Lloyd Wright’s Brightest Idea?”, *Forbes* (04/03/2014), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jonathonkeats/2014/04/03/was-this-mile-high-skyscraper-frank-lloyd-wrights-brightest-idea-moma-exhibit-reveals-wright-as-urban-planner/#7e9a8efb5736> (Accessed 08/08/19).

⁴¹³ Ashbery, “Frank”, 322.

individual;⁴¹⁴ the same rationale which led *NBC News* to refer to Ashbery as “a tower of 20th-century American poetry” upon his death in September 2017.⁴¹⁵

2.1.1. The Tower of Art: tall buildings in literature and the Ashbery connection.

Both Harvey and *NBC* use the imagery of architectural height to stress Ashbery’s stature within modern American poetry. However, such descriptions also feed into a long-standing association of tall buildings and creative inspiration. As the historian Steven Shapin writes, by the early 20th-century, the specific image of “the artistic Ivory Tower” emerged as a metaphor within literary circles.⁴¹⁶ It represented the “idea of artistic retreat and its value – and all the sensibilities attached to the closely linked notions of imagination and solitude, withdrawal, and disengagement”.⁴¹⁷ Throughout literature, Shapin indicates, architectural height became synonymous with “intensified imaginative freedom”.⁴¹⁸ The 19th-century American poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox plays on this association in “Never Mind” (1906), in which the “Temple of Art” is a tall building, and one must “climb to the top” to receive creative inspiration:⁴¹⁹ “For the tower of art has a lofty spire/ With many a stair and landing”.⁴²⁰ Mark Silverberg has written on Wilcox’s influence on Ashbery, which he suggests Ashbery “both parodies and honestly performs” in poems such as “Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox” (*The Double Dream of Spring*, 1970).⁴²¹ Indeed, in his first published collection, *Some Trees* (1956), Ashbery trades on the

⁴¹⁴ Ashbery, “Frank”, 322.

⁴¹⁵ *NBC News*, Twitter Post, (03/092017, 9:25 pm)
<https://twitter.com/NBCNews/statuses/904560916439715840> (Accessed 10/08/19).

⁴¹⁶ Steven Shapin, “The Ivory Tower: the history of a figure of speech and its cultural uses,” *British Journal for the History of Science* (03/2012), 11.

⁴¹⁷ Shapin, “Ivory”, 5.

⁴¹⁸ Shapin, “Ivory”, 5.

⁴¹⁹ Ella Wheeler Wilcox, “Never Mind”, *Poems of Sentiment* (UK: Kessinger, 2003), 3-4.

⁴²⁰ Wilcox, “Never”, 3-4.

⁴²¹ Mark Silverberg, “Laughter and Uncertainty: John Ashbery’s Low-Key Camp”, *Contemporary Literature* (Summer, 2002), 299.

ideas symbolised by Wilcox's "tower of art". In "The Painter", the speaker positions himself atop "the tallest of the buildings", in search of a new "subject" for his work, whilst all around him "artists [lean] from the buildings", in a quest for inspiration.⁴²²

Wilcox's tower of art is also reminiscent of Ashbery's "Syringa", in which both "art" and "skyscraper" join in the journey skywards.⁴²³ However, through the emergence of the skyscraper, the theoretical symbolism of the tower is rendered real in steel and concrete, a dual symbol of the creative and the architectural. In *The American Skyscraper*, Joseph Korom credits the American poet Carl Sandburg for bringing the tower of art into the 20th-century through his "body of work describing the essence of [America's] tallest buildings".⁴²⁴ In "Prayers of Steel" (1918) and his most famous work "Skyscraper" (1916), Sandburg sought to capture the "romance of the skyscraper"⁴²⁵ and to transform it from a simple work of industry into a "boundless source of material for artists [and] poets".⁴²⁶ In an interview with *The Believer* magazine in 2009, Ashbery acknowledged the influence of Sandburg's poetry on both "contemporary literature" and "my generation" in particular.⁴²⁷ The vista from the tower, Ashbery stated, had been replaced by the view from various "poet's windows in New York",⁴²⁸ whilst "the garret has become a half-acre loft" apartment.⁴²⁹ The creative process is transformed through the modern-day built environment, reminiscent of Sandburg's work, in which "the poet [...] from the skyscraper, looks out over the city".⁴³⁰

⁴²² Ashbery, "The Painter, *CP*, 28.

⁴²³ Ashbery, "Syringa", 536.

⁴²⁴ Joseph Korom, *The American Skyscraper* (USA: Branden Books, 2008), 245.

⁴²⁵ Korom, *American Skyscraper*, 245.

⁴²⁶ John Pastier, "The Skyscraper in Literature and Art", *Design Quarterly* (1988), 24.

⁴²⁷ John Ashbery and Travis Nichols, "An Interview with John Ashbery", *The Believer* (01/02/2009) <https://believermag.com/an-interview-with-john-ashbery/> (Accessed 10/09/2019).

⁴²⁸ John Ashbery, "Aldo Rossi", in *Reported Sightings*, ed. David Bergman (USA: Harvard UP, 1991), 335. (Hereafter cited as *RS*).

⁴²⁹ John Ashbery, "Owen Morrel", *RS*, 351.

⁴³⁰ William Alexander, "The Limited American, the Great Loneliness, and the Singing Fire", *American Literature* (03/1973), 82.

Ashbery's 2009 interview with *The Believer* also leads us to one final possible influence on Ashbery's portrayal of skyscrapers and tall buildings: Elizabeth Bishop. "As much as I like Carl Sandburg", Ashbery commented, Bishop "was always one of my favorite poets [and] influenced me right from the beginning".⁴³¹ In "John Ashbery's Elizabeth Bishop", Luke Carson states that Ashbery's writings "often evoke the work of Elizabeth Bishop" and that the "skyscraper" could arguably be seen as "Bishop's monument" within his work.⁴³² This is in part due to the symbol of the skyscraper in "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore" (1934). The poem was a homage to the poet Marianne Moore, who served as a mentor for Bishop in the 1930s.

skyscrapers glint in the tide; Manhattan
is all awash with morals this fine morning,
so please come flying.⁴³³

Whilst Carson suggests that skyscrapers are images of homage for both Bishop and Ashbery, they equally serve as metaphors for the poet's perspective, who is depicted here as floating "over the Gotham skyline".⁴³⁴ This idea is developed further in Bishop's "Night City (From the plane)" (1972), in which the poet is described as having "cried/a skyscraper up".⁴³⁵ The image is again reminiscent of Ashbery's "Syringa", but it also uses the building's "height" as

⁴³¹ Ashbery and Nichols, "An Interview"

⁴³² Luke Carson, "John Ashbery's Elizabeth Bishop", *Twentieth Century Literature* (Winter 2008), 449; 454; 449.

⁴³³ Elizabeth Bishop, "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore" (1934), *FSG Work in Progress*, <https://fsgworkinprogress.com/2014/04/02/invitation-to-miss-marianne-moore/> (15/12/2021).

⁴³⁴ Danny Heitman, "Moore or Less", *Humanities* (Spring, 2016), <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2016/spring/feature/moore-or-less> (accessed 12/10/19).

⁴³⁵ Elizabeth Bishop, "Night City (from the plane)", in *Geography III: Poems* (USA: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 19.

a “spatial and conceptual framing device”.⁴³⁶ Martin Bidney suggests that Bishop uses the image of the “skyscraper” and its “height” as an “allegory” for her own “miniaturizing, distancing tactics”.⁴³⁷ Bishop’s speaker surveys the city below from a great height, which allows them to re-envision the urban landscape. As the architecture critic David Nye suggests, “the creative abstraction” in “shaping one’s environment” is a direct result of the view from the skyscraper itself,⁴³⁸ which has “the potential [to] transform the objects it encounters”.⁴³⁹ Ashbery utilised this same device in “The Instruction Manual” (*Some Trees*), in which the speaker’s skyscraper vista leads him to construct a fantasy cityscape in the vacuum left by the distant streets. A “good high place”, the speaker states, allows us not only to “catch a view of the city”, but to “dream”.⁴⁴⁰

2.1.2. The tower in Ashbery: a synopsis of criticism.

Skyscrapers therefore represent “emblems of invention and reinvention of the poet and poetry”, which Ashbery acknowledged long before the publication of *Three Poems* or “Syringa”.⁴⁴¹ However, although readers of Ashbery’s poetry often acknowledge its “particularly metropolitan” or “urban sensibilities”, the specific imagery of skyscrapers and tall buildings in his work has received little critical attention.⁴⁴² The few notable exceptions concern the symbol of the tower in Ashbery’s poetry. In “‘The Tension Is in the Concept’: John Ashbery’s Surrealism”, Ernesto Suárez-Toste recognises “towers” as “a motif that keeps reappearing in Ashbery’s poetry”, one which he suggests Ashbery utilises to express his

⁴³⁶ Martin Bidney “‘Controlled Panic’: Mastering the Terrors of Dissolution and Isolation in Elizabeth Bishop’s Epiphanies”, *Style* (Fall 2000), 500; 498.

⁴³⁷ Bidney, “‘Controlled’”, 500; 497; 500.

⁴³⁸ David Nye, “The Sublime and the Skyline”, in *American Skyscraper*, 261-262.

⁴³⁹ Bidney “‘Controlled’”, 500.

⁴⁴⁰ John Ashbery, “The Instruction Manual”, *CP*, 7; 7; 6.

⁴⁴¹ James McCorkle, *The Still Performance* (Charlottesville: Virginia UP, 1989), 81-82.

⁴⁴² Marit MacArthur, *The American Landscape in the Poetry of Frost, Bishop, and Ashbery* (USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 26; 23.

creative debt to the 20th-century Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico.⁴⁴³ His analysis focuses on the “many-colored tower of longing”⁴⁴⁴ of “On the Towpath” (*Houseboat Days*), which he attributes to de Chirico’s depiction of a “multicolored tower”⁴⁴⁵ in paintings such as *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* (1914).

Frank Lepkowski briefly addresses Ashbery’s depiction of “the symbolic tower” as part of a wider study of post-Romantic themes in “Grand Galop” from *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975).⁴⁴⁶ Lepkowski interprets “The System” (*Three Poems*) as an “ironic rendition of Robert Browning’s great poem ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came’”.⁴⁴⁷ The reference is explicit on Ashbery’s part, and he describes “Childe Roland [drawing] nearer to the Dark Tower”.⁴⁴⁸ Lepkowski references the transformative role the tower plays in “Ashbery’s version of the legend”, with Browning’s “high tower of romance” reduced to a literal “shack”.⁴⁴⁹ “The tower cements our identification of the allusion”, he writes, but it also leads the reader to question “the fundamental cues of a symbol” and how they operate in Ashbery’s work.⁴⁵⁰

Finally, and most pertinently for the purposes of this chapter, Edward Larrissy offers a short discussion of the tower in “‘Is Anything Central?’ Ashbery and the Idea of a Centre”. The essay explores what Larrissy terms the “universal or central principle” in the Ashbery canon.⁴⁵¹ Whilst Larrissy’s study focuses on the more “rhetorical” or figurative “idea of a centre” in Ashbery’s work, his argument also includes a spatial theory dimension and he

⁴⁴³ Ernesto Suárez-Toste, “‘The Tension Is in the Concept’: John Ashbery’s Surrealism”, *Style* (Spring 2004), 4; 10.

⁴⁴⁴ John Ashbery, “On the Towpath”, *CP*, 504.

⁴⁴⁵ Suárez-Toste, “‘Tension’”, 10.

⁴⁴⁶ Frank Lepkowski, “John Ashbery’s Revision of the Post-Romantic Quest”, *Twentieth Century Literature* (Autumn 1993), 264.

⁴⁴⁷ Lepkowski, “John Ashbery’s”, 261.

⁴⁴⁸ John Ashbery, “The System”, *CP*, 308.

⁴⁴⁹ Lepkowski, “John Ashbery’s”, 263; 262; 263.

⁴⁵⁰ Lepkowski, “John Ashbery’s”, 262; 252.

⁴⁵¹ Edward Larrissy, “‘Is Anything Central?’ Ashbery and the Idea of a Centre”, in *Poetry and the Sense of Panic*, ed. Lionel Kelly (USA: Rodopi, 2000), 76.

proposes using “phenomenology” as a “philosophical anchor” for Ashbery’s poetry.⁴⁵² A philosophical movement which rose to increasing prominence in the 20th-century, phenomenology is considered to be the “philosophy of experience”, which seeks to ascertain the “lived meaning of space” or the “‘human value’ of places and objects”.⁴⁵³ Just as phenomenology studies the connection between abstract “consciousness” and human experience of the “physical [...] world”, Larrissy indicates a similar approach is necessary when it comes to exploring Ashbery’s “metaphor for the central”.⁴⁵⁴ He cites the image of the “highest tower” from “The One Thing That Can Save America” (*Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*) as evidence of this connection.⁴⁵⁵ Physical and figurative worlds overlap, as the tower’s architectural prominence is equally a demonstration of the importance of the abstract ideas it represents. Based on its stature alone, Larrissy interprets Ashbery’s “tower” to be a “cathedral” and suggests that the building’s centrality within the built environment is a direct representation of the “spiritually central” place it holds in people’s lives.⁴⁵⁶

2.1.3. Ashbery and religion: criticism and context.

Larrissy’s essay is an important source for this chapter, not only because it is one of the few studies to comment on Ashbery’s portrayal of tall buildings, but because Larrissy is one of only a small number of critics who acknowledge the possibility of religious or spiritual influences on Ashbery’s work. As Norman Finkelstein writes, “Ashbery is almost never discussed in religious terms”, and “religion” is not a widely accepted theme in his work.⁴⁵⁷ In

⁴⁵² Larrissy, “‘Is Anything Central?’”, 75; 85; 85.

⁴⁵³ Paul Armstrong, “Phenomenology”, in *The John Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory*, ed. Michael Groden (2nd Edition, 2005), <https://litguide.press.jhu.edu/cgi-bin/search.cgi> (Accessed 10/09/19).

⁴⁵⁴ Larrissy, “‘Is Anything Central?’”, 75.

⁴⁵⁵ John Ashbery, “The One Thing That Can Save America”, *CP*, 457.

⁴⁵⁶ Larrissy, “‘Is Anything Central?’”, 76.

⁴⁵⁷ Norman Finkelstein, *The Utopian Moment in Contemporary American Poetry* (UK: Bucknell UP, 1993), 66.

this respect, whilst critics such as Henry Weinfeld have occasionally noted the “vaguely ‘religious’ [...] themes” which pervade works such as *Three Poems*, religious concepts in the Ashbery canon are often overlooked by critics.⁴⁵⁸ Larrissy argues against this stance. Critical opinion, he indicates, tends to view Ashbery and his work as essentially agnostic or even “atheist” in nature.⁴⁵⁹ However, regardless of Ashbery’s personal attitudes towards religion, Larrissy writes, his poetry is nonetheless the result of a “Christian or [recently] post-Christian culture”.⁴⁶⁰

Although he agrees that there is “nothing intrinsically Christian” about Ashbery’s work, Larrissy maintains that it does “frequently [have] Christian connotations” which should not be ignored by Ashbery criticism.⁴⁶¹ This belief is echoed in Geoff Ward’s *Statutes of Liberty*. “Those critics such as Harold Bloom, or David Shapiro, who find ‘parodies of spiritual progress’ in Ashbery’s [poetry], have missed the wood for the trees. There is no parody”.⁴⁶² Even when Ashbery’s use of religious themes is recognised, Ward indicates, it is quickly dismissed as mere “cliché” and subsequently not afforded proper critical consideration.⁴⁶³ Ward is another of the few critics open to considering religious influences on Ashbery’s work. However, whilst Larrissy suggests that Ashbery may simply demonstrate the same mild “postmodern religious sensibility” which impacts “many another post-Romantic poet”, Ward is far more assertive in his claims.⁴⁶⁴ He maintains that Ashbery’s use of religious themes or imagery demonstrates that his poetry is “visibly, if not conventionally, Christian” and “thoroughly influenced by Christian discourse”.⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁵⁸ Henry Weinfeld, “Review: American Religious Poems: An Anthology by Harold Bloom and Jesse Zuba”, *Religion & Literature* (Summer 2007), 85.

⁴⁵⁹ Larrissy, “‘Is Anything Central?’”, 82.

⁴⁶⁰ Larrissy, “‘Is Anything Central?’”, 84.

⁴⁶¹ Larrissy, “‘Is Anything Central?’”, 85.

⁴⁶² Geoff Ward, *Statutes of Liberty* (UK: Palgrave, 2001), 168.

⁴⁶³ Ward, *Statutes*, 121.

⁴⁶⁴ Larrissy, “‘Is Anything Central?’”, 85.

⁴⁶⁵ Ward, *Statutes*, 168.

In their approaches, Ward and Larrissy arguably demonstrate the difference between viewing Ashbery as a religious poet and viewing him as a poet who occasionally makes use of religious themes. Neither critic provides any incontrovertible evidence in support of their assertions, nor do they explore Ashbery's use of religious imagery or its implications for his poetry. However, a closer look at Ashbery's biography reveals another potential basis for considering Ashbery's work in a religious context. As Karin Roffman reports in her account of Ashbery's early life, the poet underwent a "Christian education", and took part in regular "bible study" (albeit "skeptically") throughout his youth.⁴⁶⁶ Although critics often stress that the poet's early years "weren't particularly religious" as evidence that religious themes are not important in his work, faith was still a factor in his early life.⁴⁶⁷ He was raised as an Episcopalian and, although they were not particularly devout, the "family went to church every Sunday".⁴⁶⁸ This influence is evident in the poet's juvenilia, including the lost play "Ye Gods" (1940) which Roffman describes as a "religious parody" inspired by the young Ashbery's "enthusiasm" for "Christian" and "pagan myths".⁴⁶⁹ Ward's assertion that Ashbery routinely "anchors his thoughts in Christian perceptions" may be overstated.⁴⁷⁰ Just as Larrissy indicates that religious themes in Ashbery's work may simply be the result of a wider Christian culture, the poet's childhood interest in religion could be attributed to his conventional "church upbringing" rather than seen as evidence of his particular devoutness.⁴⁷¹ Nonetheless, Ashbery's early writings suggest that he was aware of the creative potential of religious ideas from a young age.

⁴⁶⁶ Karin Roffman, *The Songs We Know Best* (USA: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2017), 35.

⁴⁶⁷ Larissa MacFarquhar, "Becoming John Ashbery", *The New Yorker* (7/11/2005) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/11/07/present-waking-life> (accessed 06/12/2018).

⁴⁶⁸ MacFarquhar, "Becoming".

⁴⁶⁹ Roffman, *Songs*, 35.

⁴⁷⁰ Ward, *Statutes*, 168.

⁴⁷¹ John Ashbery and John Koethe, "An Interview with John Ashbery", *SubStance* (1982/1983), 182.

Ashbery did go through a marked “religious period”⁴⁷² during his time at Harvard, and wrote in a 1946 letter to a friend that “I have gotten religious all of a sudden”.⁴⁷³ The poet attributed his newfound “passion” to his “recent reading, which included [...] the Bible, and ‘Hindu philosophy’” as well as works by poets with prominent “religious interests”.⁴⁷⁴ The poets cited range from Dante and Donne to the later work of T.S. Eliot, and Ashbery reported that much of his own work from this period was composed in the “throes of religious feeling”.⁴⁷⁵ This “religious exploration”⁴⁷⁶ lasted over a year, and Ashbery briefly contemplated “changing [his] major from English to Comparative Religion”⁴⁷⁷ due to his “curiosity about modern man’s relationship to God”.⁴⁷⁸ This seems at odds with Weinstein’s touch of humour in his description of Ashbery as primarily the poet of “agnostics or atheists”.⁴⁷⁹ Although Ashbery admitted that he “forgot about religion for many years”⁴⁸⁰ during his adulthood, he still maintained a certain “interest in or fascination with religion” and acknowledged the presence of “religious influences” on his work.⁴⁸¹ Although his “poetry certainly isn’t religious poetry [...] there does at times seem to be a certain religious tone”.⁴⁸²

In conversation with Larrissa MacFarquhar in 2007, Ashbery stated “I think of myself as a religious person [...] what the religious right would call a ‘cafeteria Christian’—I select the parts I like and ignore the others [...] I sort of feel that God wants you to select [...] no matter how unlikely it seems that there really is a God”.⁴⁸³ Just as Ashbery suggested that he

⁴⁷² Roffman, *Songs*, 140.

⁴⁷³ John Ashbery, “Letter from JA to Bob Hunter” (06/16/1946), quoted in Roffman, *Songs*, 140.

⁴⁷⁴ Roffman, *Songs*, 140; 145.

⁴⁷⁵ Roffman, *Songs*, 144; 141; 140.

⁴⁷⁶ Roffman, *Songs*, 140.

⁴⁷⁷ John Ashbery, quoted in Roffman, *Songs*, 148.

⁴⁷⁸ Roffman, *Songs*, 148.

⁴⁷⁹ Weinfield, “Review”, 85.

⁴⁸⁰ MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

⁴⁸¹ Ashbery and Koethe, “Interview”, 182.

⁴⁸² Ashbery and Koethe, “Interview”, 182.

⁴⁸³ John Ashbery, quoted in MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

preferred to focus on some aspects of religion rather than others, the analysis in this chapter approaches the theme of religion in Ashbery's poetry in similar terms, exploring his use of one particular image as a means to gain insight into his treatment of religion in his work. When seeking spiritual inspiration for his poetry, Ashbery suggested that his approach is similar to his attitude to religion itself. He takes "religious books" and "dips into [them at] random, waiting for some word or phrase or concept to jump out".⁴⁸⁴ In this vein, I consider Ashbery's portrayal of skyscrapers, towers, and tall buildings as complex vehicles for the portrayal of religious sentiment, but also the contrasting theme of materialism. As Larrissy writes, "nobody can deny that there are many references to [religion] in Ashbery. The question is how to take them".⁴⁸⁵

2.2. Spirituality and faith: the skyscraper and the quest towards heaven.

In the autumn of 1969, John Ashbery began to envision a new book of poetry. The result, *Three Poems*, was published in 1972. Written during the same period which inspired *The Acrobats*, the collection demonstrated the same fascination with skyscrapers. Not only is the collection replete with "towers" and tall "buildings", but its opening poem, "The New Spirit", is reminiscent of *The Acrobats* itself, with its description of a veritable "landscape [...] in the sky".⁴⁸⁶ Yet, unlike the urban playground depicted in Ashbery's artwork, the tall buildings of *Three Poems* held a more spiritual significance. Ashbery described the collection as an expression of "transcendental experience";⁴⁸⁷ man's quest for what he termed "the unreachable".⁴⁸⁸ In "Thoughts on Transcendence", Wilfred Smith outlines the term's

⁴⁸⁴ MacFarquhar, "Becoming".

⁴⁸⁵ Larrissy, "'Is Anything Central?'", 83.

⁴⁸⁶ John Ashbery, "The New Spirit", *CP*, 254; 250; 249. (Hereafter cited as "NS").

⁴⁸⁷ John Ashbery, quoted in Harold Bloom, "John Ashbery: The Charity of Hard Moments", *Salamagundi* (Spring-Summer 1973), 110.

⁴⁸⁸ John Ashbery, quoted in MacFarquhar, "Becoming John".

traditional “religious” or “spiritual” connotations, associated with the passage from earthly mortality to “life eternal”.⁴⁸⁹ Within “the secular side of our culture”, transcendence has subsequently evolved to symbolise a “channel [to] something higher” or “further”.⁴⁹⁰ Whether religious (the journey towards “heaven”), metaphysical (beyond the “ceiling of awareness”) or simply spatial (“higher than the ground”), Smith suggests, to transcend has come to mean to journey “up”.⁴⁹¹

As Ashbery comments in a discussion of “religious influences” on his work with the poet John Koethe, “everything seems sort of transcendental [...] That seems to be basically what I feel about religion”.⁴⁹² However, he equally recognises the “feeling of transcendence” that skyscrapers engender.⁴⁹³ The tall buildings of “The New Spirit” represent the fusion of these ideas. Mankind is not only “building up”,⁴⁹⁴ but is possessed by the “urge to proceed higher and further”.⁴⁹⁵ The skyscraper is celebrated not just as “the tallest point on the earth’s surface”, but the closest man can get to “heaven” itself.⁴⁹⁶ Those familiar with Ashbery’s writings may find his use of such openly religious imagery surprising. A partial explanation can arguably be found in the inspiration behind *Three Poems* itself. While he decided what to write about, MacFarquhar reports that Ashbery “in search of a spark to get him going, [read] philosophy and religious books”.⁴⁹⁷ These included the King James Bible, as well as the work of the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu and the 17th-century French theological writer Blaise Pascal. This may account for the “oddly religious tone” which critics such as Harold

⁴⁸⁹ Wilfred Smith, “Thoughts on Transcendence”, *Geistesgeschichte* (1990), 37; 38; 48; 32.

⁴⁹⁰ Smith, “Thoughts”, 37; 47; 44.

⁴⁹¹ Smith, “Thoughts”, 48; 47; 47; 39.

⁴⁹² Ashbery and Koethe, “Interview”, 182.

⁴⁹³ John Ashbery, “Rodrigo Moynihan”, *RS*, 165.

⁴⁹⁴ Ashbery, “NS”, 266.

⁴⁹⁵ Ashbery, “NS”, 278.

⁴⁹⁶ Ashbery, “NS”, 278.

⁴⁹⁷ MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

Bloom detect in the collection.⁴⁹⁸ However, it equally leads us to a wider connection between faith and architectural height in Ashbery's writings.

The relationship between tall structures and religion features prominently in Ashbery's prose poem "The System", the second instalment of *Three Poems*, which the poet described as having strong "cosmological overtones".⁴⁹⁹ Here too closeness to the sky or figurative "heaven" is associated with spiritual connection to "God" and the literal "heavens".⁵⁰⁰ Architectural height is translated directly into divine importance. The tallest of the "tower[s]" has the greatest or "highest spiritual magnitude".⁵⁰¹ As the poem explains, the "tower" or "high point" of the built environment "stands as the shortest distance between your aims and those of the beloved, the only human ground that can nurture your hopes and fears".⁵⁰² As the last "human ground" between its builders and the Almighty, the building becomes not only a symbol of "hope" but of "holiness".⁵⁰³ Its distance from the ground makes it a "sacred" space, as the tower is the only place where one may hope to achieve spiritual enlightenment.⁵⁰⁴ As the architectural theorist Andrew Liang writes, this association with architectural height and faith has longstanding "religious" or "spiritual groundings".⁵⁰⁵ As early as the 16th-century, religious orders constructed "higher reaching spires on [...] churches and cathedrals" as "symbols of piety".⁵⁰⁶ Much as Liang suggests that the modern skyscraper demonstrates man's desire "to reach higher towards the heavens", Ashbery attributes the emergence of ever taller constructions to man's search for God.⁵⁰⁷ Those who

⁴⁹⁸ Harold Bloom, "John Ashbery: The Charity of Hard Moments", *Salamagundi* (Spring-Summer 1973), 110.

⁴⁹⁹ John Ashbery, quoted in David Shapiro, *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry* (NY: Columbia UP, 1979), 157.

⁵⁰⁰ Ashbery, "System", 283; 295; 283.

⁵⁰¹ Ashbery, "System", 316; 296.

⁵⁰² Ashbery, "System", 316; 289; 312.

⁵⁰³ Ashbery, "System", 312; 312; 283.

⁵⁰⁴ Ashbery, "System", 315.

⁵⁰⁵ Andrew Liang, "The Push Skyward", in *Skyscrapers of the Future*, ed. Carlo Aiello (Italy: eVolo Press, 2010), 52.

⁵⁰⁶ Liang, "Push", 52.

⁵⁰⁷ Liang, "Push", 52.

climb “higher and higher up” the tower seek to attain a “higher plane”.⁵⁰⁸ Ascension and transcendence are synonymous.

To construct and climb such structures is to comprehend God’s message. This concept is evident in the final text of *Three Poems*: “The Recital”, in which the skyscraper becomes a “spiritual model for our aspirations”.⁵⁰⁹ The tower is seen as a direct architectural extension of the will of the divine. It foreshadows man’s own journey to the city of God, as when the population of “The Recital” believe their “prayers were answered with concrete”,⁵¹⁰ “The System” argues that the relation between God and the skyscraper must be “heaven-sent”⁵¹¹. The tower is characterised “as a god come down to earth to instruct us in the ways of the other kingdom”.⁵¹² The building becomes a proxy for God himself, as Ashbery’s use of simile invests the structure with the power of heaven. In seeking to approach the heavens through architecture, man has brought the architecture of the heavens to “earth”.⁵¹³ Such towers, Ashbery suggests, represent the “most powerful preachers” of the built environment.⁵¹⁴ Their existence is proof of a “superior power”, and every person who sees the “Tower” becomes a “religious fanatic”.⁵¹⁵ In *Experiencing Cities*, Mark Hutter suggests that the upwards growth of the built environment “can serve as a symbolic representation” of man’s quest for God.⁵¹⁶ Architecture’s upwards trajectory represents a “pilgrimage” to the heavens: a “journey designed to cleanse one’s sins and bring one closer to God”.⁵¹⁷ Ashbery’s towers encapsulate this metaphorical journey. The “building” itself is described as mankind’s “penance” – that which cleanses humanity of its “sin”.⁵¹⁸ As the poem asserts,

⁵⁰⁸ Ashbery, “System”, 283; 314.

⁵⁰⁹ John Ashbery, “The Recital”, *CP*, 321.

⁵¹⁰ Ashbery, “Recital”, 325.

⁵¹¹ Ashbery, “System”, 283.

⁵¹² Ashbery, “System”, 297.

⁵¹³ Ashbery, “System”, 297.

⁵¹⁴ Ashbery, “System”, 316.

⁵¹⁵ Ashbery, “System”, 316; 308; 282.

⁵¹⁶ Mark Hutter, *Experiencing Cities* (USA: Routledge, 2015), 205.

⁵¹⁷ Hutter, *Experiencing*, 205.

⁵¹⁸ Ashbery, “System”, 280; 286; 302.

since man's "fall" from grace, not only heaven but the "sky" itself has been denied him.⁵¹⁹

"All but the Gods"⁵²⁰ have been "exiled from the skies".⁵²¹

With the emergence of the tower in "The System", man appears to have built "his own redemption".⁵²² It represents an "upward path, the spiral leading from the motley darkened and lightened landscape here below to the transparent veils of heaven".⁵²³ Ashbery's tower becomes an emblem of what Staiger terms the "phenomenology of spirit";⁵²⁴ a concrete conduit through which the transcendental "soul" interacts with the built environment.⁵²⁵ The progression of the city's inhabitants from street-level to the "building" in the "sky" is described in similar biblical terms in "Variation on a Noel";⁵²⁶ this time as a mass "exodus".⁵²⁷ The journey to the top of the skyscraper is compared to the Book of Exodus. Upon reaching the "top" of the "buildings", the city-dwellers of "The New Spirit" declare "they have reached the promised land".⁵²⁸ In language which directly credits the tower with reversing the Fall of Man, the structure is described as a new "Eden".⁵²⁹ By contrast, those who remain "below the horizon" are denied the possibility to bask in the "glow of heaven".⁵³⁰ They are "banished", their fate is to stay "earthbound".⁵³¹ The division of the city between skyline and street-level, already steeped in the symbolism of social hierarchy, takes on a deeper, spiritual significance. As Hutter writes, "the skyscraper can [...] reflect a dramatic reconstruction of a sacred landscape".⁵³² More than merely a symbol, and

⁵¹⁹ Ashbery, "System", 277; 281.

⁵²⁰ John Ashbery, "Darlene's Hospital", *CP*, 779.

⁵²¹ John Ashbery, "Variation on a Noel", *CP*, 770.

⁵²² Ashbery, "System", 288.

⁵²³ Ashbery, "System", 285.

⁵²⁴ Staiger, "Hitherside", 81.

⁵²⁵ Ashbery, "System", 285.

⁵²⁶ Ashbery, "System", 280; 281.

⁵²⁷ Ashbery, "Variation", 770.

⁵²⁸ Ashbery, "NS", 281; 280; 295.

⁵²⁹ Ashbery, "NS", 319.

⁵³⁰ Ashbery, "NS", 289; 311.

⁵³¹ Ashbery, "NS", 307; 304.

⁵³² Hutter, *Experiencing*, 205.

“sacred” due to its proximity to heaven, Ashbery’s “tower” becomes synonymous with heaven itself.⁵³³ Its summit is described as “representing heaven which we crane up at from below, knowing that we cannot get near enough”.⁵³⁴

Staiger suggests that “The System” maps “the various stages of reason, culture, and religion”.⁵³⁵ The narrative is a contemplation of the shifting nature of man’s moral values. The tower’s changing status from architectural construction to divine manifestation is reflected by Ashbery’s shift in capitalization. The ordinary “tower” is transmogrified into a devotional “Tower” in the poem’s conclusion.⁵³⁶ What began life as a nondescript “building” comes to represent “the dome of the heavens”.⁵³⁷ If we agree with Staiger’s hypothesis, the tower is conceivably the central trope demonstrating the “various stages” of religious faith.⁵³⁸ Through the form of the tower, Ashbery observes the emergence of a deity. Much as the population comes to view their construction “as a god”,⁵³⁹ Will Self suggests that we have come to “worship” skyscrapers, or regard them as a “Mecca”.⁵⁴⁰ By the poem’s end, the people have transferred their “faith” directly to the tower itself.⁵⁴¹ It, rather than God, is seen as the “superior power/ which will carry us beyond into a region of light”.⁵⁴² Throughout Ashbery’s poetry, tall constructions are portrayed as a symbol of the godhead. “Daffy Duck in Hollywood” (*Houseboat Days*) depicts a world where people “pray” to “skyscrapers”,⁵⁴³ whilst in the landscape of “A Wave” (*A Wave*) an “office building” is “worshipped” in place of “the gods”.⁵⁴⁴

⁵³³ Ashbery, “System”, 315; 316.

⁵³⁴ Ashbery, “System”, 293.

⁵³⁵ Staiger, “Hitherside”, 93.

⁵³⁶ Ashbery, “System”, 316; 308.

⁵³⁷ Ashbery, “NS”, 284; 314.

⁵³⁸ Staiger, “Hitherside”, 93.

⁵³⁹ Ashbery, “System”, 297.

⁵⁴⁰ Will Self, “The meaning of skyscrapers – From the Tower of Babel to the Shard”, *The Guardian* (27/03/15) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/27/will-self-on-the-meaning-of-skyscrapers> (accessed 23/08/17).

⁵⁴¹ Ashbery, “System”, 290.

⁵⁴² Ashbery, “System”, 290.

⁵⁴³ John Ashbery, “Daffy Duck in Hollywood”, *CP*, 512.

⁵⁴⁴ John Ashbery, “A Wave”, *CP*, 802; 787; 801.

2.2.1. The Tower of Babel

Skyscrapers, Ashbery contends, have the same effect on us as “statues of saints”.⁵⁴⁵ Society, he suggests, tends to regard tall structures “religiously”, an inclination which Self traces to the Book of Genesis.⁵⁴⁶ All skyscrapers build on “the same foundational myth: that of the Tower of Babel”.⁵⁴⁷ Ashbery repeatedly trades on this association: at least three of his later collages depict The Tower of Babel.⁵⁴⁸ Of these, Ashbery chose *Moon Glow* (2008) (see appendix 3) as the cover work for his *Collected French Translations: Prose* in 2014.⁵⁴⁹ The collage uses one of Ashbery’s favourite mediums as a base: a game board, the rules of which create a new “terrain” (to use the term of the art critic John Yau) for the selected images to navigate.⁵⁵⁰ The tower occupies the game’s centre, embodying the end point where all the board’s pathways converge. Above the tower is a pasted picture of an angel, a representation of the heavens. Immediately below, a waterfall leads back down to the bottom of the board, where earthly images dominate. Ashbery’s game re-enacts the story of Babel. Players attempt to use architecture to reach the heavens, whilst the threat of falling back to earth is ever present. As Margueritte Murphy suggests, the tower represented an endlessly adaptable image for the poet: “The Tower of Babel may stand for [...] an accumulation of life solutions, or it may refer to the text just written, Ashbery’s own accumulated, heterogeneous talk”.⁵⁵¹

⁵⁴⁵ Ashbery, “Aldo Rossi”, 336.

⁵⁴⁶ Self, “From the Tower”.

⁵⁴⁷ Self, “From the Tower”.

⁵⁴⁸ See *Moon Glow* (2008), *Promontory* (2010), and *The “Little” Tower of Babel* (2010).

⁵⁴⁹ John Ashbery, *Collected French Translations: Prose* (USA: Carcanet, 2014).

⁵⁵⁰ John Yau, “Where to Next?”, *Hyperallergic: Art* (8/01/2017) <https://hyperallergic.com/350048/where-to-next/> (accessed 12/08/17).

⁵⁵¹ Marguerite Murphy, *A Tradition of Subversion* (USA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 191.

This preoccupation with the Tower of Babel is woven throughout the long prose poem, “The New Spirit”, from *Three Poems*. The piece voices the same desire to travel “up”, “the urge to proceed higher and further”.⁵⁵² The wish to transcend is reminiscent of Ashbery’s description of the “feeling of transcendence” which skyscrapers engender.⁵⁵³ Unable to sprout “wings” or “fly”, “mankind” turns instead to its greatest strength: its architecture.⁵⁵⁴ An army of “builders” is set to work on a “tower”.⁵⁵⁵ In language which echoes the competitive architecture of skyscraper construction in 20th-century America, the tower’s goal is to be “the tallest point on the earth’s surface”.⁵⁵⁶ In the poem, architectural height is once again depicted as a means to reach the “heavens”.⁵⁵⁷ The tower’s architects aim for its “summit” to be “equidistant between earth and heaven”.⁵⁵⁸ This evokes the description of Babel as a “tower with its top in the heavens” in the Book of Genesis.⁵⁵⁹ As Liang suggests, Genesis also depicts “the genesis of building tall [...] the symbolic beginning of man’s desire to build tall structures”.⁵⁶⁰ The text of “The New Spirit” is filled with the language and imagery of ascension, both biblical and architectural. The tower is compared to an “angel” “suspended in the air”, whilst the builders strive always to “climb a step higher”.⁵⁶¹ Each brick represents “another stone added to the haphazard masonry of assorted beliefs”.⁵⁶² Whilst “Daffy Duck in Hollywood” portrays a world where people “pray” to “skyscrapers”, here prayers give rise to the tower itself.⁵⁶³ In contrast to the story of Genesis, this construction aims to challenge not only the “heavens” but the very solar system.⁵⁶⁴

⁵⁵² Ashbery, “NS”, 271; 278.

⁵⁵³ Ashbery, “Rodrigo Moynihan”, 165.

⁵⁵⁴ Ashbery, “NS”, 258; 258; 251.

⁵⁵⁵ Ashbery, “NS”, 262; 279.

⁵⁵⁶ Ashbery, “NS”, 278.

⁵⁵⁷ Ashbery, “NS”, 277.

⁵⁵⁸ Ashbery, “NS”, 270; 278.

⁵⁵⁹ Genesis 11:4.

⁵⁶⁰ Liang, “Push”, 52.

⁵⁶¹ Ashbery, “NS”, 259; 251; 251.

⁵⁶² Ashbery, “NS”, 268.

⁵⁶³ Ashbery, “Daffy Duck”, 512.

⁵⁶⁴ Ashbery, “NS”, 277.

Man's goal is "the stars" and his tower aims "to shut out the sun" with its height.⁵⁶⁵ The role of this tower, however, is not to reach the "gods", but to usurp them.⁵⁶⁶ Its construction is twinned with the "building of the metaphor that seemed about to erase them from the skies".⁵⁶⁷ The "creation" of the tower is man's answer to his own "creation" at the hands of God.⁵⁶⁸ Mastery of architecture leads mankind to believe it can surpass the gods. The tower is its greatest advance in this quest since it first "started to build".⁵⁶⁹ As Self writes, "any and all skyscrapers are anthropic subversions of the godly perspective [...] attempts to realise the entirety of human life within the built environment".⁵⁷⁰ Just as Self suggests we have come to "worship"⁵⁷¹ our architectural constructions, the builders of Ashbery's Tower of Babel "bow"⁵⁷² to their creation. As the vehicle through which they mean to transcend God, the tower has replaced the "gods" in their eyes.⁵⁷³

Ashbery frequently suggests that towers and skyscrapers are a direct challenge to God's creation as man seeks to surpass the previously unrivalled peaks of the natural world: "mountains".⁵⁷⁴ The "tower" of "Melodic Trains" (*Houseboat Days*) is modelled directly on the image of the mountain itself.⁵⁷⁵ Its design has been "Guided by a ruler held against a photomural of the alps", with particular attention to "scale".⁵⁷⁶ Similarly, in their quest to build the tallest structure on the "face of the earth", the "builders" of "The New Spirit" also take the giants of the natural world as their "blueprint".⁵⁷⁷ In language reminiscent of the

⁵⁶⁵ Ashbery, "NS", 258; 268.

⁵⁶⁶ Ashbery, "NS", 257.

⁵⁶⁷ Ashbery, "NS", 279.

⁵⁶⁸ Ashbery, "NS", 252.

⁵⁶⁹ Ashbery, "NS", 262.

⁵⁷⁰ Self, "From the Tower".

⁵⁷¹ Self, "From the Tower".

⁵⁷² Ashbery, "NS", 279.

⁵⁷³ Ashbery, "NS", 259.

⁵⁷⁴ Ashbery, "NS", 247.

⁵⁷⁵ John Ashbery, "Melodic Trains", *CP*, 506.

⁵⁷⁶ Ashbery, "Melodic", 506; 507.

⁵⁷⁷ Ashbery, "NS", 276; 262; 262.

biblical “tower with its top in the heavens” they envision their constructions “as mountains whose tops are hidden in the clouds”.⁵⁷⁸

2.2.2. False idols.

Steven Shapin, the theological historian, directly associates the emergence of towers or skyscrapers with both mountains and man’s quest for God. Tall buildings, he suggests, were ultimately “conceived as human-made sacred mountains”.⁵⁷⁹ However, as in the original story of Babel, the mountain-like tower is once more destined to be a false idol of architecture. Eventually, the builders of “The System” step back to reveal the “horrible vision of the completed Tower of Babel [...] as the last ceramic brick was triumphantly fitted into place, perfect in its vulgarity, an eternal reminder of the advantages of industry and cleverness”.⁵⁸⁰ One is reminded of Ashbery’s description, in a 1979 article for *New York* magazine, of the skyscraper as a once “utopian concept by an urban planner” which has subsequently degenerated.⁵⁸¹ Progressively, Ashbery’s tower turns into something more earthly: a skyscraper rife with “vulgarity”. This is reminiscent of the 2010 collage *The ‘Little’ Tower of Babel* (see appendix 4), in which Pieter Bruegel’s *Tower of Babel* is festooned with neon signs. Two figures in religious garb occupy the foreground, exiled from the tower. With its imitation of natural zeniths such as mountains, the skyscraper, Ashbery suggests, merely apes structures which “only god can make”.⁵⁸² Ashbery’s Babel is unworthy of the reverence that its builders envisioned. The clerics stand with their backs to it, reminiscent of Ashbery’s statement in “The New Spirit” that “turning one’s back” is the only way to escape the

⁵⁷⁸ Ashbery, “NS”, 247.

⁵⁷⁹ Shapin, “Ivory”, 1.

⁵⁸⁰ Ashbery, “NS”, 279.

⁵⁸¹ Ashbery, “Aldo Rossi”, 335.

⁵⁸² John Ashbery, “Sculpture in Gardens”, RS 356.

“terror” the tower exudes.⁵⁸³ In his 1978 article on Wright, Ashbery wrote at length on the psychological effects (“admiration, mixed with terror”) which skyscrapers engender.⁵⁸⁴ Rather than a means to transcend our environment, he suggests, the skyscraper “seems designed solely to stunt the spiritual growth” of those in its vicinity.⁵⁸⁵

This is the scenario depicted in “A Wave”. Though it aims for heaven, the skyscraper is merely a sign of man’s hubris. Rather than testifying to his faith, it demonstrates his “cocki[ness]” in the face of the Almighty.⁵⁸⁶ The structure is a challenge to God’s authority, a mockery of the “miracle” of his creation.⁵⁸⁷ This is what Self describes as the “Promethean swagger” of the modern skyscraper.⁵⁸⁸ Man’s faith becomes a “devalued currency”.⁵⁸⁹ The building which strives upwards merely “rises [...] to the indifferent heavens”.⁵⁹⁰ In the event, “A Wave” reveals, so “cold” is the “reception” which the tower’s builders receive at its summit, that the citizens of heaven take up arms to block man from entering.⁵⁹¹

Divine tolerance we seem to feel is actually in short supply
 And those moving forward toward us from the other end of
 the bridge
 Are defending, not welcoming us to, the place of power.⁵⁹²

The city of God is surrounded by “ridgelike fortifications”.⁵⁹³ Heaven has built its own constructions to counter those of man. However close architecture can bring us to the gates of

⁵⁸³ Ashbery, “NS”, 279.

⁵⁸⁴ Ashbery, “Frank”, 322.

⁵⁸⁵ Ashbery, “Aldo Rossi”, 336.

⁵⁸⁶ Ashbery, “Wave”, 806.

⁵⁸⁷ Ashbery, “Wave”, 806.

⁵⁸⁸ Self, “From the Tower”.

⁵⁸⁹ John Ashbery, “Ditto, Kiddo”, *CP*, 760.

⁵⁹⁰ John Ashbery, “When the Sun Went Down”, *CP*, 736.

⁵⁹¹ Ashbery, “Wave”, 794.

⁵⁹² Ashbery, “Wave”, 794.

⁵⁹³ Ashbery, “Wave”, 794.

the city of God, it cannot open them for us. Man may build upwards, the poet states, but he will not encounter heaven at the summit. As “Description of a Masque” (*A Wave*) proclaims, one may reach the “top” of the “tower” but “God will not be there”.⁵⁹⁴ Those who climb the tower of “The System” in search of heaven similarly meet with disappointment. There is nothing but meaningless sky. “You have returned not to the supernatural glow of heaven but the ordinary daylight you knew so well before it passed from your view”.⁵⁹⁵ Ordinary sunlight, it emerges, has been mistaken for heavenly light. As the historian James Sanders writes, the construction of ever taller buildings was responsible for casting the street-level below into eternal shadow. Much as the tower of “The System” seeks to “shut out the sun”⁵⁹⁶ with its height, the skyscrapers of the actual built environment also “block the sun”⁵⁹⁷ from street level. Man’s quest to build upwards inevitably leads to “dark, dense, hemmed in streets”.⁵⁹⁸ It is only in “the city’s upper reaches” that “the world opens up again” and light is possible.⁵⁹⁹ Ashbery characterises the street-level built environment as dark and sunless in his writings. “Fantasia on ‘The Nut-Brown Maid’” attributes the all-encompassing “darkness” of its streets to the “exaggeratedly long shadow” cast by its “tall buildings”.⁶⁰⁰ This “region of light”, “The System” suggests, is all that skyscrapers offer.⁶⁰¹ The closest man’s tower can come to bringing mankind closer to heaven is to raise it above the gloom such buildings create. This journey from “motley darkened” to “lightened landscape[s]” is apparently what man mistook for the “heavens” themselves.⁶⁰²

⁵⁹⁴ John Ashbery, “Description of a Masque”, *CP*, 756; 756; 755.

⁵⁹⁵ Ashbery, “System”, 311.

⁵⁹⁶ Ashbery, “System”, 268.

⁵⁹⁷ James Sanders, *Celluloid Skyline* (USA: Knopf, 2001), 97.

⁵⁹⁸ Sanders, *Celluloid*, 97.

⁵⁹⁹ Sanders, *Celluloid*, 97.

⁶⁰⁰ Ashbery, “Fantasia”, 539; 542; 541.

⁶⁰¹ Ashbery, “System”, 290.

⁶⁰² Ashbery, “System”, 285; 286; 283.

At the same time, the light of day divulges a further unpleasant truth: the tower which was conceived as the embodiment of heavenly beauty is “really as ugly as sin”.⁶⁰³ The tower’s architects, it appears, were mistaken in their construction: they have been “blind [...] to the truth” of the building’s nature.⁶⁰⁴ The tower embodies not “holiness” but “hubris”, the excess of pride that led to Babel.⁶⁰⁵ It is not only a simile for sin, but constructed from “sin” itself.⁶⁰⁶ The builders “imagine they have reached the promised land, when in reality the ship is sinking under them”.⁶⁰⁷ As Liang writes, despite their biblical origins, the tall structures of the built environment emerged “Not for the worship of God but instead dedicated to the glory of man – man’s desire to build skyward as a testament to himself”.⁶⁰⁸ Though architects of “The System” may “believe they are thinking of nothing but God” as they construct the tower, in reality ‘they can think only of themselves’.⁶⁰⁹ The building comes to embody the quest for earthly “advancement”, which Ashbery suggests was the real motivation all along.⁶¹⁰ The “self-convoluted shapes” of the constructions are not indicators of faith, but only of the “self-importan[ce]” of those who created them.⁶¹¹ They are described as “idolaters”.⁶¹² The tower becomes the architectural equivalent of a “telltale finger” on the landscape, directly indicating that we have “sinned”.⁶¹³

As Ashbery develops this concept of skyscrapers, they appear more and more as false gods of architecture. Though we may invest them with religious significance, doing so merely corrupts our morality. The construction of “The New Spirit” is “magnificent but

⁶⁰³ Ashbery, “System”, 284.

⁶⁰⁴ Ashbery, “System”, 284.

⁶⁰⁵ Ashbery, “System”, 283.

⁶⁰⁶ Ashbery, “System”, 284.

⁶⁰⁷ Ashbery, “System”, 295.

⁶⁰⁸ Liang, “Push”, 52.

⁶⁰⁹ Ashbery, “System”, 295.

⁶¹⁰ Ashbery, “System”, 285.

⁶¹¹ Ashbery, “System”, 284.

⁶¹² Ashbery, “System”, 288.

⁶¹³ Ashbery, “System”, 284; 290.

empty”.⁶¹⁴ It is ultimately declared a “failure”.⁶¹⁵ As the economist Edward Glaeser writes, when the biblical Babel was constructed “God punished [mankind] for monumentalizing terrestrial, rather than celestial, glory”.⁶¹⁶ Here it is not God, but the constellations of the cosmos personified which appear to thwart Ashbery’s tower. The result, however, is the same: the tower and its occupants “fall” as their goal moves ever higher out of reach.⁶¹⁷ Though the people build a “tower” to reach the stars, the figures of “the Archer” and “the Ram” continue to “tower over them”.⁶¹⁸ Even man’s greatest constructions are dwarfed by the cosmos. Through the use of the verb ‘towered’, Ashbery employs the image of the tower to stress its insignificance in the eyes of “deities”.⁶¹⁹ In the game of height, man is hopelessly outmatched. Rather than mankind’s ascendancy over religion and the universe, the tower bluntly demonstrates how far it will always be from its goal. As in the Book of Genesis, humans awake unable to communicate (“What was it we said to each other?”).⁶²⁰ This scenario appears to be the basis of Ashbery’s 2010 collage *Promontory*, a title which reflects the tower’s quest for height (see appendix 5). The Tower of Babel is pictured lopsided and crumbling. A prostrate human figure occupies the foreground, cast down alongside its construction. The poem’s ominous message is clear: “we judge not, lest we be judged, but we are judged all the same”.⁶²¹

This fate haunts Ashbery’s skyscrapers. In “The System”, each new “building” is constructed under the constant threat that it will one day be similarly “judged”.⁶²² The towers

⁶¹⁴ Ashbery, “NS”, 262.

⁶¹⁵ Ashbery, “NS”, 256.

⁶¹⁶ Edward Glaeser, “How Skyscrapers Can Save the City”, *The Atlantic* (03/2011), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/03/how-skyscrapers-can-save-the-city/308387/> (accessed 09/12/2017).

⁶¹⁷ Ashbery, “NS”, 277.

⁶¹⁸ Ashbery, “NS”, 279; 279; 274; 254.

⁶¹⁹ Ashbery, “NS”, 265.

⁶²⁰ Ashbery, “NS”, 266

⁶²¹ Ashbery, “NS”, 249.

⁶²² Ashbery, “System”, 280; 282.

are depicted in transitory, fragile terms. One by one they “vanish”, “tumble or die”.⁶²³ The few allowed to remain exist only as a demonstration of heaven’s leniency; man is granted temporary “clemency” from the transgression he has committed in constructing the tower.⁶²⁴ The association between construction and biblical destruction runs so deep that the act of “building” is the corollary to the “fear of an adverse fate’s coming to reduce one’s efforts to nothing so soon as undertaken”.⁶²⁵ The buildings of “A Wave” are similarly viewed as blasphemous. Nonetheless, even in the face of God’s wrath, man continues to build. Even amongst the “rubble” of their demolished construction, the poem’s builders announce they are “going to move still farther upward”.⁶²⁶ As the poem’s speaker declares

So if it pleases all my constructions
To collapse, I shall at least have had that satisfaction, and
known
That it need not be permanent to stay alive.⁶²⁷

As with Babel, the threat of future destruction looms over all of man’s constructions. However, this threat also serves to galvanise the architects to create a building “too strong to be pulled down”.⁶²⁸ As Liang writes “the skyscraper narrative reinforces a slow erosion of the divine doctrines from the story of Babel”.⁶²⁹ As “The New Spirit” stresses, “the continual pilgrimage has not stopped”.⁶³⁰ Mankind’s architectural journey must continue. Architectural failings have caused the original tower’s demise. It must simply have been “built

⁶²³ Ashbery, “System”, 284.

⁶²⁴ Ashbery, “System”, 281.

⁶²⁵ Ashbery, “System”, 280; 285.

⁶²⁶ Ashbery, “Wave”, 793; 790.

⁶²⁷ Ashbery, “Wave”, 790.

⁶²⁸ Ashbery, “Wave”, 795.

⁶²⁹ Liang, “Push”, 53.

⁶³⁰ Ashbery, “NS”, 248.

incorrectly”.⁶³¹ New “buildings” “shoot up” to take the original tower’s place until a veritable “metropolis” of towers stands in its stead, all continuing to grow “up”.⁶³² They are formed from the very “blueprints” of Ashbery’s Tower of Babel, one having been “placed over the other like a sheet of tracing paper”.⁶³³ In a nod to the faith which inspired them, they all boast “stained-glass window[s]”,⁶³⁴ reminiscent of the historian Keith Revell’s description of the skyscraper as a “cement cathedral”.⁶³⁵ Just as Ashbery’s Tower of Babel is presented as the “first step” which “ignites the endless cycle of rising and falling”,⁶³⁶ so too Babel stands as the figurative ancestor of all skyscrapers, part of what Self labels the “still-dominant Tower-of-Babel mythos of the western skyscraper”.⁶³⁷ The new towers still bear the sin of the first, “ancestral” tower, and are described as “moving upward like penance”.⁶³⁸

2.3. Advertising and commerce: from the spiritual to the material.

The “beliefs” which infuse these new structures are markedly different from the forces which inspired Babel.⁶³⁹ They mark another shift in Ashbery’s iconography of the tower, this time towards Mammon. As Murphy writes of “The New Spirit”, the tower’s collapse is the consequence of “industry and cleverness”, threatening the “wisdom of the stars”.⁶⁴⁰ Ashbery’s Tower of Babel ultimately became a “temple” of “industry”, and it is this preoccupation with “industry” which continues to drive the poem’s depiction of the built

⁶³¹ Ashbery, “NS”, 262.

⁶³² Ashbery, “NS”, 267; 274; 267; 271.

⁶³³ Ashbery, “NS”, 262; 256.

⁶³⁴ Ashbery, “NS”, 272.

⁶³⁵ Keith Revell, “Law Makes Order”, in *American Skyscraper*, 40.

⁶³⁶ Ashbery, “NS”, 269.

⁶³⁷ Self, “From the Tower”.

⁶³⁸ Ashbery, “NS”, 269; 248.

⁶³⁹ Ashbery, “NS”, 268.

⁶⁴⁰ Murphy, *Tradition of Subversion*, 191.

environment.⁶⁴¹ Each new tower represents a “solid block” of “business”.⁶⁴² Skyscrapers grow directly out of “commerce”, both fuelled by and depicting mankind’s newly “commere[ial]” concerns.⁶⁴³ Heathcote has written of the skyscraper as the ultimate “symbol of big business”.⁶⁴⁴ Whilst the power of “belie[f]” alone once raised such structures, now they answer only to “industry”.⁶⁴⁵ “The New Spirit” links this new fixation with commercial gain to the decline in religious belief. As the poem states, to construct a skyscraper is to “strip ourselves of the [...] business of believing”.⁶⁴⁶ Religion becomes another genus of “business”, whilst business itself has come to represent a new form of religion.⁶⁴⁷ As the poem’s speaker reflects on the new urban landscape “the change is [...] complete the new morals have altered the original data”.⁶⁴⁸ This connection between the growth of skyscrapers and the decline of faith is not restricted to Ashbery’s writings. In his essay “How Skyscrapers Can Save the City”, Glaeser notes that, until the advent of the skyscraper, the tallest buildings in the city were almost exclusively churches. The dawn of the skyscraper, he suggests, “should be seen as the true start of the irreligious twentieth century”.⁶⁴⁹

Since the days of Babel, architectural altitude was reserved for religious structures, the metaphorical “penance” which the tower’s failure requires of the built environment.⁶⁵⁰ The sky continued to be seen as the domain of God. In this context, the emergence of the skyscraper symbolised a shifting of moral as well as architectural attitudes. As financial concerns overshadowed faith, the speaker concludes, “secular structures surpassed religious

⁶⁴¹ Ashbery, “NS”, 266; 279; 279.

⁶⁴² Ashbery, “NS”, 276; 255.

⁶⁴³ Ashbery, “NS”, 255.

⁶⁴⁴ Edwin Heathcote, “Architecture: Skyscrapers are Still Towers of Strength”, *Financial Times* (10/2/2009) <https://www.ft.com/content/09989dde-ae9-11de-96d7-00144feabdc0> (accessed 08/23/2017).

⁶⁴⁵ Ashbery, “NS”, 268; 279.

⁶⁴⁶ Ashbery, “NS”, 255.

⁶⁴⁷ Ashbery, “NS”, 255.

⁶⁴⁸ Ashbery, “NS”, 271.

⁶⁴⁹ Edward Glaeser, *Triumph of the City* (USA: Penguin, 2011). 162.

⁶⁵⁰ Ashbery, “NS”, 248.

ones”.⁶⁵¹ The church, both figuratively and literally, “was eclipsed by a skyscraper”.⁶⁵² From the wreckage of Babel, Ashbery’s skyscraper “emerged stronger than before: strong as iron”, but it did so at the expense of the belief that inspired its predecessor.⁶⁵³ With the construction of new “buildings”, the people of “The New Spirit” cast aside their faith.⁶⁵⁴ They exchange “make believe” in favour of “commerce”.⁶⁵⁵ The “deities” such towers once sought are dismissed as mere “mythical and probably nonexistent beings”.⁶⁵⁶ All the while, the skyscraper stands as the emblem of “business unencumbered” by the constraints of belief.⁶⁵⁷ As Ashbery muses, in the modern-day tower “it is not necessary to sanctify the gods in order to live”.⁶⁵⁸

2.3.1. The role of business as power

Given the choice between spirituality or the materialism that skyscrapers embody, the inhabitants of “The New Spirit” choose the latter. Ashbery maps this pattern until even God takes the form of a businessman, as he represents merely an office “administrator beyond the bounds” of our perception.⁶⁵⁹ This was a major reason for the ever-taller skyscrapers of twentieth-century America. Those involved in business began to use architecture as a means of stamping their mark on the urban landscape. As Sanders writes, “corporations began erecting their own skyscrapers as a mark of their economic potency”.⁶⁶⁰ This is a theme reflected in Ashbery’s writings. “Litany” (*As We Know*, 1979) describes the skyscraper as

⁶⁵¹ Glaeser, “How Skyscrapers”.

⁶⁵² Glaeser, “How Skyscrapers”.

⁶⁵³ Ashbery, “NS”, 263.

⁶⁵⁴ Ashbery, “NS”, 267.

⁶⁵⁵ Ashbery, “NS”, 255.

⁶⁵⁶ Ashbery, “NS”, 252.

⁶⁵⁷ Ashbery, “NS”, 264.

⁶⁵⁸ Ashbery, “NS”, 259.

⁶⁵⁹ Ashbery, “NS”, 257.

⁶⁶⁰ Sanders, *Celluloid*, 96.

“like a pole pointed to the sky” saturated “in dreams and in business”.⁶⁶¹ “Korean Soap Opera” (*Hotel Lautréamont*, 1992) portrays “investment” as having “wrought havoc with the landscape”.⁶⁶² In “The Couple in the Next Room” (*Houseboat Days*) the “building” is constructed directly from “business”, representing “A slab of business rising behind the stars”.⁶⁶³ It is a direct result of the “deliberations” and “calibrat[ions]” of the corporations it houses.⁶⁶⁴ As Heathcote states “the skyscraper has come to represent boom time”.⁶⁶⁵ “The tall building is perceived as the physical embodiment of the peaks of graph growth. There is no other such visible indication of success and confidence”.⁶⁶⁶

“Houseboat Days” plays on this correlation between architectural height and financial success, with “building[s]” rising and falling with the “stock” market as though in a direct reflection of the “arithmetic” of society’s finances.⁶⁶⁷ They are an economic “seismograph”, which reflects each and every “ripple” of the financial climate.⁶⁶⁸ They “surge”, “fall” or “topple” based on the economy.⁶⁶⁹ In “Valentine” (*Houseboat Days*), architectural “height” is as accurate as “budget figures”.⁶⁷⁰ In “Business Personals” (*Houseboat Days*), skyscrapers embody not only the workings of “Business”, but are a direct sign of financial acquisition.⁶⁷¹ The poem defers to “tall” “building[s]” “Whose authority/ Speaks out of the accumulation of [our] age”.⁶⁷² Skyscrapers demonstrate not only the financial “authority” of the various corporations they embody, but, as Heathcote suggests, a physical demonstration of the state of the wider economy. They have become the chief

⁶⁶¹ John Ashbery, “Litany”, *CP*, 561; 560.

⁶⁶² John Ashbery, “Korean Soap Opera”, *Notes From the Air* (Great Britain: Carcanet, 2007), 90.

⁶⁶³ John Ashbery, “The Couple in the Next Room”, *CP*, 499.

⁶⁶⁴ Ashbery, “Couple”, 499.

⁶⁶⁵ Heathcote, “Architecture”.

⁶⁶⁶ Heathcote, “Architecture”.

⁶⁶⁷ John Ashbery, “Houseboat Days”, *CP*, 516.

⁶⁶⁸ Ashbery, “Houseboat”, 516.

⁶⁶⁹ Ashbery, “Houseboat”, 516.

⁶⁷⁰ John Ashbery, “Valentine”, *CP*, 530; 531.

⁶⁷¹ John Ashbery, “Business Personals”, *CP*, 501.

⁶⁷² Ashbery, “Business”, 501; 501; 502.

“authority” on man’s finances, their height rising directly with society’s economic “accumulation”. Indeed, much as the “tower” of “The System” symbolises that “success” is “guaranteed” for those around it, the structures reflect financial accumulation and also guarantee it.⁶⁷³ As long as one is sequestered in such a “building”, the speaker of “Business Personals” suggests, financial and entrepreneurial success is a certainty: “you come out always a little ahead”.⁶⁷⁴ Skyscrapers are the “tall guardians” or “muses” of finance, the poem reveals.⁶⁷⁵ Amongst their heights, prosperity is safeguarded from the prospect of failure. This is what Ashbery describes as the “Midas touch” of the modern skyscraper.⁶⁷⁶ There is, the poet suggests, a cultural association between skyscrapers and the prosperity they have come to symbolise. In the modern built environment, skyscrapers “stand for [...] wealth”, the journalist Aaron Betsky writes.⁶⁷⁷ Ashbery’s skyscrapers are frequently described in terms of the opulence they have come to represent, that of the poem “Friends” (*Houseboat Days*) being constructed directly out of “money”.⁶⁷⁸ The “tall buildings” of “Fantasia on ‘The Nut-Brown Maid’” are not only “jewelled” but literally coated in “gold dust”.⁶⁷⁹ This is both a physical sign of prosperity and a direct result of the “Midas touch”. In their presence, even the air itself materializes into a shimmering coat of “gold”.⁶⁸⁰ The buildings of “Drame Bourgeois” (*Houseboat Days*) are similarly an architectural embodiment of man’s financial standing or “credit”.⁶⁸¹ They feature “gilded spires” and are a greater “treasure” even than the wealth they symbolise.⁶⁸² As the journalist Jonathan Merritt writes in

⁶⁷³ Ashbery, “System”, 316; 305; 305.

⁶⁷⁴ Ashbery, “Business”, 501; 502.

⁶⁷⁵ Ashbery, “Business”, 501.

⁶⁷⁶ John Ashbery, “Owen Morrel”, *RS*, 351.

⁶⁷⁷ Aaron Betsky, “Symbolism of Skyscrapers”, *Architect* (06/23/2017), <http://www.architectmagazine.com/design/symbolism-of-skyscrapers-the-meaning-of-high-rises-around-the-world> (accessed 08/28/2017).

⁶⁷⁸ John Ashbery, “Friends”, *CP*, 524.

⁶⁷⁹ Ashbery, “Fantasia”, 541; 550; 550.

⁶⁸⁰ Ashbery, “Fantasia”, 550.

⁶⁸¹ John Ashbery, “Drame Bourgeois”, *CP*, 518.

⁶⁸² Ashbery, “Drame”, 519; 518.

“What Skyscrapers Tell Us...About Us”, “our city’s buildings have become a statement on our prosperity spoken through the megaphone of architecture”.⁶⁸³

2.3.2 The lure of consumerism and mass consumption

Ashbery uses this same image in “Other Traditions” (*Houseboat Days*), in which man “proclaim[s]” and “celebrate[s]” his achievement through the skyscraper as if “speaking into it like a megaphone”.⁶⁸⁴ One is reminded of the poet W.H. Auden’s “September 1, 1939”, in which “blind skyscrapers” utilise “their full height to proclaim/ The strength of Collective Man”.⁶⁸⁵ For Auden, the skyscraper is a concrete advertisement showcasing man’s ever-increasing power over his environment. Auden goes so far as to term this newfound control a form of “imperialism”.⁶⁸⁶ By contrast, Ashbery’s skyscrapers proclaim not man’s quest for domination, but his appetite for consumerism. Their “empire”, “On the Towpath” (*Houseboat Days*) reveals, is not only one of business, but of advertising.⁶⁸⁷

On the earth a many-colored tower of longing rises.

There are many ads (to help pay for all this).

Something interesting is happening on every landing.⁶⁸⁸

A multitude of “ads” litter the urban landscape. Various “sign[s]” have proliferated “on the roof of buildings, in the sky”.⁶⁸⁹ For Ashbery, it would appear that “ads” and the tower or

⁶⁸³ Jonathan Merritt, “What Skyscrapers Tell Us...About Us”, *Huffington Post* (05/25/2011), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jonathan-merritt/what-skyscrapers-tell-us-_b_837424.html (accessed 08/28/2017).

⁶⁸⁴ John Ashbery, “Other Traditions”, *CP*, 491; 491; 492.

⁶⁸⁵ W.H. Auden, “September 1, 1939”. In *Collected Auden* (UK: Faber and Faber, 2004), 876.

⁶⁸⁶ Auden, “September”, 876.

⁶⁸⁷ Ashbery, “On the Towpath”, 505.

⁶⁸⁸ Ashbery, “On the Towpath”, 504.

⁶⁸⁹ Ashbery, “On the Towpath”, 504.

skyscraper they festoon are inseparable. The titular “buildings” of “Wooden Buildings” (*Houseboat Days*) are mere “columns with peeling posters on them”.⁶⁹⁰ Their structures have been reduced to the equivalent of architectural poster-boards. Today, the journalist Jonathan Shaw observes, this association with advertising has come to represent the skyscraper’s main function. “Their surfaces are being rethought to carry visual content [...] more valuable than the space within”.⁶⁹¹ In addition to being a vehicle for advertisements, Ashbery’s “tower of longing” relies on them to sustain its existence (“there are many ads to help pay for this”).⁶⁹² Without them, it would simply “ceas[e] to exist”, a golem brought to life by publicity alone.⁶⁹³ This is reminiscent of the tower from “The New Spirit”, which also “ceased to exist” when those around it turn away.⁶⁹⁴ Lack of attention was as destructive to the tower as the wrath of the heavens. As such, the poet’s tower can stand only as long as “all eyes are riveted” upon it.⁶⁹⁵

As the architecture historian Gail Fenske writes, the purpose of skyscrapers as “business architecture” was to be “fiercely competitive and publicity-seeking”.⁶⁹⁶ Ashbery’s “tower of longing” exists to be seen.⁶⁹⁷ It calls on the city’s inhabitants to “observe” it and takes pride in being “visible from far away”.⁶⁹⁸ This notion of visibility, Fenske maintains, was essential to the development of the skyscraper as advertising icon. Whilst the battle to build still higher was once a matter of pure architectural bragging rights, now it carried a mercantile purpose: “advertising by means of a spectacular, media-publicity-generating height”.⁶⁹⁹ Just as corporations used the height of their skyscrapers as a concrete demonstration of their own

⁶⁹⁰ John Ashbery, “Wooden Buildings”, *CP*, 494; 495.

⁶⁹¹ Shaw, “Skyscraper as Symbol”.

⁶⁹² Ashbery, “On the Towpath”, 504.

⁶⁹³ Ashbery, “On the Towpath”, 504.

⁶⁹⁴ Ashbery, “NS”, 279.

⁶⁹⁵ Ashbery, “NS”, 279.

⁶⁹⁶ Gail Fenske, *The Skyscraper and the City* (USA: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 144.

⁶⁹⁷ Ashbery, “On the Towpath”, 504.

⁶⁹⁸ Ashbery, “On the Towpath”, 504; 505.

⁶⁹⁹ Fenske, *Skyscraper*, 144.

financial power, skyscrapers played on that prestige to advertise products. The urban planning theorist, Christopher Schliephake, describes the purpose of advertising and the “building[s]” they cover as “to dazzle, distract, and hypnotize”.⁷⁰⁰ Similarly the skyscrapers of *Houseboat Days* are described in terms of their ability to attract. They are “enchanted, many-colored things”,⁷⁰¹ covered in “neon”,⁷⁰² “flashing”,⁷⁰³ or “dramatic lighting”.⁷⁰⁴

The language and appeal of advertising are subtle but persistent themes in Ashbery’s work. He would often employ its imagery in his collages as he “glued newspaper clippings onto paintings and pasted advertising on canvas”, writes the art critic David D’Arcy.⁷⁰⁵ In his obituary of Ashbery, Mark Ford writes that “his conversation ranged from avant-garde composers to advertising jingles”.⁷⁰⁶ One is reminded of “Daffy Duck in Hollywood”, whose speaker spouts advertisements for products such as “Rumford’s Baking Powder” between erudite discussions of the 17th-century novelist Madame de La Fayette’s “La Princesse de Clèves”.⁷⁰⁷ This duality is further encapsulated in Ashbery’s 2014 collage *The Painter* (see appendix 6). The collage’s background depicts *Le Désespéré*, a self-portrait by the 19th-century French painter Gustave Courbet, whose work was both feted and reviled for its realism. Overlaid across Courbet’s face is an advertisement for Dutch Boy Paints, a company specialising in lead paint for the exterior of buildings. The advert features the company’s iconic mascot: a little ‘Dutch boy’ in painter’s overalls, complete with paintbrush in hand.

Through this simple juxtaposition, Ashbery presents us with two very different visions of the painter. Courbet arguably represents our traditional concept of the artist, yet the Dutch

⁷⁰⁰ Christopher Schliephake, *Urban Ecologies* (USA: Lexington Books, 2014), 149.

⁷⁰¹ John Ashbery, “All kinds of Caresses”, *CP*, 513.

⁷⁰² Ashbery, “All kinds”, 513.

⁷⁰³ Ashbery, “Fantasia”, 550.

⁷⁰⁴ John Ashbery, “The Gazing Grain”, *CP*, 498.

⁷⁰⁵ David D’Arcy, “John Ashbery’s Collages, Life is a Mixed-Media Affair”, *The Observer* (05/01/2017) <http://observer.com/2017/01/john-ashbery-collages-tibor-de-nagy-gallery-review/> (accessed 08/22/2017).

⁷⁰⁶ Mark Ford, “John Ashbery Obituary”, *The Guardian* (4 September 2017) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/sep/04/john-ashbery-obituary> (accessed 4/09/2017).

⁷⁰⁷ Ashbery, “Daffy Duck”, 510; 511.

Boy occupies the foreground and blocks our view of the artist himself. In what the historian David Blank terms the “Age of Advertising”, the imagery and influence of advertising have eclipsed our former perception of art.⁷⁰⁸ When asked to envision a painter, the poet suggests, we are more likely to turn to the iconic logo of the Dutch Boy than to the artists of history. Advertising has become our artwork. The collage thus offers a message about the power of advertising to infiltrate culture. Ashbery suggested this in a 1980 article on modern American art published in *New York* magazine, in which he alludes to Andy Warhol’s artwork depicting Campbell’s “soup cans”.⁷⁰⁹ Warhol’s famous depictions of commercial products such as Brillo Pads (what the art critic Anthony Grudin terms “branded images”) seemed to make advertising and art synonymous.⁷¹⁰ Similarly, Ashbery portrays the Dutch Boy as both artwork and artist. His brush is poised mid-air, frozen in the act of painting over Courbet’s work. The anguished face of the artist is replaced by the cheerful image of advertising.

The collage reflects not only Ashbery’s “delight[t] in the irreverent mix and mash-up of high and low culture”, but also the significance he places on advertisements themselves.⁷¹¹ Just as the poet’s “Tower of Babel” comes to encapsulate the society in which it was built (as the “mascot of that time”), skyscrapers and the advertisements they bear offer insight into an era’s social, economic, and political conditions.⁷¹² They represent what the historian Nancy Spears calls “repositories of cultural meaning”.⁷¹³ Ashbery regularly stresses the role of tall buildings as wider cultural or societal replicas of their surroundings. They are frequently described as “mirrors”, the “glass” and “brushed metal” of their architectural “surface[s]” offering a real and metaphorical reflection of the world around them.⁷¹⁴ As dual

⁷⁰⁸ David Blank, “A Note on the Golden Age of Advertising”, *Journal of Business*, (01/1963), 33.

⁷⁰⁹ Ashbery, “Owen Morrel”, *RS*, 351.

⁷¹⁰ Anthony Grudin. “‘A Sign of Good Taste’: Andy Warhol and the Rise of Brand Image Advertising”, *Oxford Art Journal* (2010), 212.

⁷¹¹ Eleanor Spencer, “‘A work of art that the critic cannot even talk about’: The Poetry of John Ashbery”, in *American Poetry Since 1945*, ed. Eleanor Spencer (USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 106.

⁷¹² Ashbery, “NS”, 279; 267.

⁷¹³ Nancy Spears and Richard Germaine, “1900-2000 in Review”, *Journal of Advertising*, (2007), 19.

⁷¹⁴ John Ashbery, “The Ice-Cream Wars”, *CP*, 529.

representations of architecture and advertising, the poet suggests in his essay “Fantastic Architecture”, skyscrapers are uniquely qualified to “epitomize moments of life”.⁷¹⁵ Those structures of “The Other Tradition” carry the very “sentiment” and “ideas” of the entire age “emblazoned” on their billboard banners.⁷¹⁶

Skyscrapers hold a particularly strong association with their country of origin: America.⁷¹⁷ As the journalist Colin Marshall writes, the “very first skyscraper went up in the United States”.⁷¹⁸ Already a symbol of “American ambition”, their proliferation across the nation led skyscrapers to become symbols not only of how America was viewed by the outside world, but how the nation viewed itself.⁷¹⁹ As Glaeser comments, “if you want to know what America thinks...look at her skylines”.⁷²⁰ As in “Unctuous Platitudes” (*Houseboat Days*), skyscrapers have become direct representations of the “mental climate” of the nation.⁷²¹ Though many taller structures have subsequently been built outside the United States, the cultural identity of skyscrapers, Marshall maintains, remains “quintessentially American”.⁷²² Indeed, in a 1979 article for *New York* magazine, “Visionary Drawings of Architecture”, Ashbery reflected that skyscrapers are the “local” or “native-vernacular architecture” of America.⁷²³ In both the Book of Genesis and “The New Spirit”, mankind’s urge to build ever upwards left it without a common tongue or means to communicate. In contrast, the poet suggests, America is united by the dialect or “vernacular” of its skyscrapers. The structure is as embedded in its culture as language itself.

⁷¹⁵ John Ashbery, “Fantastic Architecture”, *RS*, 326.

⁷¹⁶ Ashbery, “Other Tradition”, 491; 494; 493; 494.

⁷¹⁷ Ashbery, “Collective Dawns”, 494.

⁷¹⁸ Colin Marshall, “The World’s First Skyscraper”, *The Guardian* (04/2/2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/apr/02/worlds-first-skyscraper-chicago-home-insurance-building-history> (accessed 09/15/2017).

⁷¹⁹ Marshall, “World’s First”.

⁷²⁰ Glaeser, “How Skyscrapers”.

⁷²¹ John Ashbery, “Unctuous Platitudes”, *CP*, 498.

⁷²² Marshall, “World’s First”.

⁷²³ John Ashbery, “Visionary Drawings of Architecture”, *RS*, 344; 347.

While stressing the role of skyscrapers as symbols of American innovation, “A Wave” takes this concept further. The “building[s]” are described as “ads for civilization” itself.⁷²⁴ Rather than epitomizing a specific culture, skyscrapers become “chroniqueurs” of all human progress.⁷²⁵ So synonymous are skyscrapers and the concept of human achievement, that eventually the constructions of “A Wave” become mankind’s chief accomplishment. More than just a symbol of advancement, they have absorbed the entire “civilization” they represent.⁷²⁶ Their cultural identity has become an “Anthem to perpendicularity”, and the skyscraper stands as the result of “Every artifice of which the/ human/ Genre is capable”.⁷²⁷ Like numerous other skyscrapers in the poet’s writings, it too is a “mirrored surface”.⁷²⁸ Yet what it ultimately reflects is not mankind’s accomplishments, but its “excess”.⁷²⁹ Man’s quest for advancement becomes unquenchable, to the extent that the very constructions which embody his desires become unsustainable. The ceaseless need to “advance” causes each of man’s “constructions/ To collapse”.⁷³⁰ As the poet warns

One idea is enough to organize a life and project it
 Into unusual and viable forms, but many ideas merely
 Lead one thither into a morass of their own good intentions.⁷³¹

Whether it is the proliferation of desires or the pursuit of the heavens, “too much” is always a bad thing.⁷³² The excess skyscrapers embody leads to their downfall. The historian James Playsted-Wood states that the skyscraper has ultimately come to embody “materialism and its

⁷²⁴ Ashbery, “Wave”, 802; 788.

⁷²⁵ Ashbery, “Wave”, 788.

⁷²⁶ Ashbery, “Wave”, 788; 803.

⁷²⁷ Ashbery, “Wave”, 803.

⁷²⁸ Ashbery, “Wave”, 801.

⁷²⁹ Ashbery, “Wave”, 801.

⁷³⁰ Ashbery, “Wave”, 790.

⁷³¹ Ashbery, “Wave”, 789.

⁷³² Ashbery, “Wave”, 806.

ideals” above all else.⁷³³ Ashbery’s “A Wave” reflects this materialism as the inevitable “social implication” of excess.⁷³⁴ Mankind increasingly associates “success[s]” with material fulfilment.⁷³⁵ Progress is subsumed by “profit” while the drive to innovate is replaced by the need to “have”.⁷³⁶

The poems of *Houseboat Days* mirror such materialism. “I could make a list of each one of my possessions”, the speaker of “Business Personals” boasts, with particular focus on “how much each thing cost[s]”.⁷³⁷ The skyscraper of “Houseboat Days” is a monument to “having”,⁷³⁸ while that of “Collective Dawns” declares “you can have whatever you want/ Own it I mean”.⁷³⁹ If the skyscraper is truly a reflection of culture, the journalist Patricia Arcilla writes, then it is inevitably “our present dominant form of social structure—the so-called consumer culture”.⁷⁴⁰ Acquisition has become man’s main goal. Indeed, “Blue Sonata” (*Houseboat Days*) reveals, it has come to be seen as the bare minimum, in a world in which “having too many” things has grown to symbolise “having just enough”.⁷⁴¹ “Moderation” has become an alien concept in the society of “Fantasia on ‘The Nut-Brown Maid’”, in which the speaker continues to ponder “how many [...] things can one want?”⁷⁴² Skyscrapers, the journalist Jonathan Merritt writes, have ultimately come to symbolise a world in which “we are because we have”.⁷⁴³ This concept is explored in the final text of Ashbery’s *Three Poems*. Whilst “The New Spirit” and “The System” explore the relationship between the tower and religious faith, “The Recital” reflects the emergence of the skyscraper as an image of

⁷³³ James Playsted-Wood, *Magazines in the United States* (NY: Ronald Press, 1971), 132.

⁷³⁴ Ashbery, “Wave”, 794.

⁷³⁵ Ashbery, “Wave”, 804.

⁷³⁶ Ashbery, “Wave”, 801; 790.

⁷³⁷ Ashbery, “Business”, 502.

⁷³⁸ Ashbery, “Houseboat”, 516.

⁷³⁹ Ashbery, “Collective Dawns”, 493.

⁷⁴⁰ Patricia Arcilla, “An Architect Envisioned these Futuristic Skyscrapers for a ‘New Advanced Society’”, *ArchDaily* (04/08/2015) <http://www.businessinsider.com/civilization-0000-for-a-new-advanced-society-2015-4?IR=T> (accessed 08/18/2017).

⁷⁴¹ John Ashbery, “Blue Sonata”, *CP*, 532.

⁷⁴² Ashbery, “Fantasia”, 542; 544.

⁷⁴³ Merritt, “What Skyscrapers Tell Us”.

materialism. The poem's speakers are described in terms of their materialistic values. They "delight to enumerate all the things" they possess, whilst their very "happiness" is defined by their belongings.⁷⁴⁴ As the poem explains: "the naming of all the new things we now possessed had become our chief occupation; that very little time for the mere tasting and having of them was left over".⁷⁴⁵

2.3.3. False advertising and hollow promises.

"The Recital" returns to the biblical theme Ashbery has employed previously but this time linking it to the theme of materialism. The skyscraper is "inexhaustible in pleasures and fertile pursuits as some more down-to-earth Eden, from which [...] the torments of that older fantasy-world had been banished by a more reasonable deity".⁷⁴⁶ Once more mankind views its architecture as divine. Buildings mimic God's act of "creation" and humans view their constructions as representing the "dawn" of a "new world".⁷⁴⁷ However, this time, it is a world which mirrors man's own rapacity. As the avatar of this materialistic culture, he sees the skyscraper as an "ideal" world.⁷⁴⁸ Its advertisements are labelled "manna from heaven", using religious terminology, and the building itself embodies the romanticized version of reality that these advertisements promise.⁷⁴⁹ As the sociologist Marsha Richins stresses, "advertising presents an unrealistic or idealized picture of people and their lives".⁷⁵⁰ "Eden" itself becomes an architectural construct of "brick".⁷⁵¹ The world it offers is free from pain or

⁷⁴⁴ Ashbery, "Recital", 319; 319; 320.

⁷⁴⁵ Ashbery, "Recital", 319.

⁷⁴⁶ Ashbery, "Recital", 319.

⁷⁴⁷ Ashbery, "Recital", 323; 325; 319.

⁷⁴⁸ Ashbery, "Recital", 322.

⁷⁴⁹ Ashbery, "Recital", 323.

⁷⁵⁰ Marsha Richins, "Social Comparison and the Idealized Images of Advertising", *Journal of Consumer Research* (06/1991), 71.

⁷⁵¹ Ashbery, "Recital", 319; 321.

any form of negative experience. Only “pleasure” is possible.⁷⁵² The building represents not only materialism, but also hedonism. The utopia it represents is matched by the “utopic joys” it offers.⁷⁵³ Society has come to reflect what Spitzer terms “the pictures of felicity and luxury which smile at [us] from the billboards” of our city’s skyscrapers.⁷⁵⁴ Ashbery’s skyscraper is a tongue-in-cheek monument to both the consumer economy and the advertising business itself. The “skyscraper” of “Purists Will Object” (*A Wave*), is, itself, the ultimate advertisement. It invariably draws all “gazes” and offers “pleasure” that “cannot” be “escape[d]”.⁷⁵⁵

all

in the interests of this pornographic masterpiece,

Variegated, polluted skyscraper to which all gazes are drawn.⁷⁵⁶

As in “The Recital”, the skyscraper embodies the very “pleasure” that the advertisements adorning its sides promise.⁷⁵⁷ The abstract “tower of longing” is transformed into commercialized pornography, a debased reproduction of the desires which led to its creation.⁷⁵⁸

However, although the speaker of “Fantasia on ‘The Nut-Brown Maid’” looks to the skyscraper to fulfil his every desire he is shocked when it fails to live up to its promises. As the poem opines, “One’s desire keeps getting granted for someone else”.⁷⁵⁹ People are no closer to achieving their dream, though they continue to see it depicted everywhere in

⁷⁵² Ashbery, “Recital”, 323.

⁷⁵³ Ashbery, “Recital”, 319.

⁷⁵⁴ Leo Spitzer, “American Advertising Explained as Popular Art”, in *Essays on English and American Literature*, ed. Anna Hatcher (USA: Princeton UP), 265.

⁷⁵⁵ John Ashbery, “Purists Will Object”, *CP*, 745.

⁷⁵⁶ Ashbery, “Purists”, 745.

⁷⁵⁷ Ashbery, “Purists”, 745.

⁷⁵⁸ Ashbery, “On the Towpath”, 504.

⁷⁵⁹ Ashbery, “Fantasia”, 543.

advertisements. Similarly, the speaker of “Melodic Trains” only compounds his own “panic” and “unhappiness” when reaching the “tower” does not give him the idealised life he envisioned.⁷⁶⁰ What from a distance appeared to be the promise of fulfilment is revealed, closer up, to contain only “Clouds of anxiety, of sad, regretful impatience/ With ourselves, our lives”.⁷⁶¹ Its promise is “reflect[ed] imperfectly” in its reality.⁷⁶² He is left only with more “dissatisfaction”.⁷⁶³ This inevitable disappointment, the linguists Robin Tolmach Lakoff and Raquel Scherr write, is at the heart of the true nature of advertising. Inevitably, we become increasingly critical of what we perceive to be, by comparison, our own “mediocre” lives.⁷⁶⁴ “Although ads hold forth the implicit or explicit promise that one’s life will more closely approach the ideal by product use, this promise is imperfectly, if at all, fulfilled”.⁷⁶⁵

Skyscrapers, Ashbery writes in a 1980 article for *New York Magazine*, are “as suspect as the commercialism” they represent.⁷⁶⁶ He labels them “counterfeit objects”, false down to their very architectural structure.⁷⁶⁷ As “Try Me! I’m Different!” (*A Wave*) reveals

Whatever is sworn, promised, sealed
With kisses, over and over, is strange, faithless
And fundamentally unlike us.⁷⁶⁸

“Valentine” similarly casts aspersions on these towers of “dreams”.⁷⁶⁹ They are presented as symbols of “progress” and “‘advanced’ thinking”.⁷⁷⁰ Their “height” is a direct correlation of

⁷⁶⁰ Ashbery, “Melodic”, 506.

⁷⁶¹ Ashbery, “Melodic”, 506.

⁷⁶² Ashbery, “Melodic”, 507.

⁷⁶³ Ashbery, “Melodic”, 507.

⁷⁶⁴ Robin Tolmach Lakoff and Raquel Scherr, *Face Value* (USA: Routledge, 1984), 290.

⁷⁶⁵ Lakoff and Scherr, *Face*, 290.

⁷⁶⁶ Ashbery, “Owen Morrel”, *RS*, 352.

⁷⁶⁷ John Ashbery, “Environmental Art”, *RS*, 345.

⁷⁶⁸ John Ashbery, “Try Me! I’m Different!”, *CP*, 782.

⁷⁶⁹ Ashbery, “Valentine”, 532.

⁷⁷⁰ Ashbery, “Valentine”, 531; 532

the “grandeur of the ideas” they espouse.⁷⁷¹ However, instead of desire, the structures fill the poem’s speaker only with “doubt”.⁷⁷² Rather than uncritically accepting their message, he demands “Proof of it”, only to discover that the structures are as fragile as the lies which form their foundation.⁷⁷³

You can’t think about them too long
Without knocking them over. Your castle is a house of cards,
[...] towering farther
Than the eye can see into the clouds, and it is also built on
Shifting sands.⁷⁷⁴

Ultimately, Ashbery’s skyscrapers return time and again to the image of the first “tower with its top in the heavens”. Though the towering structure of “The Recital” comes to be a true emblem of the materialistic culture it represents, in doing so it serves only to condemn those who built it. As the poem states: “Perhaps no art, however gifted and well-intentioned, can supply what we are demanding of it: not only the figured representation of our days but the justification of them”.⁷⁷⁵ What man seeks in his constructions, Ashbery suggests, is not only the reflection of his values, but vindication for them. Instead of condemning his sins, he wishes for the skyscraper to rationalize them. This is explored in “The System”, which stops to ponder “what actually was wanted from this construct[ion]?”.⁷⁷⁶ The building’s architects seek not “redemption” from evil, but to be told that “a certain amount of evil is necessary”.⁷⁷⁷

⁷⁷¹ Ashbery, “Valentine”, 530.

⁷⁷² Ashbery, “Valentine”, 532.

⁷⁷³ Ashbery, “Valentine”, 532.

⁷⁷⁴ Ashbery, “Valentine”, 532.

⁷⁷⁵ Ashbery, “Recital”, 322.

⁷⁷⁶ Ashbery, “System”, 287.

⁷⁷⁷ Ashbery, “System”, 288; 284.

Rather than to be exonerated from the sin of building the structure, they want their constructions to prove that they have “sinned to some purpose”.⁷⁷⁸ Thus, in the final analysis, mankind is accountable not to God, but to his own architectural creations. As Ashbery explained during his 1994 interview with David Herd for *P.N. Review*, New York is “a good place to write poetry”, because “there are skyscrapers”: “there are many tall buildings which are always drawing one’s mind upwards, perhaps to a spiritual realm, perhaps not”.⁷⁷⁹

⁷⁷⁸ Ashbery, “System”, 290.

⁷⁷⁹ David Herd, “In Conversation with John Ashbery”, *P.N. Review* (Sept-Oct, 1994) https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=2216 (Accessed 10/02/2020).

Since 1988, a 400-foot steel structure has stretched across downtown Minneapolis, bridging the divide, architecturally and metaphorically, between the city’s eastern and western halves. As “the largest public artwork in Minneapolis”, the Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge commemorates the local arts patron who helped fund the project.⁷⁸⁰ Amongst the literary and cultural community of the metropolis, however, it is commonly referred to as “the Ashbery Bridge”.⁷⁸¹ The reason for this is the poem Ashbery was commissioned to write for the construction, which spans the overhead beams of the structure. Given that “its metal letters extend over 16 lanes of traffic”, locals joke that the bridge is “the longest poem in the world”, inadvertently hinting at how dynamically Ashbery’s text and the bridge’s structure, designed by the sculptor and architect Siah Armajani, are intertwined.⁷⁸² Whilst the poem re-enacts the themes of passage and construction the bridge represents, the words themselves have been riveted to the struts, rendering them as much a part of the structure as the metal of which it is comprised (see appendices 1-3). “It is not a conduit (confluence?) but a place. The place, of movement and an order [...] where you stand and think of going no further”.⁷⁸³

Ashbery met Armajani whilst writing a piece on his work for *New York* magazine in the early 1980s, in which he commended Armajani for bringing “new dimensions” to “public” space.⁷⁸⁴ “Public” or “environmental art”, Ashbery reflected, “has been with us for a long time”, to the extent that, “in New York, it seems to be about all there is to look at”.⁷⁸⁵ Wherever “developers have been forced to leave an empty space, somebody has thoughtfully

⁷⁸⁰ Eric Lorberer, “The Ashbery Bridge”, *Jubilat* (2007), 99.

⁷⁸¹ Lorberer, “Ashbery”, 99.

⁷⁸² Paul Schmelzer, “Not a Conduit but a Place”, *Walker Art Center* (12/09/2017), <https://walkerart.org/magazine/john-ashbery-siah-armajani-bridge-poem> (Accessed 05/01/2021).

⁷⁸³ John Ashbery, Untitled, *Hotel Lautréamont* (NY: Alfred Knopf, 1992), 127.

⁷⁸⁴ John Ashbery, “Siah Armajani”, in *Reported Sightings*, ed. David Bergman (USA: Harvard UP, 1991), 347. (Hereafter cited as RS).

⁷⁸⁵ John Ashbery, “Environmental Art”, RS, 342.

tucked in a vest-pocket park”, or another “public” minded project.⁷⁸⁶ Yet, despite the ubiquity of these spaces, Ashbery continued, it is inevitable that “much public outdoor art can’t stand up to the city” which surrounds it.⁷⁸⁷ In constant danger of being subsumed by the “blasé assimilating power” of the urban environment, these public works “recede into the background”, at best achieving a “semi-invisible status”.⁷⁸⁸ When it comes to the public parts of the built environment, the poet stressed, “everything” is ultimately “about space”: both in terms of the “tremendous competition” for it and the struggle public spaces face in establishing an architectural identity as fully-fledged places in their own right.⁷⁸⁹ Though the artist or architect may seek to “alleviate the insane visual congestion” of urban life or “cause us to think beautiful thoughts”, to properly bring a work to life through the medium of public space, Ashbery suggested, they must recognise the roles such spaces play in the “daily lives” of a city’s populace.⁷⁹⁰

It was this understanding of the underlying “architecture” of public space, which Ashbery admired in Armajani: “Unlike most who attempt ‘public’ sculpture, he has remembered that the public is made up of individual private persons, and has left messages for them throughout his open and monumental constructions”.⁷⁹¹ Less than a decade after his article on Armajani, Ashbery’s message would be transmitted through the medium of the architect’s construction as, although Ashbery eventually published the untitled prose poem in *Hotel Lautréamont* (1992), in its truest form it exists as a “site-specific text piece”.⁷⁹² Though the published poem is not written in verse form, in “The Ashbery Bridge: Poetry and Public Space”, Eric Lorberer suggests that the structure even “uses beams and spacing to suggest

⁷⁸⁶ Ashbery, “Environmental”, 343.

⁷⁸⁷ Ashbery, “Environmental”, 343.

⁷⁸⁸ Ashbery, “Environmental”, 343.

⁷⁸⁹ Ashbery, “Environmental”, 342; 343; 343.

⁷⁹⁰ Ashbery, “Environmental”, 343.

⁷⁹¹ Ashbery, “Siah Armajani”, 347.

⁷⁹² Lorberer, “Ashbery”, 99.

caesura”.⁷⁹³ This concept of architecture as poetic form is exemplified by the line “it is fair to be crossing, to have crossed” which is separated at the caesura by the construction’s metal struts.⁷⁹⁴ What exists on paper as a fragment from a single line of poetry is here transformed through the medium of the bridge itself: the process of transition not only extends from one point in space to the other, but also from present to past tense rendered physical in steel and concrete. To cross the bridge is to enact the poem, the reader literally having ‘crossed’ the structure at the point of the caesura. The result is a work which “is meant to be physically encountered”, one which uses the medium of the built environment not just to passively “display” the poem but to actively “complete it”.⁷⁹⁵ Much as the poet emphasised the “public” aspect of Armajani’s creations, Lorberer indicates that Ashbery’s collaboration with the architect stemmed directly from their shared desire to create precisely this “public setting for poetry” within the built environment.⁷⁹⁶ It is this element of public participation which enables the “poem to do its work in the public space” and transforms the Ashbery Bridge from a simple “public art project” to a fully-fledged public place in its own right.⁷⁹⁷

Although Ashbery’s collaboration with Armajani showcases the poet’s work in relation to concepts of public space or place, the ways in which Ashbery “imagines a role for poetry in the public sphere” has seldom been explored by critics.⁷⁹⁸ Lorberer’s essay remains the sole critical study of the Ashbery Bridge to date and the only major piece of criticism to explore Ashbery’s work in this context, despite the fact that Ashbery’s comments on his own poetic process arguably offer a foundation for considering his work in relation to concepts of public space or place. As the poet explained in his 1994 interview with David Herd for *P.N. Review*, “lots of my poems have their origin in what I hear people saying in the street in New

⁷⁹³ Lorberer, “Ashbery”, 115.

⁷⁹⁴ John Ashbery, Untitled, *Hotel Lautréamont* (USA: Alfred Knopf, 1992), 127.

⁷⁹⁵ Lorberer, “Ashbery”, 104; 114; 114.

⁷⁹⁶ Lorberer, “Ashbery”, 116.

⁷⁹⁷ Lorberer, “Ashbery”, 116; 101.

⁷⁹⁸ Lorberer, “Ashbery”, 99; 116.

York”. Indeed Ashbery confirmed his habit of gaining inspiration for poems in “public places” throughout much of his career.⁷⁹⁹ In his seminal study *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space*, Jan Gehl suggests that this potential to serve as a “starting point” for fostering creative “stimulation comprise[s] one of the most important qualities of public spaces altogether”.⁸⁰⁰ As an architectural framework which enables “seeing and hearing a great number of unknown people”, public space is “a medium for the unpredictable, the spontaneous, the unplanned” and therefore, a catalyst for “inspiration”.⁸⁰¹

Despite these considerations, critics have been slow to consider the relationship between public places and Ashbery’s poetics. Susan Schultz indicates that this may be because Ashbery is traditionally viewed as a poet of “the private realm”, which leads critics to overlook the ways in which his work engages with the “public” world.⁸⁰² However, another possible factor is the broader lack of critical consensus surrounding how questions of public or private should be understood in an Ashbery context, even in abstract terms. As the American poet Gene Frumkin commented in his 1986 retrospective on Ashbery’s work for the literary magazine *Conjunctions*, there is a longstanding difference in opinion concerning whether, at heart, “the poet is a public man” (his poems “discoursing about anything” and everything through their “collage-like [...] grouping together of diverse elements” from “public life”) or whether his work should be viewed as simply “too private” to enable public interpretation.⁸⁰³ This plays on a longstanding cultural concept, whereby that which is “public” is traditionally associated with inclusivity, accessibility and easy intelligibility, whilst the idea of the “private” suggests the difficulty or even “incomprehensibility” which

⁷⁹⁹ David Herd, “In Conversation with John Ashbery”, *P.N. Review* (1994) https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe?item_id=2216 (Accessed 03/01/2021).

⁸⁰⁰ Jan Gehl, *Life Between Buildings* (UK: Island, 2001), 13.

⁸⁰¹ Gehl, *Life*, 13; 19; 13.

⁸⁰² Susan Schultz, Introduction, in *The Tribe of John*, ed. Susan M. Schultz (USA: Alabama UP, 1995), 6; 4.

⁸⁰³ Gene Frumkin, “Review”, *Conjunctions* (1986), 259; 259; 259; 262; 263.

Ashbery's work is often associated with.⁸⁰⁴ For example, whilst Helen Vendler, "more than any other critic, [...] has introduced and fought for Ashbery as a public poet", she has done so primarily by making his writings more accessible to "readers who are not also critics or academics".⁸⁰⁵ In this respect, suggestions that Ashbery's poetry should be considered in "public" terms have largely focused on countering his reputation for opacity rather than considering how his is a "poetry that seeks to matter in the public space".⁸⁰⁶ In a 1972 interview with the poet and academic Alfred Poulin at The Brockport Writers Forum, Ashbery voiced disappointment that his work continued to be viewed in such "private" terms: "The reputation that my poetry has of being something terribly private and difficult to get into is not at all what I hoped for. I'm hoping that someday people will see it that way, as trying to become the openest possible form".⁸⁰⁷ Much as he was drawn to the "public" nature of Armajani's "open and monumental constructions", Ashbery sought the same quality of 'openness' in his own work. "My intention is to communicate [...] to stretch poetry rather than to level it, to make it more inclusive".⁸⁰⁸

As the last of three chapters dedicated to the treatment of various genres of urban space in the poet's work, this analysis considers how Ashbery's poetry relates to ideas of public space or place, exploring his depiction of such spaces within a specifically urban context. The first chapter considered the urban built environment as a whole, exploring the imagery of cities in Ashbery's poetry. Chapter 2 considered the individual edifices which make up the urban landscape, focusing on the poet's portrayal of skyscrapers, towers and tall buildings. By contrast, the present chapter approaches Ashbery's cities from the more diffuse

⁸⁰⁴ Bryan Appleyard, "'The Major Genius of a Minor Art'", *The Times* (23/08/1984), reprinted by *Carcanet*, <https://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?showdoc=1;doctype=interview> (Accessed 15/01/2021).

⁸⁰⁵ Schultz, *Tribe*, 3.

⁸⁰⁶ Lorberer, "Ashbery", 133.

⁸⁰⁷ A. Poulin, "The Experience of Experience", *Michigan Quarterly Review* (1981), 251.

⁸⁰⁸ Poulin, "Experience", 250.

perspective of the pavement, focusing on what Gehl terms the spaces “between buildings”.⁸⁰⁹ By Gehl’s own admission, this classification incorporates the endlessly “broad spectrum” of “communal” or “publically accessible spaces” which make up the “exterior” architecture of urban life (fulfilling every purpose from the “transitional” to the “recreational or social”).⁸¹⁰

To explore this theme, I focus on Ashbery’s “Litany”, the 65-page poem composed in two “independent” but, according to the poet, “simultaneous” columns which opens *As We Know* (1979).⁸¹¹ The piece demonstrates a preoccupation with both the imagery and wider themes of public space. However, the primary rationale for this selection is based on more abstract qualities, namely, the so-called “experience” or “poetic expression” Ashbery sought to encapsulate when writing “Litany”.⁸¹² As Ashbery explained in his 2003 interview with Mark Ford, by writing a “long poem in two columns”, he sought to evoke a very specific experience, that of “eavesdropping on two different conversations” in a crowded space.⁸¹³ By requiring the reader “to pay attention to two separate poems at the same time”, “Litany” holds the potential to transcend the page. Ashbery stressed that, by design, “we can’t follow either one without neglecting the other one”.⁸¹⁴ Much as Ashbery stated that a major source of his poetic inspiration came from things he “overheard in the street”, the intention was for “Litany” to become a form of “environment” all of its own, in the sense that it represents “something that you are immersed in but cannot possibly be conscious of the whole of”.⁸¹⁵ This makes “Litany” a challenge for poetic analysis, with its dual, “simultaneous” form leading to a deliberate reduction in the significance of individual lines in favour of a looser, more deictic kind of poetic expression. Ann Lauterbach summarises, “one person will

⁸⁰⁹ Gehl, *Life*, 15.

⁸¹⁰ Gehl, *Life*, 11; 12; 12; 9; 17; 14.

⁸¹¹ John Ashbery, “Litany”, *Collected Poems, 1956-1987*, ed. Mark Ford (UK: Carcanet, 2001), 553 (Hereafter cited as *CP*).

⁸¹² Poulin, “Experience”, 254.

⁸¹³ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 61.

⁸¹⁴ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 61.

⁸¹⁵ Larissa MacFarquhar, “Becoming John Ashbery” *The New Yorker* (31/10/2005) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/11/07/present-waking-life> (Accessed 10/03/2020).

perceive an illuminating moment, another will discern a different one [...] allowed to move, and choose, among the great mass and flow of particulars.”⁸¹⁶ Consequently, the poet indicates that it is necessary “to draw up guidelines before beginning”, in order to “deal critically with the poem”.⁸¹⁷ Given both my focus on the “environment” that the poem’s dual structure is designed to represent and Ashbery’s insistence that “both columns [appear] on a single page, no matter how small the margins”, I have decided that the interpretive benefits of reproducing both columns outweigh the formal and stylistic problems of not doing so (see appendix 4).⁸¹⁸ However, in order to analyse the poem effectively, I will only be doing so when citing quotations of four lines or more. I will not give both columns equal critical attention in these instances, nor will I suggest that the monologues be considered in strict tandem. However, I will briefly explore, where relevant, how they do or do not contextualise or re-contextualise each other. This approach aims to show an awareness of the effect that the poem’s dual form produces, and, given the poet’s suggestion that “the two columns are like two people”, I address the columns as distinct speakers unless otherwise stated.⁸¹⁹ Columns will be referenced as either left or right, and all quotations from the right-hand column will remain in italics. Finally, although the poem “works well in performance” and was in part written to simulate the experience of “listening to a reading” and the “distractions” therein, my analysis concentrates on the challenges posed by reading “Litany” on the page.⁸²⁰

The chapter is divided into four sections. Section one establishes the wider cultural and critical foundation underlying the poet’s depiction of public space, as a starting point for considering the poem in a spatial theory context. Section two builds on this analysis, considering “Litany” vis-à-vis ideas of what Ashbery terms “form as subject matter”, to

⁸¹⁶ Ann Lauterbach, “What We Know as We Know It”, *Conjunctions* (2007), 349.

⁸¹⁷ Peter Stitt, “The Art of Poetry”, *Paris Review* (Winter 1983), <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3014/the-art-of-poetry-no-33-john-ashbery> (Accessed 20/01/2021).

⁸¹⁸ John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out* (USA: Harvard UP, 1994), 226.

⁸¹⁹ Stitt, “Art”.

⁸²⁰ MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

suggest how the shifting relationship between the poem's structure and content impacts how we as readers navigate the text.⁸²¹ Section three explores Ashbery's depiction of public space in relation to ideas of inspiration and amalgamation, to suggest how the poet portrays such spaces as a metaphor for a more immersive, experiential form of poetic expression. Finally, section four considers how Ashbery uses the imagery of public space and place to explore concepts of connection and disconnection.

3.1. "Tangled, muddy, and perplexed": putting Ashbery's public spaces in context.

When *As We Know* was published in 1979, Ashbery was at a watershed in his career. Whilst he had achieved recognition from the literary establishment with the success of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, many still viewed his "poetry [as] difficult to the point of incomprehensibility".⁸²² Ashbery summarised the situation in his 1983 interview with Peter Stitt, referring to his "most recent book", *As We Know*: "I live with this paradox. On the one hand I am an important poet [...] and on the other hand, nobody understands me. I am often asked to account for this state of affairs, but I can't".⁸²³ "Litany", Ashbery indicated, was a response to this situation, emerging from his desire to escape any "preconceived notion of what my poetry is", both his own and that of critics.⁸²⁴ With a well-earned reputation for "formidable structural complexity",⁸²⁵ the poem is printed in two parallel columns, the left in roman type and the right in italics, which, the "Author's note" informs us, "are meant to be read as simultaneous but independent monologues".⁸²⁶ Any analysis of "Litany", Ashbery

⁸²¹ Ashbery, "Litany", 646.

⁸²² Herd, *John Ashbery*, 2.

⁸²³ Stitt, "Art".

⁸²⁴ Stitt, "Art".

⁸²⁵ Elina Siltanen, *Experimentalism as Reciprocal Communication in Contemporary American Poetry* (USA: John Benjamins, 2016), 128.

⁸²⁶ Ashbery, "Litany", 553.

stated, will inevitably “leave a great deal out of account”, seizing upon an individual “idea that occurs” amongst the “great many other things” that emerge throughout its narrative ebb and flow.⁸²⁷ Yet this, the poet indicated, was an inherent part of the poetic experience that the poem sought to convey.

I intended, in “Litany”, to write something so utterly discursive that it would be beyond criticism [...] because this would somehow exemplify the fullness, or, if you wish, the emptiness, of life, or, at any rate, its dimensionless quality [...] The poem is of immense length, and there is a lack of coherence between the parts. Given all this, I don't really see how one could deal critically with the poem so I suppose it is necessary for the critic to draw up guidelines before beginning.⁸²⁸

Like the text on the Ashbery bridge, “Litany” requires a level of reader participation to “deal” with it, with Ashbery “leaving it up to each reader to make his or her own poem out of the raw materials given”.⁸²⁹ In this regard, Ashbery primarily “consider[ed] the poem as a sort of environment”, suggesting that “Litany” sought to encapsulate not just a specific “environment at a single moment” but the shifting experience represented by being “immersed” in a particular space over a “succession of moments”.⁸³⁰ This description, as John Keeling notes, suggests a deliberate “spatializing” of otherwise abstract concepts of experience, with the poem’s apparent “chaotic formlessness” serving as a means of “meditating on a particular moment [or moments] in time” in specifically spatial terms.⁸³¹ Nonetheless, as a poem that is deliberately “not [written in] a form that has a cohesive

⁸²⁷ Stitt, “Art”.

⁸²⁸ Stitt, “Art”.

⁸²⁹ Stitt, “Art”.

⁸³⁰ Stitt, “Art”.

⁸³¹ John Keeling, “The Moment Unravels”, *Twentieth Century Literature* (1992), 126; 126; 127.

structure”, “Litany” is a challenge for those exploring Ashbery’s work in an architectural or spatial theory context.⁸³² As the urban theorist Wes Jones writes, “architecture” traditionally stands as a “metaphor” for “qualities of fixity, structure, organizational character” and “order”, all of which are reliant on the condition of “assumed permanence”.⁸³³ If individual buildings represent certainty and stability, Ashbery sought, by contrast, to imbue “Litany” with an opposing “feeling of unsureness”,⁸³⁴ one which, in an echo of the collection’s title, endeavoured to go beyond “poetry ‘as we know it’”.⁸³⁵ Given that it resists any attempt to achieve “fixity” or a “linear notion of progression”, Keeling suggests that “Litany” “grapples with the anything but fixed materiality of our world” and, if it is indeed a “spatializing project”, it should be explored only in terms of more “abstracted” concepts of perspective.⁸³⁶ However, much like the poem on the Ashbery Bridge, another way to approach the poetic “environment” of “Litany” is to return to the poet’s comments on the experience represented by “public” or “environmental art”. “You’re surrounded by different elements of a work and it doesn’t really matter whether you’re focussing on one of them or none of them at any particular moment, but you’re getting a kind of indirect refraction from the situation that you’re in”.⁸³⁷

By employing the “public space of the bridge” as a vehicle for poetry, Ashbery required the poem to constantly compete for the reader’s attention, contending with the noise of traffic, the chatter of nearby pedestrians, and the constant stream of “cars below, whose movement we constantly sense on the periphery” as we traverse the bridge/poem.⁸³⁸ However, rather than overwhelm Ashbery’s text, the ever “shifting surface” of the public

⁸³² Stitt, “Art”.

⁸³³ Wes Jones, “Un-volumetric architecture”, in *Contemporary Public Space*, ed. Luca Molinari (UK: Thames and Hudson, 2006), 97. (Hereafter cited as *CPS*).

⁸³⁴ Stitt, “Art”.

⁸³⁵ Stitt, “Art”.

⁸³⁶ Keeling, “Moment”, 131; 130; 127; 137; 147.

⁸³⁷ MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

⁸³⁸ Lorberer, “Ashbery”, 123; 122.

setting has “contextualized” it, adding additional, deictic layers of meaning which “we constantly witness between its lines”.⁸³⁹ Larissa MacFarquhar indicates that this “in-the-round-effect” is also what Ashbery was “trying to achieve [...] when he wrote ‘Litany’”, in the same way that “he wanted to simulate the experience of overhearing two conversations at once”.⁸⁴⁰ Both “Litany” and the poem on the bridge trade on the same notion of being “immersed” in an environment or “distracted” in the face of “competing stimuli”.⁸⁴¹ Both require us to “cultivate a different sort of attention” if we are to truly ascertain an idea of the larger, unperceived whole.⁸⁴² This concept was central to Ashbery’s sense of his own poetic expression: “it sometimes seems to me that my poetry is like that. You don’t really have to pay that much attention to it – it’ll be doing its job if you are just intermittently aware of it and thinking about other things at the same time”.⁸⁴³

3.1.1. “Not a conduit [...] but a place”: Defining public space in the context of Ashbery’s poetry.

If we are to approach “Litany” as a form of “environment” then Ashbery’s characterisation of the poem as fundamentally “restless, mobile, and [subject] to change” necessitates that we consider it in relation to a model of space equally “immersive” and “discursive”.⁸⁴⁴ Rather than the rigid inflexibility implied by traditional constructions, the protean nature of public space reflects the qualities of openness and “openmindedness” which Keeling indicates any reading of “Litany” “demands”.⁸⁴⁵ However, given that the general

⁸³⁹ Lorberer, “Ashbery”, 131; 123.

⁸⁴⁰ MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

⁸⁴¹ MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

⁸⁴² MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

⁸⁴³ MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

⁸⁴⁴ Herd, *John Ashbery*, 176.

⁸⁴⁵ Keeling, “Moment”, 127.

criteria for what constitutes public space cover a “number of architectural and spatial phenomena”,⁸⁴⁶ a multitude of “conflicting interpretations of public space” have naturally arisen throughout spatial theory.⁸⁴⁷ To this end, in *Public Places, Urban Spaces*, the urban theorists Carmona, Heath, Oc and Tiesdell state that “there is little value in putting boundaries around the subject” of public place, as it is largely resistant to “definition”.⁸⁴⁸ Much as Ashbery proposes that one must “draw up guidelines” to address the poetic “environment” of “Litany”, I too must clarify how I will approach concepts of public place and space within the context of this analysis.

Given that Lorberer does not consider the Ashbery Bridge explicitly in the context of spatial theory, he does not attempt to define such spaces. However, his characterisation of “poetry in the public sphere” offers a starting point for exploring the nature of public spaces as a whole, both in terms of Ashbery’s own understanding and for addressing such spaces in the wider context of spatial theory.⁸⁴⁹ This characterisation is predominantly deictic in nature, with Lorberer stressing that the composition of all public space “changes from one moment to the next”, due to the “chaos of movement” and “confusion” which such spaces embody.⁸⁵⁰ Lorberer suggests that Ashbery’s interpretation of public spaces is one which emphasises their capacity for juxtaposing “order and the constant cry of the unknown”: the unchanging architectural structure of the spaces themselves combined with the more unpredictable human element which renders such parts of the built environment public in the first place.⁸⁵¹ As a result, any vision of public space “can only exist in the present”, with Lorberer specifying such spaces to be inherently “transitional” in nature.⁸⁵² Lorberer’s analysis draws on the

⁸⁴⁶ Aldo Amoyino, “More Space, Less Volume”, in *CPS*, 15.

⁸⁴⁷ Zeynep Çelik, “Streets and the Urban Process”, in *Streets: Critical Perspectives on Public Space*, eds. Zeynep Çelik, et. al (USA: UP California, 1997), 5.

⁸⁴⁸ Matthew Carmona, et al, *Public Places, Urban Spaces* (UK: Architectural Press, 2003), 5

⁸⁴⁹ Lorberer, “Ashbery”, 99.

⁸⁵⁰ Lorberer, “Ashbery”, 120; 121; 117.

⁸⁵¹ Lorberer, “Ashbery”, 120

⁸⁵² Lorberer, “Ashbery”, 125; 124.

network of knotted connections which spaces like the Ashbery Bridge represent, both figuratively and architecturally, reflecting an understanding of public space as being “not a matter of any particular building or place; [but] the spaces in between, the connections that make sense of forms”.⁸⁵³ On the one hand, writes the urban theorist Trevor Boddy, as the connective, architectural and “living tissue” which holds a city together, “street-level” public space is arguably the “most fundamental” facet of the urban built environment.⁸⁵⁴ Yet despite the central role they play in maintaining an underlying sense of “architectural order”, such spaces remain fundamentally “messy” in nature, characterised by unpredictability, discontinuity, interruption, disorientation and the kind of “unlikely juxtaposition” which Gehl suggests is a prerequisite for inspiration.⁸⁵⁵ This leads Boddy to term public space a “zone of coexistence, of dialogue, [and] of friction”, with such an “unpredictable intermingling” of elements invariably producing both conflict and interaction.⁸⁵⁶

In *Contemporary Public Space*, Enrico Morteo argues that such spaces are essentially “composite” in nature, characterised by an endless string of “combinations being tried out” and eventually discarded.⁸⁵⁷ “Anything seems to go with anything”,⁸⁵⁸ with even “things that don’t match”⁸⁵⁹ being brought together solely through the “influence of form”.⁸⁶⁰ This relies on an uneasy balancing act between concepts of chaos and of order, with the medium of public space “altering relationships” between things which pass through it, however fleetingly, simply by bringing them into a shared spatial context.⁸⁶¹ This applies to our own role as individuals in public space, encapsulating “the often involuntary relationship we

⁸⁵³ Michael Sorkin, “Introduction”, *Variations on a Theme Park*, ed. Michael Sorkin (USA: Hill and Wang, 1992), XII.

⁸⁵⁴ Trevor Boddy, “Underground and Overhead” in *Variations*, 124; 147; 124.

⁸⁵⁵ Boddy, “Underground”, 125; 128; 133.

⁸⁵⁶ Boddy, “Underground”, 152.

⁸⁵⁷ Enrico Morteo, “Architecture & Volume”, in *CPS*, 57; 58.

⁸⁵⁸ Sorkin, “Introduction”, xiii.

⁸⁵⁹ Morteo, “Architecture”, 55.

⁸⁶⁰ Morteo, “Architecture”, 58.

⁸⁶¹ Morteo, “Architecture”, 60

develop with the phenomena that surround us”.⁸⁶² By merely “being present”, “however passively”, we become an active part of that composite.⁸⁶³ Or, as Gehl writes, “in public spaces the individual is present, participating in a modest way, but most definitely participating”.⁸⁶⁴

3.1.2: “‘Public’ poems”: Public Spaces in Ashbery Criticism.

In “Poetry and ‘enactments of public space’”, the American poet Dale Smith states that “‘public space’ is a really interesting term” in poetry criticism.⁸⁶⁵ It is only natural for poets to perceive “their poetry in relation to ‘public space’”, Smith argues, as a means of “imagining an audience” or ideas of “engagement”.⁸⁶⁶ Yet considering how poetry engages with public space has been largely overlooked in poetry criticism. Smith attributes this to the fact that “poetry” has traditionally been “read as an aesthetic and private discourse that resides beyond the realm of civil society”.⁸⁶⁷

Although various critics have occasionally commented on Ashbery’s specific depictions of public places in individual poems, few explore the poet’s wider depiction of such spaces, despite Lorberer’s suggestion that Ashbery recognised the “poetic possibilities” inherent in public space and place.⁸⁶⁸ This may be due to the fact that interpretations of what constitutes public space or place cover a broad spectrum of imagery. That said, the current analysis identifies two critical studies which address themes of public space both in relation to the idea of the built environment and in the specific context of Ashbery’s poetry. The first

⁸⁶² Morteo, “Architecture”, 60

⁸⁶³ Gehl, *Life*, 19.

⁸⁶⁴ Gehl, *Life*, 17.

⁸⁶⁵ Dale Smith and Jules Boykoff, “Poetry and ‘enactments of public space’”, *Jacket2*, (2011) <https://jacket2.org/commentary/poetry-and-enactments-public-space> (Accessed 18/02/2021).

⁸⁶⁶ Smith and Boykoff, “Poetry”.

⁸⁶⁷ Smith and Boykoff, “Poetry”.

⁸⁶⁸ MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

is Lorberer's "The Ashbery Bridge: Poetry and Public Space", which suggests how, through his collaboration with Armajani, the poet establishes a "role for poetry in the public sphere".⁸⁶⁹ Lorberer's article is, to date, the only in-depth consideration of what is arguably Ashbery's most fully fledged engagement with ideas of public space. However, although the critic acknowledges that Ashbery and his poetry are rarely considered in this "public" context, he does not suggest what potential implications the Ashbery Bridge could hold for concepts of public space in Ashbery's work outside of the specific context of his project with Armajani. Instead, he seeks to demonstrate how the project differs from the majority of other "poetry which appears on public display" due to how "dynamically" text and place interact.⁸⁷⁰

The second study is *In Search of Communication and Community*, in which Kacper Bartczak dedicates a chapter to "public" or "common environments" as part of a broader study of Ashbery's depiction of "community and its external space".⁸⁷¹ Defining such spaces as places of "gathering", "passage" and "communication", Bartczak investigates the psychological implications of Ashbery's depiction of public environments in a large selection of texts, notably *Houseboat Days* (1977), *Flow Chart* (1991), *Hotel Lautréamont* (1992), *And the Stars Were Shining* (1994) and *Your Name Here* (2000).⁸⁷² Bartczak's study opens with an in-depth exploration of what constitutes private and public in the context of Ashbery's poetry, in which the critic explores the idea of approaching Ashbery as a "public poet" in line with the Whitman tradition.⁸⁷³ As one of the few studies to consider Ashbery's poetry in relation to the poetics of public space, his analysis of the "roles of the private and of the public" in the poet's work was a key source in preparing this chapter.⁸⁷⁴ However, he

⁸⁶⁹ Lorberer, "Ashbery", 99.

⁸⁷⁰ Lorberer, "Ashbery", 112; 113.

⁸⁷¹ Kacper Bartczak, *In Search of Communication and Community* (Germany: Peter Lang, 2006), 153; 159; 153.

⁸⁷² Bartczak, *Search*, 158; 153; 153.

⁸⁷³ Bartczak, *Search*, 154.

⁸⁷⁴ Bartczak, *Search*, 153.

primarily frames Ashbery's spatial poetics as "evoking a mental space" or "intellectual landscape", as a metaphor for a more abstract "human consciousness".⁸⁷⁵

3.1.3. Possible influences on Ashbery's "public" poetics: Marianne Moore.

To inform our understanding of influences on Ashbery's depiction of public space, it is beneficial to consider a figure who is often listed not only as having "hugely influenced" his work but as having "deeply influenced [...] contemporary poetry" as a whole: the 20th-century American poet Marianne Moore.⁸⁷⁶ Moore's impact on Ashbery is well documented, with the poet having listed her amongst the "most important" of the "major poets whom I feel as influences" in his 1989 Charles Eliot Norton Lecture.⁸⁷⁷ Karin Roffman indicates that this influence often manifested itself in spatial or phenomenological terms, suggesting that Ashbery had been "having a virtual conversation with Marianne Moore about the ideal relationship between people and things ever since the publication of [...] *Some Trees*".⁸⁷⁸ Ashbery "directly revises Moore's poetry and ideas", particularly in terms of his understanding of "both physical and metaphorical spaces".⁸⁷⁹

In his 1967 review of *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*, Ashbery deemed Moore "our greatest modern poet", a status which he attributed in part to her mastery of "'public' poems".⁸⁸⁰ For Ashbery, this "public" quality is expressed through Moore's fidelity to everyday experience, through which she processes and reproduces "the unwanted

⁸⁷⁵ Bartczak, *Search*, 46; page number not given; 157.

⁸⁷⁶ Adrienne Raphael, "The Marianne Moore Revival", *The New Yorker* (13/04/2016) <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-marianne-moore-revival> (Accessed 05/11/2020)

⁸⁷⁷ John Ashbery, *Other Traditions* (USA: Harvard UP, 2000), 4.

⁸⁷⁸ Karin Roffman, "John Ashbery 'Sings a Song of Thingness'", *RainTaxi* (2008) <https://www.raintaxi.com/literary-features/john-ashbery-created-spaces/john-ashbery-sings-a-song-of-thingness/> (Accessed 12/10/13).

⁸⁷⁹ Roffman, "John Ashbery".

⁸⁸⁰ John Ashbery, "Jerboas, Pelicans, and Peewee Reese: Marianne Moore", in *Selected Prose*, ed. Eugene Richie (US: UP Michigan, 2008), 108; 83.

information that constantly accumulates around us”.⁸⁸¹ As an example of such “public” poetics, Ashbery cites Moore’s “The Old Amusement Park” (1964), which he praises for its “evocation of [...] place”:⁸⁸²

where crowds flock to the tramcar,
rattling greenish caterpillar
as bowling-ball thunder
quivers the air⁸⁸³

For Ashbery, such depictions demonstrate how Moore’s poetry “leans out into space”, integrating everything from “overheard remarks” to the everyday “details of life”.⁸⁸⁴ When reading Moore’s work, Ashbery argues, “we are in a landscape”, one we are called to “participate” in as much as the poem itself.⁸⁸⁵ However, he also evokes the mutable character of ““public”” spaces as a metaphor for the nature of Moore’s work, which is known for “switching landscapes, language and levels with breathtaking abruptness”.⁸⁸⁶ This concept is echoed in “Marianne Moore and the Poetics of Pragmatism”, in which Rachel Buxton uses the image of “the street” as a metaphor for the “difficulty and instability” of Moore’s poetry.⁸⁸⁷ “Moore’s fidelity to experience, her dedication to this ‘physical world’ [...] resists the temptation to be any less complex, any more settled, than the world in which we live”.⁸⁸⁸ Throughout her “poetry of public values”, Buxton argues, Moore’s “stance resembles that of [the 19th-century American philosopher] William James”, as outlined in his 1906

⁸⁸¹ Ashbery, “Jerboas”, 86.

⁸⁸² Ashbery, “Jerboas”, 86.

⁸⁸³ Marianne Moore, “The Old Amusement Park”, *The New Yorker* (29/08/1964), 34.

⁸⁸⁴ Ashbery, “Jerboas”, 87; 86; 86.

⁸⁸⁵ Ashbery, “Jerboas”, 111; 85

⁸⁸⁶ Ashbery, “Jerboas”, 111; 112.

⁸⁸⁷ Rachel Buxton, “Marianne Moore and the Poetics of Pragmatism”, *Review of English Studies* (09/2007), 535.

⁸⁸⁸ Buxton, “Marianne Moore”, 535.

“Pragmatism” lecture.⁸⁸⁹ As James writes, “the world of concrete personal experiences to which the street belongs is multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed”.⁸⁹⁰ Intriguingly, Herd cites the same passage in reference to Ashbery’s “Litany”, employing James’ “tangled” imagery of the streets to suggest how the poem is concerned less with “privileged” events than “with all those other moments that make up life”.⁸⁹¹ Much as Ashbery described the poem’s “discursive” style as an attempt to encapsulate the “fullness” and “emptiness” of experience, Herd indicates, James’ street analogy prefigures Ashbery’s “perpetually changing attempt to understand the situation as a whole [...] including his relation to it”.⁸⁹²

3.2. “We feel we have more in common with a landscape”: Approaching “Litany” in spatial terms.

When Ashbery’s eighth book of poetry, *As We Know*, was published, its format set it apart from his previous works. As Lauterbach states, unlike the majority of literary publications the collection took the “unique, horizontal shape” traditionally “associated in the visual arts with landscape”, much as the more conventional “vertical” layout “is [associated] with portraiture” (appendix 5).⁸⁹³ As the only book the poet published in this format, Lauterbach labels this a somewhat “eccentric” choice on Ashbery’s part, albeit one which may nonetheless offer some “clue to the book’s contents”.⁸⁹⁴ This is supported by Ashbery’s own comments just a few years before the publication of *As We Know*. In his 1972 interview with A. Poulin Jr., Ashbery stated that how a poem was “printed in a book” was a crucial part

⁸⁸⁹ Buxton, “Marianne Moore”, 531; 535.

⁸⁹⁰ William James, *Writings 1902-1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (NY: LOA, 1987), 495.

⁸⁹¹ Herd, *John Ashbery*, 12.

⁸⁹² Herd, *John Ashbery*, 12.

⁸⁹³ Lauterbach, “What”, 342.

⁸⁹⁴ Lauterbach, “What”, 342.

of “the experience” of the text, to the extent that he believed such elements had the potential to “make or break the poetic expression”.⁸⁹⁵ When approaching poetry, he stressed, it is vital that we “see the poem, the way it looks on the page [...] That’s all very important; it triggers the mental, invisible image of the poem”.⁸⁹⁶

Before the reader has even opened the “strangely shaped”⁸⁹⁷ *As We Know*, they are being subtly primed to approach the poems in spatial terms, with works published in landscape layout inevitably being “spatialized”⁸⁹⁸ in a way that those in traditional format are not. To this end, John Shoptaw remarks, it is true that many of the collection’s “poems preoccupy themselves with the question of place”,⁸⁹⁹ with Ward likening its shorter works to individual “threads” in a “metropolitan tapestry”, replete with the imagery of “construction” and urban life.⁹⁰⁰ The reality, however, is that the “book’s 7-by-9 inch format was devised” for a single purpose: “to set-off the seventy-page poem ‘Litany’”.⁹⁰¹ This was due to the aforementioned “twin columns” which make up the poem’s form, intended, as the infamous “Author’s note” informs us, “to be read as simultaneous but independent monologues”.⁹⁰² It was Ashbery’s determination to feature “both columns on a single page, no matter how small the margins” which led “Viking Press [to] come up with a new page” specifically in order to “accommodate the crowded poem”.⁹⁰³

These “technical matters” are “relevant to the greater achievement of ‘Litany’” and reflect its original method of composition.⁹⁰⁴ Using a form of “double-columned typing”, Ashbery would “start with the left-hand column and write until he reached the end of the

⁸⁹⁵ Poulin, “Experience”, 249; 254; 254.

⁸⁹⁶ Poulin, “Experience”, 248.

⁸⁹⁷ Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 225.

⁸⁹⁸ Daniel Weston, “The spatial supplement”, *Cultural Geographies* (04/2011), 174.

⁸⁹⁹ Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 237-238.

⁹⁰⁰ Ward, *Statutes*, 163.

⁹⁰¹ Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 225.

⁹⁰² Herd, *John Ashbery*, 176.

⁹⁰³ Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 226

⁹⁰⁴ Andrew Dubois, *Ashbery’s Forms of Attention* (USA: Alabama UP, 2006), 98.

page. Then he would reset the margin at the middle, return to the top of the page, and compose the right-hand column”.⁹⁰⁵ This “production method” was intrinsically “claustrophobic”, involving a constant sense of spatial renegotiation as each of the columns appeared to strive for the available terrain of the page.⁹⁰⁶ In writing one column, Ashbery was required to maintain a constant, albeit peripheral, awareness of the other. This division of attention operated spatially, with the poet having to ensure that neither column began to “drift over the centre line” to encroach upon the other’s territory.⁹⁰⁷ However, this equally signified a parallel division of psychological and creative attention, with Ashbery having to navigate between two alternating lines of narrative thought with each intermittently interrupting the other. The poem’s composition was therefore fuelled by a constant state of distraction, the poet caught between the two texts as each struggled, figuratively and literally, to establish its own narrative space. In his interview with Ford, Ashbery suggested that this quality of “parallel productive play” was what the dual form of “Litany” was intended to evoke, with the poem having been inspired by the idea of being subjected to competing sources of external stimuli in a crowded environment.⁹⁰⁸ “I thought it would be interesting to have to pay attention to two separate poems at the same time; it would be like eavesdropping on two different conversations at a cocktail party – something that happens to us all fairly often and therefore should have a poem written about it. We can’t follow either one without neglecting the other one, at least briefly”.⁹⁰⁹

⁹⁰⁵ Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 225.

⁹⁰⁶ Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 225.

⁹⁰⁷ Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 225.

⁹⁰⁸ Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 229.

⁹⁰⁹ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 61.

3.2.1. “It starts out/ With some notion and switches to both”: the question of perspective.

Debate has arisen about the best way to approach “Litany”. The poet Maureen Bloomfield suggests that “the only way to read [it is] to alternate between one column and the next”, switching whenever there is a “natural break” in the text.⁹¹⁰ However, Denis Donoghue labels this practice “perverse, because the sentences rarely end with the page”.⁹¹¹ In this respect, Donoghue insists, there are no “natural breaks” to accommodate switching between one column and the other, with Ashbery providing no guidance as to when such transitions are supposed to occur.⁹¹² This, it appears, was the poet’s intention. When asked by Stitt how the poem “should” be read, Ashbery emphasised the individual reader’s agency in choosing how they will navigate the text, working their way back and forth between columns as they see fit. By its very design, he stressed, “it’s not a form that has a cohesive structure”.⁹¹³ However, this means “it could be read just as one pleases”: “I don’t think there is any particular way. [...] I don’t think people ever read things the way they are supposed to. I myself will skip ahead several chapters or read a little bit of this page and a little bit of that page, and I assume that is what everybody does”.⁹¹⁴

As “Litany” begins, this struggle to traverse its poetic environment is conveyed in architectural terms. The reader is thrust in medias res into what is apparently a street scene, grounded in the imagery of public space, with the columns’ disparate descriptions of the surroundings serving as a metaphor for the “methodology of/for experience”, and the inherent limitations therein.⁹¹⁵ However, as the speakers’ proceed through their parallel

⁹¹⁰ Maureen Bloomfield, “Reading” in Circles”, *The New York Review* (03/04/1980), <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1980/04/03/reading-in-circles/> . (15/01/2021).

⁹¹¹ Denis Donoghue, “Sign Language”, *New York Review* (24/01/1980), https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1980/01/24/sign-language/?lp_txn_id=1013510 (accessed 14/01/2021).

⁹¹² Donoghue, “Sign”.

⁹¹³ Stitt, “Art”.

⁹¹⁴ Stitt, “Art”.

⁹¹⁵ Keeling, “Moment”, 127.

“cataloguing[s]” of the built environment, what emerges is more a spatialised “collage of images” than a stable or fully fledged portrait of space and place.⁹¹⁶

For someone like me	<i>So this must be a hole</i>
The simple things	<i>Of cloud</i>
Like having toast or	<i>Mandate or trap</i>
Going to church are	<i>But haze that casts</i>
Kept in one place.	<i>The milk of enchantment</i>
Like having wine and cheese.	<i>Over the whole town,</i>
The parents of the town	<i>Its scenery, whatever</i>
Pissing elegantly to escape knowledge	<i>Could be happening</i>
Once and for all. The	<i>Behind tall hedges</i>
Snapdragons confused in a wind	<i>Of dark, lissome knowledge.</i> ⁹¹⁷
Of fire and rage far over	
The streets as they end.	

Both columns open with the image of the “town”, a rare moment of direct overlap acknowledged by both Keeling and Lauterbach. Keeling notes that “both are detailing the ‘town’ and both speak of this in terms of ‘knowledge’ – although each seems to be on a different track, or radically different, depending on how they are read”.⁹¹⁸ For Keeling, this stands as an isolated example of how reading one column may impact our reading of the other, with the columns detailing two perspectives on the same experience in time and space.

⁹¹⁶ Keeling, “Moment”, 127.

⁹¹⁷ Ashbery, “Litany”, 554-555.

⁹¹⁸ Keeling, “Moment”, 128.

“Litany” later evokes this scenario, suggesting that it may detail “something as/ Basic as two people” engaged in surveying the same “scene” at the same time.⁹¹⁹ This inability for people “to see precisely the same way” or experience a given situation from the same perspective, whether figuratively or literally, is a recurring theme throughout “Litany”, one which Ashbery repeatedly explores in relation to concepts of place.⁹²⁰ However, here the twin outlooks occlude more than they reveal, combining to cloak the depicted scene in a narrative “haze”.

The left column favours a relatively concrete depiction of “the town”, one grounded both in the language of the built environment and with a greater emphasis on “the temporal and material” nature of the poem’s setting.⁹²¹ By contrast, if the right column is viewed as a different perspective on the same “scenery”, then it represents a more impressionistic, dreamlike interpretation of space and place, with Harold Bloom suggesting that it constitutes the more “intensely figurative” side of “Litany”.⁹²² This contrast could reflect the subjectivity of experience, with the columns approaching the same environment from different angles, spatially and conceptually, perceiving and relating to that environment in markedly different ways. Alternatively, given Vendler’s suggestion that “Litany” is a poetic embodiment of the “bicameral mind”,⁹²³ these separate visions could represent a “mimesis of the mind’s private life”,⁹²⁴ illustrating the disparate ways in which we, as individuals, intellectually perceive matters of place. Based on this interpretation, the left column may voice the impulse we feel to approach our surroundings in analytical terms, seeking to impose a sense of order, whilst the right envisions the same setting through a more intuitive, and imaginative lens.

⁹¹⁹ Ashbery, “Litany”, 582.

⁹²⁰ Ashbery, “Litany”, 601.

⁹²¹ Keeling, “Moment”, 129.

⁹²² Harold Bloom, “The Poetry Symposium”, *New York Times* (21/11/2004), <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/21/books/review/the-poetry-symposium.html> (Accessed 20/01/2021).

⁹²³ Helen Vendler, “Ashbery’s Aesthetic”, *Harvard Review* (Spring, 2002), 82.

⁹²⁴ Dubois, *Ashbery’s Forms*, 98.

In the final analysis, how we frame the theoretical connections between the columns arguably doesn't really matter here. After all, as Bloom comments, it is largely assumed that the columns are likely to be "somehow related", even if this is only due to the fact of their "running side by side".⁹²⁵ Regardless of the "referential interrogation" which may or may not take place between them, the few available details provided between the columns' differing descriptions become "confused" when considered in connection, something which theoretically succeeds in "emphasizing [their] common subject" matter whilst simultaneously stressing our inability to obtain anything approaching a "whole view".⁹²⁶ Instead of filling the metaphorical (or architectural) gaps left by the other, each portrait instead reveals yet further omissions in the poem's characterisation of the built environment. This reflects the reader's own position, straddling the interstices between these perspectives, attempting to experience them as both simultaneous and independent and therefore able to occupy neither position exclusively. Yet, instead of providing two coalescing depictions of the same environment, Ashbery depicts the poem's setting through the myriad details which are suggested to have "escape[d]" both speakers' perception, with the poet alluding to what "*could be happening*" around street corners or "*behind tall hedges*" as much as he describes the actual details of the town itself. This is suggested by the echoing elision of "*hole*" and "*whole*" which dominates the right column's initial depiction of the built environment, in which an emblem of spatially defined absence descends "*Over the whole town*", eclipsing it from view. The speaker's reference to a "*hole*" through the landscape could be read as an allusion to the hole which exists at the centre of "*Litany*" itself, namely, the margin of "blank space" at the centre of the page.⁹²⁷ Ashbery "half-jokingly said that [his] object was to direct the reader's attention to the white space between the columns", making them aware of the symbolic terrain they must

⁹²⁵ Bloom, "Poetry".

⁹²⁶ Keeling, "Moment", 127; 142.

⁹²⁷ Stitt, "Art".

traverse to get from one part of the poem to the other, and the decisions they make in doing so.⁹²⁸ However, this metaphorical no man's land also stands as a reminder of all that gets lost between one monologue and the other, with the negative space at the poem's heart symbolising the literal gap in perspective which separates the speakers and, by extension, the blind spot we find ourselves in as readers. Our initial impression of the poem's setting is therefore marked by our inability to grasp a complete vision of the environment being described, with both speakers conceding that their portraits of the landscape will inevitably be "*seen as inadequate*", plagued by "*vagueness*" and "*abstractions*".⁹²⁹ The left-hand column seeks to forge connections beyond its own limited "knowledge" of its surroundings, attempting to use the common medium of "place" to reach out to "someone like me".

Based on this interpretation, the speakers' starting point within the built environment operates as a form of architectural and metaphorical common ground, with the speaker reflecting on the potential for "kinship" among that which is "kept in one place".⁹³⁰ Yet, as the speakers continue on their separate paths, neither appears able to navigate their way through the built environment. The left-hand column is almost immediately met with the impasse of "streets as they end": a metaphorical and architectural dead end from which the reader and speaker may travel forward together no further.⁹³¹ The right column voices this lack of spatial or poetic orientation by calling attention to the markers which are supposed to help us navigate this space and yet leave us only more adrift. "*Around us are signposts*", and yet "*nothing directs*".⁹³² This conflates ideas of spatial orientation with those of more abstract instruction, as though the speaker's inability to establish their bearings within the built environment causes them to feel equally untethered within the poem. Rather than a lack of

⁹²⁸ Stitt, "Art".

⁹²⁹ Ashbery, "Litany", 569; 571; 595.

⁹³⁰ Ashbery, "Litany", 554.

⁹³¹ Ashbery, "Litany", 554.

⁹³² Ashbery, "Litany", 555.

external guidance, their paralysis is the result of “*too much direction*”, “*too much arbitration*”, as the plethora of “*signposts*” disorient more than they effectively direct.⁹³³ This evokes the “*swerving path*” of “*Litany*”, as a form of poetic experience designed to deny any singular or linear sense of progression.⁹³⁴ From the outset, both the speakers’ and reader’s inability to orient themselves within the poem’s metaphorical “environment” are conveyed in spatial terms. However, just as myriad signposts surround the speaker, our own sense of impasse derives not from a lack of external guidance, but rather “*too much direction*”. In a 1980 interview with the journalist David Remnick, Ashbery reflected that readers have long “wanted a key to my poetry”, whilst he felt able “only [to present] them with a new set of locks”, being unwilling or unable to explain how his work should be approached.⁹³⁵ Perhaps unsurprisingly, on the one occasion he purposefully provides directions, he consequently does so in a fashion which appears to render it virtually impossible “to read ‘*Litany*’ as form, title, and author prescribe”.⁹³⁶ Any attempt to read the columns as simultaneous will invariably undermine their proposed independence, and vice versa, with the author’s note outlining a reading experience which the poem itself stresses “*cannot, by definition, / Take place*”.⁹³⁷ This leaves the speaker in a form of narrative and spatial deadlock. Each street represents a different metaphorical path through the poem’s narrative “environment”. Yet, in electing to walk down any one of them, they will inevitably “thwart any directions, right or wrong”.⁹³⁸ As long as they remain hypothetical, all routes through the poem, whether through the streets of its setting or the columns on its pages, remain equally “right” and

⁹³³ Ashbery, “*Litany*”, 555.

⁹³⁴ Ashbery, “*Litany*”, 565.

⁹³⁵ David Remnick, “John Ashbery in Conversation”, *Bennington Review* (1980), <https://www.benningtonreview.org/john-ashbery> (Accessed 10/02/2021).

⁹³⁶ Dubois, *Ashbery’s Forms*, 98

⁹³⁷ Bloomfield, “Reading”.

⁹³⁸ Ashbery, “*Litany*”, 593.

⁹³⁹ Ashbery, “*Litany*”, 592.

“wrong”, much as the monologues may stand as both independent and simultaneous until we begin trying to navigate our way between them.

Distinctions between spatial orientation and poetic instruction become increasingly blurred, with “Litany” foregrounding the challenge that the columns pose for the reader, drawing deliberate attention to the decisions we make as we navigate the text, “*jumping from line to line,/ From page to page*”.⁹³⁹ One column taunts us with the possibility that we have taken a wrong turn, pondering “*one wonders if it was this/ Rather than the other that one was supposed to read*”, warning us to “*beware the right margin/ Which is unjustified*”, whilst “*The left/ Is justified and can take care of itself*”.⁹⁴⁰ Blaming the surrounding “*Architecture*” for our “*Half-formed notions*”, the poem bears a metapoetic impression of its own form.⁹⁴¹ Each column reveals a surreptitious sense of consciousness of the other, as though conditioned to be aware of the “other” simply out of shared proximity, yet not so aware as to threaten the so-called independence of either. “Each is alone and valid”, the poem informs us.⁹⁴² Even if we must turn our attention from one column to the other in order to read “Litany” as the form prescribes, “we must not treasure/ It less”.⁹⁴³

3.2.2. “Half sketched”/ “Half demolished”: incomplete spaces and experiences.

The experience of disorientation creates a sense that the poem’s landscape is somehow evasive, leading the speaker to question what it means if such a vision of space is to be considered as the “foundation [...] For what is afterwards to be erected/ On this plot”.⁹⁴⁴ This elides concepts of architectural and poetic construction, blurring the line between laying

⁹³⁹ Ashbery, “Litany”, 609.

⁹⁴⁰ Ashbery, “Litany”, 609; 615; 615.

⁹⁴¹ Ashbery, “Litany”, 609.

⁹⁴² Ashbery, “Litany”, 618.

⁹⁴³ Ashbery, “Litany”, 566.

⁹⁴⁴ Ashbery, “Litany”, 626.

the groundwork for a building and establishing the poem's setting. Both actions rely on providing an initial substructure, one which inevitably "forms [and] shapes" all that we "build" upon it.⁹⁴⁵ As "*the place/ We started out from*", the "town" is supposedly tasked with "*Pointing out the way at the beginning*", something which is stressed to be a "*useful function*" as we begin our journey through the poem.⁹⁴⁶ Just as an architectural foundation determines the structural stability of that which is constructed upon it, however, the speaker questions the implications for a narrative grounded in such a "*fragmented*" vision of place.⁹⁴⁷ Yet the desire to evoke a deliberate sense of incompleteness, experiential and spatial, Ashbery stated, was a fundamental part of why he envisioned "Litany" in spatial terms in the first place. As Ashbery explained in his interview with Stitt, "I consider the poem as a sort of environment, and one is not obliged to take notice of every aspect of one's environment—one can't, in fact. That is why it came out the way it did".⁹⁴⁸ This reinforces our sense that, "in 'Litany', Ashbery works out of a landscape", much as the poet likened the poem to "public" or "environmental art", as forms of expression which take place through the medium of space and place.⁹⁴⁹ Both create a sense of intermittent immersion, requiring us to be "surrounded by different elements" which may or may not go together. However, neither represents something which we can perceive in whole terms. Rather than detracting from the poem's meaning, these literal and metaphorical gaps in the scenery are framed as a deliberate poetic device, much as Ashbery sought to make the reader "pay attention to two separate poems at the same time" and therefore be unable to "follow either one". The poem is therefore "*as notable for its gaps/ As for what's there*", a message which Ashbery encodes into its narrative.⁹⁵⁰

⁹⁴⁵ Ashbery, "Litany", 626.

⁹⁴⁶ Ashbery, "Litany", 573.

⁹⁴⁷ Ashbery, "Litany", 573.

⁹⁴⁸ Stitt, "Art".

⁹⁴⁹ Keeling, "Moment", 127.

⁹⁵⁰ Ashbery, "Litany", 579.

	<i>Who could have explained it?</i>
	<i>"Only pluralism..." but we get</i>
	<i>Far less for our money that way.</i>
Half-noticed, the sound	<i>Aye, and fewer replies too</i>
Half-remembered and the	<i>To sopping prayer-strips</i>
Continuing chapter half-sketched –	<i>Hanging like dejected plumage from that</i>
O were we wrong to notice	<i>Rafter over the porch swing.</i>
To remember so much	<i>They are anxious to be done with us,</i>
When so little else has survived?	<i>For the interview to be over, and we,</i>
	<i>We have just begun.</i> ⁹⁵¹

Here the evocation of “*pluralism*” plays on the themes of independence and coexistence which underpin the poem. Whilst they retain individual autonomy over their own monologues, the columns must divide authority over the narrative as a whole and are constantly engaged in renegotiating control of this metaphorical terrain. Yet, the result is that we paradoxically end up with “*less*” rather than more, something which Ashbery attributes to the pluralistic form of “*Litany*” itself.

If “*Litany*” is “half-formed”, it is therefore both because it is quite literally formed out of two halves and because these halves never come together to create a coherent whole. This could be attributed to the practice of “eavesdropping” which inspired the poem, with Ashbery deliberately crafting its dual narrative to be a reflection of such indirect and fragmented ways to communicate or perceive meaning. Having “wanted to simulate [this form of] experience” on the page, Ashbery reflected that there were periods when working on “*Litany*” felt “more like transcription than like composition”, akin to a “leaching of the world” around him into

⁹⁵¹ Ashbery, “*Litany*”, 562-563.

poetry.⁹⁵² This reinforces our sense of “Litany” as a poetic reflection of an “environment” as experienced over a “succession of moments”, in the same way that Ashbery viewed “environmental art” as an “indirect refraction from the situation” or surrounding space it is placed in.⁹⁵³ However, if, as “Litany” suggests, the details of that “environment” are intended to remain “half-noticed”, then the simple act of noticing them holds the potential to not just disrupt the quality of our surroundings but to actively demolish them. In the words of the poem, “One destroys so much merely by pausing/ To get one’s bearings, and afterwards/ The scent is lost”, with the true character of the moment becoming irretrievably lost as soon as one stops to consider it.⁹⁵⁴ Experience and environment are portrayed in tandem, to the extent that both the landscape and our impression of it begin to decay the minute they are placed under direct scrutiny. In this scenario, “defining our locus” is not only “impossible” but actively unappealing, as every attempt to identify the true “contours” of such a space only succeeds in paradoxically “blurring” it until “nothing stands in its place”.⁹⁵⁵ As Ashbery recounted of a 1980 reading of “Litany”, “I told the audience that [...] there would be an awful lot that they would miss, and I intend that”.⁹⁵⁶

3.2.3. “Wandering, improvisatory”: the role of the active reader.

Shoptaw describes “Litany” as “a two-way street”, using the language of the built environment not just as a metaphor for the poem’s form but because he sees each column as representing a different “circumferential, adverbial route to and from the central” (and thus, he suggests, a different “way of knowing”).⁹⁵⁷ This is a good analogy for how we approach

⁹⁵² MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

⁹⁵³ MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

⁹⁵⁴ Ashbery, “Litany”, 612.

⁹⁵⁵ Ashbery, “Litany”, 628; 594; 592; 594.

⁹⁵⁶ Remnick, “John Ashbery”.

⁹⁵⁷ Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 246.

the poem as readers. The columns are described as “*ill-defined sidewalks [that] seem to lead nowhere*”, or as a “*swerving path*” which denies us linear progression.⁹⁵⁸ Reading each column is akin to being “*pointed/ Down a sidewalk*”, trying “to catch up to [the speaker] in the streets” of Ashbery’s poem/city.⁹⁵⁹ Alternately, the blank space which separates the columns may be seen as the metaphorical “empty street” which runs throughout the poem, whilst we as readers are engaged in a game of “*street crossing*” from one side of the page to the other, our reading practices representing a form of “*traffic*”.⁹⁶⁰ Through such imagery, Ashbery compels us to be aware less of what specifically we are reading than how exactly we are reading it, much as the columns of “Litany” force us into a constant awareness of our movements through and within the poem: “*how is it that you get from this place/ To that one only a little distance away*”.⁹⁶¹ This ties into a wider dynamic, whereby the imagery of streets, sidewalks and public spaces serves as a recurrent symbol for the establishment of poetic meaning, to the extent that the “asphalt” paths of the built environment are suggested to represent a more metaphorical road to comprehending “the true ether that surrounds us”.⁹⁶² This description tethers the abstract to the architectural, as the mythical “ether” historically “conceived as filling all space, including the interstices between” is rendered in concrete terms.⁹⁶³ This stresses the nature of public spaces as “the spaces between, the connections which make sense of forms”,⁹⁶⁴ sealing up the metaphorical gaps in the built environment in the form of streets, pavements, “*sidewalks*” and the myriad “*spaces between*” which claim “*dominion over the flat, quiet land around them*”.⁹⁶⁵ Yet such spaces operate as an equally effective metaphor for the deliberately “discursive” nature of “Litany”, with the speaker

⁹⁵⁸ Ashbery, “Litany”, 581; 565.

⁹⁵⁹ Ashbery, “Litany”, 625; 580.

⁹⁶⁰ Ashbery, “Litany”, 603; 593.

⁹⁶¹ Ashbery, “Litany”, 611.

⁹⁶² Ashbery, “Litany”, 576.

⁹⁶³ “Ether”, n., *OED Online* (06/2020) Oxford UP. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/64728> (Accessed 03/10/2021).

⁹⁶⁴ Sorkin, “Introduction”, XII.

⁹⁶⁵ Ashbery, “Litany”, 623.

moving through the built environment on a path so “*wandering* [and] *improvisatory*” that it is as much a “diversionary tactic” as a viable pathway to poetic expression.⁹⁶⁶ As the “space between buildings” and other fixed sites within the built environment, public spaces are traditionally viewed as “spaces of passage”.⁹⁶⁷ Whilst this renders them as fluid as they are ubiquitous, they are seen not as destinations but as a means to connect to other possible end points. This creates a sense of disrupted linearity, in the same way that Ashbery sought to reinforce the “lack of coherence between the parts” of “*Litany*”. Yet he also depicts such spaces as being “without the finality” that other parts of the built environment represent, with such spaces operating not as a repository for a single, stable meaning, but rather as a channel through which an endless number of possible significations may be conveyed.⁹⁶⁸ This reflects the ways in which Ashbery’s poetry “guards against conclusions”, with Donoghue detailing how the poet avoids settling on a single subject or achieving what the critic terms “a complete poetry”.⁹⁶⁹ Rather, the poet prefers a more “serpentine” form of expression, complete with narrative detours which lead not to catharsis but yet more “possibilities” for meaning.⁹⁷⁰ As Ashbery explained to David Kalstone, “my poetry sometimes proceeds as though an argument were suddenly derailed [...] It’s a kind of mimesis of how experience comes to me”.⁹⁷¹

“This”, the poem informs us, “is where it all/ Had to take place”,⁹⁷² as though doubting that another, less “discursive” form of space would be able to accommodate the poet’s wish to “get as many different kinds of stuff into one’s writing as possible” and have it

⁹⁶⁶ Ashbery, “*Litany*”, 567; 608.

⁹⁶⁷ Morteo, “*Architecture*”, 81.

⁹⁶⁸ Ashbery, “*Litany*”, 602.

⁹⁶⁹ Denis Donoghue, *Reading America* (USA: California UP, 1988), 303

⁹⁷⁰ Donoghue, *Reading*, 303.

⁹⁷¹ David Kalstone, *Five Temperaments* (UK: Oxford UP, 1977), 174.

⁹⁷² Ashbery, “*Litany*”, 558.

“all exist simultaneously”.⁹⁷³ This creates a parallel, decentralised or even centreless sense of space and narrative, in which the fleeting emergence of meaning between the poem’s overlapping “*columns of print*” is akin to “*a landmark in a chain of landmarks*”.⁹⁷⁴ Like the signposts of the poem’s opening, that which traditionally stands as an architectural marker of significance multiplies to the point of confusion, with Ashbery using the language of the built environment as a metaphor for the speaker’s inability to orient themselves within the “dimensionless” “environment” of the poem, and thus being “*never closer/ To the end or to the beginning*”.⁹⁷⁵ Rather than representing routes to the “central”, either in terms of poetic meaning or as paths through a metaphorical built environment, it is potentially more accurate to describe “Litany” as a series of roads which simply direct us to other roads, all leading “*toward the center that is not there*”.⁹⁷⁶ Or, as Donoghue writes, “if you stop at any point [...] you have merely exercised your freedom to do so”.⁹⁷⁷

3.3. “Get up in public and proclaim”: Public space as a model for poetry.

Ashbery actively sought the “chance occurrences” that public space has to offer, using those he encountered as a “spark to get him going” or “prompt” him as a poet.⁹⁷⁸ MacFarquhar summarises: “for poetic purposes he likes situations where he is likely to encounter the peculiar and the unexpected [...] strolling around downtown”, in search of an “idea for a new poem” amongst the hustle and bustle of street level.⁹⁷⁹ This, Gehl suggests, is one of the central benefits offered by public space. Even being in “passive contact” with the wealth of

⁹⁷³ Rich Kelly, “Library of America Interviews: John Ashbery”, *Library of America e-Newsletter* (2008), https://loa-shared.s3.amazonaws.com/static/pdf/LOA_Ashbery_interview_on_Collected_Poems.pdf (Accessed 02/10/2021).

⁹⁷⁴ Ashbery, “Litany”, 637.

⁹⁷⁵ Ashbery, “Litany”, 602.

⁹⁷⁶ Ashbery, “Litany”, 617.

⁹⁷⁷ Donoghue, “Sign”.

⁹⁷⁸ MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

⁹⁷⁹ MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

unexpected stimuli which such spaces provide may serve as a creative “opportunity for stimulation”.⁹⁸⁰ In “Litany”, Ashbery places the reader in this situation: positioned amidst the competing stimuli of the poem’s metaphorical “environment”, seeking out threads of meaning whilst its polyphonic form leads to a constantly fluctuating flow of unexpected juxtapositions. Inspired by the “parallel productive play” of overheard conversation in busy spaces, the poem in turn expands on the multitude of “inspirations” to be found amongst “beautifully varied streets” and peopled public space.⁹⁸¹ Whilst the left column employs the imagery of public space as a metaphor for “what poetry is”, however, the right column underscores the inability of poetry to truly capture such spaces and, by extension, the nature of experience itself.⁹⁸²

Musing on these things he turned off the

Great high street which is like a too-busy

Harbor full of boats knocking against each

Other, a blatantly cacophonous if stirring

Symphony, with all its most

Staggeringly beautiful aspects jammed against

The lowest motives and inspirations that ever

Infected the human spirit, into a

Small courtyard continued by an alley

We had been overhearing, all that time.

Not that writing can transcend life,

Any more than the act of writing can

Outdistance the imagination it feeds on and

Imitates in its ductility, its swift

Garrulity, jumping from line to line,

From page to page

*Too remote and too near to transcend it*⁹⁸³

The left column maps out the speaker’s “meditations” through the imagery of space and place, cultivating a connection not only between poem and environment but between ideas of

⁹⁸⁰ Gehl, *Life*, 21.

⁹⁸¹ Ashbery, “Litany”, 640.

⁹⁸² Ashbery, “Litany”, 608.

⁹⁸³ Ashbery, “Litany”, 608-609.

architectural and narrative structure.⁹⁸⁴ As that which “carries” both the speaker and their “musing[s]” on their parallel journey through the built environment, the “street” represents a symbolic parallel for the poem’s “narrative thrust”, tethering their abstract reflections to their more concrete surroundings.⁹⁸⁵ So complete is this suggested correlation between space and “Poetry” that Ashbery’s speaker wonders whether leaving the “too-busy” rush of the “high street” will allow them to exit the “form” and “fabric” of the poem itself.⁹⁸⁶ This impulse to “escap[e]/ The rat race, if only for a time” could serve as an analogy for Ashbery’s wish to get away from poetry “as we know it”, with the speaker “turn[ing] off” of the main thoroughfare in favour of finding a less travelled route through the metaphorical side streets of the poetic built environment.⁹⁸⁷ Yet whichever path they forge, through back alleys and “steep/ Building-shadows”, they find themselves metaphorically “pursued” through the cityscape by the poem’s narrative.⁹⁸⁸ Considered in connection with that of the left column, which proceeds along its own narrative path just across the page, this description could be read as a reflection of the speaker’s inability to “*outdistance the imagination*” of the poet, along with “*the act of writing*” (or, in our case, reading) which records it. This creates a parallel between poem and page or “*the story/ [and] its telling*”, in which the one column details the narrative we are to “read about” whilst the other concerns itself with the medium through which that narrative is actually “*to be told*” and eventually “*read*”.⁹⁸⁹ In this context, the reader’s passage through the poem shadows the speaker’s journey through the built environment, the one “*jumping from line to line,/ From page to page*” in the same way that the other travels “Up” and “Down” through the highways and byways of public space.⁹⁹⁰

⁹⁸⁴ Ashbery, “Litany”, 608.

⁹⁸⁵ Ashbery, “Litany”, 608.

⁹⁸⁶ Ashbery, “Litany”, 608.

⁹⁸⁷ Ashbery, “Litany”, 608.

⁹⁸⁸ Ashbery, “Litany”, 608.

⁹⁸⁹ Ashbery, “Litany”, 608-609.

⁹⁹⁰ Ashbery, “Litany”, 608-609.

Donoghue argues that the recurring image of “city streets” throughout *As We Know* operates as a way for the poet to question ideas of “poetic imagination” and, by extension, the “poetic character” of “place” and “space” in general.⁹⁹¹ Here, Ashbery uses the imagery of streets to frame the speaker’s perceptions in inherently spatial terms. The shifting direction of their thoughts is navigated in terms of space and place, much as the meandering path of their “musing” is directed by the equally “swerving path” of the street underfoot.⁹⁹² As both that which determines the poem’s “narrative thrust” and the source of its “inspiratio[n]”, the street transcends its role as a passive vehicle for the speaker’s musings to become a form of architectural muse in its own right. However, such spaces equally serve as an architectural analogy for the more abstract nature of “Poetry”, to the extent that they are termed “the ideal poem-construct”.⁹⁹³ This description merges ideas of architectural construction and the more abstract bringing together of conceptual elements to create a more complex whole, blending “*abstractions*” into a more concrete vision of “*materialism and space*”.⁹⁹⁴

In contrast to the fixity represented by buildings and other so-called “inanimate objects” of architecture, “Litany” depicts public space in frenetic and kinetic terms.⁹⁹⁵ The “street” is characterised less by its spatial dimensions than by the multitude of disparate elements contained within it at any one time, each engaged in an endless series of interactions and intermittent associations. So diverse is the tableau in question that “All” of life’s “most/ Staggeringly beautiful aspects” are indicated to be in evidence at any given moment. This frames public space as a microcosm of the “human spirit”, much as Gehl proposes that such spaces represent the most “human dimension” of urban and architectural theory as a whole.⁹⁹⁶ Given that they are “dynamic, mix-use” environments, public spaces play host to the entire

⁹⁹¹ Donoghue, *Reading*, 303.

⁹⁹² Ashbery, “Litany”, 565.

⁹⁹³ Ashbery, “Litany”, 608; 608; 595.

⁹⁹⁴ Ashbery, “Litany”, 595.

⁹⁹⁵ Gehl, *Life*, 21.

⁹⁹⁶ Jan Gehl, *Cities for People* (USA: Island Press, 2010), 3.

spectrum of humanity for what Gehl proposes is a “limitless” range of potential purposes.⁹⁹⁷ As such, it makes sense that such spaces stand as a concrete representation of the equally kaleidoscopic range of “human” impulses which pass through them, much as the “street” of “Litany” embodies the full range of human nature, from its “lowest motives” to its highest “inspirations”.

The poem reflects cultural characterisations of public places as composite and thoroughly protean spaces, with the image of the “street” embodying the qualities of juxtaposition and contradiction which led Ashbery to seek inspiration within the real-life built environment. This, the speaker suggests, is a shared quality of poetry and public space, both tasked with turning cacophony into “symphony”: merging a plethora of discordant, disharmonious elements to create a newly composite whole. It is hard not to see this as a potential analogy for “Litany” specifically, both as a poem inspired by the disjointed hubbub of public space and in terms of the task it faces in weaving together “*Too many strands [...] too independent of each other*” into a single form of poetic expression.⁹⁹⁸ These concepts of symphony and cacophony assume further dimensions when considered in relation to how “Litany” works in performance. Yet even considered solely in the context of the page, “Litany” repeatedly seeks to encapsulate themes of cacophony and dissonance, referring to itself as “a poem of harmonious dejection”, full of “choreographed intrusions” and “meaningless syllables that have a music of their own”.⁹⁹⁹ This is perhaps a particularly apt metaphor for the oft-cited mishmash sensibilities of Ashbery’s poetry, through which he combined a “jumble of styles and voices”, in order to see what it would all “sound like thrown together”.¹⁰⁰⁰ As the poet explained regarding the “collage-like effect” of much of his work, “I like my poems to include as many things in them as possible [...] [and] I like having

⁹⁹⁷ Gehl, *Cities*, 3.

⁹⁹⁸ Ashbery, “Litany”, 571.

⁹⁹⁹ Ashbery, “Litany”, 574; 569; 556.

¹⁰⁰⁰ MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

them happening all at once”.¹⁰⁰¹ However, the “reflection” proffered by public space also serves a more philosophical purpose, allowing the speaker to externalise the abstract “motives and inspirations” which the street has come to represent.¹⁰⁰² By being reflected through the architectural “fabric” of public space, such concepts are given physical “form”, rendering them metaphorically and literally concrete and thus allowing the speaker to “contemplate them” in phenomenal and phenomenological terms.¹⁰⁰³ Matters of “place” are suggested to be “objects of contemplation”, a description which plays on the ambiguity of psychological “abstractions” and concrete “materialism”.¹⁰⁰⁴ After all, an object can be a material thing, capable of being physically perceived and encountered, or it could just refer to that which a specified action or feeling is directed towards. Similarly, that which is contemplated may be physically viewed or just mentally considered, much as the speaker describes “Poetry” as “looking steadily at something” which theoretically, or at least physically, “isn’t/ Really there at all”.¹⁰⁰⁵

The image of “aspects jammed against” each other by the “too-busy” nature of public space serves as a parallel for the overcrowded nature of “Litany” as a means of poetic expression. Due to the confines of both poem and page, two supposedly independent narratives are made to occupy a space traditionally designed to host only one, with the poem’s literal and figurative spaces suffering from the poetic equivalent of congestion. The relationship between the poem’s form and its portrayal of public space forms the main subject matter of section four of this chapter. However, if the influence which public space exerts upon those within it is first and foremost a matter of physical proximity, then portraying the interactions which this shared spatial context facilitates in spatial terms is a

¹⁰⁰¹ Jessica Sequeira, “Portrait in a Crimson Mirror”, *The Crimson* (01/05/2009), <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2009/5/1/portrait-in-a-crimson-mirror-john/> (Accessed 10/10/2021).

¹⁰⁰² Ashbery, “Litany”, 641.

¹⁰⁰³ Ashbery, “Litany”, 608.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Ashbery, “Litany”, 602.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Ashbery, “Litany”, 608.

natural next step in the portrayal of such places. Given the reputation public spaces hold for fostering unlikely juxtaposition and “unpredictable intermingling”,¹⁰⁰⁶ this metaphorical pushing and shoving could represent the struggle that conflicting or “*contrary principles*”¹⁰⁰⁷ face in order to fit within the same space at the same time. Passive influence is converted into a more percussive contact, which leaves all involved slightly altered and on a slightly different metaphorical path.

3.3.2. “Who can describe the exact feel”: public space as a symbol of experience.

Like “The Instruction Manual” (*Some Trees*, 1956), “Litany” contrasts the traditional idea that you “*have to sequester yourself*” or stay “*holed up in some office skyscraper*” in order to compose “*poetry*” against the inspirations to be found “*down/ In the street*”.¹⁰⁰⁸ Ashbery uses the imagery of public space as a metaphorical “*bridge between [the poet] and ‘life’*”, with such spaces serving as a concrete symbol of the heterogenous nature of “*contemporary existence*”.¹⁰⁰⁹ The street has become so imbued with the second-hand thoughts and feelings transferred to it by “*throngs of passer[s]by*” that those who enter it risk being “*infected*” by errant emotions or “*inspirations*”, much as the poet frequented public spaces in search of a “*spark to get him going*”.¹⁰¹⁰ Whilst public space usually offers a passive means of “*receiving impulses from others*”, here the speaker derives such signals directly from the street itself, as though otherwise abstract ideas have saturated the very bricks and mortar and may be picked up on the shoes like chewing gum. This blurs the line between the metaphysical and the physical (or architectural), in the same way that “*Litany*”

¹⁰⁰⁶ Boddy, “Underground”, 133.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Ashbery, “Litany”, 653.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Ashbery, “Litany”, 651.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Ashbery, “Litany”, 605; 599.

¹⁰¹⁰ Ashbery, “Litany”, 633.

portrays public spaces less by their architectural characteristics than by their role as a more abstract conduit for a collective stream of consciousness. In this respect, Ashbery suggests that considering things through the lens of space and place allows us to see that which is normally “beyond our perception”.¹⁰¹¹ Walking “*Down a sidewalk*” that so many others have walked down allows us to “*know ourselves/ And each other*” in “*a way that living our own lives/ Never does*”, as though one may adopt a different point of view not by standing in someone else’s shoes but by looking at the same environment from the same perspective.¹⁰¹² In allowing us “*To see precisely the same way*”, however temporarily, public space serves as a model for a more direct vision of poetic expression, one which transcends the “*individual act*” of the solitary “*writer or artist*” to “*make room for the general public/ To crowd around and be enchanted by it too*”.¹⁰¹³ As the poet explained in a 1970 interview with *The Morning Sentinel*, the function of poetry should be “to make the reader want to experience it for himself”, putting the speaker “both in the place of the artist and also in the place of the public”.¹⁰¹⁴

Despite the potential such spaces are suggested to represent, “*Litany*” depicts public spaces as parts of the built environment which traditionally “*remain unseen unknown and undeveloped*”, with such imagery serving as a symbol for the nature of attention and inattention, or the overlooked creative possibilities inherent in immediate everyday experience.¹⁰¹⁵ To this end, Ashbery’s comments on “*Litany*” stress that he viewed experiences in or of public space as something that “should have a poem written about it” with the poem’s twin form seeking to evoke this immersive and ultimately discursive poetic “environment”. However, Ashbery concluded that it was inevitably “something of a failure”

¹⁰¹¹ Ashbery, “*Litany*”, 604.

¹⁰¹² Ashbery, “*Litany*”, 625.

¹⁰¹³ Ashbery, “*Litany*”, 653; 603; 601.

¹⁰¹⁴ John Ashbery, Interview with *The Morning Sentinel* (03/08/1970), quoted in Shoptaw, *On the Outside*, 235.

¹⁰¹⁵ Ashbery, “*Litany*”, 603.

in this respect.¹⁰¹⁶ After all, eavesdropping on separate conversations requires the listener to occupy a specific, deictic positioning in time and space, as “the experience cannot [...] be replicated by reading the transcripts of both conversations”.¹⁰¹⁷ Nor, it is arguable, can “polyphony” be effectively emulated when the “separate” voices in question both stem from Ashbery himself and, Stitt suggests, are often “very similar to one another” in tone.¹⁰¹⁸ “Litany” internalises this incongruity, encoding its struggle to capture the dimensions of the very thing that it supposedly “*imitates*”. In this respect, the poem reflects not just Ashbery’s wish to break away from “preconceived notions of what [his] poetry is” but the irreconcilable discrepancy which he viewed to be at the heart of poetry itself. As the poet explained to Poulin, “most of my poems are about the experience of experience”.¹⁰¹⁹ Yet, at the same time, he struggled with the intrinsic limitations of poetry in encapsulating such experience because “every piece of writing is a two-dimensional rendering of life, which is three-dimensional”.¹⁰²⁰ The right-hand column emphasises the gap between three-dimensional inspiration and two-dimensional poetic simulation, reminding the reader that, technically, “*we have been overhearing all this time*”, even whilst drawing attention to the words on the “*page*” which are meant to convey this. Thomas Gardner reflects that “Ashbery’s work grows out of a tension [...] generated by the desire to capture immediate experience and by the accompanying awareness that what is isolated and given dimension is never the moment itself but is always and only form”.¹⁰²¹ “Litany” is fuelled by this tension, reflecting on the futility of trying to simulate the “now [of] the now” through a medium which translates all sense of immediacy “into permanence”.¹⁰²² Every attempt to portray the “moment that

¹⁰¹⁶ MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

¹⁰¹⁷ MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

¹⁰¹⁸ Stitt, “Art”.

¹⁰¹⁹ Poulin, “Experience”, 245.

¹⁰²⁰ Sequeira, “Portrait”.

¹⁰²¹ Thomas Gardner, “Reading Ashbery”, *Critic* (Spring, 1986), 50.

¹⁰²² Ashbery, “Litany”, 582.

enshrines us/ Now, in this place” is shadowed by the knowledge that the experience in question “Can never be felt/ Outside time”.¹⁰²³ Before we have even begun to contemplate it, “the moment has gone away”, leading the speaker to conclude that only “One thing is sure: nothing/ Can replace it”.¹⁰²⁴

Gardner suggests that Ashbery characterises the “moment as it is lived” in spatial terms, suggesting that the poet primarily portrays the intangibility of immediate experience as a “‘dimensionless area’ that seems both full and empty”.¹⁰²⁵ This description is reminiscent of the poet’s intention for “Litany” to “exemplify the fullness”, “emptiness” and “dimensionless quality” of life. However, “Litany” equally uses the imagery of public space to explore the inability for “Poetry” to truly embody such a “*subject matter*”, calling attention to the discrepancy between the “*living*” reality of such spaces and the representation the poet has “*managed/ Somehow to get down on the page*”.¹⁰²⁶ Unable to evoke the sense of present tense immediacy and deictic immersion such spaces represent, the depiction of public space is therefore imbued only with the metaphorical “*life of art*” instead of “*Anything [truly] living*”.¹⁰²⁷ As soon as the poet has “*finished writing*”, the scene is rendered “*dead*”, devoid of the effervescent “*life*”, “*glitter/ And luminosity*” such spaces were previously suggested to engender.¹⁰²⁸ Any portrait of public space will therefore inevitably have to sacrifice “*so many details/ That are probably significant*” to the character of such spaces, or overlook the “*wide[r]*” image of the “*whole*” which such details comprise.¹⁰²⁹ If “Litany” can be read as an attempt to capture the nature of deictic experience in what are essentially two-dimensional terms, then, as an architectural emblem of such experience, it is only to be expected that its

¹⁰²³ Ashbery, “Litany”, 602; 636

¹⁰²⁴ Ashbery, “Litany”, 636; 594.

¹⁰²⁵ Gardner, “Reading”, 50.

¹⁰²⁶ Ashbery, “Litany”, 605.

¹⁰²⁷ Ashbery, “Litany”, 643; 605.

¹⁰²⁸ Ashbery, “Litany”, 605.

¹⁰²⁹ Ashbery, “Litany”, 605.

depictions of public space will be “half-sketched”, with Ashbery suggesting that this may be the only way we can depict such spaces at all. However, as the left column echoes, it may equally be because any portrait of public space, once committed to the page, is destined thereafter to be “always the same”.¹⁰³⁰ As a static description, it can never truly “mirror” such “indeterminate” parts of the built environment, being incapable of “changing as they change”.¹⁰³¹ It appears that the immediacy and changeability which makes public space “the ideal poem-construct” are paradoxically the same qualities that make it “so hard to write about” such spaces and, by extension, so difficult to effectively encapsulate them in poetic terms.¹⁰³² However, just as Ashbery suggested that the reader “can’t understand a poem in one outside-of-time instant”, he also uses the imagery of public space as a means to suggest that encapsulating such a deictic form of experience may necessitate that we think differently about “poetry as we know it”.¹⁰³³ The poem’s divided form could be viewed as a metaphor for the way in which Ashbery suggested a given “moment will separate itself” into different aspects in one’s memory, creating a feeling of “unity constantly separating”.¹⁰³⁴ “Ashbery compares his poems to environments, the idea being that an environment is something that you are immersed in”, enabling the reader to be “surrounded by different elements of a work”¹⁰³⁵ and consequently “feel it, experience it” in immersive terms.¹⁰³⁶ For, as “Litany” suggests, “*Who can begin/ To describe without feeling it?* ”.¹⁰³⁷ Better yet, how does one “*describe the exact feel*” of a place “*in such a way as to/ Make you wish you were in it, or [...] to make you realise that you actually are in it.*”¹⁰³⁸

¹⁰³⁰ Ashbery, “Litany”, 604.

¹⁰³¹ Ashbery, “Litany”, 604.

¹⁰³² Ashbery, “Litany”, 602.

¹⁰³³ MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

¹⁰³⁴ Richard Jackson, *Acts of Mind* (USA: Alabama UP, 1983), 75.

¹⁰³⁵ MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

¹⁰³⁶ Ashbery, “Litany”, 626.

¹⁰³⁷ Ashbery, “Litany”, 605.

¹⁰³⁸ Ashbery, “Litany”, 601.

3.4. “Form as subject matter”: connection, disconnection and public place.

“Litany” outlines a desire to “turn away” from that which occurs “in the foreground” in favour of preoccupying itself with that which traditionally exists “in the background”, a message which purportedly comes straight from “the author” himself.¹⁰³⁹ In the context of the passage in question, this new emphasis on “background” forges a direct connection between concepts of setting (or, more specifically “Landscape”) and that which usually remains overlooked, with both being “barely seen (sometimes/ Not seen at all)”.¹⁰⁴⁰ This holds implications for and within the poem’s narrative, as it operates as a spatially based metaphor for the speaker/poet’s attempts to “shift the focus/ [onto] the scenery [and] away from the action”, moving the “narrative thrust” of the poem to address less the things which “*occupy the same space*” than the qualities of that space itself.¹⁰⁴¹ This could serve as a subtle reminder for the reader to look beyond the words printed on the page to the “well proportioned” space of the page, as the literal and figurative “landscape” which the “narrow lanes” of the poem’s text share “in common”.¹⁰⁴² However, it also works as an analogy for what the speaker labels the relationship between “form /Vs. content” in poetic terms.¹⁰⁴³ This description separates poetry into its component parts, isolating the overarching, physical structure from the individual words or ideas expressed within that structure, with it being “the latter” which is conventionally viewed to represent “what the poem is actually about”.¹⁰⁴⁴

Dubois states that “although the two columns of ‘Litany’ suggest the potential for a binary division of content, there is actually nothing in the form that makes such a binary

¹⁰³⁹ Ashbery, “Litany”, 624.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Ashbery, “Litany”, 624.

¹⁰⁴¹ Ashbery, “Litany”, 624.

¹⁰⁴² Ashbery, “Litany”, 624.

¹⁰⁴³ Ashbery, “Litany”, 646.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Ashbery, “Litany”, 646.

division inevitable”.¹⁰⁴⁵ Arguably, the reverse is equally true: that our immediate supposition that there must be a relationship between the columns is based simply on the fact that they are, to echo the words of the poem, “kept in one place” (creating a sense of shared space which may imply “kinship” but also emphasise inherent “differences”).¹⁰⁴⁶ This is suggested by Ashbery’s description of the columns of “Litany” as “two separate poems”, akin to eavesdropping on “two different conversations” which mingle together by virtue of originating from the same “environment”. Similarly, by being contained in the same poem, the same page, the columns of “Litany” automatically appear to invite comparison, as though their simple proximity requires the reader to seek possible connections between them. Ashbery, however, provides us with no other obvious reason to consider the columns in conjunction and, regardless of our natural impulse to do so, the poem is largely written in a way that ensures that the reader “cannot follow the pattern” (if there is indeed a pattern to be found).¹⁰⁴⁷ That is not to say that the constant awareness of both columns does not influence how we attempt to identify such patterns. Based on the author’s note, Keeling frames the columns as “voices which are expressed at the same moment in time, [and] which thereby offer us a point of similar origin (temporally)”.¹⁰⁴⁸ It is this shared origin alone, Keeling argues, which provides our basis for comparison. Nonetheless, even within such a context, what we read in one column has the capacity to “drastically change the tone and sense” we identify in the other, or they may appear to “mimic [,] repeat[, or] contradict one another”, depending on how the poem is read.¹⁰⁴⁹ Beyond this suggested basis for comparison, however, he recognises that it is theoretically possible that the columns actually “have nothing to do

¹⁰⁴⁵ Dubois, *Ashbery’s Forms*, 99.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Ashbery, “Litany”, 554.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Remnick, “John Ashbery”.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Keeling, “Moment”, 128.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Keeling, “Moment”, 128.

with one another”, and that we should perhaps “not continue to compare and contrast” them, at least not directly.¹⁰⁵⁰

This interpretation frames the columns as elements within a shared context, with our understanding of them being naturally shaped by that context, however transitory it may be. What is, for Keeling, however, a shared point in time may equally be viewed as a shared origin or place in space, with the columns being akin to two people passing through the same environment which is defined only by “*who*” or “*what is there*” “*at any given/ Moment*”.¹⁰⁵¹ Section III opens with both columns preoccupied with such deictic models of the built environment, with both employing the imagery of streets as a means to explore interactions between time and space. Whilst the left column frames the “beautifully varied streets” which crisscross the cityscape as an analogy for the passage of “time”, however, the right is more concerned with the possibilities for connection and disconnection that such spaces represent.¹⁰⁵²

Some say that the measuring of time

Sometimes when we see another person

Is a recognition of what it is, but

Walking down a street or

I think the things that are in it

Standing to one side, we feel

Are more like it, though not quite it.

We ought to go up and speak to that person

Because they expected to die.

Actually what it is is controlled

*But we do not, or seldom, speak to strangers.*¹⁰⁵³

¹⁰⁵⁰ Keeling, “Moment”, 128.

¹⁰⁵¹ Ashbery, “Litany”, 641.

¹⁰⁵² Ashbery, “Litany”, 640.

¹⁰⁵³ Ashbery, “Litany”, 640-641.

Here the right column reflects public places as breaking down traditional “*frontiers*” in “*space*”, so that even an “*empty street*” symbolises “*opening landscapes,/ New people, mingling in new conversations*”.¹⁰⁵⁴ As Gehl writes “being present in the same space” degrades boundaries between “isolation and contact”, necessitating “being among others, seeing and hearing others, receiving impulses for others”.¹⁰⁵⁵ Similarly, “*Litany*” proposes, “the object will be partially perceived by the forms/ Around it”, “changing as they change”.¹⁰⁵⁶ Whilst Ashbery acknowledges the fleeting connections which such indirect contact may produce, he also stresses the superficial nature of such associations outside of a purely spatial context. Elements occupying the same time and place may have the ability to re-contextualise or catalyse one another. However, that does not mean that they will automatically do so, at least not in any profound or lasting sense. Rather, such interactions occur only “*sometimes*”, and even then those involved are only required to “*get along in short periods*”, with the speaker even stressing that “*It is forbidden/ To have much to do with strangers*” outside of these fleeting moments of spatially based contact.¹⁰⁵⁷ Due to the shifting character of public space, however, those who pass through such spaces are also only required to coalesce in such temporary terms, with the speaker being free to “*Turn around and go back and not speak/ To the others who were there*” at any time.¹⁰⁵⁸ This interpretation presents otherwise unconnected elements originating from the same “environment”, united by the momentary shared medium of space, but otherwise “too independent of each other” to truly be considered in tandem.¹⁰⁵⁹ Similarly, although the “monologues” largely “stay distinct”, there will inevitably be “times [when] the columns seem to come together”, as

¹⁰⁵⁴ Ashbery, “*Litany*”, 597.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Gehl, *Life*, 19; 17; 17.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Ashbery, “*Litany*”, 648; 604.

¹⁰⁵⁷ Ashbery, “*Litany*”, 641.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Ashbery, “*Litany*”, 641.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Ashbery, “*Litany*”, 571.

though lapsing into temporary alignment.¹⁰⁶⁰ However, like the spatially based kinship of speaker and stranger, such perceived interconnections emerge only for the span of a “given/ Moment”, before the “lack of coherence between the parts” reasserts itself.

Given that each person will “experience” “Litany” in their own way, Keeling proposes that perceived links between the columns can be attributed to some “arbitrary connection” on the part of the reader, emerging chiefly “in terms of one person’s perspective” rather than due to any deliberate effort on Ashbery’s part to synchronise specific sections.¹⁰⁶¹ Instead, different readers’ attentions will inevitably latch onto different things, each following “some passing event or object which may or may not connect to another event, another object”.¹⁰⁶² Rather than a misreading of the poem, however, such phantom connections were part of the experience which “Litany” was intended to emulate. Ashbery stated that “Litany” was partly inspired by the fact that “nobody” understood his work. However, it also reflected his belief that all art, once created, is destined to be “misinterpreted for better or worse” to the point that “misunderstanding and appreciation are much the same”.¹⁰⁶³

3.4.1. “Visions may arise and occupy the same space”: spatially based significance and the quest for connection.

Section II of “Litany” continues to explore how public space degrades the boundary between isolation and contact, the right column voicing “*that truly human passion to be all alone*” against the left’s fear of being “the only one”.¹⁰⁶⁴ In the same way that being present in public space causes a person to become part of the ever-changing tableau which such

¹⁰⁶⁰ Keeling, “Moment”, 128.

¹⁰⁶¹ Keeling, “Moment”, 129.

¹⁰⁶² Lauterbach, “What”, 348.

¹⁰⁶³ John Ashbery, “Abstract Expressionism”, *RS*, 258-59.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Ashbery, “Litany”, 610.

spaces represent, the presence of a “young man” and “girl” on the “pavement” “at the same time” as the poet temporarily integrates them into the “fabric/ Of his existence”.¹⁰⁶⁵ However, whilst this spatially prescribed togetherness stops the speaker from being technically alone, the promise of connection which their proximity would seem to infer never actually materialises.

Seated on the pavement, sitting	<i>Get something out of this too.</i>
Merely. Not even	<i>Otherwise the night has no end.</i>
Lost in thought she seemed, but	
Accepting the waiting for it	<i>Otherwise the weeping messiah</i>
Or whatever else might be in the channel	<i>Who comforts us on those nights</i>
Of time we were being ferried across.	<i>When truth has flown out of the window</i>
Her face was totally devoid of expression	<i>Would never place an asterisk</i>
Yet wore a somehow kind look, so I was glad	<i>On your heart. Your whole life</i>
Of it in the deepening fever of the day.	
No sign	<i>Would be like walking through a field</i>
Did she make of interest to her companion	<i>Of tall grasses, in time with the wind</i>
Who ever and anon did searchingly	<i>As it blows. And in old age</i>
Regard her face, as though to ascertain	<i>There will have been no jump to the</i>
That the signs he wished to read there	<i>Old man you then are, only a nudge</i>
Were indeed not there, that there was nothing	<i>And a promise of more</i> ¹⁰⁶⁶
In her aspect to cause him to change	

¹⁰⁶⁵ Ashbery, “Litany”, 608; 610; 610.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Ashbery, “Litany”, 610-611.

The desire to associate and the intrinsic inability to do so are embodied by the figure of the man who, instead of taking cues from his setting, instead concentrates his attention entirely on the young girl. However, this focus stems not from a wish to understand the girl herself but instead from an apparent expectation that her presence could hold implications for him in the here and now. He studies her “searchingly” for some shift in her comportment which would “cause him to change” in turn, looking to her to elucidate his own existence within the shared space of the street and, by extension, the poem’s narrative.

Considered in this context, the figures on the pavement could be viewed as separate elements reflecting on or shaped by a shared environment, just as the monologues of “Litany” arguably represent voices stemming from a common point in space and place. Despite this prolonged scrutiny, however, the girl remains “totally devoid of expression”, evincing no awareness of her surroundings or catalyst which could “change” the poem’s “narrative thrust”. Rather, she is simply depicted as present, her apparently vacant exterior symbolising less the potential for hidden meaning than the equal possibility that there is no such deeper meaning to be found. Her presence on the pavement could therefore be read as akin to one of the countless occurrences of potential overlap between the columns, with Ashbery playing on our desire to forge connections between that which “*may arise and occupy the same space*”. Instead of continuing to actively search for “the signs he wished to read there”, the man resorts to simply re-confirming their continued absence. These so-called “signs”, the poem hints, may symbolise a “deepening” of significance, something which, Ashbery informs us, “could easily happen” and yet does not.¹⁰⁶⁷ However, faced with this lack of external stimulus, all the man can do is “stare at his guitar” and imagine, in a detached way, “what it would be like/ To play something” as though unable to take agency in his own mode of

¹⁰⁶⁷ Ashbery, “Litany”, 610.

“expression”.¹⁰⁶⁸ Given the enigmatic relationship between them, the figures could symbolise the columns themselves, with the one appearing to look to the other for some echoed element which may link them together beyond the implied common ground of the pavement or page. This reflects the ambiguity of whether either column can be considered as an effective form of poetic expression in its own right, with Donoghue suggesting that Ashbery’s message is conveyed not through “local meaning” in either column but in making us consider the “relation between them”, and “how one such meaning bears upon the next”.¹⁰⁶⁹

Consequently, Donoghue writes, “what Ashbery asks of his style is that it keep him in the space of his themes”.¹⁰⁷⁰ Beyond this concept, however, the figures arguably serve as stand-ins for the reader, offering two diverging models for how “Litany” could be read. The first, the man, represents those who actively seek to uncover “signs” in an attempt “to wrestle an explicable meaning out of the poem”.¹⁰⁷¹ The second model, symbolised by the girl, embodies the more passive form of involvement which Ashbery indicated “Litany” was designed to encourage, in which we allow the poem to simply wash over us. Like the poet in public space, the reader is left to wander, “letting his mind catch on one phrase or another. And if he finds himself suddenly jolting back to attention [...] he must accept that he has missed a bit of the poem, [...] and just enjoy what is left without worrying too much about how it all fits together”.¹⁰⁷²

There is potentially a parallel to be made here with how we approach Ashbery’s poetry as a whole. Gi Taek Ryoo argues that ultimately it is solely “the false gesture of meaning in Ashbery’s poetry that motivates us to find ‘links’ between disparate nodes of thoughts or images”.¹⁰⁷³ “Litany” deliberately plays on our desire to establish meaning by

¹⁰⁶⁸ Ashbery, “Litany”, 610.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Donoghue, *Reading*, 309.

¹⁰⁷⁰ Donoghue, *Reading*, 307.

¹⁰⁷¹ MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

¹⁰⁷² MacFarquhar, “Becoming”.

¹⁰⁷³ Gi Taek Ryoo, “Ashbery’s Aesthetics of Difficulty”, *English Language and Literature* (2021), 106.

making such connections. As previously stated, at the time he was writing the poem, Ashbery was increasingly frustrated about attitudes towards his work. The twin columns of “Litany” are arguably the “form that thinking found”.¹⁰⁷⁴ In the same manner that the poem reflects on the influences exerted on something by “the forms /Around it”, it employs that sense of form as a way to generate poetic narrative or meaning, encouraging readers to create connections for themselves. Yet the paths we make whilst “*wandering, improvisatory*” through the poem’s landscape are equally shaped by the so-called architecture of the poem, that which “Litany” terms “form as subject matter”: something which “can never contribute, but of which/ It must needs always be aware”.¹⁰⁷⁵ To this end, John Ash proposes that Ashbery’s “poems have a kind of improvisatory architecture”, contrasting “great freedom” with a more intuitive “control”.¹⁰⁷⁶ As Ashbery responded, “yes, I think that’s a rather beautiful formulation, architecture being so non-improvisatory”.¹⁰⁷⁷

¹⁰⁷⁴ Herd, “Occasions”, 237.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Ashbery, “Litany”, 646.

¹⁰⁷⁶ John Ash, “In Conversation with John Ashbery”, *P.N. Review* (2005) https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe?item_id=5781 (Accessed 08/03/2021).

¹⁰⁷⁷ Ash, “Conversation”.

Chapter 4. “The architecture of us”: the house in the writings of John Ashbery.

In 1964, John Ashbery looked around the farmhouse which had been in his family for over five decades. After 8 years in Paris, he had returned to his hometown of Sodus, Upstate New York for his father’s funeral. Following the service, he began to write the poem that would be published in *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970) as “Fragment”. Despite his reluctance to acknowledge autobiographical elements in his work, Ashbery described the poem as “elegiac”.¹⁰⁷⁸ Yet, if “Fragment” is an elegy, the loss it embodies is not solely that of a son mourning his father. In conversation with Mark Ford in 2003, the poet gave a rare insight into the poem’s composition. In coming to terms with his father’s death, he experienced a second loss: that of the house itself. “I started writing it soon after my father died, and I realized as I was writing that these were the last days I’d ever live in our house, where I’d grown up”.¹⁰⁷⁹

After Chester Ashbery’s death, the poet’s mother sold the family home. The two events became inseparable for Ashbery, who was thrust back to his childhood, only to have it taken from him. As Marit MacArthur writes, the sale of Ashbery Farm had “dramatic effects on the poet and his poetry”.¹⁰⁸⁰ Although his relationship with the house had been ambivalent, its sale left Ashbery feeling cut off from his past. The result was that “his [own native] landscape was never the same”.¹⁰⁸¹ This is the loss charted in “Fragment”: that of a parent, but also of Ashbery’s own sense of self. Without our home, the poem asks, who are we?

¹⁰⁷⁸ Mark Ford, *John Ashbery in Conversation* (UK: Between the Lines Press: 2003), 51.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 51.

¹⁰⁸⁰ Marit MacArthur, *The American Landscape* (USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 171.

¹⁰⁸¹ MacArthur, *American*, 181.

Our daily imaginings are swiftly tilted down to
Death in its various forms. We cannot keep the peace
At home, and at the same time be winning wars abroad.
And the great flower of what we have been twists
On its stem of earth, for not being
What we are to become, fated to live in
Intimidated solitude and isolation.¹⁰⁸²

Death, Ashbery reflects, is experienced not only through the loss of people, but also of places. While his father's death forced Ashbery to confront his own mortality, the sale of the house led him to contemplate the ephemeral nature of human experience. "Home" is portrayed as central to one's identity, as the place which encapsulates "all we have been". Yet, like the history it houses, it becomes something "we cannot keep". Metaphorical roots become literal, as the "stem" which connected the speaker to his home is suddenly broken. Without this connection, "Fragment" laments, what are we "to become"?

After the farm's sale, Ashbery did not return again until his mother's death in 1987. As he contemplated the once familiar landscape, he was struck by how much had changed. "The land all around the farm was bare, you could see for miles and now it's all overgrown [...] these distant perspectives were very much in my memories of the place, rather than the way it looks now".¹⁰⁸³ Ashbery realised that the house of his past survived only in his memory. This experience inspired *Flow Chart*. Conceived as a means of re-connecting with his heritage, Ashbery began the "100-page poem about [his] mother" shortly after her death.¹⁰⁸⁴ Once again, he found it difficult to separate his recollections of a parent from those

¹⁰⁸² John Ashbery, "Fragment", in *Collected Poems, 1956-1987*, ed. Mark Ford (UK: Carcanet, 2001), 231 (Hereafter cited as *CP*).

¹⁰⁸³ John Ashbery, "Interview by Marit MacArthur", *LIT-12* (Spring 2007), 151.

¹⁰⁸⁴ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 64.

of the house he grew up in. When asked about the inspiration behind *Flow Chart*, Ashbery described the experience of writing the poem as akin to walking through his childhood home: “the house [...] where I had all my stuff, including John’s Report Cards, my mother would have labelled boxes of things of mine”.¹⁰⁸⁵ This scene found its way directly into the poem. The speaker explores the “house” to discover not only “boxes filled with papers (John’s report cards)” but a passage back to “the lost days” of youth.¹⁰⁸⁶

Whilst previous chapters have focused on Ashbery’s representation of public or communal space, this and subsequent chapters consider private or domestic places in his work. The present chapter focuses on Ashbery’s depiction of the house or home. For the purposes of my argument, I follow the socio-architectonic definition of what constitutes a house from *A Field Guide to American Houses*, by Virginia and Lee McAlester: “a single-family, freestanding residence”, the “primary purpose of which is dwelling”.¹⁰⁸⁷ Chapter 5 studies the portrayal of hotels and apartments in Ashbery’s poetry. Finally, Chapter 6 explores the role of suburbia.

The present chapter examines two specific collections: *The Double Dream of Spring* and *Flow Chart* (1991). These have been selected due to their association with both the image of the house and Ashbery’s biography. In these collections, Ashbery portrays the two major homecomings of his adult life. Yet in both cases he would return to find that his relationship with home had irrevocably changed. The connection between these collections has so far not been considered in the critical analysis of Ashbery’s work, either in terms of their depiction of houses or their autobiographical association with the theme of homecoming. This chapter suggests that, just as Ashbery cites these homecomings as a

¹⁰⁸⁵ MacArthur, *American*, 214.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Ashbery, *Flow Chart* (UK: Carcanet, 1991), 114. (Hereafter cited as *FC*).

¹⁰⁸⁷ Virginia McAlester and Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses*, (USA: Knopf-Doubleday, 1984), xi.

critical inspiration behind both *The Double Dream of Spring* and *Flow Chart*, it was through these collections that he would renegotiate his bond with home.

When it comes to autobiography and Ashbery's poetry, criticism is roughly split into two camps: those who argue that Ashbery is enigmatically autobiographical and those who reject autobiography as a viable approach to his work. A prime example of the former is *On the Outside Looking Out* by John Shoptaw, which argues that Ashbery's work is "more 'confessional' than it appears to be on the surface".¹⁰⁸⁸ By contrast, the latter group suggests that this approach "reduces the poetry to autobiography",¹⁰⁸⁹ with John Koethe contending that "one thing that can never be said of Ashbery's poetry is that its primary function is to serve as a vehicle of personal self-expression".¹⁰⁹⁰ While it is informed by this debate, this chapter does not aim to provide or advocate for an exclusively autobiographical reading of Ashbery's work. Rather, it explores the concept of autobiography in relation to one specific image: Ashbery's portrayal of the house. Ashbery himself described his poetry as "anti-biographical".¹⁰⁹¹ However, it is arguably in his depiction of the house or home that he is at his most autobiographical. In *House as a Mirror of Self*, Clare Cooper-Marcus writes that houses are not only architectural but also psychological constructions. They represent the most intimate structures of the built environment, and those with which one develops the strongest "emotional relationship [...] either positive or negative".¹⁰⁹² Houses, Cooper-Marcus suggests, are biographically charged spaces. Consciously or subconsciously, it is difficult to separate ourselves from the places where we dwell.

¹⁰⁸⁸ John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out* (USA: Harvard UP, 1994), 36

¹⁰⁸⁹ Antoine Cazé, "'The end of friendship with self-alone'", *Erea* (2007)

<http://journals.openedition.org/erea/176> (Accessed 3/06/19).

¹⁰⁹⁰ John Koethe, "The Absence of a Noble Presence", in *The Tribe of John*, ed. Susan Schultz (Tuscaloosa: Alabama UP, 1995), 86.

¹⁰⁹¹ MacArthur, *American*, 148.

¹⁰⁹² Clare Cooper-Marcus, *House As a Mirror of Self* (USA: Nicholas-Hays, 2006), 4.

The house is one aspect of the built environment which has received significant attention in Ashbery criticism. Even the normally enigmatic Ashbery recognised that “houses seem to be a recurring theme in my poetry”,¹⁰⁹³ and stated that his actual homes tend to make “cameo appearance[s]”¹⁰⁹⁴ in his writings. This acknowledgement is arguably sufficient reason to investigate the recurrence of houses across the Ashbery canon. Nonetheless, the majority of criticism to date has focused less on dissecting the houses of Ashbery’s poetry than on mapping the Hudson house, Ashbery’s principal adult home. Although these studies have done a great deal to cement the link between his actual house and his work, the poetry has usually been treated as secondary, and little attention has been paid to in-depth analysis of specific texts. Through close readings of *Flow Chart* and selected poems from *The Double Dream of Spring*, this chapter builds upon the existing critical framework and explores the link between Ashbery’s real-life homes and the house as a poetic construct.

The chapter is divided into four sections. Section one considers the wider critical and cultural context which underpins the houses of Ashbery’s work. The subsequent three sections take inspiration from the poet’s dwelling history, which was primarily based around “three houses”: the Rochester house, Ashbery Farm, and the Hudson house.¹⁰⁹⁵ Each represented a different archetype of home for Ashbery and played a distinct role in shaping the depiction of houses in his writings. Based on this analysis, the chapter addresses three distinct themes which Ashbery associates with house and home. Section two considers the relationship between the house and childhood, as an image associated with a person’s early development. Section three examines the theme of alienation, to suggest how Ashbery portrays houses as symbols of exile. Finally, section four studies Ashbery’s houses from the

¹⁰⁹³ John Ashbery, “Letter to R.B. Kitaj”, (07/12/1976), quoted in MacArthur, *American*, 29.

¹⁰⁹⁴ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 64.

¹⁰⁹⁵ MacArthur, *American*, 150.

perspective of adulthood, as a space associated with nostalgia, guilt and eventual reconciliation.

4.1. The house and the home: the critical context of Ashbery's houses.

In 2005, Karin Roffman visited Ashbery's home in Hudson, Upstate New York. It was a seminal moment for Roffman, who became Ashbery's biographer. She reports that she felt "surprise at the setting".¹⁰⁹⁶ "I was expecting a mid-century-modern glass cube and found instead a large, gloomy-looking nineteenth-century Victorian manse".¹⁰⁹⁷ Roffman reflects wider concepts about the relationship between house and occupant. In what Cooper-Marcus terms the dual identity of "self/dwelling", a house is often seen as an extension of the occupant.¹⁰⁹⁸ Within this context, Ashbery's house was something of an anomaly to Roffman, which led her to question perceived ideas about him. If the house truly is a "symbol of the self",¹⁰⁹⁹ what were the implications of Ashbery's home for a figure so dominant in "modernist poetry"?¹¹⁰⁰ This is the question which motivated Roffman to write an account of Ashbery's early years (1927-1955). Given that Ashbery did not purchase the property until 1978, it seems somewhat incongruous that it inspired Roffman to write about the first 30 years of his life. What was it about Ashbery's adult home that led Roffman to be so "curious about his past" and "early life"?¹¹⁰¹

Ashbery's 1994 article for the magazine *Architectural Digest*, "The Poet's Hudson River Restoration", may provide an explanation, as it stressed the connection between his present home and the environments of his youth. "Upstate New York is where I was born and

¹⁰⁹⁶ Karin Roffman, *The Songs We Know Best* (USA: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2017), ix.

¹⁰⁹⁷ Roffman, *Songs*, ix.

¹⁰⁹⁸ Cooper-Marcus, *House*, 13.

¹⁰⁹⁹ Cooper-Marcus, *House*, 64.

¹¹⁰⁰ Roffman, *Songs*, ix.

¹¹⁰¹ Roffman, *Songs*, x; xv.

raised [...] there is something familiar about the land [...] that perhaps amounts to ‘roots’”.¹¹⁰² Ashbery’s association of his early life with a specific environment is not unusual, nor is the imagery he uses to symbolise this relationship. In *Rootedness: The Ramifications of a Metaphor*, Christy Wampole describes roots in specifically spatial terms. Our roots represent our “heritage of place”.¹¹⁰³ They symbolise our permanent connection to the “places that have marked one’s character”,¹¹⁰⁴ be it our “birthplace”, “native land” or that “origin of all origins”: our “home”.¹¹⁰⁵ Roots and home overlap as places which have played a critical role in our development, as symbols of our formative environment and years.

This perceived connection to the landscape of his early life, Ashbery suggests, was central to his decision to buy the Hudson residence. It symbolised a dual homecoming, geographical and psychological. Ashbery’s decision to return to Upstate New York mirrors the sentiments of *Flow Chart*, in which where you “want to live” is invariably overshadowed by where “you came from”.¹¹⁰⁶ This analogy informed not only Ashbery’s residential life, but his poetry. Whilst “Fragment” depicts our ties to our childhood home in terms of literal “roots”,¹¹⁰⁷ *Flow Chart* employs similar imagery to describe the connection between house and occupant. It represents the “spot to which they are rooted”, whilst one speaker expresses the need “to return home, to/ our roots, of course”.¹¹⁰⁸

This rhetoric plays on overlapping and sometimes contradictory interpretations of home. Accordingly, a discussion of what constitutes house and home is needed before Ashbery’s treatment of these themes can be properly addressed. Although the terms are often treated as synonymous, the architectural theorist David Clapham states that houses are

¹¹⁰² John Ashbery, “The Poet’s Hudson River Restoration”, *Architectural Digest* (06/1994), 44.

¹¹⁰³ Christy Wampole, *Rootedness* (USA: Chicago UP, 2016), 251.

¹¹⁰⁴ Christy Wampole, “Clinging to Our ‘Roots’”, *New York Times* (30/05/2016) <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/30/opinion/clinging-to-our-roots.html> (Accessed 05/24/19).

¹¹⁰⁵ Wampole, *Rootedness*, 17; 86; 226; 23.

¹¹⁰⁶ Ashbery, *FC*, 103; 104.

¹¹⁰⁷ Ashbery, “Fragment”, 236.

¹¹⁰⁸ Ashbery, *FC*, 200; 22.

generally understood in terms of “physical shelter”.¹¹⁰⁹ As he writes in *The Meaning of Housing*, academic discussions of the house have been largely “concerned with the physical fabric of the dwelling”.¹¹¹⁰ By contrast, home is a more diffuse notion, based on psychological and emotional, rather than solely residential factors. The architectural critic Kim Dovey describes the distinction: whilst a house is simply “an object [...] home is best conceived of as [...] an emotionally based and meaningful relationship between dwellers and their dwelling places”.¹¹¹¹ This interpretation portrays the house as merely the real-life building around which the more abstract and mysterious sense of home is constructed. Alternatively, the latter may convey an individual’s attachment to their wider personal landscape of “hometown, state, or country”.¹¹¹² However, even within this spatial context, home is traditionally understood to symbolise “more than a place”.¹¹¹³

Ashbery’s own statements concerning the Hudson house offer a wealth of significations. These can be broadly divided into three categories: the emotional and psychological, the temporal or historical, and finally the familial. For example, the same “narratives of origin”¹¹¹⁴ discussed by Wampole are prevalent in “The Poet’s Hudson River Restoration”, twinned with themes of “nostalgia”.¹¹¹⁵ Whilst home is frequently defined in terms of its impact on a person’s “sense of self” or “identity”, Ashbery explores the often contradictory impulses the term evokes in him.¹¹¹⁶ He describes the need to balance the pull he feels towards the landscape of his “childhood” with his identity as “an adult”.¹¹¹⁷

¹¹⁰⁹ David Clapham, *The Meaning of Housing* (UK: Bristol UP, 2005), 117.

¹¹¹⁰ Clapham, *Meaning*, 117.

¹¹¹¹ Kim Dovey, “Homes and Homelessness”, in *Home Environments*, ed. Irwin Altman (NY: Plenum, 1985), 33.

¹¹¹² Wampole, “Clinging”.

¹¹¹³ Wampole, *Rootedness*, 120.

¹¹¹⁴ Wampole, *Rootedness*, 220.

¹¹¹⁵ Ashbery, “Poet’s Hudson”, 44.

¹¹¹⁶ Wampole, “Clinging”.

¹¹¹⁷ Ashbery, “Poet’s Hudson”, 44.

In this respect, Ashbery's "collaged" sense of home mimics the "architecturally-hybrid" structure of the house itself.¹¹¹⁸ The Hudson property reminded him of "where my grandparents lived. I loved to visit their house [and] felt a sense of loss when it [was sold]. I read somewhere that people frequently buy a house that reminds them of their grandparents' home".¹¹¹⁹ Ashbery's statement bridges the emotional and architectural understandings of what constitutes home. The resemblance to a pre-experienced residential environment triggered emotional and psychological associations of home, an experience which Ashbery describes as both deeply personal yet also universal; an ingrained part of how we as human beings interpret space and place.

Whilst Dovey's writings demonstrate the conceptual differences which separate the physical house from the more metaphysical home, this approach arguably overlooks the essential relationship between them. Despite its various other dimensions, home remains, at heart, a place. As Clapham writes, the "house carries meanings that arise out of, and in turn influence" how we perceive home.¹¹²⁰ Even at its most abstract level, each person's idea of home is modelled upon their real-life residential experience. As Ashbery told Ford, he chose the Hudson house because it "remind[ed] me of my grandparents' house [...] it immediately seemed somehow familiar".¹¹²¹ It is within this interplay of the personal and the architectural that we arguably find the truest encapsulation of what home signifies. In this respect, this chapter considers the idea of home directly in terms of its relationship with the house, and vice versa. As Ashbery told David Herd in a 1994 interview, his ability to feel "at home" in an environment was based on its connection to one "house in particular", that in which he had spent his earliest years with his grandparents.¹¹²²

¹¹¹⁸ Ashbery, "Poet's Hudson", 40.

¹¹¹⁹ Ashbery, "Poet's Hudson", 40.

¹¹²⁰ Clapham, *Meaning*, 117.

¹¹²¹ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 64.

¹¹²² David Herd, "Interview with John Ashbery", *PN Review*, (September-October 1994), 32.

4.1.2. Home in spatial theory: two examples related to Ashbery.

Both Dovey and Ashbery depict home as an endlessly versatile image in purpose and function, as it consists of both “physical and symbolic boundaries”.¹¹²³ The multifaceted nature of home, and by extension, the house, has also made it one of the most thoroughly studied environments in spatial and literary theory. Ashbery appears to have been fully aware of these broader connections. For example, he makes several references to the “marvellous book” *Eccentric Spaces* by Robert Harbison.¹¹²⁴ The book studies the interplay between space and human imagination and considers the house as a place of “self-expression” or as an external “part of the self”.¹¹²⁵ Ashbery’s interest in *Eccentric Spaces* holds intriguing implications for his portrayal of houses, particularly given that he cited it on multiple occasions in his own architecture criticism. One example is Ashbery’s 1983 article on the artist David Ireland’s home for *House & Garden*: “An Artist’s Daring Dream House”.¹¹²⁶ The preface features a quotation from Harbison: “one takes architecture as the expression of an individual life [...] Places thoroughly lived in become internalized [...] til they represent a person to himself, a process the critic [can] follow in reverse, deducing the life from the quarters”.¹¹²⁷ If Ashbery found such frameworks informative, might we not apply the same approach to the houses of his poetry?

Another key critic in relation to Ashbery is the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, whose seminal work *The Poetics of Space* focused on the emotional, psychological, and personal aspects of architecture. Though Bachelard’s theories held broader implications for concepts of architecture in general, his book focused on the house. John Stilgoe writes that

¹¹²³ Dovey, “Homes”, 36.

¹¹²⁴ John Ashbery, “Sarah Winchester’s Llanda Villa”, in *Reported Sightings*, ed. David Bergman (USA: Harvard UP, 1991), 340.

¹¹²⁵ Robert Harbison, *Eccentric Spaces*, (USA: MIT, 2000), 22.

¹¹²⁶ John Ashbery, “An Artist’s Daring Dream House”, *House & Garden* (May 1983), 98.

¹¹²⁷ Harbison, *Eccentric*, 22.

“in the house Bachelard [discovered] a metaphor for humanness”.¹¹²⁸ Bachelard used houses as a medium to explore not only how we perceive notions of home, but how we respond to space in general. Houses, he wrote, had a “double life”—having aspects both architectural and emotional which overlap and inform one another.¹¹²⁹ “A house that has been experienced is not an inert box [...] inhabited space transcends geometrical space”.¹¹³⁰ Bachelard was a proponent of phenomenology, an architectural and philosophical movement which rose to prominence in the 20th-century. *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* outlines its central tenets as a “return to the study of things”, prioritising “subjective” or “sensory experience”.¹¹³¹ Bachelard’s analysis went beyond real-life architecture to consider the depiction of space in literature, to draw parallels between the houses of our imagination and those we build and inhabit.

The compatibility of Bachelard’s theories and Ashbery’s poetry has been discussed previously in Ashbery criticism. For example, in *How Poets See the World*, Willard Spiegelman discusses the possibility of “using Bachelard as an entry into Ashbery”.¹¹³² Most of these studies have focused on the poetic aspects of Bachelard’s theories, rather than concepts of architectural or geometrical space. However, Ashbery’s own writings indicate the validity of the connection. In his 1989 lecture “Poetical Space”, Ashbery stated that “poetry is a kind of phenomenology” and the poet, equally, “a phenomenologist”.¹¹³³ Like the architect and the artist before him, Ashbery suggested, the poet has to reconceptualise “received notions of what space actually looks like [...] in order to express something, a feeling [or] idea”.¹¹³⁴

¹¹²⁸ John Stilgoe, Foreword to *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard (USA: Beacon Press, 1994), vii.

¹¹²⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (USA: Beacon Press, 1994), 96.

¹¹³⁰ Bachelard, *Poetics*, vii.

¹¹³¹ David Woodruff-Smith, “Phenomenology”, in *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta (2018) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology/> (Accessed 12/05/18).

¹¹³² Willard Spiegelman, *How Poets See the World* (UK: Oxford UP, 2005), 214.

¹¹³³ John Ashbery, “Poetical Space”, in *Selected Prose*, ed. Eugene Richie (USA: Michigan UP, 2004), 210.

¹¹³⁴ Ashbery, “Poetical”, 212.

4.1.3. “Oh the places I’ve lived”: Ashbery’s residential history.

Bachelard indicates that each literary house has its origins in a “real house”.¹¹³⁵ Consequently, an in-depth consideration of the theme of home in Ashbery’s work should begin with a study of his real-life dwellings. Despite the attachment to Ashbery Farm voiced in “Fragment”, Ashbery experienced a “childhood spent among three houses”.¹¹³⁶ The first, Ashbery Farm, had been the family homestead since 1915. However, “until [Ashbery] was about seven [he] lived mainly with [his maternal] grandparents” in nearby Rochester.¹¹³⁷ The fact that his earliest years were spent outside the parental home is likely to have complicated the young Ashbery’s concept of normal residential behaviour. However, Ashbery loved the Rochester house and “always felt very much at home in that environment”.¹¹³⁸ This domestic stability was interrupted by his sudden relocation to Ashbery Farm, which had long-lasting repercussions for Ashbery, personally and poetically. MacArthur writes that “because he had involuntarily moved to Sodus and left [...] Rochester, Ashbery already had a sense of loss as a young child”.¹¹³⁹ Home, traditionally associated with security, became “stranger and more menacing in the process”.¹¹⁴⁰

Ashbery’s childhood reveals two very different residential experiences and prototypes for home. Though he eventually came to recall Ashbery Farm with nostalgia, Ashbery often expressed mixed feelings about his childhood there. He was much “happier in Rochester than in Sodus”, where he felt “isolated [and] unhappy”.¹¹⁴¹ He pined for his former home and would “escape” there at “every opportunity”.¹¹⁴² In 1934 his grandparents’ retired to a

¹¹³⁵ Bachelard, *Poetics*, 68.

¹¹³⁶ MacArthur, *American*, 150.

¹¹³⁷ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 21.

¹¹³⁸ John Ash, “In Conversation with John Ashbery”, *PN Review*, (November-December 1985), 33.

¹¹³⁹ MacArthur, *American*, 153.

¹¹⁴⁰ Roffman, *Songs*, 40.

¹¹⁴¹ Roffman, *Songs*, 20; 23

¹¹⁴² Ford, *John Ashbery*, 40.

cottage in nearby Pultneyville. This became the third and final home environment of Ashbery's youth, where he "spent a series of idyllic summers".¹¹⁴³ Moreover, the sense of isolation which Ashbery felt in Sodus was compounded by his younger brother's death from leukaemia in 1940.¹¹⁴⁴ Ashbery was not informed of Richard's illness, and was sent away to stay with friends. When he was "allowed home" six months later, he discovered that his "brother had just died".¹¹⁴⁵ The experience left him feeling exiled from a home with which he already had an unhappy relationship. Three decades before the farm's sale, Ashbery already associated it with grief and loss.

After leaving Sodus as a teenager, Ashbery went through what he termed his "many years of drifting".¹¹⁴⁶ As the subsequent chapter explores, Ashbery's nomadic dwelling habits throughout this period made it difficult to establish a sense of home. When Ashbery eventually purchased the Hudson house in 1978, his partner David Kermani states that it was because it reminded "him in many ways of his grandparents' home in Rochester [and] the happiest time of his early childhood".¹¹⁴⁷ In an echo of Ashbery's own rhetoric, Kermani described it as a place where Ashbery could once again become "rooted".¹¹⁴⁸ After decades of "apartment hopping", writes Brice Brown, Ashbery was finally ready to embark on his first experience of "homebuilding".¹¹⁴⁹

¹¹⁴³ Mark Ford, "'The Songs We Know Best': John Ashbery's Early Life by Karin Roffman", *The Guardian* (19/07/2017) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jul/19/songs-we-know-best-john-ashbery-karin-roffman-review> (Accessed 13/11/18).

¹¹⁴⁴ MacArthur, *American*, 153.

¹¹⁴⁵ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 27.

¹¹⁴⁶ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 50.

¹¹⁴⁷ John Kermani, "John Ashbery's Cinema". *RainTaxi* (Summer 2008) www.raintaxi.com/literary-features/john-ashbery-created-spaces/john-ashberys-cinema-paradiso-domestic-elements-as-poetry/ (Accessed 12/10/13).

¹¹⁴⁸ Kermani, "John Ashbery's".

¹¹⁴⁹ Brice Brown, "Created Space", *RainTaxi* (Summer 2008) <http://www.raintaxi.com/literary-features/john-ashbery-created-spaces/created-space-a-case-for-john-ashberys-chelsea-apartment/> (Accessed 20/03/18).

4.1.4. The house in Ashbery criticism: real vs. poetic houses and the idea of influence.

Although most critical attention has focused upon the Hudson house as a reflection of Ashbery's poetic imagination rather than the imagery of houses themselves in his work, there are two notable exceptions. The first is Marit MacArthur's *The American Landscape in the Poetry of Frost, Bishop, and Ashbery*, which offers the most in-depth analysis to date of house imagery in Ashbery's poetry. The chapter on Ashbery considers "the central image of the abandoned farmhouse" across his entire canon, specifically as an emblem of Ashbery's kinship with "earlier American authors with rural roots".¹¹⁵⁰ Although a key reference, MacArthur stresses that she does not consider these images in a spatial theory context and "avoided the idea of 'poetry of place'".¹¹⁵¹ A second critic of note is Annette Gilson, who addresses Ashbery's house imagery in her critical account of the famously reclusive mid-19th-century poet Emily Dickinson. As Adrienne Rich reflects: "probably no poet ever lived so much and so purposefully in one house", as Dickinson refused to leave her home for over a decade.¹¹⁵² Whilst house imagery is only part of Gilson's analysis, it is a fitting trope for approaching Dickinson's poetic legacy. More precisely, Gilson explores Dickinson's "diachronic influence" on one specific Ashbery poem, "Clepsydra", from *Rivers and Mountains* (1966).¹¹⁵³ The speaker is locked within the "house of [his] brain", an image reminiscent of Dickinson's "One need not be a chamber to be haunted":¹¹⁵⁴ "One need not be a house-/ The Brain has corridors surpassing/ Material Place".¹¹⁵⁵

¹¹⁵⁰ MacArthur, *American*, 2; 24.

¹¹⁵¹ MacArthur, *American*, 8.

¹¹⁵² Adrienne Rich, "Vesuvius at Home", *Parnassus Poetry Review* (1976) www.parnassusreview.com/archives/416 (Accessed 29/09/12)

¹¹⁵³ Annette Gilson, "Disseminating 'Circumference': The Diachronic Presence of Dickinson in John Ashbery's 'Clepsydra'", *Twentieth Century Literature*, (Winter, 1998), 501.

¹¹⁵⁴ John Ashbery, "Clepsydra", *CP*, 146.

¹¹⁵⁵ Emily Dickinson, "'Poem 407'", in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R.W. Franklin, (UK: Belknap, 1998), 430.

Despite their otherwise different analytical approaches, both MacArthur and Gilson explore Ashbery's houses in terms of specific frameworks of influence, in order to locate his work within the wider narrative of the house in American poetry. Gilson discusses the centrality of houses in Dickinson's work, as images principally associated with the "treatment of the self".¹¹⁵⁶ For both Ashbery and Dickinson, the house is a "spatial metaphor" which consists of both psychological and architectural elements.¹¹⁵⁷ In this interpretation, our domestic environment becomes our principal means of "addressing the self".¹¹⁵⁸ Brain and house are equated, as the house is represented as an external manifestation of the occupant. In this respect, Gilson suggests that Ashbery primarily "extends the house metaphor Dickinson employed".¹¹⁵⁹

By contrast, MacArthur proposes that Ashbery shares a "direct lineage" with two "major American poets" of house and home, Robert Frost and Elizabeth Bishop.¹¹⁶⁰ All three poets, she suggests, demonstrate a shared "preoccupation with neglected, rural houses".¹¹⁶¹ Whilst Bishop has seldom been considered in this context by critics, Frost is "an obvious subject for [the] study" of houses in American poetry.¹¹⁶² In *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of the Self*, Frank Lentricchia writes that houses are considered to be "one of the central themes in [Frost's] poetics".¹¹⁶³ "Ghost House" (1901) is an oft-cited example, in which the speaker recounts "I dwell in a lonely house I know/ That vanished many a summer ago".¹¹⁶⁴ The poem's "vanished abode" encapsulates many of the ideas which Frost would explore in his depiction of houses.¹¹⁶⁵ The image juxtaposes the natural

¹¹⁵⁶ Gilson, "Disseminating", 491.

¹¹⁵⁷ Gilson, "Disseminating", 494.

¹¹⁵⁸ Gilson, "Disseminating", 489.

¹¹⁵⁹ Gilson, "Disseminating", 500.

¹¹⁶⁰ MacArthur, *American*, 16.

¹¹⁶¹ MacArthur, *American*, 16.

¹¹⁶² MacArthur, *American*, 8.

¹¹⁶³ Frank Lentricchia, *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of the Self* (USA: Duke UP, 1975), 32.

¹¹⁶⁴ Robert Frost, "Ghost House", *Collected Poems* (NY: Library of America, 1995), 15.

¹¹⁶⁵ Frost, "Ghost House", 15.

and architectural worlds, as nature slowly reclaims the spaces where man dwells. However, the “abandoned farmhouse” also operates as an emblem of nostalgia in Frost’s work, one through which he considers the ephemeral nature of time, memory, and history.¹¹⁶⁶ As he writes in the later poem “Directive” (1946), “There is a house that is no more a house/ Upon a farm that is no more a farm”.¹¹⁶⁷ The image is reminiscent of the experience which inspired *Flow Chart*, when Ashbery reflected that the home of his childhood had ceased to exist outside of his memory. Whilst Gilson writes that the so-called house of “Ashbery’s brain is haunted”¹¹⁶⁸ by Dickinson, MacArthur places Ashbery as the “poetic heir”¹¹⁶⁹ to Frost. These potential frameworks of influence illustrate the central role houses have played in the development of American poetry.

The question of influence and how it manifests itself in Ashbery’s work is a major feature of Ashbery criticism. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom explores Ashbery’s complicated relationship with poetic tradition, with specific reference to “Fragment” and “Soonest Mended” from *The Double Dream of Spring*. We see this also in reference to *Flow Chart* in Marjorie Perloff’s *New York Times* review of the collection. Perloff states that the poem “recalls Wordsworth’s ‘Prelude’ [...] Eliot’s ‘Four Quartets’ [and] Auden’s ‘Bucolics’”.¹¹⁷⁰ The passage from *The Prelude* which Perloff cites as evidence of the connection between Ashbery and Wordsworth contains mention of a “house”, although the image is not addressed in her review.¹¹⁷¹ This suggested link holds interesting implications for potential autobiographical approaches to Ashbery’s collection. Wordsworth subtitled his work “The Growth of a Poet’s Mind; An Autobiographical Poem”, and critics such as

¹¹⁶⁶ MacArthur, *American*, 17.

¹¹⁶⁷ Robert Frost, “Directive”, *Collected Poems*, 341.

¹¹⁶⁸ Gilson, “Disseminating”, 499.

¹¹⁶⁹ MacArthur, *American*, 2.

¹¹⁷⁰ Marjorie Perloff, ““The Forest of Agony and Pleasure””, *New York Times* (16/06/1991) www.movies2.nytimes.com/books/98/04/26/nnp/ashbery-flow.html (Accessed 15/05/19).

¹¹⁷¹ Perloff, “Forest”.

Geoffrey Hartman interpret the poem as a study of Wordsworth's autobiographical "sense of self" or "selfhood" as a subject.¹¹⁷²

In this respect, Perloff reveals that the same metaphor of a flow chart which inspired the poem's title can equally be used to map out connections between Ashbery's collection and the other works which it echoes. This critical approach stresses that Ashbery's poetry was not produced in a vacuum. Even what is arguably personal or autobiographical in Ashbery's works is part of a broader literary tradition. Ashbery's own writings show a deep awareness of this fact, and it is arguably through his portrayal of houses that he acknowledges his debt to tradition. "Sleepers Awake", from *Can You Hear, Bird* (1995) explores the relationship between the house and poet. Reminiscent of Gilson's piece, the poem offers a view of Dickinson in the room where she spent much of her life: "Emily Dickinson slept on her cold, narrow bed in Amherst./ When she awoke there would be a new poem inscribed [...] on the windowpane; outside".¹¹⁷³ The poem has been interpreted as a confession of literary heritage, and Langdon Hammer cites it as evidence that Ashbery's writing "is usually about other writing, which it alludes to, borrows from or comments on".¹¹⁷⁴

"Sleepers Awake" demonstrates Ashbery's debt to the great writers of the past. However, it equally foregrounds a creative debt to the domestic realm itself. The house is represented as the medium of creative expression. Merely the act of dwelling is enough to produce poetry, with Dickinson portrayed in a passive role, awakening to find the poem already formed. Ashbery lists a compendium of past authors as various as Whitman, Kafka, and Homer. Great names from across the ages and disciplines of literature are portrayed in a

¹¹⁷² Geoffrey Hartman, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (USA: U of Minnesota P, 1987), 3; 10.

¹¹⁷³ John Ashbery, "Sleepers Awake", *Notes from The Air* (UK: Carcanet, 2007), 180.

¹¹⁷⁴ Langdon Hammer, "'But I Digress'", *New York Times* (04/20/2008), www.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/books/review/Hammer-t.html?ref=review&pagewanted=all&_r=0 (Accessed 18/10/12).

decidedly domestic setting, their seminal works formed amongst “old pillow cases” and used “coffee grounds”.¹¹⁷⁵ Ashbery places himself at the end of this list of writers involved in the domestic arts of “writing and sleeping”.¹¹⁷⁶ He employs the image of the house to express his connection with the writers of the past, as a trope to explore ideas of literary influence.

Hammer concludes that “Sleepers Awake” “makes fun of our interest in writers’ home lives and their writing habits”.¹¹⁷⁷ This is borne out by the fact that Ashbery’s real-life house has received far more critical attention than the houses of his poetry. The most extensive study of Ashbery’s home is the website “John Ashbery’s Nest”, which features a full interactive tour of the Hudson house. The project is the result of a collaboration between Roffman and Ashbery which began in 2009. It offers “a unique opportunity [...] to see the art, objects, books and furniture [of the] house” in situ and allows unprecedented access to one of the most important landmarks of Ashbery’s creative life.¹¹⁷⁸ However, although “John Ashbery’s Nest” is a major resource for scholars, it is important to acknowledge what it does and does not achieve. It claims to “explore links to related Ashbery poems to highlight the relationship between physical objects and poetic imagination”.¹¹⁷⁹ However, poetic analysis is not the project’s true purview, and links to specific poems are a superficial, secondary addition to the wider goal of preserving Ashbery’s house for study. Although the project stresses the importance of Ashbery’s domestic spaces, it does not suggest how these spaces may have shaped the portrayal of houses in his work. Rather, the project provides a foundation upon which a more in-depth study of Ashbery’s house imagery can be constructed.

¹¹⁷⁵ Ashbery, “Sleepers”, 180.

¹¹⁷⁶ Ashbery, “Sleepers”, 180.

¹¹⁷⁷ Hammer, ““But I Digress””.

¹¹⁷⁸ Yale Digital Humanities Lab (YDHL), introduction to “John Ashbery’s Nest.” www.ashberylhouse.yale.edu/about/introduction-0 (Accessed 10/12/18).

¹¹⁷⁹ YDHL, introduction to “John Ashbery’s Nest.”

4.1.5. Ashbery on house and home.

As previously stated, houses are a “recurring theme” in Ashbery’s poetry, before and beyond the collections considered in this chapter.¹¹⁸⁰ Within a spatial theory context, one notable example is “Le Livre Est sur La Table”, from Ashbery’s first major published collection, *Some Trees* (1956). In a scene which Kacper Bartczak describes as “an act of poetic annexation of the so far uncharted territory into the human realm”,¹¹⁸¹ a man places a “house/ Against the blue sea. He walks away/ And it remains”.¹¹⁸² The house becomes a model for man’s relationship with his surroundings. Ashbery continued to experiment with this concept in subsequent collections. The titular poem of 1984’s *A Wave* traces the origins of the house back to the inception of the built environment. The house, Ashbery suggests, represents how the man-made “landscape came to be as it is today”.¹¹⁸³ It symbolises “every artifice of which the/ human/ Genre is capable. And they called it our home”.¹¹⁸⁴ The house, Ashbery suggests, is both the origin of all architecture and the zenith of its achievements. *Flow Chart* builds upon this narrative to map the house’s evolution from a “rickety wooden” shelter to the first “stone house man had built”.¹¹⁸⁵ The need to dwell is the ultimate impetus behind all construction: that which led man to “conceive a new architecture” to shape his environment.¹¹⁸⁶ The culmination of this process can arguably be seen in Ashbery’s celebrated poem “Pyrography” (*Houseboat Days*, 1977). It depicts a “million homes all over the land”, with humanity having successfully molded the landscape into “the image of ourselves”.¹¹⁸⁷

¹¹⁸⁰ Ashbery, “Letter to R.B”.

¹¹⁸¹ Kacper Bartczak, *In Search of Communication and Community*, (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2006), 20.

¹¹⁸² John Ashbery, “Le Livre Est Sur La Table,” *CP*, 39.

¹¹⁸³ John Ashbery, “A Wave”, *CP*, 787.

¹¹⁸⁴ Ashbery, “Wave”, 788.

¹¹⁸⁵ Ashbery, *FC*, 103; 150.

¹¹⁸⁶ Ashbery, *FC*, 200.

¹¹⁸⁷ John Ashbery, “Pyrography,” *CP*, 496.

When quizzed about the concept of biography by Roffman, Ashbery reported that, whilst living in Paris in the early 1960s, he had hoped to write “a critical biography” of the 19th-century French writer and poet Raymond Roussel.¹¹⁸⁸ Although the project never materialised, Ashbery “tracked down” and “found [Roussel’s] unlisted former homes” as a starting point for his study.¹¹⁸⁹ This research methodology stresses Ashbery’s awareness of the connection between home and the concept of biography, and suggests that he recognised the critical framework which seeks to interpret artists in terms of the houses they resided in. Ashbery’s 1983 interview with Peter Stitt for *The Paris Review* developed this idea further. Ashbery recounted that, whilst in Paris he “would do a Proustian excursion, looking at buildings he or his characters had lived in. Like his childhood home in the boulevard Malesherbes or Odette’s house in the rue La Pérouse”.¹¹⁹⁰ Through such journeys Ashbery intertwined the artist and his creation in a process which did not prioritise real-life home environments over fictional ones. This not only stresses the link between a creator and their home space but demonstrates how Ashbery sought to tie fictional spaces to their real-life equivalents. If one may hope to better comprehend a writer’s work through an analysis of their domestic space, might we not also be able, by extension, to better understand their fictional creations as well?

Ashbery’s collaborations with “John Ashbery’s Nest” and other projects centered on his house could conceivably be a result of those early Parisian excursions. As Brown writes, “judging by the numerous examples of preserved artists’ residences [around] the world [...] we are unflaggingly fascinated by the ways creative people live”.¹¹⁹¹ For Ashbery such impulses also shaped how he experienced his own home. Indeed, the earliest critical attention

¹¹⁸⁸ Roffman, *Songs*, xii.

¹¹⁸⁹ Roffman, *Songs*, xii.

¹¹⁹⁰ Peter Stitt, “John Ashbery, The Art of Poetry”, *The Paris Review* (Winter 1983). www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3014/john-ashbery-the-art-of-poetry-no-33-john-ashbery (Accessed 12/05/19).

¹¹⁹¹ Brown, “Created Space”.

the Hudson house received came from Ashbery himself, in “The Poet’s Hudson River Restoration”. Whilst the article’s title elided Ashbery’s career as a poet with the house of which he wrote, Ashbery specifically commented on home’s ability to “elicit poetry”.¹¹⁹² Moreover, he not only acknowledged the connection between an artist’s work and their residence, but consistently fostered this relationship vis-à-vis his own canon. An example of this “cross-pollination” was his 2013 collaboration with the Loretta Howard Gallery.¹¹⁹³ The exhibition “Poet Among Things” considered Ashbery “through the medium” of his “house in Hudson”.¹¹⁹⁴ The gallery was decorated to mirror the setup of Ashbery’s home, complete with his own art and furniture. The result blurred the line between public exhibition and private dwelling, an experience which Albert Mobilio of the *Paris Review* likened to “standing inside one of Ashbery’s poems”.¹¹⁹⁵

4.2. The house of childhood and the early life lessons of home.

Ashbery continued to develop his relationship with concepts of house and home throughout his career as a poet. However, in what is arguably his most definitive discussion of what constitutes “home”, “The Poet’s Hudson River Restoration”, he kept returning to one theme in particular: that of the connection between home and early life, what he termed his “roots”.¹¹⁹⁶ In order to explore how this idea manifests itself in Ashbery’s poetry, we return to the piece which opened this discussion: “Fragment”. As previously stated, Ashbery “began writing [the poem] at [his] parents’ home when [he] went home for [his] father’s funeral”.¹¹⁹⁷

¹¹⁹² Ashbery, “Poet’s Hudson”, 44.

¹¹⁹³ David Bergman, Introduction, in *Reported Sightings*, by John Ashbery, (USA: Harvard UP, 1991), xii.

¹¹⁹⁴ Loretta Howard Gallery, “John Ashbery: Poet Among Things”, *Loretta Howard* (09/2013).

<http://www.lorettahoward.com/content/john-ashbery-poet-among-things> (accessed 21/11/17).

¹¹⁹⁵ Albert Mobilio, “Art House”, *The Paris Review* (22/10/2013)

<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2013/10/22/art-house-on-john-ashbery-collects/> (accessed 12/11/17).

¹¹⁹⁶ Ashbery, “Poet’s Hudson”, 44.

¹¹⁹⁷ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 51.

Antoine Cazé suggests that “Fragment” is ultimately a meditation on “absence and death”.¹¹⁹⁸ Concepts of home and death frequently overlap, as the house which Ashbery connected with grief since his brother’s death “became further associated with sudden loss”.¹¹⁹⁹ “Fragment”, depicts home as the site of “burials”, a place in which one is always in the process of “dying”.¹²⁰⁰ The main purpose of the house, Ashbery indicates, is not dwelling, but to stand as a “memorial” to its previous inhabitants.¹²⁰¹ This imagery is reminiscent of Dickinson’s “Because I could not stop for Death”, which “likens death [to] the security of a home”.¹²⁰² However, in place of Dickinson’s description of a “House” as “A Swelling in the Ground”, Ashbery’s language is even less equivocal.¹²⁰³ Home is depicted as a literal “grave”: the embodiment of “Death in its various forms”.¹²⁰⁴

This latter line is arguably a reflection of Ashbery’s difficulty in separating his sentiments regarding his father’s death from the sale of the house in which he had “grown up”, to the extent that he believed the poem became an “elegy” for both losses.¹²⁰⁵ Whilst critics such as Cazé suggest that “Fragment” is ultimately a work of memento mori, the poem’s elegiac themes frequently centre around the image of the house itself. Themes of mortality and architecture are elided to the extent that deaths are likened to “foreclosures”, with the loss of home equated to the loss of life.¹²⁰⁶ In a 1976 letter to the artist R.B. Kitaj, Ashbery stressed the connection between mortality and home. He described the “theme” of “houses” in his poetry by quoting the 17th-century metaphysical poet, John Donne: “we are born but to

¹¹⁹⁸ Cazé, “The end”.

¹¹⁹⁹ MacArthur, *American*, 172.

¹²⁰⁰ Ashbery, “Fragment”, 231; 242.

¹²⁰¹ Ashbery, “Fragment”, 232.

¹²⁰² Elsie Davinroy, “Tomb and Womb: Reading Contexture in Emily Dickinson”, *Legacy*, vol. 23 (2006), 8.

¹²⁰³ Emily Dickinson, “Poem 479”, *Poems*, 493.

¹²⁰⁴ Ashbery, “Fragment”, 234; 231.

¹²⁰⁵ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 51.

¹²⁰⁶ Ashbery, “Fragment”, 243.

the liberty of the house”.¹²⁰⁷ “Donne’s saying we’re all under house arrest [...] we can’t get away from our [...] mortal situation, that we’re going to die”.¹²⁰⁸

As Arnold Weinstein writes, houses are a longstanding symbol of how “writers have thought about [or] represented death”.¹²⁰⁹ Whilst Ashbery connects his own use of house imagery to this tradition, he brings his distinctive imagination to the trope. His interpretation of Donne draws a parallel between the passage of human life and our habitation in the house, to the extent that our existence is defined by our residence. In this respect, Ashbery depicts houses as what “Fragment” terms a form of “touchable mortality”.¹²¹⁰ Yet, if the house truly represents the place where one “returns to die” it is because it is also the place from which we first “begin”.¹²¹¹ In the 1619 sermon cited by Ashbery, Donne reflects on this concept. Home is described as a place of “death”, but also as that into which “we are born”.¹²¹² If the house is a “grave”, Donne writes, it is equally the “womb” in which “we are all conceived”.¹²¹³ Ashbery and the artist Jane Hammond traded on the concept of house as womb in their collaboration “Midwife to Gargoyles” (1996), a mixed-media collage which includes an image of the cross section of a house (appendix 1). In a continuation of the birth imagery of the piece’s title, each of the rooms inside the structure features an embryo nestled within, as though ensconced between the walls of an architectural womb.

As Davinroy writes, the imagery of “tomb and womb” has long been established in poetic tradition, with one often serving “as a metaphor for the other”.¹²¹⁴ However, Ashbery’s use of such imagery was also a reflection of his homecoming experience. Whilst his return to Ashbery Farm made the poet face his own mortality, it also caused him to contemplate his

¹²⁰⁷ Ashbery, “Letter to R.B.”.

¹²⁰⁸ Ashbery, “Interview by Marit MacArthur”, 200.

¹²⁰⁹ Arnold Weinstein, *A Scream Goes Through the House* (USA: Random House, 2007), 291.

¹²¹⁰ Ashbery, “Fragment”, 232.

¹²¹¹ Ashbery, “Fragment”, 231.

¹²¹² John Donne, “Sermon XXV”, in *The Works of John Donne*, ed. Henry Alford (UK: J.W. Parker, 1839), 500.

¹²¹³ Donne, “Sermon XXV”, 500.

¹²¹⁴ Davinroy, “Tomb”, 1; 9.

origins. Ashbery described re-entering the house as akin to “suddenly being yanked back to [his] childhood”, the two so deeply intertwined that to cross the building’s threshold was to instantly relive the years he spent within its walls.¹²¹⁵ Just as Ashbery defined home as the place in which he had been “born and raised”, “Fragment” stresses the connection between the house and early life.¹²¹⁶ Once again, “home” is described as our “roots” or “source”.¹²¹⁷ However, Ashbery extends this symbolism to present the house as the embodiment of *ab ovo*: “the only real beginning” which we can trace our existence back to.¹²¹⁸

Whilst “Fragment” was inspired by the loss of a childhood environment, it also operates as a meditation on early experience. In “John Ashbery: The Charity of The Hard Moments”, Bloom suggests that Ashbery’s earlier collections repeatedly embody a “sense of awakening” or “the new birth of fresh being”.¹²¹⁹ Bloom interprets this imagery as a metaphor for Ashbery’s changing relationship with his “poetic subject”.¹²²⁰ However, in “Fragment” this awakening is arguably more literal. Ashbery leads the reader to step back to the vantage point not only of childhood, but also of the earliest stages of perception.

Its landscape puts toward a pointed roof
 Continuing inquiry and reappraisal of always new
 Facts pushing past into bright cold
 As from general spindles a waterfall of data
 Is absorbed.¹²²¹

¹²¹⁵ John Ashbery, “Letter to Charles Newman” (1976), quoted in MacArthur, *American*, 171.

¹²¹⁶ Ashbery, “Poet’s Hudson”, 44.

¹²¹⁷ Ashbery, “Fragment”, 231; 236; 230.

¹²¹⁸ Ashbery, “Fragment”, 231; 229.

¹²¹⁹ Harold Bloom, “John Ashbery: The Charity of The Hard Moments”, *Salamagundi* (Spring-Summer 1973), 115; 117.

¹²²⁰ Bloom, “John Ashbery”, 117.

¹²²¹ Ashbery, “Fragment”, 233.

The poem re-enacts the beginnings of cognition, with a new mind in the process of forming its first impressions of its surroundings. Amidst this onslaught of sensory stimulation, the first image that emerges is that of the “pointed roof”. In *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, Witold Rybczynski argues that the tapered roof has become synonymous with the “popular image of the home”.¹²²² As “children growing up”, such stylised architectural features of “actual houses” are how we form our first “idea of home”.¹²²³ “Fragment” latches onto the image of house and home to give the reader a sense of place in this unfamiliar environment. Our experience is similar to that of the poem’s speaker, who uses the image as a means to ground themselves amidst the influx of new information. It is not only the first sight they see, but that which enables them to begin to situate themselves within their environment. In this formative period, Ashbery suggests the ability to recognise home is one of the first and most valuable lessons we learn.

In this respect, “Fragment” not only depicts the house as the place of our origins, but as the catalyst which marks the advent of the self. As Bachelard writes, the house of our childhood is where “life begins”.¹²²⁴ There exists a “home beyond man’s earliest memory”, composed of a “synthesis of immemorial and recollected” impressions.¹²²⁵ The ability to recognise home is suggested to be innate: a primordial impulse which shapes us even before we become aware of it. This unremembered home could be a metaphor for the collective unconscious. However, it equally operates as an allegory for the conscious and the unconscious mind of the individual occupant, or the passage between unconsciousness and consciousness. As such, Bachelard writes that the home of our childhood is as much metaphysical as it is physical space, and symbolises the divide between what he terms the

¹²²² Witold Rybczynski, *Home* (USA: Penguin, 1987), 5.

¹²²³ Rybczynski, *Home*, 49; 11; viii.

¹²²⁴ Bachelard, *Poetics*, 5.

¹²²⁵ Bachelard, *Poetics*, 5.

“non-I” and the “I”.¹²²⁶ In “Fragment”, “home” is described as “bearing the notion of responsibility of self”, as the space in which we develop our “own burden of thought”.¹²²⁷ It is the place of our “first memory”, from which we embark on “The first day/ of the new experience” that shall be our lives.¹²²⁸ However, rather than being just the setting for such early psychological development, our early home environment actively shapes how we interpret and encounter the world around us. First houses, Cooper argues, represent not only a person’s earliest but most formative environment. They “are the grounds of our first experience”, and the place in which “we discover [the] laws that we will apply later to the world at large”.¹²²⁹ As Ashbery writes, “slowly as from the center of some diamond/ You begin to take in the world”.¹²³⁰ Just as our life develops outwards in a form of a helix pattern, with home always at its start and centre, so do our forays into the wider landscape.

The poem suggests that the timeline of a person’s growth parallels the progress they make in investigating their environment. By mapping these first paths of exploration “Fragment” arguably also maps out what both Ashbery and Benjamin Colbert describe as the “passages of being” which characterise early development.¹²³¹ First is infancy, in which the scope of our entire world exists within the house itself, and our furthest journey is to “the next room”, all the time watched over with “parental concern”.¹²³² Then there is adolescence, in which we finally “get over the threshold” to make our first curious forays into not just “the surrounding neighborhood”, but independence and the outside world.¹²³³ Finally, there is adulthood, in which we have “grown up” and may proceed into unknown and “open

¹²²⁶ Bachelard, *Poetics*, 5.

¹²²⁷ Ashbery, “Fragment”, 210.

¹²²⁸ Ashbery, “Fragment”, 241; 236.

¹²²⁹ Cooper, *House*, 17.

¹²³⁰ Ashbery, “Fragment”, 231.

¹²³¹ Benjamin Colbert, “Romantic Entanglements: Ashbery and The Fragment”, in *Poetry and the Sense of Panic*, ed. Lionel Kelly (UK: Rodopi, 2000), 42.

¹²³² Ashbery, “Fragment”, 237; 239.

¹²³³ Ashbery, “Fragment”, 232; 231.

places”.¹²³⁴ According to this interpretation, each fresh burst of discovery could be said to correspond to a phase of early life, with the poem tethering what it terms our “continual development” to our progress out of the house.¹²³⁵ Each stage of our growth is reflected by the “maturity of [our] surroundings”.¹²³⁶

This underlines the status of the house as the setting for our first experiences, but also as the place in which we form our earliest perceptions of the world around us. Not only does the house shape “what we are to become”, but it will provide us with the “true basis for understanding” through which we form our relationship with the wider world.¹²³⁷ Ford specifically refers to *Flow Chart*’s representation of houses as expressive of Ashbery’s nostalgia for early home environments. As he writes, the poem “features numerous passages that evoke his life on the farm, or at his grandparents’ houses in Rochester and then Pultneyville”.¹²³⁸ Whether we are immediately aware of it or not, Ashbery indicates, our early home environment continues to impact us long after we have left it behind. As the poem’s speaker continues, “always there is a connection, albeit/ Sometimes an/ Extremely loose one like a tendril that brushes against one”.¹²³⁹ In “The Psychology of Home”, Julie Beck states that, though most people “accumulate several different homes over the course of a lifetime [...] the place where we grew up usually retains an iconic status”.¹²⁴⁰ Ultimately, Beck suggests, it is through our relationship with such spaces that we develop the “psychology of home” that we carry with us through life.¹²⁴¹ This connection may help to explain why Ashbery still viewed the region where he was “born and raised” as “home”.¹²⁴²

¹²³⁴ Ashbery, “Fragment”, 240; 236.

¹²³⁵ Ashbery, “Fragment”, 230.

¹²³⁶ Ashbery, “Fragment”, 233.

¹²³⁷ Ashbery, “Fragment”, 23; 235.

¹²³⁸ Ford, “Songs”.

¹²³⁹ Ashbery, *FC*, 199.

¹²⁴⁰ Julie Beck, “The Psychology of Home”, *The Atlantic*, (Dec 30, 2011).

<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2011/12/the-psychology-of-home-why-where-you-live-means-so-much/249800/> (Accessed 24/02/18).

¹²⁴¹ Beck, “Psychology”.

¹²⁴² Ashbery, “Poet’s Hudson”, 44.

In both his adult dwelling choices and his poetry, Ashbery still recognised his enduring ties to what he jokingly termed “the Holy Land/ of western New York state”.¹²⁴³ This is arguably a pastiche of the so-called “iconic” status which critics such as Beck assign to our first home.¹²⁴⁴ Yet, as MacArthur writes, Ashbery was being “only partly ironic about the sacredness of [his] roots”.¹²⁴⁵ Although Ashbery would often critique idealised images of home, he nonetheless recognised the importance that such concepts hold in our culture. As he writes in *Flow Chart*, our first “home” or “house” retains a special significance due simply to the fact that “we grew up here” or were “born here”.¹²⁴⁶ In his 2007 interview with MacArthur, Ashbery stressed the importance of one’s formative years and environment: “the first experiences in one’s life tend to be the strongest, really”.¹²⁴⁷ He reflects this concept in *Flow Chart*, which emphasises the ties of “Earliest /Childhood [...] which continue to stick to us long after they have worn off”.¹²⁴⁸

Ashbery would examine this connection with his first home in “Soonest Mended”, which Roffman calls a “reflection on first experiences”.¹²⁴⁹ Though Ashbery stated that he did not generally write about himself and his own experiences, at least not directly, he acknowledged that “Soonest Mended” was an exception in this regard. “I often called [it] my ‘One-size-fits-all confessional poem’, which is about my youth and maturing”.¹²⁵⁰

the avatars

Of our conforming to the rules and living

Around the home have made—well, in a sense, ‘good citizens’ of us,

¹²⁴³ John Ashbery, “As You Came from the Holy Land”, *CP*, 430.

¹²⁴⁴ Beck, “Psychology”.

¹²⁴⁵ MacArthur, *American*, 187.

¹²⁴⁶ Ashbery, *FC*, 23; 94; 131; 166.

¹²⁴⁷ Ashbery, “Interview by MacArthur”, 193.

¹²⁴⁸ Ashbery, *FC*, 86

¹²⁴⁹ Roffman, *Songs*, 19.

¹²⁵⁰ Ashbery, “Interview with Murphy”, 25.

Brushing the teeth and all that, and learning to accept
The charity of the hard moments as they are doled out,
For this is action, this not being sure, this careless
Preparing, sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow,
Making ready to forget, and always coming back
To the mooring of starting out, that day so long ago.¹²⁵¹

Our first home, the poem indicates, is our first world, the architectural perimeter which delineates our early existence. It represents the place from which we “start”, the “friendly beginning” from which our lives unfurl.¹²⁵² The poem also emphasises the role the house plays in our early education. It is by “living/ Around the home” that we develop the habits which we later carry into adulthood and the outside world. Before we can become “good citizens” in the world at large, Ashbery asserts, we must first learn to be good inhabitants.

In an uncharacteristic moment of candour, Ashbery directly connected “Soonest Mended” to his own early experience of home. In particular, he referenced a book his grandmother had owned: *The Child at Home*.¹²⁵³ It encapsulated “her approach to child-rearing”, in which “home was a place primarily to instil manners and morals in children”.¹²⁵⁴ This description ties our early behavioural education to the structure of the house itself. Home becomes not only the place in which we are taught, but the medium through which this instruction is delivered. The influence of this “strict” mindset is apparent in “Soonest Mended”.¹²⁵⁵ It is arguably the inspiration behind the title of the poem, which abbreviates the classic proverb “Least said, soonest mended”.¹²⁵⁶ Though the origins of the phrase are

¹²⁵¹ John Ashbery, “Soonest Mended”, *CP*, 186.

¹²⁵² Ashbery, “Soonest”, 184;185.

¹²⁵³ John Scott, *The Child at Home*, (NY: American Tract Society, 1833).

¹²⁵⁴ Roffman, *Songs*, 17.

¹²⁵⁵ Roffman, *Songs*, 17.

¹²⁵⁶ See Roffman, *Songs*, 17.

unknown, it embodies a sense of stoicism, through which it is better to endure in silence than voice complaint. Similarly, not only is the house of the poem characterised by its rules and the need to conform, but even the cruelty of punishment is labelled an act of kindness aimed at preparing us for the adversity of the outside world. As the poet states, early life and the lessons of home are about “learning to accept/ The charity of the hard moments as they are doled out”. In her discussion of Ashbery’s use of rural imagery, MacArthur writes that the poet merges elements of his “childhood upbringing [and] childhood landscape”.¹²⁵⁷ As Ashbery’s comments on the inspiration behind “Soonest Mended” suggest, the same could equally be said of his representation of houses. In a form of meta-narrative, Ashbery’s poem could be said to be a direct result of the education he himself received. Much as Ashbery stresses that he “learned to be polite and careful”, and was “harshly punished” for infractions, the poem emphasises home to be a place for instruction and discipline.¹²⁵⁸

Ashbery would later paraphrase this concept in *Flow Chart*, which states that “as I live in a house/ am so bound to its principles”.¹²⁵⁹ Again, Ashbery alludes to Donne’s sermon on the “liberty of the house”.¹²⁶⁰ However, here, the speaker suggests that to inhabit a house is essentially to adopt the standards and beliefs which the residence embodies, with such rules being part of the definition of what constitutes home. As the poem’s speaker continues, “in short it is my home, and you are welcome in it/ for as long as you wish to stay and abide by the rules”.¹²⁶¹ Our right to inhabit depends on our observation of the house’s authority, and the ultimate condition of our “welcome” is our obedience. To this end, the house of “Soonest Mended” is depicted as a form of avatar or divine teacher which embodies “the promise of learning”.¹²⁶² It holds the “early lessons” which will transform us into informed, enlightened

¹²⁵⁷ MacArthur, *American*, 178.

¹²⁵⁸ Roffman, *Songs*, 17.

¹²⁵⁹ Ashbery, *FC*, 114.

¹²⁶⁰ Donne, “Sermon XXV”, 500.

¹²⁶¹ Ashbery, *FC*, 200.

¹²⁶² Ashbery, “Soonest”, 185.

residents.¹²⁶³ Through this characterisation, Ashbery evokes a sense of inflated spiritual significance. The rules we must live by take on the importance of edicts from a deity. The house morphs from a simple architectural structure to an object of worship or a form of sanctified ground. We, in turn, take the role of a postulant in search of spiritual or so-called residential illumination, where achieving the rank of good citizen is more akin to becoming a buddha. However, as Bloom writes, “Ashbery domesticates this fierce idealism”, and such grandiose rhetoric is immediately punctured with a sense of bathos.¹²⁶⁴ The commandments to be followed are revealed to be nothing more than mundane reminders about the importance of dental hygiene and household responsibilities. Rather than just the space which we came from, “Soonest Mended” indicates, the house of our childhood is primarily significant as the place in which “the clarity of the rules dawned on you for the first time”.¹²⁶⁵

It is here that we acquire the rudimentary knowledge of how to live, with even the most humdrum of daily activities depicted as novel and unknown. Ultimately, each person is indebted to “the climate that fostered them”.¹²⁶⁶ Through this description, Ashbery depicts the childhood home as actively nurturing or nourishing. It is not simply the neutral backdrop for our early life, but a key participant in our upbringing. In this respect, Ashbery plays with implications of the term foster, which means not only to “promote the development” or “growth” of something but “to bring up, educate, nurture *in* beliefs [or] habits”.¹²⁶⁷ More specifically, it can signify “to bring up (a child) with parental care”.¹²⁶⁸ This can be read as a transferred epithet, with the place in which we were brought up taking on the qualities of the guardian who raised us.

¹²⁶³ Ashbery, “Soonest”, 185.

¹²⁶⁴ Bloom, “John Ashbery”, 116.

¹²⁶⁵ Ashbery, “Soonest”, 185.

¹²⁶⁶ Ashbery, “Soonest”, 185.

¹²⁶⁷ “foster” n.1 *OED Online* (June 2019) Oxford University Press

www.oed.com/view/Entry/73854?rskey=J6qHnn&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid (Accessed 12/07/19).

¹²⁶⁸ “foster” n.1, *OED*.

4.3. Growing Up and Leaving the House: Alienation and Exile from Home.

Throughout Ashbery's poetry, MacArthur states, the landscape of childhood is "revaluated and newly appreciated [...] from the perspective of adult life".¹²⁶⁹ However, "Soonest Mended" indicates that what we are being prepared for is not only the outside world, but adulthood itself.

how to receive this latest piece of information.
Was it information? Weren't we rather acting this out
For someone else's benefit, thoughts in a mind
With room enough to spare for our little problems
(so they began to seem),
Our daily quandary about food and the rent and bills to be
paid?
To reduce all this to a small variant,
To step free at last, miniscule on the gigantic plateau –
This was our ambition: to be small and clear and free.¹²⁷⁰

Again, the house is depicted as a practice ground for real life, a microcosm through which one may "reduce all this to a small variant". There we are weaned on "little problems" while being protected from the "hazards" of the world at large.¹²⁷¹ The shelter it offers is temporary, secondary to its role as the catalyst in our maturation. Once this goal is achieved, Ashbery suggests, our first house inevitably recedes, to be replaced by the wider world

¹²⁶⁹ MacArthur, *American*, 180.

¹²⁷⁰ Ashbery, "Soonest", 184.

¹²⁷¹ Ashbery, "Soonest", 185.

beyond its walls. Through adulthood, we gain independence, and, as the landscape of our lives expands, so do our responsibilities. Juvenile concerns are overtaken by worries about “food and the rent and bills” as we strike out on our own to form a new sense of home.

Such descriptions led Ashbery to describe “Soonest Mended” as “a poem that chronicled the ‘early lessons’ of growing up”.¹²⁷² This, Ashbery implies, is what our first, formative environment is designed for. Our home, like a chrysalis, must be shed when we reach adulthood.

Not ours to own [...] but to be with, and sometimes

To be without, alone and desperate.

[...]

But like the friendly beginning of a geometric progression

Not too reassuring, as though meaning could be cast aside
some day

When it had been outgrown.¹²⁷³

Ashbery himself experienced such involuntary domestic upheaval multiple times throughout his childhood, what “Soonest Mended” evokes as “moving and not wanting to be moved”.¹²⁷⁴ He described being uprooted at the age of seven to return to Ashbery farm as “traumatic”, a “dislocation”.¹²⁷⁵ The experience overshadowed Ashbery’s concept of home for much of his life. *Flow Chart* tells of the need “For children to [...] have a happy home”, in which the foundation of a stable residential environment is suggested to be the key to childhood

¹²⁷² Roffman, *Songs*, 17.

¹²⁷³ Ashbery, “Soonest”, 185.

¹²⁷⁴ Ashbery, “Soonest”, 185.

¹²⁷⁵ MacArthur, *American*, 21.

development.¹²⁷⁶ However, the poem depicts such happy homes to be short-lived, as the speaker states, “I’ve seen children, taken from their homes/ at too early an age, left to wander”.¹²⁷⁷ The description is evocative of a premature birth. If our first home is the place of our psychological and emotional development, Ashbery suggests that this development can be precipitously interrupted. The occupant is forcibly removed from their formative environment before they are ready, in a way that is reminiscent of an abduction. Yet once evicted, they find themselves abandoned and rootless. Outside the security of the home, or pseudo-womb, their continued survival appears uncertain. As the speaker broods “Are you alive severed from it?”¹²⁷⁸ Bachelard writes that “the house we are born in is physically inscribed in us”.¹²⁷⁹ We maintain a form of metaphysical umbilical cord with our childhood home. Within the confines of this analogy, Ashbery’s rhetoric of roots is rendered anatomical. As *Flow Chart* asserts, it “gestates with you, /because of you, and in you”.¹²⁸⁰ Home and occupant are depicted as mutually dependent, as each symbolically ‘conceives’ the other. Home is also the place of our metaphorical inception and subsequent incubation. Without it, the poet writes, “It’s as though you were never born”.¹²⁸¹

If *Flow Chart* depicts the departure from home as a wrenching experience, it also stresses it to be a necessary one. At its core, home represents a

place

that must sooner or later go away. At that point we’ll have lived, and the having

done so would

be a passport to a permanent, adjacent future, the adult equivalent of innocence

¹²⁷⁶ Ashbery, *FC*, 15.

¹²⁷⁷ Ashbery, *FC*, 27.

¹²⁷⁸ Ashbery, *FC*, 43

¹²⁷⁹ Bachelard, *Poetics*, 14.

¹²⁸⁰ Ashbery, *FC*, 141.

¹²⁸¹ Ashbery, *FC*, 18.

in a child, or lost sweetness in a remembered fruit: something to tell time by.¹²⁸²

The allusion to lost fruit has dual implications. Firstly, it brings to mind Ashbery's childhood amongst the apple trees of Ashbery Farm. However, it is arguably also a reference to the forbidden fruit of the Book of Genesis that first led humanity to lose its "innocence". The departure from this first, formative environment is likened to the Fall of Man, as one is shut out from "paradise".¹²⁸³ Yet "Innocence" must be sacrificed in order to achieve adulthood, which is likened to Lucifer's act of "rebellion" in the Book of Revelations.¹²⁸⁴ Ashbery extends this imagery throughout *Flow Chart*, in which the house is defined as a place "Innocent children hang out in", or a person's relationship with their home is "nurtured by their innocence".¹²⁸⁵ This extends the metaphor of house as "heaven".¹²⁸⁶ However, in this analogy, the Fall we enact is not only our departure from the house, but our transition from child to adult.

In her biography of the poet, Roffman comments on Ashbery's sentiments about "growing up"; "in this inevitable act of maturing, one 'sacrifices' the self formed in one's childhood".¹²⁸⁷ What is being described in *Flow Chart* is arguably what the speaker terms our "coming-of-age".¹²⁸⁸ Ashbery would evoke this concept in conversation with Roffman in 2007, in which he described how, as a teenager, he felt that he had "arrived at the threshold of maturity" when he exited the family home.¹²⁸⁹ Leaving the house is the final rite of passage, to the extent that the advent of adulthood is likened to the literal threshold of the home. Just

¹²⁸² Ashbery, *FC*, 76.

¹²⁸³ Ashbery, *FC*, 134.

¹²⁸⁴ Ashbery, *FC*, 76; 19.

¹²⁸⁵ Ashbery, *FC*, 137; 11.

¹²⁸⁶ Ashbery, *FC*, 65.

¹²⁸⁷ Roffman, *Songs*, 123.

¹²⁸⁸ Ashbery, *FC*, 90.

¹²⁸⁹ Roffman, *Songs*, 100.

as leaving home is the catalyst in our maturation, then remaining at home freezes our development. *Flow Chart* describes a situation in which those who stay at home

forget to grow and they are suddenly looking at being older,
not recognising much? Or when people decide to migrate
from the village that has held them all these years like a spot
and uncomplainingly releases them to fall back
into the dreams that are the very fabric of our maturing.¹²⁹⁰

Migration and maturation are presented as synonymous, whilst those who linger stay “at home/ and remain the same”.¹²⁹¹ The latter not only shun adulthood, but ultimately commit to an “ideal/ of zero growth”.¹²⁹² When the speaker returns years later, “grown older and wiser”, they discover that the house has become “a time capsule”, untouched since their departure.¹²⁹³

However, whilst MacArthur states that certain references to houses may allude to the actual homes of Ashbery’s childhood, houses also operate as “poetic evocations of [...] displacement” in his writings.¹²⁹⁴ *Flow Chart* repeatedly uses the image of the home or house as a symbol for something unobtainable or absent. The promise of shelter is portrayed as forever out of reach, as things “move farther and farther away, like houses”.¹²⁹⁵ The speaker tells of “the windswept tumult that is to be our home” which may only be inhabited “once we have penetrated it successfully”.¹²⁹⁶ Rather than offering comfort and the chance to settle, the

¹²⁹⁰ Ashbery, *FC*, 210.

¹²⁹¹ Ashbery, *FC*, 119.

¹²⁹² Ashbery, *FC*, 196.

¹²⁹³ Ashbery, *FC*, 187; 29.

¹²⁹⁴ MacArthur, *American*, 2.

¹²⁹⁵ Ashbery, *FC*, 172.

¹²⁹⁶ Ashbery, *FC*, 96.

quest for home is depicted as turbulent and almost certainly futile. This culminates in Ashbery's use of the image of home as a simile for the ephemeral nature of human experience:

Like a home that must be abandoned quickly, whose carpets and wallpaper get
that faintly
distressed look [...] go on without us, leave us waiting in space
for a connection that never comes. Somehow we'd survive – we always do – but
at what cost.¹²⁹⁷

The house is depicted as disposable, and the fact that we shall inevitably have to move on and discard this place is suggested to be part of the definition of what constitutes home. Ashbery depicts home as the encapsulation of all that is impermanent in our lives—a paradoxical image of all that is transitory. The house appears to literally vanish around the occupant. The “carpets and wallpaper”, walls and floors, becomes so worn and “distressed” that they collapse, leaving the speaker stranded in the space the building once occupied.

This feeds into a wider “breaking of ties to particular places and homes” in Ashbery's work.¹²⁹⁸ Ashbery deconstructs the emotional connotations of the term home and plays on the synonyms of home and house. Not only is home meant to signify a prolonged relationship with a particular residence but it also implies an emotional attachment which transcends the purely architectural dimensions of a house. *Flow Chart* consolidates these ideas, to the extent that the abstract concept of what we call home is imbued with the same material and architectural fallibilities as a house. Like the architecture of the house itself, our bond with

¹²⁹⁷ Ashbery, *FC*, 182.

¹²⁹⁸ MacArthur, *American*, 29.

the place we dwell is also subject to wear and tear. It can collapse if not sufficiently nurtured and maintained. Just as the edifice of the house may be demolished, our sense of home can just as easily be destroyed. In a world where the house symbolises transience, the speaker not only abandons their home, but is ultimately “abandoned” by it in turn. They find themselves in an unknown landscape, awaiting “a connection that never comes”. Without this sense of connection, the speaker finds that the former site of the house has been demoted from “home” to simply nondescript “space”.

The concept of home, Ashbery suggests, implies a degree of permanence yet relies on a structure which can easily be taken from us. This was underscored for him by his father’s death, when he realised these were “the last days I’d ever live in our house”.¹²⁹⁹ The depth of this loss bled through into “Fragment”, which expresses the speaker’s fear of being “shut out” from his home.¹³⁰⁰ In turn, *Flow Chart* would later express the frustration of suddenly finding oneself “a squatter in one’s own house”, as the speaker finds they no longer have any claim over the place they call home.¹³⁰¹ Our attachment to a specific house, Ashbery indicates, can outlast our right to inhabit it. This overlap of the emotional and spatial significations of home is a common theme in Ashbery’s work. He later experimented with this rhetoric in “Has to Be Somewhere” (2000), which described

my so-called hometown,
where I had never felt at home, yet never dreamed
of wishing for another.¹³⁰²

¹²⁹⁹ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 51.

¹³⁰⁰ Ashbery, “Fragment”, 236.

¹³⁰¹ Ashbery, *FC*, 43.

¹³⁰² John Ashbery, “Has to Be Somewhere”, *Your Name Here* (UK: Carcanet, 2000), 113.

Just because we originate from or reside in a particular place, Ashbery stresses, does not automatically guarantee that we shall experience the sense of emotional attachment that the term home traditionally implies.

Ashbery's account of his early relationship with home exhibits the same antithesis we see in his poetry. The contrast of exile and home is particularly evocative, as the condition of exile traditionally signifies separation from one's home or homeland. Ashbery's description inverts and exploits such undertones. It creates a scenario where one is both home and yet paradoxically not allowed to be at home; in which the space in which one supposedly belongs is also the place which seeks to reject us. These ideas coalesce until it appears that Ashbery views his hometown both as that which he has been exiled *from* and also the place he has been exiled *to*. Ashbery frequently spoke of how, as a child, he "was sort of an outcast" in Sodus.¹³⁰³ He was considered an "oddity"¹³⁰⁴ and "did not have many friends".¹³⁰⁵ Ashbery attributed this to the fact that he "liked poetry and art", which he believed was irreconcilable with that "rural" world.¹³⁰⁶ The poet's childhood experience of home appears to have continued to impact how he viewed himself throughout his life. *Flow Chart* bemoans the struggle of "Not being allowed to fit in".¹³⁰⁷ The speaker eventually decides to depart before he is "banished".¹³⁰⁸ Expulsion is presented as a foregone conclusion, in which the lesser of two evils is to spurn your home before it spurns you. As the poem surmises, "Better/ to go into exile early rather than late".¹³⁰⁹

Despite the relief Ashbery expressed at having escaped his hometown, he nonetheless demonstrated an equal desire to return. He later expressed surprise that he could feel

¹³⁰³ John Ashbery "Interview with John Murphy", *Poetry Review* (August 1985), 32.

¹³⁰⁴ Ford, "Songs".

¹³⁰⁵ Ashbery, "Interview with Murphy", 32.

¹³⁰⁶ Ashbery, "Interview with Murphy", 32.

¹³⁰⁷ Ashbery, *FC*, 37.

¹³⁰⁸ Ashbery, *FC*, 18.

¹³⁰⁹ Ashbery, *FC*, 44.

"homesick for the place (he) had been so eager to leave", and could only reason that his old house and the impression of home it represented had somehow "imprinted on me [...] maybe without me realizing it".¹³¹⁰ In *Homesickness: An American History*, Susan Matt states that "ties to home, although often underestimated or misunderstood, are strong and enduring".¹³¹¹ Regardless of our emotions towards the place we call home, it still retains importance in our lives. This ambivalence, whereby speakers fluctuate between being homesick and simply sick of home, is the dichotomy that characterises *Flow Chart*. Whilst certain passages welcome our ties to "the beloved home" of childhood, acceptance is frequently juxtaposed with resentment.¹³¹² One speaker rails,

Nobody asked me whether I wanted to be
born here,
whether I liked it here¹³¹³

The narrator finds themselves bound to a place over which they have no say, and yet which impacts them throughout their existence. Our most formative environment, one of the "points that define us", is presented as a *fait accompli*.¹³¹⁴ However, this rebellious voice is mitigated by a tone of resignation: ultimately, the poem concludes, we cannot escape our ties to home.

And then you see, it became part of our cultural history. We can't ignore it
even though we'd like to, it's so mild and hurtless. And you thought

¹³¹⁰ MacArthur, *American*, 160; 31.

¹³¹¹ Susan Matt, "The New Globalist is Homesick", *New York Times* (21/03/2012) https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/22/opinion/many-still-live-with-homesickness.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1& (Accessed 21/01/13).

¹³¹² Ashbery, *FC*, 115.

¹³¹³ Ashbery, *FC*, 151.

¹³¹⁴ Ashbery, *FC*, 200.

you had it bad, or good. With as many associations as that
to keep thumbing through¹³¹⁵

At its most fundamental level, home is presented as something “Not to like, but to live
in”.¹³¹⁶

Lyn Keller describes Ashbery’s reliance on “paradoxes [...] contradiction and
qualification” in his poetry.¹³¹⁷ However, it may still seem slightly incongruous that Ashbery
chose to define home according to both its permanence and impermanence. More so that he
expressed both a sense of alienation from the place of his origins and yet a longing for its
“familiar[ity]”.¹³¹⁸ When asked to rationalise the poet’s paradoxical rhetoric, Keller writes:
“Ashbery tries to render the complexity of individual consciousness [...] based on man’s
ability to entertain contradictory emotions simultaneously”.¹³¹⁹ Though Keller does not
discuss the image of the house in the poet’s work, this helps to explain why something could
be “ephemeral [...] yet permanent”¹³²⁰ in Ashbery’s writings, or why a poem’s speaker may
condemn their hometown in the same breath that they declare they “never dreamed of
wishing for another”.¹³²¹ The fact that Ashbery’s depiction of homes and houses is frequently
deeply conflicted also reflects his own “mixed feelings about the world of his childhood”.¹³²²
In a letter from 1979, the year after he purchased the Hudson house, Ashbery described his
ambivalent sentiments towards the place of his origins in language which reflects the
contradictory attitudes later expressed in “Has to Be Somewhere”: “I felt much more exiled

¹³¹⁵ Ashbery, *FC*, 20.

¹³¹⁶ Ashbery, *FC*, 54.

¹³¹⁷ Lyn Keller, ““Thinkers Without Final Thoughts””, *ELH* (Spring 1982), 247.

¹³¹⁸ Ashbery, “Poet’s Hudson”, 44.

¹³¹⁹ Keller, “Thinkers”, 247.

¹³²⁰ Keller, “Thinkers”, 248.

¹³²¹ Ashbery, “Has to Be Somewhere”, 113.

¹³²² MacArthur, *American*, 159.

in my hometown [...] than I have ever felt anywhere since [...] I'm glad [to be] out of there [...] though I must say I rather enjoy going back".¹³²³

If self-imposed exile is damaging, however, Ashbery reveals that the alternative is no better. Just as the decision to stay home halts our maturation, he indicates that it also leads to the stagnation of our potential. As *Flow Chart* jibes: "One can live in the same house with one's ambitions [...] oh come off it, no".¹³²⁴ As a child, Ashbery became increasingly convinced that Ashbery Farm was not "the place to be for an artist".¹³²⁵ This was partly due to the "conflict between Ashbery's artistic interests and his father's farming".¹³²⁶ As the poet stated, "My father's interests didn't appeal to me [...] I obviously wasn't cut out to be a farm boy and Huck Finn type and neither of my parents read books".¹³²⁷ This not only "caused a certain amount of friction", but aggravated his homesickness for his former home in Rochester.¹³²⁸ There, his grandfather had "particularly doted on his grandson, and, unlike Chester Ashbery, encouraged his literary and artistic interests".¹³²⁹ Whilst one home had hosted the development of Ashbery's creative aspirations, the young poet saw his new home as an impediment to them. The speaker of *Flow Chart* states

I suppose if one
were born and grew up on a desert island, knowing
of nothing better or even different, one might coincide
with the four walls that contain one and see no anomaly.¹³³⁰

¹³²³ John Ashbery, "Letter to Betsy Myers Exner", (03/10/1978), quoted in MacArthur, *American*, 159.

¹³²⁴ Ashbery, *FC*, 26.

¹³²⁵ Roffman, *Songs*, 6.

¹³²⁶ MacArthur, *American*, 155.

¹³²⁷ Labrie, "John Ashbery", 29.

¹³²⁸ MacArthur, *American*, 150.

¹³²⁹ MacArthur, *American*, 150.

¹³³⁰ Ashbery, *FC*, 26.

In a similar fashion, Ashbery's time at the Rochester house not only made it difficult for him to feel a sense of home at Ashbery Farm, but also opened his eyes to its limitations.

As a teenager, Ashbery believed that, due to his small-town upbringing, his "career as a poet had ended before it began".¹³³¹ *Flow Chart* echoes this sentiment, where opportunity is portrayed as forever out of reach, meant for other people, but never for us.

Where the fuck do you think you're going? *This* is the frontier.

Beyond lies civility, a paradise of choices – maybe. But it wasn't made to be tested by such primitive assaying tools as you.¹³³²

The limitations of home are rendered physical: a literal "frontier" which separates us from what we seek. Just as Ashbery once described Sodus as "a really primitive place", he appears to have feared that it would render him primitive by association.¹³³³ As a child, he wrote of his "efforts to educate himself beyond the provincialism of his small town and his family" but felt that he would inevitably have to leave both behind if he wished to accomplish his goals.¹³³⁴ As he writes in *Flow Chart*:

Pottsville is too small for a man of your calibre. Full many a flower
is born to blush unseen and waste its fragrance on the arctic air.¹³³⁵

"Pottsville" becomes a metaphor for small town America. There is a direct correlation between a town's size and the merits of its inhabitants, who are as likely to fulfil their true

¹³³¹ John Ashbery, quoted in *A History of Poetry in Letters*, ed. Joseph Parisi (NY: W.W. Norton, 2002), 362.

¹³³² Ashbery, *FC*, 134.

¹³³³ Ashbery, "Interview by MacArthur", 191.

¹³³⁴ Roffman, *Songs*, 98.

¹³³⁵ Ashbery, *FC*, 30.

“calibre” there as the growth of a flower is to be nurtured in “arctic” climes. The passage is a direct reference to “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”, by the 18th-century English poet, Thomas Gray. In Gray’s poem, “Full many a flow’r is born to blush unseen” alludes to the unrecognised potential of those who, though gifted, were overlooked due to their circumstances.¹³³⁶ More specifically, the poem opens with a pastoral depiction of rural life, and attributes this lack of recognition to the agrarian lifestyles of its “unseen” inhabitants. Or, as David Cecil concludes, “it may be that in [Gray’s] obscure graveyard lie those who but for circumstance would have been as famous as Milton”.¹³³⁷

Much as *Flow Chart* portrays success as dependent on one’s location, Gray juxtaposes an unsung rural life with a life that is remembered. For both Ashbery and Gray, lack of exposure stands as the greatest distinction between “the great and the humble”.¹³³⁸ If Ashbery believed his roots might render him unable to be a poet, Gray’s poet is made “mute” by his rural surroundings.¹³³⁹ *Flow Chart* speaks of the need to “Strike out on the highroad to professional success”, whilst the achievement of one’s potential is portrayed as dependent upon one’s willingness to “leave home, strike out on your own”.¹³⁴⁰ To this end, Roffman suggests that Ashbery’s youth was characterised by dreams of “leaving Sodus [...] and his childhood for a brighter future far away”.¹³⁴¹ Just as the promise of that future relied specifically on his escape from Sodus, *Flow Chart* specifically associates success with “getting/ someplace, getting/ to be someone”.¹³⁴² Even MacArthur, in her discussion of Ashbery’s rural origins, depicts such roots to be somehow antithetical to his achievements: “That Ashbery emerged from this provincial world should make us all the more amazed at

¹³³⁶ Thomas Gray, “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”, *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44299/elegy-written-in-a-country-churchyard/> (Accessed 09/09/17).

¹³³⁷ David Cecil, “The Poetry of Thomas Gray”, in *Eighteenth Century English Literature*, ed. James Clifford. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1959), 241.

¹³³⁸ Cecil, “Poetry”, 242.

¹³³⁹ Gray, “Elegy”.

¹³⁴⁰ Ashbery, *FC*, 31; 207.

¹³⁴¹ Roffman, *Songs*, 97.

¹³⁴² Ashbery, *FC*, 36.

the poet he grew up to be”.¹³⁴³ Or, as *Flow Chart* muses, “Little was ever made of the anomaly that we grew up here [...] It was never factored into the partial account that we succeeded”.¹³⁴⁴

4.4. Reconciliation: Rebuilding the House and Refamiliarising Ourselves with Home.

Despite the conflicted nature of Ashbery’s representation of home from the perspective of adulthood and decades spent in the city, Ashbery came to recognise the rural climes of his childhood as “sublimely beautiful”, whereas he had once found them “stark and lonely”.¹³⁴⁵ Indeed, as early as *The Double Dream of Spring*, he explored such changing attitudes towards the landscape of home. One example is “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape”. The poem’s protagonist is reminiscent of the young Ashbery, having been “forced as you know to flee” under ominous clouds of “domestic thunder”.¹³⁴⁶ Home is presented as vaguely threatening, with the latter image suggestive of familial strife, calling to mind the Greek god Zeus, the “father” who “sits in thunder” on Mount Olympus, whilst the son is forced to flee from his “bolts of loving thunder”.¹³⁴⁷ This could be an allegory of Ashbery’s own escape from Sodus, and the sense of suffocation he felt at Ashbery Farm. He listed many reasons behind his decision to leave the home of his childhood, one of which was the “simmering domestic tensions of his early years”.¹³⁴⁸ His lack of enthusiasm for his “father’s agricultural interests [...] caused a certain amount of friction”, which led Ashbery to state that he “felt always as though I were living on the edge of a live volcano”.¹³⁴⁹

¹³⁴³ MacArthur, *American*, 148.

¹³⁴⁴ Ashbery, *FC*, 131.

¹³⁴⁵ Roffman, *Songs*, 24.

¹³⁴⁶ Ashbery, “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape”, *CP*, 207.

¹³⁴⁷ Ashbery, “Farm Implements”, 207; 206; 207.

¹³⁴⁸ Ford, “Songs.”

¹³⁴⁹ Ford, “Songs.”

The poem describes the place they came from as a form of “duplicate father”, as though their home is imbued with the same sense of wrath.¹³⁵⁰ Yet, much as Ashbery began to renegotiate his relationship with Upstate New York after his father’s death, so too the speaker finds their view of home softening. From the vantage point of their “shoebox of an apartment” in the city, they begin to pine for their former environment.¹³⁵¹ As Ashbery writes of those city dwellers, “suddenly they remembered how it was cheaper in the country”, or that “it sure was pleasant to spend a day in the country”.¹³⁵² Positive associations emerge as the speaker begins to doubt their previous assessment of their childhood landscape. As Ashbery writes, our adult view of home is essentially “remembered space, toxic or salubrious, whole or scratched”.¹³⁵³ While Ashbery would frequently refer to the power of nostalgia and its ability to romanticise the past, the poem suggests that our early memories of home are not absolute. Rather, on their arrival back to the place they have spent so much time “fearfully” avoiding, they discover that the terror the landscape inspired in them in their youth is now a mere figment of their imagination.¹³⁵⁴ They appear surprised by the bucolic but unremarkable nature of their surroundings.

‘Actually it’s quite
pleasant
Here’ [...] ‘If this is all we need to fear [...]’
Then I don’t mind so much’.¹³⁵⁵

¹³⁵⁰ Ashbery, “Farm Implements”, 207; 206.

¹³⁵¹ Ashbery, “Farm Implements”, 206.

¹³⁵² Ashbery, “Farm Implements”, 207.

¹³⁵³ Ashbery, “Farm Implements”, 207.

¹³⁵⁴ Ashbery, “Farm Implements”, 207.

¹³⁵⁵ Ashbery, “Farm Implements”, 207.

This is reminiscent of *Flow Chart* in which the protagonist is “horrificed/ by the construction” that is their childhood home.¹³⁵⁶ In a transferred epithet, their attitude towards their home imbues it with a form of terrible power over them, as though the house is a tulpa or thoughtform brought to life through the sheer power of belief, standing as an architectural manifestation created by their own fear. However, when they revisit it years later they discover that the terror the house once inspired has dissipated. Rather, it is a simply an ordinary building: a force of “magic enmity no longer, an object merely.”¹³⁵⁷

Just as Ashbery acknowledged his rural roots as an adult, after his reluctance to recognise them in early life, the speaker of “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape” embraces their identity as a “country bumpkin”.¹³⁵⁸ They declare “*For this is my country*”,¹³⁵⁹ with what Joseph Conte describes as “a sort of breast-beating patriotism”.¹³⁶⁰ However, what is being claimed is not a nation but rather the home of the poet’s youth. The quest to escape a small city apartment arguably operates as a conceit for a more metaphysical journey. As Conte writes, “the poem describes the escape of the inveterate city-dweller on a hot, summer weekend to a home in Westchester or the Hamptons”.¹³⁶¹ The poem comes full circle, as that which the speaker once sought to escape from becomes their place of refuge, and the journey to leave home is reversed. In a similar fashion, Ashbery joked that the Hudson house was his respite from the “distractions of the city”.¹³⁶² As he wrote in “The Poet’s Hudson River Restoration”, “I now feel very much at home there, even though I’m still what locals call a ‘weekender’ - anyway, a long weekend”.¹³⁶³ Much as the poem’s speaker finds new appreciation for their childhood home through the eyes of a holidaymaker,

¹³⁵⁶ Ashbery, *FC*, 123.

¹³⁵⁷ Ashbery, *FC*, 96.

¹³⁵⁸ Ashbery, “Farm Implements”, 207.

¹³⁵⁹ Ashbery, “Farm Implements”, 206.

¹³⁶⁰ Joseph Conte, *Unending Design* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991)

http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/ashbery/rutabagas.htm (Accessed 12/10/12).

¹³⁶¹ Conte, *Unending*.

¹³⁶² Ashbery, “Poet’s Hudson”, 44.

¹³⁶³ Ashbery, “Poet’s Hudson”, 44.

Ashbery's renewed sense of connection with the land of his roots was arguably inspired by his status as an out-of-towner.

However, for both Ashbery and the speakers of his poetry the decision to leave home was not without its price, and the subsequent return was not always a smooth one. As MacArthur puts it, "as he has lost members of his family, Ashbery seems to have become ever more attached to the houses and landscapes he associates with them, in his poetry and in his own life".¹³⁶⁴ In *Flow Chart*, for example, "Houses were put up for sale",¹³⁶⁵ and "each sale might signify a death",¹³⁶⁶ whilst "the generations collapse like floors/ in a burning building".¹³⁶⁷ Given that the various homes of the poet's childhood were all "deeply associated with immediate family and ancestors" it is perhaps unsurprising that Ashbery blurs themes of familial and architectural loss in his work.¹³⁶⁸ Indeed, he remarked that the sense of isolation from his own heritage which inspired *Flow Chart* stemmed not only from his loss of connection to the homes of his childhood but from his status as "the end of the Ashbery line".¹³⁶⁹ Through his decision to pursue his own creative interests and aspirations rather than follow his father into farming, the poet felt that he had failed his family, a fact which, after his mother's death, left him questioning his legacy. As they survey the landscape of what used to be their home, the speaker of *Flow Chart* appears to feel the need to justify themselves

You have mastered and accomplished much else besides, not least turning
yourself from a

Slightly unruly child into a sophisticated and cultivated adult with a number of books

¹³⁶⁴ MacArthur, *American*, 201.

¹³⁶⁵ Ashbery, *FC*, 116.

¹³⁶⁶ MacArthur, *American*, 216.

¹³⁶⁷ Ashbery, *FC*, 203

¹³⁶⁸ MacArthur, *American*, 150.

¹³⁶⁹ MacArthur, *American* 201.

to his credit and many more projects in the works.¹³⁷⁰

Although Ashbery repeatedly stated that he was “against trying to deal with one’s life in one’s poetry”, it is difficult not to draw parallels here.¹³⁷¹ The allusion to books appears almost openly self-referential, in the same way as the poem’s previous reference to “John’s report cards” stored in the house’s attic.¹³⁷²

Much like the poet upon his return to the family farm in the wake of his mother’s death, the speaker finds themselves faced with the vanished world of their childhood. They embody the same values of cultivation and sophistication which the young Ashbery believed would be unobtainable if he remained in Sodus. When faced with their early home, the speaker states “I could see the whole distance I had come”, from the landscape of childhood to the accomplishments of adulthood.¹³⁷³ However, what is also being acknowledged is their own journey to personal achievement, in which the path to progress is correlated with the mileage travelled from home. In this respect, they continue to directly measure their success in terms of place or space, to express “Our wonderment/ at how we got from there to here”.¹³⁷⁴

Yet, although the speaker may have achieved their dream, they realise that they “have been false/ to [their] beginnings”.¹³⁷⁵ Without a sense of our own history, how is it possible to achieve a true and conciliated sense of self? Or, as the speaker surmises, “how does one explain that by never looking back one is always/ seeing backward”.¹³⁷⁶ Ford indicates that, in order to come to terms with his identity as both a poet and an individual, Ashbery first had

¹³⁷⁰ Ashbery, *FC*, 177.

¹³⁷¹ Ashbery “Interview with Murphy”, 23.

¹³⁷² Ashbery, *FC*, 114.

¹³⁷³ Ashbery, *FC*, 49.

¹³⁷⁴ Ashbery, *FC*, 5.

¹³⁷⁵ Ashbery, *FC*, 173.

¹³⁷⁶ Ashbery, *FC*, 210.

to reconcile himself with “his provincial rural upbringing, and the compound of guilt and nostalgia that was its legacy”.¹³⁷⁷ In this context, *Flow Chart* is arguably the culmination of this process, abstracted to the point of “poetic idiom”.¹³⁷⁸ Ashbery’s guilt is personified, in the same manner that the literal ghosts of the speakers’ ancestors “Came back to haunt” them.¹³⁷⁹ The poem warns, “the spirits are still angry” whilst a cacophony of voices demand “do/ you want/ our heritage?”¹³⁸⁰ Such depictions “dramatise the anxieties” which Ashbery harboured over what he deemed the “unacceptable aspects of his adulthood”.¹³⁸¹ Much as Ashbery felt culpable over his failure to live up to his family’s expectations, the speaker of *Flow Chart* asks themselves, “How far did I go wrong?”¹³⁸² They castigate themselves that they did not “proceed as my ancestors had done”.¹³⁸³ Most crucially, they long for a way to “be washed free of all blame”.¹³⁸⁴

Yet despite the often “fraught and guilt-ridden” relationship Ashbery had with home, it was nonetheless “complicated by a counter-longing”:¹³⁸⁵ the same need to “[satisfy his] nostalgia” which the poet indicates led him to purchase the Hudson house.¹³⁸⁶ Through his adult relationship with home, Ashbery sought to transform a landscape of “mild apprehension [and] ominous foreboding” into something reassuring.¹³⁸⁷ Similarly, the speaker of *Flow Chart* confronts the spectre of their past home, “tearing down the gnarled structure, exposing [...] the evidence/ for all to see”.¹³⁸⁸ Demolition merges with purification, as the speaker absolves themselves of both their ties to their home and the guilt associated with it. However,

¹³⁷⁷ Ford, “Songs.”

¹³⁷⁸ Ford, “Songs.”

¹³⁷⁹ Ashbery, *FC*, 148.

¹³⁸⁰ Ashbery, *FC*, 178; 50.

¹³⁸¹ Ford, “Songs”.

¹³⁸² Ashbery, *FC*, 81.

¹³⁸³ Ashbery, *FC*, 187.

¹³⁸⁴ Ashbery, *FC*, 147.

¹³⁸⁵ Ford, “Songs.”

¹³⁸⁶ Ashbery, “Poet’s Hudson”, 44.

¹³⁸⁷ Ford, “Songs.”

¹³⁸⁸ Ashbery, *FC*, 74.

rather than renouncing the place of their origins, they renew their relationship with it on fresh terms. This reunion is depicted in architectural terms, as the speaker decides to rebuild their house where it once stood.

MacArthur suggests that the “ubiquitous presence of abandoned buildings” in Ashbery’s work symbolises his decision to abandon his family home.¹³⁸⁹ However, the speaker of *Flow Chart* vows to make their house “habitable” again.¹³⁹⁰ They resolve to “make it over. Perhaps not a total/ from-the-ground-up rehab, perhaps only a few cosmetic touches”.¹³⁹¹ However, in “rebuilding” their home, they are similarly indicated to be “Constructing themselves”.¹³⁹² In coming to terms with the place of our origins, we are equally re-evaluating our sense of ourselves. In a similar fashion, Ashbery’s choice to return to his roots demonstrated his desire not simply to “overcome his background” as MacArthur suggests, but to reconcile himself with it.¹³⁹³ However, both the poet and the speaker of *Flow Chart*, recognised that it was important not to repeat the mistakes of the past. Rather,

really it would be best to start all over again from the beginning
and find some really decent area that reflects a commitment to oneself.¹³⁹⁴

This commitment to himself is what Ashbery ultimately strived to achieve with the Hudson house; not only a connection to his origins, but a reflection of his adult and creative self. Whilst Ashbery frequently portrayed his childhood home as incompatible with his creative interests, he actively sought to create an adult vision of home which nurtured his art. As Kermani comments, the decision to buy the house was based on poetic as much as

¹³⁸⁹ MacArthur, *American*, 3,

¹³⁹⁰ Ashbery, *FC*, 83.

¹³⁹¹ Ashbery, *FC*, 49.

¹³⁹² Ashbery, *FC*, 136; 84.

¹³⁹³ MacArthur, *American*, 162.

¹³⁹⁴ Ashbery, *FC*, 83.

residential considerations. “Ashbery chose [the] house because he sensed that [it] had the potential to become [an] important tool, serving to enhance his creativity and supply much of the raw material for his work”.¹³⁹⁵ As the poet writes in *Flow Chart*, when all other forms of home vanish, “you must start to dwell in it,/ the poetry”.¹³⁹⁶ Rather than taking sides in the conflict between home and art, it asks, why can one not accommodate the other? What “if poetry were something else entirely [...] What if it were only a small, other way of living”?¹³⁹⁷

¹³⁹⁵ Kermani, “John Ashbery’s”.

¹³⁹⁶ Ashbery, *FC*, 145.

¹³⁹⁷ Ashbery, *FC*, 145.

Thomas Gardner suggests that, at its heart, Ashbery’s poetry explores “how we establish a ‘home’” or become “at home in a landscape”.¹³⁹⁸ However, despite the many references to domesticity in his work, Gardner concludes that the concept of what he calls inhabitation remains problematic for Ashbery. In essence, Ashbery’s poetry embodies “a way of inhabiting the world in which one is ultimately homeless and without any way of guaranteeing a position of rest or belonging”.¹³⁹⁹ To elucidate, Gardner references *Flow Chart*, whose speaker declares that they have “no real home and no one to inhabit it except you”.¹⁴⁰⁰ This collection and its depiction of houses was considered in the previous chapter. Yet, amongst the more traditional dwellings which pervade the poem’s landscape, a new structure emerges: a “gigantic, decaying apartment complex”, known as “‘The Sunflower’”.¹⁴⁰¹

A noted architect had done/ it right once, with open spaces, communal nurseries, walkways. Yet [...] no one liked it. People refused to move in. It was cold and impersonal.¹⁴⁰²

The building was constructed to be a “paradise”, created to meet all the requirements of modern dwelling.¹⁴⁰³ Yet, although there is no fault in its design, it succeeds only in “alienating” the potential residents it was built to attract.¹⁴⁰⁴ Ashbery stresses the building’s

¹³⁹⁸ Thomas Gardner, “Review: An Open, Habitable Space”, *Contemporary Literature*, (Winter, 1992), 721; 716.

¹³⁹⁹ Gardner, “Review”, 717.

¹⁴⁰⁰ John Ashbery, *Flow Chart* (UK: Carcanet, 1991), 27. (Hereafter cited as *FC*)

¹⁴⁰¹ Ashbery, *FC*, 189.

¹⁴⁰² Ashbery, *FC*, 189.

¹⁴⁰³ Ashbery, *FC*, 189.

¹⁴⁰⁴ Ashbery, *FC*, 189.

function as a mass-dwelling: an alternative to the multitude of individual houses which feature throughout the poem. However, though its “communal” architecture is initially suggested to be superior, the building lies in ruins: “a better construction [...] but it was empty”.¹⁴⁰⁵ Unable to fulfil its purpose, it has stagnated, the complex and the vacant apartments it houses likened to a sunflower devoid of “seeds”.¹⁴⁰⁶

Though “The Sunflower” stands as a solitary bastion of mass-dwelling within the landscape of *Flow Chart*, it is far from an isolated reference in Ashbery’s work. One of the most well-known examples of Ashbery’s earlier apartment imagery is the “middle-class apartment” of “The Skaters”, which appears 25 years earlier in *Rivers and Mountains*, where the speaker feels “cut off from the life in the streets” below.¹⁴⁰⁷ However, the figurative seed for *Flow Chart*’s apartment complex can perhaps be found in one of *Rivers and Mountains*’s less prominent poems, “The Ecclesiast”, in which a crumbling, multi-unit structure is described as “worse than the sunflower”.¹⁴⁰⁸ Like its counterpart from *Flow Chart*, the building has been designed to house a “whole host” of occupants.¹⁴⁰⁹ Nonetheless, it too serves only to repel potential inhabitants, with life within its “many walls” likened to a “shoe [that] pinches, even though it fits perfectly”.¹⁴¹⁰ In an epithet transferred from its missing inhabitants, the building stands “vagrant”, destined to “remain empty” and, eventually, “to be condemned”.¹⁴¹¹ In a structure meant to bring its inhabitants “together”, Ashbery writes, people have never felt so “far apart”.¹⁴¹² Whether or not the roots of *Flow Chart*’s apartment building can truly be found in the crumbling structure of “The Ecclesiast”, these descriptions make clear that Ashbery explored multi-unit architecture and its implications in his poetry

¹⁴⁰⁵ Ashbery, *FC*, 189.

¹⁴⁰⁶ Ashbery, *FC*, 189.

¹⁴⁰⁷ John Ashbery, “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape”, *Collected Poems, 1956-1987*, ed. Mark Ford (UK: Carcanet, 2001), 206 (Hereafter cited as *CP*).

¹⁴⁰⁸ John Ashbery, “The Ecclesiast”, *CP*, 135.

¹⁴⁰⁹ Ashbery, “Ecclesiast”, 135.

¹⁴¹⁰ Ashbery, “Ecclesiast”, 135.

¹⁴¹¹ Ashbery, “Ecclesiast”, 135; 136; 135.

¹⁴¹² Ashbery, “Ecclesiast”, 136.

long before “The Sunflower”. Nonetheless, the year after *Flow Chart*’s publication, Ashbery conceivably alluded to the poem’s “decaying apartment complex” again in “The Old Complex”, from his new collection, *Hotel Lautréamont* (1992).

As structures go, it wasn’t such a bad one,

and it filled the space before the eye

with loving, sinister patches. A modest

eyesore. It reduced them to a sort of paste

wherein each finds his account, goes off

to live among the shore’s bashed-in hulks.¹⁴¹³

Like “The Sunflower”, the building is described as a “complex”: a larger “whole” consisting of a “number” of individual, “interconnected parts”.¹⁴¹⁴ This not only characterises the structure itself (a single edifice consisting of a network of apartment units), but the residents who inhabit it. Though their individual separateness is noted, “each” having their own identity and “account”, by residing in the apartment complex they are also “reduced” to a cumulative, uniform “paste”: defined primarily by their ability to “[fill] the space” within. To occupy the complex and “live among” its residents, is to be part of a collective “them”. In “The Old Complex”, Ashbery conceivably presents us with the aspiration of “The Sunflower”, fully realised. Not only were the two collections published only a year apart, but

¹⁴¹³ John Ashbery, “The Old Complex”, *Hotel Lautréamont* (USA: Alfred Knopf, 1992), 107 (Hereafter cited as *HL*).

¹⁴¹⁴ “complex”, n. *OED Online* (12/2019) Oxford UP.

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/37671?rkey=AZdDLn&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid> (Accessed 12/12/19) (Hereafter cited as *OED*).

“many of [*Hotel Lautréamont*’s] lyrics were written while Ashbery was writing *Flow Chart*”.¹⁴¹⁵ When asked about the inspiration behind *Hotel Lautréamont* in a 1997 interview with David Herd for *P.N. Review*, Ashbery linked the book to his longstanding “[interest] in types of accommodation”.¹⁴¹⁶ However, John Emil Vincent suggests that it is equally inspired by the “*idea of a hotel*” itself.¹⁴¹⁷ Ashbery cited the specific influence of the “image of the hotel” or the “hotel room” on the collection.¹⁴¹⁸ As the poet explained “I’ve always been fascinated by the idea of houses, and I think hotels would come under the same general category [...] They seem to have a commanding presence somehow. They’re telling you something”.¹⁴¹⁹

This chapter examines the depiction of hotels and apartments, as the second of three chapters dedicated to Ashbery’s portrayal of the residential. Whilst chapter four focused on the relationship between the “traditional [...] single-family” residence and the individual occupant, this chapter looks at buildings designed to accommodate the many, not the few.¹⁴²⁰ As I suggest in section one, the relationship between hotels and apartment blocks is a long-established one, both in spatial theory and architectural history, as well as in Ashbery’s own residential experience. As the architectural critic Anitra Nelson writes, both consist of “high-density blocks of self-contained units” in which many individuals can be accommodated simultaneously.¹⁴²¹ Although I discuss Ashbery’s residential history, his portrayal of these spaces is not analysed within an overtly biographical context; nor as a direct reflection of his relationship with specific dwellings. Rather, I explore the implications of hotels, apartments, and other forms of “multi-unit” accommodation for both individual identity and questions of

¹⁴¹⁵ John Emil Vincent, *John Ashbery and You* (USA: U of Georgia P, 2007), 75.

¹⁴¹⁶ David Herd, “In Conversation with John Ashbery”, *P.N. Review* (September-October 1994) https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=2216;hilite=david%20herd (Accessed 12/1119).

¹⁴¹⁷ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 82.

¹⁴¹⁸ Herd, “Conversation”.

¹⁴¹⁹ Herd, “Conversation”.

¹⁴²⁰ Carole Despres, “The Meaning of Home”, *Journal of Architectural Planning* (Summer 1991), 96.

¹⁴²¹ Anitra Nelson, *Small is Necessary* (USA: Pluto Press, 2018), 46.

community.¹⁴²² Chapter six will consider the role of suburban space, to suggest how suburbia operates as a discursive landscape in Ashbery's writings, through which he explores concepts of significance, culture, centrality and peripherality.

Houses have been widely acknowledged to be a major theme in Ashbery's poetry, not least by the poet himself. In his interview with Herd, he attributed his "fascination" with the house to a wider interest in residential architecture. However, critics have been slow to explore his depiction of other "types of accommodation", or to relate Ashbery's house imagery to his portrayal of other forms of residential space. These other spaces have tended to be discussed solely in terms of one-off images rather than recurring themes in their own right. While some exceptions are discussed in this chapter, Ashbery criticism has tended to prioritise more traditional dwellings like houses over less traditional alternatives, such as apartment buildings. This is evident in studies of the poet's real-life homes. Before his death in 2017, Ashbery owned two properties: his house in Hudson and a three-bedroom apartment in New York City. Purchased in 1978 and 1984 respectively, Ashbery moved into the two properties "almost simultaneously", and divided his time between them.¹⁴²³ However, whilst the Hudson house has received extensive critical study, Ashbery's apartment has been largely ignored. In 2008, the *Rain Taxi Review of Books* dedicated an edition to "the poet's homes in Hudson and Manhattan".¹⁴²⁴ Of the dozen articles on "Ashbery's textual and domestic environments", all but one concentrated on the Hudson house.¹⁴²⁵ Even Brice Brown's "A Case for John Ashbery's Chelsea Apartment", asserts that the apartment was by far the less significant of the poet's two homes. "Any symposium on Ashbery's habitats will focus on his

¹⁴²² Nelson, *Small*, 54.

¹⁴²³ John Ashbery, quoted in Brice Brown, "A Case for John Ashbery's Chelsea Apartment", *Rain Taxi* (Summer 2008) <http://www.raintaxi.com/literary-features/john-ashbery-created-spaces/created-space-a-case-for-john-ashberys-chelsea-apartment/> (Accessed 10/10/19).

¹⁴²⁴ Eric Lorberer, "Publisher Preface", *Rain Taxi* (Summer 2008) <http://www.raintaxi.com/literary-features/john-ashbery-created-spaces/publisher-preface/> (Accessed 10/10/19).

¹⁴²⁵ Micaela Morrisette, "John Ashbery Created Spaces", *Rain Taxi* (Summer 2008) <http://www.raintaxi.com/literary-features/john-ashbery-created-spaces/> (Accessed 10/10/19).

Colonial Revival house”, Brown admits, and “deservedly so”.¹⁴²⁶ The Chelsea apartment can appear “ordinary, mundane, almost disappointing” compared to the “grandiose, multifaceted work of art” which is the Hudson house.¹⁴²⁷ As a result, there is a critical consensus that the Hudson house offers a “more complete statement” on Ashbery and his work.¹⁴²⁸

This viewpoint reflects a trend in our culture, whereby apartments or mass-dwelling spaces are frequently seen as less personal and therefore less significant than houses. In the same manner that Ashbery once characterised hotels as “benignly neutral space”,¹⁴²⁹ his partner David Kermani suggests that the stereotype of apartments as “bland white cubes”¹⁴³⁰ may have impacted critical interpretations of Ashbery’s residential history. Rather than fully developed home environments, Kermani writes that apartments are conventionally thought to be “merely functional living spaces”, suitable for “pragmatic domestic living” but nothing more.¹⁴³¹ In her history of the American apartment building, *Alone Together*, Elizabeth Collins-Cromley states that multi-unit buildings are traditionally seen as “banal” compared to “idealized” houses.¹⁴³² Just as single-family residences represent a deeper connection between occupant and dwelling, apartments are correspondingly considered to weaken that connection. This can be directly attributed to their status as “multiple dwellings”, as the identity of the individual occupant is subsumed within a structure specifically designed to simultaneously house “hundreds of other persons”.¹⁴³³ Collins-Cromley likens apartment living to the relative anonymity offered by hotels, as both are seen as deliberately depersonalised spaces upon which “individuality [can] not be stamped”.¹⁴³⁴ Fundamentally,

¹⁴²⁶ Brown, “Case”.

¹⁴²⁷ Brown, “Case”.

¹⁴²⁸ Brown, “Case”.

¹⁴²⁹ Herd, “Conversation”.

¹⁴³⁰ David Kermani, “John Ashbery’s Cinema Paradiso”, *Rain Taxi* (Summer 2008)

<http://www.raintaxi.com/literary-features/john-ashbery-created-spaces/john-ashberys-cinema-paradiso-domestic-elements-as-poetry/> (Accessed 10/10/19).

¹⁴³¹ Kermani, “John Ashbery’s”.

¹⁴³² Elizabeth Collins-Cromley, *Alone Together* (USA: Cornell UP, 1990), 8; 25.

¹⁴³³ Collins-Cromley, *Alone*, 1; 3.

¹⁴³⁴ Collins-Cromley, *Alone*, 21.

both represent “deceptive architecture”, which only obfuscates our impressions of those who inhabit them.¹⁴³⁵ This may explain the lack of critical interest in Ashbery’s portrayal of hotels and apartments, although the poet both reflects and counters these perceptions in his depiction of these spaces. Nonetheless, a consideration of Ashbery’s hotels and apartments helps us understand his depiction of the built environment in general. As Brown writes, understanding the importance of these spaces to Ashbery’s life and work simply “requires a greater intellectual leap of faith”.¹⁴³⁶

This chapter focuses on two collections: *Rivers and Mountains* and *Hotel Lautréamont*. Although *Hotel Lautréamont* may have been inspired by the “hotel metaphor” of its titular poem, both collections are rooted in the imagery of hotels and apartments.¹⁴³⁷ However, given that Ashbery made explicit reference to *Hotel Lautréamont* in expressing his ideas on hotels and other forms of multi-unit architecture, this chapter uses that collection as the starting point. I pay particular attention to three key texts: “The Skaters” and “Clepsydra” from *Rivers and Mountains*, and the titular poem of *Hotel Lautréamont*. Although *Rivers and Mountains* has been covered extensively by critics, *Hotel Lautréamont* has received less attention. Possible connections between these collections have consequently not been considered. In *John Ashbery and You*, John Emil Vincent states that, though the “vast majority” of Ashbery criticism has been written “in the last thirty years”, attention has largely focused on his earlier writings.¹⁴³⁸ There have been “few sustained critical treatments of his work post [...] *Flow Chart*” (1991), as later collections have largely received “short book reviews” rather than in-depth analysis.¹⁴³⁹

¹⁴³⁵ Collins-Cromley, *Alone*, 20.

¹⁴³⁶ Brown, “Case”.

¹⁴³⁷ Krystyna Mazur, “The ‘Unfamiliar Stereotype’: Repetition in the Poetry of John Ashbery”, in *Poetry and the Sense of Panic*, ed. Lionel Kelly (Netherlands: Rodopi, 2000), 111.

¹⁴³⁸ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 3.

¹⁴³⁹ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 3.

The chapter is divided into three sections. Section one explores the broader cultural and critical context which underpins Ashbery's hotel and apartment imagery. Section two considers themes of architectural and poetic structure in "Hotel Lautréamont". Section three focuses on the idea of the collective and its implications for individual identity, to suggest how Ashbery associates apartments and mass-dwelling with the theme of commonality.

5.1. "Hotel this or that": the cultural and critical context of Ashbery's hotels and apartments.

In 1992, Ashbery published his 15th poetry collection, *Hotel Lautréamont*. Released only a year after *Flow Chart*, the book marked a significant shift for the poet. In place of the "100-page poem" which was its predecessor, Ashbery's new collection consisted of 82 shorter works, each apparently with its own poetic voice.¹⁴⁴⁰ In her review for *The Independent* newspaper, Barbara Everett expressed her frustration with the collection. For a poet who has consistently "balked readers" due to his "obscurity" and "impermeable Surrealism", it may seem as though "the book's title offers a way in": a key to decoding the collection as a whole.¹⁴⁴¹ However, Everett concludes, when it comes to Ashbery, it is best to avoid being overly literal in our interpretation, especially given his reputation for "planned resistance to observation or overview".¹⁴⁴² "*Hotel Lautréamont* is as little about hotels as [Ashbery's] earlier collection devotes itself to tennis courts", she writes.¹⁴⁴³ "None of the poems [...] can be said to be elucidated by its title" and "nothing can be learned" from considering the collection in this context.¹⁴⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴⁰ Mark Ford, *John Ashbery In Conversation* (UK: Between The Lines, 2003), 64.

¹⁴⁴¹ Barbara Everett, "Book Review / Blue Snow and Green Cream: 'Hotel Lautréamont'", *The Independent* (20/02/1993) <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/book-review-blue-snow-and-green-cream-hotel-lautreamont-john-ashbery-carcenet-795-pounds-1474126.html> (Accessed 20/11/19).

¹⁴⁴² Everett, "Book".

¹⁴⁴³ Everett, "Book".

¹⁴⁴⁴ Everett, "Book".

Whilst it would indeed be reductive to analyse *Hotel Lautréamont* solely in relation to the “oblique sign-posting” of its title, Ashbery’s own comments encourage us to look deeper into the connection.¹⁴⁴⁵ As the poet explained in a 1977 interview with David Lehman, he routinely used the titles of his works as a tool for meaning, viewing them as a way to add a “further dimension to poetry”.¹⁴⁴⁶ “For me the title of a poem is really much more than the word title generally suggests; it’s also the subject of the poem, implicitly, and sometimes contrary to one’s impressions otherwise of the text [. . .] The title almost amounts to the ‘given’ for me; it indicates a space in which I will work. In addition to introducing the poem, it introduces me to the poem”.¹⁴⁴⁷ As this chapter explores, this equation of title and poem, subject and space, holds intriguing implications for a consideration of “Hotel Lautréamont”, with Ashbery reflecting on how a poem’s title has the power to shape how it is perceived. Whenever he started a new work, Ashbery revealed that “the title is assigned *before* the poem is written”, theoretically allowing the chosen title to influence the poem’s composition.¹⁴⁴⁸ Moreover, even if the completed work has “nothing to do” with the ideas (or, indeed, spaces) “indicated [...] in the title”, the poet concluded, “the reader is obliged to consider the poem as somehow related to [that] subject”.¹⁴⁴⁹

When asked about the inspiration behind *Hotel Lautréamont*, the poet specifically referenced the role hotels have played in “book titles” throughout literary history. “Hotels have always been popular [...] *The Haunted Hotel* by Wilkie Collins, for example, and Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Hotel*, and of course [Vicki Baum’s] *Grand Hotel*”.¹⁴⁵⁰ *Hotel Lautréamont* should not be viewed only in the context of that tradition, Ashbery suggested,

¹⁴⁴⁵ Everett, “Book”.

¹⁴⁴⁶ David Lehman, “‘The Shield of Greeting’: The Function of Irony in John Ashbery’s Poetry”, in ed. David Lehman, *Beyond Amazement* (USA: Cornell UP, 1980), 111.

¹⁴⁴⁷ Lehman, “Shield”, 111.

¹⁴⁴⁸ Lehman, “Shield”, 111.

¹⁴⁴⁹ Lehman, “Shield”, 111.

¹⁴⁵⁰ Herd, “Conversation”.

but also as part of it. As the collection's preface states, the title "alludes to the pseudonymous Count de Lautréamont [real name Isidore Ducasse], a nineteenth-century poet remembered for his pre-Surrealist epic prose poem, *The Songs of Maldoror*" (1868).¹⁴⁵¹ According to its dust-jacket, the collection claims to demonstrate the "important influences of such 'outsider' French poets as Rimbaud, Roussel, and Ducasse-Lautréamont" on Ashbery's work, which are often "overlooked" in favour of considering the poet in a specifically "American" context.¹⁴⁵² These are the "forgotten presences", *Hotel Lautréamont* indicates, which ultimately inhabit Ashbery's meta-poetic hotel-cum-collection, just as the displaced presence of the eponymous "M./ le Comte" haunts the otherwise vacant "buildings" of the poem "American Bar" (*Hotel Lautréamont*).¹⁴⁵³

Despite deliberately framing *Hotel Lautréamont* in such meta-literary terms, when asked to expand on "what attracted [him] to the image of the hotel", Ashbery focused not on the abstract, literary image but on its more concrete characteristics.¹⁴⁵⁴ "There is something very attractive about a hotel because it has got so many rooms, and so many different kinds of people all doing different things".¹⁴⁵⁵ The preface to *Hotel Lautréamont* also foregrounds this focus, as it reveals that the title was inspired less by "commonality between Ashbery and Ducasse's work"¹⁴⁵⁶ than "Ducasse-Lautréamont's"¹⁴⁵⁷ connection to the idea of the hotel. "Little is known about him, save that [...] he spent his brief adult life in various hotels in Paris, checking-out of his transient existence in 1870".¹⁴⁵⁸ This description elides Lautréamont with the spaces in which he lived and worked, the poet being defined by his residence in hotels to the extent that even his death is likened to "checking-out". As Vincent

¹⁴⁵¹ Ashbery, *HL*, no page number given.

¹⁴⁵² Ashbery, *HL*, no page number given.

¹⁴⁵³ John Ashbery, "American Bar", *HL*, 44.

¹⁴⁵⁴ Herd, "Conversation".

¹⁴⁵⁵ Herd, "Conversation".

¹⁴⁵⁶ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 74.

¹⁴⁵⁷ Ashbery, *HL*, no page number given.

¹⁴⁵⁸ Ashbery, *HL*, no page number given.

summarises, the collection's title "poem is named after a hotel", which is in turn "a hotel named after a poet, who died miserable and alone in a hotel".¹⁴⁵⁹ The image comes full circle, to the extent that Ashbery's hotel bridges the divide between architectural and literary construction. The hotel represents an overarching structure, within which a number of independent but associated rooms (and by extension their occupants) are housed – much as the "apartment" complex of "The Skaters" encompasses the "lives of many individuals".¹⁴⁶⁰ In this respect, it is a natural analogy for *Hotel Lautréamont*: a series of individual poems grouped into a single collection, which "remain stubbornly separate as units but join in the enterprise of maintaining a tone".¹⁴⁶¹ Ashbery's interpretation of the hotel foregrounds this same dichotomy between the single part and the larger whole, the individual and the community. Architecture, he indicates, is able not only to juxtapose "different" elements, but also to bring them together in interesting ways. This may account for the difficulty some critics have in ascertaining the "drift of most of the poems," as well as the relationship between them.¹⁴⁶² Poems appear "dislocated" from one another, Everett writes, as at "the precise point at which the reader might trust a poetic world or style, the [collection] changes gear".¹⁴⁶³ This randomness is arguably not accidental. Rather, it is a deliberate device used by Ashbery to convey the diverse nature of the hotel environment, or his "organization of the book as an object or as a collection or as a metaphorical or performative structure", in which the "single poem" is secondary to the larger whole.¹⁴⁶⁴ The poet's interview with Herd supports this connection and makes clear that hotels were a more complex source of inspiration for Ashbery than has previously been understood. As structures able to accommodate "many [...] people" simultaneously, hotels symbolise multiplicity or plurality.

¹⁴⁵⁹ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 80.

¹⁴⁶⁰ Ashbery, "Skaters", 171.

¹⁴⁶¹ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 86.

¹⁴⁶² Everett, "Book".

¹⁴⁶³ Everett, "Book".

¹⁴⁶⁴ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 26.

The poet emphasises the hotel's affinity with "mass" accommodation: that which the architects Alison and Peter Smithson define as "all dwellings not built to the especial order of an individual".¹⁴⁶⁵

Ashbery's interest in these structures appears to be a direct result of their status as "variously peopled" spaces, and he characterises them primarily in these terms.¹⁴⁶⁶

Ultimately, he is "fascinated" by hotels not only because they are a type of "accommodation" but, more significantly, because they are "accommodating".¹⁴⁶⁷ They represent not just shelter, but endless adaptability in the face of constantly shifting circumstances. In this respect, Herd suggests that the hotel may constitute a suitable metaphor for the "inclusive" nature of Ashbery's poetry, which seeks to incorporate both "everything" and "nothing".¹⁴⁶⁸ Just as Ashbery relates his interest in hotels to his fascination with "types of accommodation" in general, his description of hotels leads us to consider another form of habitation: the "apartment".¹⁴⁶⁹ It falls into the "same general category" as hotels for Ashbery: designed to accommodate the "many", not the few.¹⁴⁷⁰ Indeed, he arguably uses the terms "apartment" and "hotel" almost interchangeably in poems such as "The Skaters".¹⁴⁷¹ In *Hotel: An American History*, A.K. Sandoval-Strausz outlines the "substantial degree" of architectural "overlap between hotels and apartment buildings".¹⁴⁷² Both are "purpose-built structures containing a number of dwellings" or "individuated spaces".¹⁴⁷³ Both house a collection of "individuals", each in "their own small, identical rooms".¹⁴⁷⁴ However, whilst they may share certain architectural similarities, hotels hold certain connotations which apartments do not.

¹⁴⁶⁵ A. Smithson and P. Smithson, "Criteria for Mass-Housing", *Ekistics* (10/1960), 224.

¹⁴⁶⁶ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 82.

¹⁴⁶⁷ Herd, "Conversation".

¹⁴⁶⁸ Herd, "Conversation".

¹⁴⁶⁹ Herd, "Conversation".

¹⁴⁷⁰ Herd, "Conversation".

¹⁴⁷¹ Ashbery, "Skaters", 171; 157.

¹⁴⁷² A.K. Sandoval-Strausz, *Hotel: An American History* (USA, Yale UP, 2007), 279.

¹⁴⁷³ Sandoval-Strausz, *Hotel*, 266; 150.

¹⁴⁷⁴ Sandoval-Strausz, *Hotel*, 150.

As the urban theorist Rob MacDonald writes, hotels are typically seen as “places of temporary residence” in contemporary culture.¹⁴⁷⁵ They are associated with transience and impermanence, and represent “temporary lodging for travellers” rather than a more long-term connection with space and place.¹⁴⁷⁶ Hotels therefore do not meet what the architectural historian Elizabeth Collins-Cromley describes as “the requirements for proper dwelling”, due to the inherent “instability” of “hotel life”.¹⁴⁷⁷ In this respect, hotels are seen as “temporary” supplements to one’s primary place of residence rather than fully-fledged dwelling spaces. As the 20th-century philosopher Martin Heidegger writes in “Building Dwelling Thinking”, “to dwell” is “to remain, to stay in place”, an idea which he relates to the practice of “building” or that which is built.¹⁴⁷⁸ In spatial theory terms, he suggests, the physical “abode [or] the place of dwelling” is ultimately secondary to the actual act of residing in a fixed space.¹⁴⁷⁹

In this interpretation, the short-term shelter that hotels offer makes dwelling impossible, and MacDonald characterises hotels as “temporary homes” rather than viable, permanent residences.¹⁴⁸⁰ However, this is arguably something of a contradiction in terms, as home traditionally signifies a prolonged relationship with a particular residence (“a place where one lives permanently”).¹⁴⁸¹ Collins-Cromley suggests that this divide between “permanent and transient” space is also the main criterion which differentiates the apartment building from the hotel, or why apartments qualify as “residential spaces” in their own right whereas hotel rooms do not.¹⁴⁸² Nonetheless, “multiple dwellings” remain “far beneath [the]

¹⁴⁷⁵ Rob MacDonald, “Urban Hotel”, *Built Environment* (2000), 142.

¹⁴⁷⁶ “hotel”, n. *OED* (12/2019)

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/88802?rskey=At7EnC&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid> (Accessed 10/12/19).

¹⁴⁷⁷ Collins-Cromley, *Alone*, 11; 21; 18.

¹⁴⁷⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (USA: Harper Collins, 1971), 147.

¹⁴⁷⁹ Heidegger, *Poetry*, 147.

¹⁴⁸⁰ MacDonald, “Urban”, 150.

¹⁴⁸¹ “home”, n.1 and adj., *OED* (12/2019)

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/87869?rskey=14wqWj&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid> (Accessed 01/12/19).

¹⁴⁸² Collins-Cromley, *Alone*, 20; 12.

standards for home”.¹⁴⁸³ The reasons range from questions of privacy and the lack of distinction between public and non-public space, to the diminished relationship between self and dwelling and the potential for “unwelcome contact with strangers”.¹⁴⁸⁴ This feeds into the essential hierarchy of “domestic architecture” itself.¹⁴⁸⁵ Despite changing residential practices, most people envision “home as a private house”, and home continues to be “culturally defined” as an “independent” or “private, single-family house”.¹⁴⁸⁶ Collins-Cromley believes such spaces hold an “idealized” place in society, and that the “mythologizing of home” has led to corresponding “myths of private home-ownership”.¹⁴⁸⁷ “Shared” or “multiple dwelling” spaces such as apartments appear utilitarian and impersonal in comparison, characterised by an “absence of all individuality”.¹⁴⁸⁸

Whilst the differences between hotels, dwellings, and apartments help us to understand such spaces from a spatial theory perspective, Ashbery appears to have viewed these distinctions as less important, suggesting that, for him, “hotels would come under the same general category” as “houses”, “the apartment”, and other “types of accommodation”.¹⁴⁸⁹ This potentially gives us more latitude to explore connections between these forms of space. An additional basis for this interpretation can be found in the overlapping architectural histories of hotels and apartments. Despite “historically serving visitors and transients”, hotels were “the first apartment buildings”, as they were frequently “appropriated as permanent living quarters” and “ad hoc multiple dwellings” throughout American history.¹⁴⁹⁰ They were often the only affordable urban housing before the apartment building became prominent around the turn of the 20th-century.¹⁴⁹¹ “The hotel was

¹⁴⁸³ Collins-Cromley, *Alone*, 16.

¹⁴⁸⁴ Collins-Cromley, *Alone*, 20.

¹⁴⁸⁵ Collins-Cromley, *Alone*, 28.

¹⁴⁸⁶ Collins-Cromley, *Alone*, 1; 14; 15.

¹⁴⁸⁷ Collins-Cromley, *Alone*, 25; 3; 21.

¹⁴⁸⁸ Collins-Cromley, *Alone*, 12; 5; 20.

¹⁴⁸⁹ Herd, “Conversation”.

¹⁴⁹⁰ Collins-Cromley, *Alone*, 18.

¹⁴⁹¹ Collins-Cromley, *Alone*, 18.

adopted as the architectural and functional basis for the apartment building”, which directly resulted in apartments reflecting “hotel-like elements”.¹⁴⁹² In this respect, Sandoval-Strausz argues that hotels were “the first [...] multiple dwellings in United States history”,¹⁴⁹³ and can therefore be seen as the “appropriate model and identifier for [all] other multiple dwellings”.¹⁴⁹⁴ Whilst this may be overstated, the architectural historian Paul Groth estimates that (in the decades leading up to *Hotel Lautréamont*’s publication) half of all hotel rooms in major American cities were occupied by permanent residents.¹⁴⁹⁵ “People live in hotels, full-time, throughout the United States. Americans have done so for over two hundred years”.¹⁴⁹⁶

Hotels continued to be used for “either tourist or residential use” throughout Ashbery’s lifetime.¹⁴⁹⁷ The poet was aware of this dual role and differentiated between the “tourist hotel” and those intended for long-term accommodation in his conversations with Roffman.¹⁴⁹⁸ As I will explore, Ashbery’s own residential history testifies to this connection. He “lived in various hotels” throughout his time in Paris in the 1950s and 60s, and stated that many consisted of “apartments” specifically designed for “extended stays”.¹⁴⁹⁹ When it comes to Ashbery’s depiction of hotels, we are therefore not necessarily looking at the “one-night-hotel” which Everett references in her review.¹⁵⁰⁰ Rather, through his depiction of both hotels and apartments Ashbery would play with ideas of permanence and impermanence, connection and disconnection. As the poet explained to Herd, these are spaces which have the potential to be “lived in”.¹⁵⁰¹ Consequently, transience is not the primary term by which this

¹⁴⁹² Sandoval-Strauss, *Hotel*, 276; 277.

¹⁴⁹³ Sandoval-Strauss, *Hotel*, 267.

¹⁴⁹⁴ A.K. Sandoval-Strausz, “Homes for a World of Strangers”, *Journal of Urban History* (01/09/2007) <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0096144207303812> (Accessed 10/01/2020).

¹⁴⁹⁵ Paul Groth, *Living Downtown* (USA: U of California P, 1994), 1.

¹⁴⁹⁶ Groth, *Living*, 1.

¹⁴⁹⁷ Groth, *Living*, 1.

¹⁴⁹⁸ For two examples, see Karin Roffman, *The Songs We Know Best* (USA: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2017), 35; 50.

¹⁴⁹⁹ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 48; 49; 48.

¹⁵⁰⁰ Everett, “Book”.

¹⁵⁰¹ Herd, “Conversation”.

analysis defines such structures, nor the principal way it differentiates hotels from apartments. Instead, Ashbery's portrayal of both structures is considered in more strictly architectural terms, as what Nelson terms twin examples of "self-contained [...] rooms separated, but a part of, [a] multi-unit and multi-storey [...] building".¹⁵⁰²

5.1.1. "My many years of drifting" – hotels, apartments, and Ashbery's residential history.

Although this chapter does not consider Ashbery's portrayal of hotels and apartments as explicitly autobiographical, an understanding of his residential history (what "The Skaters" terms "the range of the poet's experience") nonetheless helps us to comprehend how such images manifest themselves in his poetry.¹⁵⁰³ In 1935, an eight-year-old Ashbery learned that a poem he had written had been "read to acclaim at the New York City apartment of the famous novelist Mary Roberts Rhinehart".¹⁵⁰⁴ The event was a party for the city's literary elite, the audience a "crowd of publishers and writers".¹⁵⁰⁵ In her biography of Ashbery's early life, Karin Roffman suggests that this "awakened [Ashbery] to new ideas about poetry".¹⁵⁰⁶ However, it potentially had a similar impact on the young Ashbery's concept of the poet. The experience conflated ideas of inner-city living and creative life for Ashbery, who began to believe that the city was "clearly the place to be for an artist".¹⁵⁰⁷ Kermani reports that the event not only shaped Ashbery's early perceptions of apartment life, inspiring the young poet to write a (now lost) poem specifically "about city apartment living", but continued to influence Ashbery's residential choices well into adulthood.¹⁵⁰⁸ "I had long

¹⁵⁰² Nelson, *Small*, 45.

¹⁵⁰³ Ashbery, "Skaters", 154.

¹⁵⁰⁴ Roffman, *Songs*, 7.

¹⁵⁰⁵ Roffman, *Songs*, 7.

¹⁵⁰⁶ Roffman, *Songs*, 7.

¹⁵⁰⁷ Roffman, *Songs*, 6.

¹⁵⁰⁸ Kermani, "John Ashbery's".

suspected that memories of what Ashbery imagined as that site of his first New York triumph—a modern, sophisticated, literary setting—have stayed with him, and that there is something of those memories reflected in the [apartment] building where he has lived since 1972”.¹⁵⁰⁹ Ashbery moved to New York City in 1949, which he described as a series of “giant canyons of apartments”.¹⁵¹⁰ Roffman catalogues the “shifting mosaic” of Ashbery’s residential life during this period.¹⁵¹¹ In his first “two months” in NYC, he had “already changed apartment three times”, and this pattern of transience characterised his dwelling habits throughout early adulthood.¹⁵¹² Whilst Ashbery recounted that he was accustomed to letting or sub-letting a room or apartment for even as little as “three weeks” at a time, the “‘expense’ of living in the city” also made it difficult to balance comfort and affordability.¹⁵¹³ “Cheap rents” meant substandard accommodations with “bleak furnished rooms”.¹⁵¹⁴ Ashbery was constantly searching for “a nicer place to live” and received financial assistance from his parents as he struggled to “pay his own rent”.¹⁵¹⁵ These circumstances were compounded by Ashbery’s nomadic streak, as he later described his adult homes in Chelsea and Hudson as “the only place[s] he’s ever lived where he hasn’t constantly thought about moving”.¹⁵¹⁶ This implies that he found it difficult to feel at home, and Brown suggests that Ashbery may “have been in pursuit of a pre-envisioned ideal” throughout his “apartment-hopping”.¹⁵¹⁷

Whilst these could be seen as commonplace experiences, another explanation for Ashbery’s residential patterns is more specific to the poet himself. Roffman’s account demonstrates that his social circle was largely formed by those who had previously shared or

¹⁵⁰⁹ Kermani, “John Ashbery’s”.

¹⁵¹⁰ John Ashbery, “Letter from JA to KK, September 13, 1949”, quoted in Roffman, *Songs*, 183.

¹⁵¹¹ Roffman, *Songs*, 3.

¹⁵¹² Roffman, *Songs*, 4.

¹⁵¹³ Roffman, *Songs*, 181; 202.

¹⁵¹⁴ Roffman, *Songs*, 202.

¹⁵¹⁵ Roffman, *Songs*, 202; 204.

¹⁵¹⁶ Kermani, “John Ashbery’s”.

¹⁵¹⁷ Brown, “Case”.

were currently “sharing an apartment.”¹⁵¹⁸ Social and residential networks were largely interdependent, and in a 1950 letter Ashbery wrote of his desire to “spend my life [...] amid my friends”.¹⁵¹⁹ Residential arrangements had a collective aspect, and these spaces served as a form of connective tissue which linked Ashbery and the members of his social circle. Relationships were forged simply by being “neighbors” in the same “apartment building”, and on multiple occasions Ashbery “secured an apartment [...] and a new friend” in the same instance.¹⁵²⁰ For example, he met the artist Jane Freilicher, his lifelong friend and artistic confidant, when he moved into the apartment below hers in 1949. Moves were often provoked by people “breaking up and getting back together”, and Ashbery “hastily packed up his apartment” on more than one occasion due to the “cycle of a relationship ending”.¹⁵²¹ Many of Ashbery’s relationships from this time had a direct impact on his development as a poet. Whilst Ashbery and O’Hara described the New York School as just a group of artists and writers with “a preference for the same bars”, they could also be described as a network of people who frequented the same apartments.¹⁵²² People would be “invited to read their poems”, and the “apartment” of one of the group’s members would become an impromptu performance space for the evening.¹⁵²³ Roffman recounts that Ashbery “[held] court” at poetry readings “inside his apartment”, and the group held frequent creative gatherings where “everyone [was] a writer, painter or musician”.¹⁵²⁴ Reminiscent of the poet’s childhood memory of Rhinehart’s literary gatherings, Ashbery suggests the group tended to create an “artist’s ghetto” wherever its members resided.¹⁵²⁵ This environment was highly “conductive

¹⁵¹⁸ Roffman, *Songs*, 202.

¹⁵¹⁹ John Ashbery, “Postcard from JA to JF, September 8, 1950”, quoted in Roffman, *Songs*, 201.

¹⁵²⁰ Roffman, *Songs*, 181.

¹⁵²¹ Roffman, *Songs*, 221; 190; 217.

¹⁵²² Academy of American Poets, “The Artists & Poets of the New York School”, *Poets.org* (21/03/2015) <https://poets.org/text/artists-poets-new-york-school> (Accessed 10/12/19).

¹⁵²³ Roffman, *Songs*, 207.

¹⁵²⁴ Roffman, *Songs*, 3.

¹⁵²⁵ Roffman, *Songs*, 237.

to simmering creativity”, and “friendships were spurred not only by competition but collaboration”.¹⁵²⁶

Nonetheless, Ashbery found this situation increasingly stifling. “Even to close friends, the group seemed impenetrable”, and Roffman writes that residential arrangements during this period created a situation in which “John was rarely alone, but he felt lonely”.¹⁵²⁷ This dual sense of community and isolation was intensified by his experience of apartment life itself, which allowed one to be surrounded by people but still be essentially alone. By 1955, Ashbery worried that he had become overly “dependent on [his] friends” and was concerned that artistic “sterility” would result.¹⁵²⁸ This “reinforced John’s desire to be alone” and in the later stages of his residence in NYC “John moved to the only single he could (barely) afford”.¹⁵²⁹ However, this also meant that he increasingly “felt like an outsider” within his social circle, and worried the move may have “socially annihilated him”.¹⁵³⁰ During this time he drafted a three-act play about “a small group in almost total isolation from the rest of society”, which perhaps “offered an allegory for Ashbery’s own clan in New York”.¹⁵³¹ Although unpublished, the play embodied the same duality of community and solitariness which Ashbery had voiced previously, and excerpts depict “the decay of the tribal spirit” and consequent decline of “the group” as “each begins to go his own way”.¹⁵³²

Ashbery moved to France in 1955 after being awarded a Fulbright Scholarship. Roffman perceives this to be further evidence of his transient nature at this time, and cites the line “What more is there to do but stay? And that we cannot do” from “The Instruction Manual” (*Some Trees*, 1956), which the poet wrote shortly before he left America.¹⁵³³ For

¹⁵²⁶ Roffman, *Songs*, 203; 219-220.

¹⁵²⁷ Roffman, *Songs*, 218; 217.

¹⁵²⁸ Roffman, *Songs*, 141; 194.

¹⁵²⁹ Roffman, *Songs*, 222; 202.

¹⁵³⁰ Roffman, *Songs*, 24; 204.

¹⁵³¹ Roffman, *Songs*, 234; 235.

¹⁵³² John Ashbery, “Letter from JA to KK, April 13, 1955”, quoted in Roffman, *Songs*, 234.

¹⁵³³ John Ashbery “The Instruction Manual”, *CP*, 8.

Ashbery, Roffman writes, such sentiments “had a parallel meaning in his own life”,¹⁵³⁴ and indeed his “addresses in Paris”¹⁵³⁵ were no less numerous than those in NYC. He moved between “quite a few” different forms of accommodation during these years, all of which appear to have been in multi-unit buildings.¹⁵³⁶ These ranged from student dorms at the *Cite Universitaire*, to various “chambres de bonne”, to a “room [...] in a big roomy apartment building”.¹⁵³⁷ However, Ashbery stated that he mainly “lived in various hotels” on “extended stays”.¹⁵³⁸

After his return to NYC in 1965, the poet’s transient residential habits resumed. However, his relationship with apartment dwelling changed in the early 1970s. When Ashbery was once again “obliged to move in 1972”, Kermani reports, “he took an apartment in a bland 1960s high-rise, liking it so much that he rented a larger and better-situated apartment in the same building when the first lease expired in 1974, and then in 1984 he moved into a still larger space on a higher floor” which “has remained his favorite”.¹⁵³⁹ Kermani’s summary of Ashbery’s residential patterns depicts a strange mix of moving and staying in place, of both attachment to (the larger apartment building) and detachment from (the individual apartments within it). Nonetheless, with this final move in 1984, Ashbery found a space which met his “pre-envisioned ideal”.¹⁵⁴⁰ Just as Kermani indicates that Rhinehart’s literary gathering gave Ashbery fixed ideas “about city apartment living”, he suggests this final apartment was a direct result of the same early experience: “the *idea* of this kind of New York apartment [was] rooted in [that] childhood memory”.¹⁵⁴¹ The fact that Ashbery maintained two separate homes for the remainder of his life is conceivably further

¹⁵³⁴ Roffman, *Songs*, 240.

¹⁵³⁵ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 48.

¹⁵³⁶ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 48.

¹⁵³⁷ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 47; 40.

¹⁵³⁸ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 48.

¹⁵³⁹ Kermani, “John Ashbery’s”.

¹⁵⁴⁰ Brown, “Case”.

¹⁵⁴¹ Kermani, “John Ashbery’s”.

evidence of his difficulty in committing himself to a single dwelling. However, Kermani argues that “Ashbery’s initial move into the Chelsea building signified the birth of his entire [adult experience of homebuilding], and the resulting residential upgrades—including the purchase of his Hudson home [...] were expansions and refinements of” that original concept.¹⁵⁴²

5.1.2. “You read into it/ The meaning”: Hotels and apartments in Ashbery criticism.

Despite Ashbery’s history of both hotel and apartment-living, neither of these spaces has been covered extensively in Ashbery criticism. Critics, including David Herd and Ben Hickman, have commented on the isolated image of the “apartment” in poems such as “The Skaters”,¹⁵⁴³ whilst Bonnie Costello suggests the poem’s speaker is a “self-representational figure” for “Ashbery in his New York apartment”.¹⁵⁴⁴ However, there has been no in-depth critical attention paid to this topic. By contrast, there are two noteworthy studies of the image of the hotel in Ashbery’s poetry, both of which are key references for this chapter. The first is by Krystyna Mazur, who addresses Ashbery’s use of the “hotel metaphor” in the poem “Hotel Lautréamont” as part of a wider survey of “poetic repetition” in his work.¹⁵⁴⁵ Mazur’s analysis centres on the poem’s form, which she explores as both a “model of poetic repetition” and as evidence of “Ashbery’s repetitive strategies”.¹⁵⁴⁶ This study is a key reference for section 2 of this chapter, which considers the poem’s emphasis on “structural pattern”, both architectural and poetic.¹⁵⁴⁷ However, although Mazur hints at a deeper

¹⁵⁴² Brown, “Case”.

¹⁵⁴³ See David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (UK: Manchester UP, 2000), 104, and Ben Hickman, *John Ashbery and English Poetry* (UK: Edinburgh UP, 2012), 121.

¹⁵⁴⁴ Bonnie Costello, “John Ashbery’s Landscapes”, in *The Tribe of John*, ed. Susan Schultz (USA: Alabama UP, 1995), 65.

¹⁵⁴⁵ Mazur, ““Unfamiliar””, 105.

¹⁵⁴⁶ Mazur, ““Unfamiliar””, 105.

¹⁵⁴⁷ Mazur, ““Unfamiliar””, 110.

relationship between “Hotel Lautréamont” and the hotel of its title, she does not regard the implications of Ashbery’s hotel imagery as more than a straightforward embodiment of repetition. Ultimately, she concludes, with its focus on reiteration, the poem is about the conventions and constrictions of “literary creativity”.¹⁵⁴⁸

The second study is by John Emil Vincent, who considers the image of the hotel as part of his book on Ashbery’s “later works”, specifically in his chapter on *Hotel Lautréamont*.¹⁵⁴⁹ Like Mazur, Vincent’s analysis is centred around “the ‘hotel’ metaphor [of the collection’s] title poem”, though he does explore the metaphor’s possible implications, “by extension, for [the] book”.¹⁵⁵⁰ To this end, he references how the “*idea* of a hotel” appears in a select number of poems from *Hotel Lautréamont*, namely through themes of “isolation”, immobility and “impermanence”.¹⁵⁵¹ Although he uses the image of the hotel as a vehicle to explore the broader themes of *Hotel Lautréamont*, rather than vice versa, Vincent’s study remains the most extensive investigation of Ashbery’s hotel imagery to date.

Despite Everett’s insistence that “nothing can be learned” by considering *Hotel Lautréamont* in relation to the image of the hotel, both Vincent and Mazur’s work suggests otherwise.¹⁵⁵² However, there are a number of key differences between Mazur and Vincent’s critical approaches and the one outlined in this chapter. Although both critics explore hotels as part of their analysis, neither focuses specifically on Ashbery’s hotel imagery or its part in his wider depiction of residential space. Neither provides an in-depth treatment of these themes, nor a spatial theory perspective. In turn, neither critic connects their reading to Ashbery’s work beyond *Hotel Lautréamont*.

¹⁵⁴⁸ Mazur, “‘Unfamiliar’”, 112.

¹⁵⁴⁹ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 5.

¹⁵⁵⁰ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 80.

¹⁵⁵¹ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 80; 82; 82.

¹⁵⁵² Everett, “Book”.

A final critical work of note, albeit one with a decidedly different analytical scope, is “A Case for John Ashbery’s Chelsea Apartment”, by Brice Brown, which I mentioned earlier. However, although Brown acknowledges that “Ashbery’s work is permeated with references to domesticity and a sense of place”, including “apartments”, he does not address Ashbery’s portrayal of such spaces in his poetry.¹⁵⁵³ The possible implications of the Chelsea apartment for Ashbery’s depiction of apartments in his work, and vice versa, are also not explored. Rather, Brown focuses on the wider connection between Ashbery’s apartment and his general creative process, in order to stress the importance of the “Chelsea space as a facilitator of Ashbery’s poetry”.¹⁵⁵⁴ Though he acknowledges that the apartment is nondescript compared to the “histrionics” of Hudson, Brown suggests that its “utter commonness” is deliberate on Ashbery’s part.¹⁵⁵⁵ The space, he argues, has been meticulously organised to reflect not only the “allure of everyday domesticity”, but Ashbery’s own fascination with the banal.¹⁵⁵⁶ “Beneath this blanket of bland familiarity, Ashbery encourages a recognition of the dullness underlying our own lives [...] the nuanced mysteries to be found in the run-of-the mill [...] —yet universal — details of everyday life”.¹⁵⁵⁷ Ashbery’s “poetry and prose are intimately entwined with his domestic environments”, Brown indicates, and an “understanding of the one [is] essential to an understanding of the other”.¹⁵⁵⁸

5.2. “A series of boxes”: architectural and poetic structure in “Hotel Lautréamont”.

¹⁵⁵³ Brown, “Case”.

¹⁵⁵⁴ Brown, “Case”.

¹⁵⁵⁵ Brown, “Case”.

¹⁵⁵⁶ Brown, “Case”.

¹⁵⁵⁷ Brown, “Case”.

¹⁵⁵⁸ Brown, “Case”.

Through his “meditations on the structure of hotels”, Ashbery establishes a link between the nature of architecture and that of poetry itself.¹⁵⁵⁹ The hotel of *Hotel Lautréamont* is a metaphor for the collection, which gathers together poems in the way a hotel accumulates guests. Each poem becomes a hotel room with a different occupant, each “inhabited by different presences, different voices”.¹⁵⁶⁰ As previously discussed, Ashbery chose the hotel image “as a title for [the] book” due to its association with “inclusiv[ity]”.¹⁵⁶¹ However, though it may symbolise the relationship between Ashbery’s collection and the individual works housed within it, this metaphor becomes more complex when considering the connection between *Hotel Lautréamont* and its titular poem. Ashbery “wrote the poem ‘Hotel Lautréamont’ because [he] found a photograph of Lautréamont” in which the writer “seemed to be in a hotel room”.¹⁵⁶² The image motivated Ashbery to write a poem with a “hotel-like feel”, an ambience which he would try later to extend to the collection as a whole.¹⁵⁶³ “Hotel Lautréamont” was therefore inspired both by the idea of “a hotel”, and that of a single “hotel room”: as the overarching whole and the individual part.¹⁵⁶⁴ In Ashbery’s “hotel metaphor”, Mazur writes, “access to the whole structure” is achieved only by passing through “each of the hotel rooms” inside.¹⁵⁶⁵ It may only be understood or “undone from within”.¹⁵⁶⁶ In what ways does “Hotel Lautréamont”, as an individual work, reflect the same focus on architectural structure which gave rise to the collection as a whole? How does Ashbery use the concept of the hotel to explore the relationship between literature and architecture? Finally, how can we use this specific poem as a starting point for a wider consideration of Ashbery’s hotel and apartment imagery?

¹⁵⁵⁹ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 80.

¹⁵⁶⁰ Mazur, “‘Unfamiliar’”, 111.

¹⁵⁶¹ Herd, “Conversation”.

¹⁵⁶² Herd, “Conversation”.

¹⁵⁶³ Herd, “Conversation”.

¹⁵⁶⁴ Herd, “Conversation”.

¹⁵⁶⁵ Mazur, “‘Unfamiliar’”, 110; 111; 111.

¹⁵⁶⁶ Mazur, “‘Unfamiliar’”, 111.

Despite the work of both Mazur and Vincent, some critics contest the validity of considering “Hotel Lautréamont” as an expression of Ashbery’s hotel metaphor. Indeed, although Everett warns the reader against accepting Ashbery’s titles at face value, she indicates that this is particularly true of *Hotel Lautréamont*’s “title-poem”.¹⁵⁶⁷ Even if Ashbery did conceive of the overarching “collection of poems” as a form of hotel, she maintains, there is ultimately “nothing” about “Hotel Lautréamont” as an individual work which “directly reflects or mentions” this idea.¹⁵⁶⁸ Despite the references to hotels and hotel rooms which litter the collection, the only direct mention of a hotel in “Hotel Lautréamont” indeed comes in the poem’s title. At first glance, this would perhaps justify Everett’s interpretation that the collection’s title poem is not truly “about hotels”.¹⁵⁶⁹ However, her assertion that it also fails to “[reflect]” such structures is less justifiable. In his interview with Herd, Ashbery provided a deeper rationale for the connection, one which demonstrated that he found the metaphor of the hotel to be as applicable to the collection’s titular piece as it was to *Hotel Lautréamont* as a whole. “I thought of the four sections of four stanzas each as being like four floors of a hotel, like the boxes behind the desk where the keys are hung”.¹⁵⁷⁰ The inspiration Ashbery drew from hotels was multifaceted in nature, focused not only on the abstract ideas associated with such spaces but their real-life, concrete framework. There is, Ashbery suggested, a natural correlation between poetic and architectural structure, to the extent that creative composition and architectural construction become merged. The stacking of stanzas is likened to the accumulation of floors in a building, reminiscent of Ashbery’s earlier poem “Syringa” (*Houseboat Days*, 1977) in which

¹⁵⁶⁷ Everett, “Book”.

¹⁵⁶⁸ Everett, “Book”.

¹⁵⁶⁹ Everett, “Book”.

¹⁵⁷⁰ Herd, “Conversation”.

The singer thinks
Constructively, builds up his chant in progressive stages
Like a skyscraper.¹⁵⁷¹

For Ashbery, architectural construction served as an appropriate analogy for artistic development or narrative progression. However, what was it specifically about the idea of a hotel that influenced the composition of “Hotel Lautréamont”? Conversely, what was it about this particular poem that led Ashbery to describe it as uniquely “like [...] a hotel”? In his interview with Herd, Ashbery indicates that his choice of form for “Hotel Lautréamont” was directly influenced by the architectural structure of a hotel itself. The structured grid of “boxes” reproduces the form of the hotel building, with its composition of floors, corridors, and individual rooms. Each box corresponds to a hotel room, whilst the individual “keys” housed within are the occupants, representing the individual guests who pass through. The result is a sense of *mise en abyme*, whereby Ashbery presents a hotel within a hotel, in much the same way that “Hotel Lautréamont” is housed within its eponymous collection. Rather than a single, unified structure, Ashbery suggests that “each” of the poem’s “four sections” constitutes its own metaphorical hotel. He repeatedly divides, multiplies and replicates the image within itself, in much the same way that he suggested to Herd that “Hotel Lautréamont” could embody the idea of a “hotel”, or even multiple “hotels”, all contained within the walls of a single “hotel room”.¹⁵⁷²

The poem’s structure reinforces this effect. The piece is a pantoum, a strict poetic form in which the second and fourth lines of each quatrain are subsequently repeated as the first and third lines of the next, and so forth. It is this “particularly rigid structure”, Mazur

¹⁵⁷¹ John Ashbery, “Syringa”, *CP*, 536.

¹⁵⁷² Herd, “Conversation”.

suggests, which makes the pantoum the ideal choice for “a ‘hotel’ poem”.¹⁵⁷³ Like a hotel, “the structure [...] exists prior to the poem”, an empty construction waiting to be occupied by the poet’s words.¹⁵⁷⁴ This is reminiscent of *Flow Chart*’s metaphor of an unoccupied apartment complex as a sunflower without seeds, and, indeed, Ashbery reframes this concept in specifically spatial terms in another poem from *Hotel Lautréamont*, “That You Tell”. The second stanza describes “How room has been created/ before the notion of what was going to go in it actually existed”.¹⁵⁷⁵ Narrative structure is depicted in architectural terms, to the extent that the poem refers to its opening stanza or “prologue” as “the floor above”.¹⁵⁷⁶ Ashbery referred to the pantoum as a type of “paint-by-numbers” poetry, whereby the poet writes according to a pre-existing pattern and the various lines represent little more than spaces to be filled.¹⁵⁷⁷ This description suggests a certain diminishment of individualism and creative freedom as ‘in a pantoum repetitions are generated mechanically’ as “a function of convention” rather than as a deliberate artistic choice.¹⁵⁷⁸ The overlying structure takes precedence over the poem’s individual narrative, which is ultimately restricted and conditioned by the form.

In a 2000 interview with Kacper Bartczak, Ashbery described this practice as one in which the poet puts the structure “in place first, and then writes the poem to fit”.¹⁵⁷⁹ The “poet’s task is to devise lines to fit” that looping pattern, which will continue to shape, restrict and even predetermine the flow of the narrative through its repeating chain of refrains.¹⁵⁸⁰ This emphasis on reiteration arguably correlates with the repetitive construction model typical of multi-unit architecture. Like the hotel, “the structure itself is permanent”,

¹⁵⁷³ Mazur, “‘Unfamiliar’”, 111.

¹⁵⁷⁴ Mazur, “‘Unfamiliar’”, 110.

¹⁵⁷⁵ John Ashbery, “That You Tell”, *HL*, 142.

¹⁵⁷⁶ Ashbery, “That You Tell”, 142.

¹⁵⁷⁷ Herd, “Conversation”.

¹⁵⁷⁸ Mazur, “‘Unfamiliar’”, 110.

¹⁵⁷⁹ Kacper Bartczak, *In Search of Communication and Community* (Germany: Peter Lang, 2006), 222.

¹⁵⁸⁰ Mazur, “‘Unfamiliar’”, 110.

“its elements identical and symmetrically aligned”.¹⁵⁸¹ The effect is one of proliferation and replication. Four lines collect to form four stanzas, which in turn accumulate to create four sections, “like four floors of a hotel”. The larger whole remains a culmination and reflection of the individual elements. Yet, within that strict overlying framework, individual lines remain infinitely variable, in much the same way that the poet suggests a hotel may simultaneously house “many different kinds of people” within its “many rooms”. When asked why he enjoyed “working with a pre-established form”, Ashbery responded: “Because I think it forces you to go in places that you wouldn’t go otherwise, just because you have to satisfy this exterior architecture”.¹⁵⁸²

5.2.1. “The larger limiting scheme” – the relationship between form and content.

Just as Ashbery suggests that it is the hotel’s architectural structure which gives the hotel its significance, in “Hotel Lautréamont” the structure of the pantoum becomes a tool to convey its meaning. However, whilst the poem’s form may change our understanding of its content, the reverse is also true. From its first lines, the poem’s narrative foregrounds the same preoccupation with poetic structure which inspired its composition. In what is perhaps a typical example of what Everett terms Ashbery’s “maddening” use of misdirection, however, the poem opens by informing the reader not about the pantoum, but a separate verse form entirely: the ballad.¹⁵⁸³

Research has shown that ballads were produced by all of society
working as a team. They didn’t just happen. There was no guesswork.

¹⁵⁸¹ Mazur, ““Unfamiliar””, 111.

¹⁵⁸² Bartczak, *Search*, 222.

¹⁵⁸³ Everett, “Book”.

The people, then, knew what they wanted and how to get it.

We see the results in works as diverse as “Windsor Forest” and “The Wife of Usher’s Well”.¹⁵⁸⁴

The assertion that creative “works” are “produced by all of society” is arguably a reference to Lautréamont’s maxim from *Les Chants de Maldoror* that “Poetry should be made by all. Not by one”,¹⁵⁸⁵ which has been likened to the practice of “collective writing”.¹⁵⁸⁶ Art is ultimately the product of the wider culture in which it is created, Lautréamont suggests, and its aim should be to embody the “collective unconscious” rather than the individual artist.¹⁵⁸⁷ This sentiment reflects the inherent collectivity associated with both the idea of the hotel and Ashbery’s hotel metaphor. However, the focus on the ballad may seem somewhat incongruous given Ashbery’s emphasis on the “hotel-like” nature of the poem’s pantoum structure.¹⁵⁸⁸ On the one hand, Mazur stresses that ballads are not traditionally associated with the same “rigidity of form” which characterises the pantoum.¹⁵⁸⁹ Yet, as a variation of common metre which is “less regular and more conversational”, ballad metre arguably embodies the same sense of commonality which Ashbery sought to evoke through his use of the pantoum, as it allowed for the lyrics of multiple different ballads to be sung to the same tune.¹⁵⁹⁰ Whilst potentially more flexible than the pantoum, it could feasibly also be viewed as more “accommodating”, to use the poet’s terminology. Regardless of such particulars, “Hotel Lautréamont” describes ballads with the same “sense of control” and predetermination associated with the pantoum’s “formal limitations”, in what reads as a pastiche of a literary

¹⁵⁸⁴ John Ashbery, “Hotel Lautréamont”, *HL*, 14.

¹⁵⁸⁵ Isidore Ducasse (Comte Lautréamont), *Les Chants de Maldoror* (NY: 1965, 33).

¹⁵⁸⁶ Mazur, ““Unfamiliar””, 114.

¹⁵⁸⁷ Peter Nesselroth. *Lautréamont’s Imagery* (France: Librairie-Droz, 1969), 29.

¹⁵⁸⁸ Herd, “Conversation”.

¹⁵⁸⁹ Mazur, ““Unfamiliar””, 113; 116.

¹⁵⁹⁰ Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Common metre”, *Britannica Online*, <https://www.britannica.com/art/common-metre> (Accessed 09/11/2021).

history or a dictionary entry.¹⁵⁹¹ Rather than the result of artistic expression or imaginative innovation, they have been meticulously engineered according to a precise plan. The value of art is suggested to be based upon an exacting form of criteria, to the extent that spontaneous (or perhaps individual) creative expression is dismissed as nothing more than vague “guesswork”. In “Orality and the Ballad Tradition”, Suzanne Gilbert stresses that, until the 19th-century, it was customary for many versions of the same ballad to be in circulation simultaneously due to the form’s “connection to oral tradition”.¹⁵⁹² Most remained unrecorded or “unwritten” for centuries, and narratives would shift and proliferate as works were passed down through “generations of [people] who remembered [the] material”.¹⁵⁹³

In contrast to the almost mechanized precision outlined in “Hotel Lautréamont”, the majority of traditional ballads cannot truly be said to have a single or correct version. This may reflect a deliberate separation (or juxtaposition) of poetic structure and content on Ashbery’s part. The structure of the pantoum conceivably symbolises the rigid architecture of the hotel, whilst the narrative of the more variable ballad represents the inherent diversity of the fluctuating population housed within. The poetic structure does not truly reflect the narrative, and vice versa. Elina Siltanen suggests that the lack of a “self-explanatory relation between ‘form’ and ‘content’” is evidence that Ashbery deliberately “undermines” the supposed connection “between form and content” in his work.¹⁵⁹⁴ She suggests this “metatextually [calls] attention to [the poem’s] own construction” and allows the poet to challenge literary convention.¹⁵⁹⁵ However, in “Hotel Lautréamont” this divergence between form and content could also be interpreted as a symbol of the suggested disconnect between

¹⁵⁹¹ Mazur, “‘Unfamiliar’”, 110.

¹⁵⁹² Suzanne Gilbert “Orality and the Ballad Tradition”, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Women’s Writing*, ed. Glenda Norquay (UK: Edinburgh UP, 2012), 38.

¹⁵⁹³ Gilbert, “Orality”, 42; 39.

¹⁵⁹⁴ Elina Siltanen, *Experimentalism as Reciprocal Communication in Contemporary American Poetry* (US: John Benjamins, 2016), 54.

¹⁵⁹⁵ Siltanen, *Experimentalism*, 55.

hotel and guest. As the architectural theorist Florian Urban writes, multi-unit accommodations are “theorized [to be] decontextualized, one-size fits all” environments in which the individual guest or occupant is subsequently decontextualised.¹⁵⁹⁶

Ashbery replicates the same effect through the poetic structure of *Hotel Lautréamont*. Mazur indicates that Ashbery’s hotel metaphor is a “perfect definition of a pantoum”, with its “rigid order” of repeated lines.¹⁵⁹⁷ However, whilst Mazur focuses on the cumulative impact of repetition, these reiterations conceivably serve an additional purpose. Though the words remain the same, the pantoum’s interwoven pattern of repeating refrains creates differences in meaning. Lines are de-contextualised or re-contextualised throughout the text, an effect which Ashbery reinforces through subtle shifts in punctuation and grammar. One example can be found in the final line of stanza eleven:

When all we think of is how much we can carry with us
small wonder that those at home sit, nervous, by the unlit grate.
All the behemoths have filed through the maze of time.
It remains for us to come to terms with *our* commonalty.¹⁵⁹⁸

In this first iteration, the line is end-stopped, presented as a complete, declarative statement. “*Our* commonalty” is depicted as a *fait accompli*, one which we must inevitably accept. Gilbert stresses the ballad’s collective nature, as works were “shaped and marked over time” by “passing through the mouths of many reciters”.¹⁵⁹⁹ This accounts for the “faceless anonymity that literary tradition has ascribed to ballad authorship”, with the majority of works considered to have no true “original author” or, perhaps more accurately, no *single*

¹⁵⁹⁶ Florian Urban, *Tower and Slab* (USA: Routledge, 2011), 2-3.

¹⁵⁹⁷ Mazur, ““Unfamiliar””, 111; 112.

¹⁵⁹⁸ Ashbery, “Hotel”, 15.

¹⁵⁹⁹ Gilbert, “Orality”, 38.

author to which they can be attributed.¹⁶⁰⁰ From the opening lines of “Hotel Lautréamont”, Ashbery ties the poem into this collaborative tradition. The plural “we” which narrates the poem reflects the “collective” voice suggested to have forged it.¹⁶⁰¹ However, when the line reappears in the following stanza, its purpose has shifted, as has the former emphasis on the plural possessive determiner “our”: “It remains for us to come to terms with our commonalty/ and in so doing deprive time of further hostages”.¹⁶⁰² No longer a goal in and of itself, commonality is now presented simply as a means to an end, a necessary inconvenience which must be endured in order to escape the so-called “[hostage]” situation the speakers find themselves in. The prior requirement that we “come to terms” with our situation suggests a degree of difficulty in accepting our circumstances before our inevitable resignation. That inner struggle is now rendered tangible, to the extent that “our commonalty” is no longer simply a universal truth but a condition of our continued security. Our collective identity turns insidious as, instead of being a sign of our common interests, it now derives purely from our shared fate as captives.

Whilst this initially appears hyperbolic, an exaggeration of the rigid structure of the poem’s pantoum-cum-hotel, Ashbery’s use of the term “hostages” conceivably serves another, more artful purpose in this context. The term hostage is derived from the Old French “(h)ostage”,¹⁶⁰³ which the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists as an etymological root not only for the words “host”¹⁶⁰⁴ and “hospitality”,¹⁶⁰⁵ but for the word “hotel”¹⁶⁰⁶ itself (“hostage” being an antiquated word for a “hostelry or inn”¹⁶⁰⁷). In this interpretation, Ashbery’s hotel

¹⁶⁰⁰ Gilbert, “Orality”, 43; 38.

¹⁶⁰¹ Ashbery, “Hotel”, 14.

¹⁶⁰² Ashbery, “Hotel”, 14.

¹⁶⁰³ “hostage” n.2, *OED*, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/88751?rskey=GTLqpl&result=3#eid> (Accessed 02/01/2020).

¹⁶⁰⁴ “host”, n.2, *OED*, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/88744#eid1316038> (Accessed 02/01/2020).

¹⁶⁰⁵ “hospitality”, n. *OED*, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/88730?redirectedFrom=hospitality#eid> (Accessed 02/01/2020).

¹⁶⁰⁶ “hotel”, n. *OED*, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/88802?rskey=zNT3dT&result=1#eid> (Accessed 02/01/2020).

¹⁶⁰⁷ “hostage”, *OED*.

metaphor is inverted. Just as the speakers' commonality turns against them, the hotel's inherent hospitality twists the structure to a more sinister purpose. Its drive to accommodate and shelter its guests intensifies to the point that it becomes a veritable prison. Ashbery's hospitality is therefore double-edged, offering the promise of shelter whilst at the same time entrapping and constraining the hotel's occupants. Ashbery utilises the structure of the pantoum, with its repetitions and variations, as a tool to create further meaning. The poem mimics the way ballads would traditionally shift and change with the telling, a work's "evolution over time [...] reflecting the individual ballad maker's [or reciter's] input".¹⁶⁰⁸ Ashbery's hotel residents correspondingly demonstrate a "growing awareness of being conditioned by a larger limiting scheme".¹⁶⁰⁹ Just as the pantoum operates as an artificial container of the poem, the reader becomes increasingly aware of the artificial structure containing its speakers. The "physical world becomes a part of the poem" and vice versa, with communal architecture leading to collective identity.¹⁶¹⁰

5.2.2. "The new flatness": the question of depth and the breakdown of structure.

The form of "Hotel Lautréamont" is a reflection of Ashbery's wider hotel metaphor: an overarching structure which strives to maintain and unite a multitude of meanings and individual elements. As Mazur writes, Ashbery's "hotel metaphor is [...] a perfect definition of a pantoum", as both can ultimately be characterised as "a structured way of letting rooms to different voices".¹⁶¹¹ Yet, just as the identity of the individual occupant is lost amongst the plurality of multi-unit architecture, the single voice is ultimately subsumed by the cacophony of the crowd. Although the poet may use the pantoum's reiterating structure to create

¹⁶⁰⁸ Gilbert, "Orality", 42.

¹⁶⁰⁹ Bartczak, *Search*, 56,

¹⁶¹⁰ Bartczak, *Search*, 57-58.

¹⁶¹¹ Mazur, "'Unfamiliar'", 111.

meaning it may also simultaneously destabilise it. As Peter Stitt writes of Ashbery's experiments with poetic form, "most of these poems gradually lose in coherence of meaning what they maintain in rigor of form".¹⁶¹² Lines lose their original, or individual, significance in new and different contexts as "the highly controlled form of precisely recurring repetitions is likely to produce meanings which are absurd or unintelligible".¹⁶¹³ The effect would have been intriguing to Ashbery who, less than a decade after *Hotel Lautréamont*, published a collection entitled *Chinese Whispers* (2001). Just as messages passed between people inevitably degrade or breakdown, the poetic structure of "Hotel Lautréamont" eventually "sinks into dementia, proving narrative passé".¹⁶¹⁴ The poem's content mirrors the instability of its form, and its own "inability to be definitive" as a result.¹⁶¹⁵ In this respect, Ashbery is not only inspired by the "structure of hotels", but uses that structure to create ambiguity and ultimately undermine the disciplined pattern which the pantoum traditionally represents. "Hotel Lautréamont" conceivably showcases not structure itself but the eventual failure of that structure, and the inevitable collapse of control into disorder. The poem's form also creates a sense of stagnation, representing a lack of progression and an inability to move on. Whilst "the titles of Ashbery's books preceding [*Hotel Lautréamont*] all imply movement", the image of a hotel implies "a stop, even if a temporary one".¹⁶¹⁶ This is echoed by the structure of the pantoum, with any forward momentum soon subverted by the pattern of repetition, and any sense of stable meaning compromised by newfound ambiguity. Vincent suggests that this "stationariness" is "the most cogent reason the poem is named after a hotel".¹⁶¹⁷ However, he also suggests that this emphasises the lack of "commonality between Ashbery and Ducasse's work", especially given that Ashbery's tribute to Lautréamont takes

¹⁶¹² Peter Stitt, *Uncertainty and Plenitude* (USA: Iowa UP, 1997), 23.

¹⁶¹³ Mazur, "'Unfamiliar'", 114.

¹⁶¹⁴ Ashbery, "Hotel", 14.

¹⁶¹⁵ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 76.

¹⁶¹⁶ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 74.

¹⁶¹⁷ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 80.

the strict form of a pantoum rather than the more free-form “prose poem” that Lautréamont was known for.¹⁶¹⁸ Yet, through his use of poetic structure, Ashbery arguably emulates the very ambience of chaos which Lautréamont reportedly strove for in his work: that of a “continually derailed monologue” and the inevitable “decay of narrative”.¹⁶¹⁹

This dichotomy, between structure and the lack of structure, is reflected in the cover art of the collection, which Ashbery specifically “chose for the book jacket” because it “seemed to be looking out of a window – or into a window, you can’t tell which” (see appendix 1).¹⁶²⁰ The collage in question, *Untitled* (c.1930) by the 20th-century American artist Joseph Cornell, depicts an aperture in a stone façade, through which the night sky, clouded with falling snow, is visible. This perspective initially leads the viewer to believe they have been positioned inside a building. Yet the collage’s foreground, the building’s supposed interior, is inconsistent with this, buried in the same heavy snow which falls beyond the window itself. This is reminiscent of Collins-Cromley’s description of mass-dwellings as fundamentally “deceptive architecture”.¹⁶²¹ Cornell’s piece initially offers the promise of structure and stability. However, when we look closer, the reality of that structure is called into question, just as Everett indicates that the hotel of *Hotel Lautréamont*’s title “adverts to the actual only to deny its immediate utility”.¹⁶²² Ashbery suggested that these features gave the piece a distinctly “hotel-like feel”,¹⁶²³ its spatial ambiguities being appropriate for a collection which he characterised as embodying “the new flatness”.¹⁶²⁴ His description of the hotel as a form of one-dimensional “neutral space” or non-space arguably reflects the lack of emotional and personal connection between hotel and resident (what critics such as Groth

¹⁶¹⁸ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 74.

¹⁶¹⁹ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 74; 76.

¹⁶²⁰ Herd, “Conversation”.

¹⁶²¹ Collins-Cromley, *Alone*, 20.

¹⁶²² Everett, “Book”.

¹⁶²³ Herd, “Conversation”.

¹⁶²⁴ John Ashbery, “The Youth’s Magic Horn”, *HL*, 87.

term the hotel or apartment complex's architecture of "anonymity").¹⁶²⁵ This interpretation stresses the hotel's nature as superficial or purely functional space, the absence of literal depth and dimension symbolising the structure's corresponding lack of figurative profundity. However, such comments further indicate that the poet conceived of the collection, and by extension his own hotel metaphor, in both poetic and architectural terms. Architectural structure serves as a metaphor for narrative structure, and vice versa. In the same way that Everett foregrounds the lack of linear development throughout both *Hotel Lautréamont* and its title poem, the hotel's "flatness" perceivably symbolises this lack of narrative depth. As Vincent writes, "the hotel is flat, just a wall with a window, [which] seems to speak not so much to the idea that meaning escapes us but to the notion that the comfort of shelter escapes the poet in his medium".¹⁶²⁶ This is reflected in Cornell's own series of "'hotel' boxes", "constructions" which Ashbery cited as a direct influence not only on *Hotel Lautréamont* but his broader hotel metaphor.¹⁶²⁷ In his 1967 review "Cornell: the Cube Root of Dreams", Ashbery indicates that Cornell's "bare, quasi-constructivist 'hotels'" encapsulate the "impression we have of [a place] before going there": architecture brought to the level of "abstraction".¹⁶²⁸ Ashbery's hotel metaphor and Cornell's "hotels/boxes"¹⁶²⁹ arguably draw from the same "idea of a hotel".¹⁶³⁰ Both are suggested to embody "absences" rather than presence, or concepts of non-space rather than space.¹⁶³¹ In much the way that *Hotel Lautréamont*, it has been argued, is not truly about hotels, in Cornell's boxes "the named object does not appear in the construction".¹⁶³² Rather, in their depictions of "inside out" or

¹⁶²⁵ Groth, *Living Downtown*, 231.

¹⁶²⁶ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 82.

¹⁶²⁷ John Ashbery, "Cornell: The Square Root of Dreams", *Art News* (Summer, 1967), RS, 15.

¹⁶²⁸ Ashbery, "Cornell", 16-17; 15; 17.

¹⁶²⁹ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 72.

¹⁶³⁰ Elisabeth Bell, "Hyperboxes, Hyped Boxes, Über-Boxes", *American Book Review* (03/2003), 11-12.

¹⁶³¹ Bell, "Hyperboxes", 11-12.

¹⁶³² Bell, "Hyperboxes", 11-12.

“imaginary architecture”, both Ashbery and Cornell leave it to the reader or “spectator to complete the associations”.¹⁶³³

5.3. “For they said we are all one here”: the architecture of the collective.

Whilst, on the surface, “Hotel Lautréamont” may not appear to be “about hotels”, a close reading of the text demonstrates that Ashbery uses the poem to evoke many of the themes associated with his hotel metaphor, including multiplicity, commonality, and collectivity. “Many hands are making work light again”, the poem declares, the speakers (or hotel inhabitants) described as not only “working as a team” but operating “as one”.¹⁶³⁴ The poem is narrated by an “all and self-inclusive we”, suggested to be the result of the same collaboration and commonality it portrays.¹⁶³⁵ As Bartczak writes, “the poem’s form becomes both the limit of the world that Ashbery’s poetic selves occupy and a condition that enables these selves to take shape”.¹⁶³⁶ However, this collective voice appears directly tied to the image of the hotel itself, as the speakers only remain as a united “we” as long as they “stay indoors”.¹⁶³⁷ Their mass identity is dependent upon their continued residence within the multi-unit architecture of the hotel itself. “If we tried to leave”, the narrator wonders, what would become of “us?”¹⁶³⁸ The answer soon becomes apparent. As the hotel residents “emerge into the open”, the collective, first person plural pronoun begins to splinter.¹⁶³⁹ Even then, the poem’s narrative voice ultimately fails to declare its own individuality, as it remains unable to achieve a singular identity or sense of selfhood. However, whilst the independent

¹⁶³³ Bell, “Hyperboxes”, 11-12.

¹⁶³⁴ Ashbery, “Hotel”, 14.

¹⁶³⁵ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 78.

¹⁶³⁶ Bartczak, *Search*, 15.

¹⁶³⁷ Ashbery, “Hotel”, 15.

¹⁶³⁸ Ashbery, “Hotel”, 15.

¹⁶³⁹ Ashbery, “Hotel”, 15.

‘I’ continues to be absent, a new, distinct presence emerges in the penultimate stanza: “you”.¹⁶⁴⁰ Theoretically, this transition to the second person pronouns “you or “your” could be read as either plural or singular, given the poem’s overall focus both on collective identity and ambiguity.¹⁶⁴¹ Siltanen writes at length about the “openness of the pronoun *you*” in Ashbery’s work, as a frequently ambiguous form of address which may variously refer to the reader, an unidentified, “poem-internal ‘other’” (whether plural or singular) or even “several [different] *you*’s” simultaneously.¹⁶⁴² This theory holds intriguing implications for a consideration of commonality and collective identity in “Hotel Lautréamont” and Ashbery’s poetry more generally. Nonetheless, in the specific context of the poem’s final stanzas, the pronoun appears to refer to the singular, as the “many hands” which once forged the narrative coalesce into a single palm against an individual “forehead”.¹⁶⁴³ To stray from the hotel is to break away from the collective “we” which describes its inhabitants. However, it is also to be “thrust ever onward, into perversity”: to deviate from that which is universally accepted (or expected).¹⁶⁴⁴ The journey towards individuality is portrayed as an act of deviance: a degeneration of the ideals the collective strives for. The narrators consequently lament that “we must have made some ghastly error” in departing from the structure.¹⁶⁴⁵ The narrative is reversed as, in an act likened to embracing a “rose, [and] recommending its thorns”, the one-time “hostages” voluntarily re-sequester themselves in the collective of the hotel.¹⁶⁴⁶ Even the “you” which emerged in the penultimate stanza does not escape this fate, as the repeating refrain of the pantoum’s final quatrain once again integrates it back into the overlying, cumulative structure of the poem’s metaphorical “hotel”. In the closing line, the poem comes

¹⁶⁴⁰ Ashbery, “Hotel”, 16.

¹⁶⁴¹ Ashbery, “Hotel”, 16.

¹⁶⁴² Siltanen, *Experimentalism*, 54; 56.

¹⁶⁴³ Ashbery, “Hotel”, 16.

¹⁶⁴⁴ Ashbery, “Hotel”, 16.

¹⁶⁴⁵ Ashbery, “Hotel”, 16.

¹⁶⁴⁶ Ashbery, “Hotel”, 16.

full circle, both literally and figuratively, as it reiterates the sentiment of its opening stanza: “The people, then, knew what they wanted and how to get it”.¹⁶⁴⁷ In an allegory of multi-unit architecture, which seeks to impose a structure on the heterogenous population housed within, Ashbery uses the poetic structure of “Hotel Lautréamont” to corral the poem’s once wayward inhabitants.

5.3.1: “We are part of some system”: Concepts of community.

In the same manner that Collins-Cromley stresses the role that multi-unit architecture plays in “bringing people into contact with each other”, Ashbery repeatedly foregrounds the inherently communal nature of such buildings.¹⁶⁴⁸ As he writes in the titular poem of *Rivers and Mountains*, these structures are fundamentally “collective places”, designed to accommodate the “vast mass of today’s” population.¹⁶⁴⁹ Even once private “homes” morph into “mass” dwellings as “thousands of people” “pack” themselves between their “walls”.¹⁶⁵⁰ This hyperbolises the high-density nature of the modern residential environment. However, in “The Skaters”, which Bartczak refers to as Ashbery’s “apartment poem”, the poet presents us with a particularised portrait of an individual apartment and its occupant:¹⁶⁵¹ “Helga, in the miniscule apartment in Jersey City”.¹⁶⁵² The specificity of this description contrasts with the poet’s characterisation of mass-dwellings as emblems of the many rather than the individual. However, as the speaker soon reveals, the image of Helga and the apartment is arguably representative of the wider themes of the poem as a whole. “It is time

¹⁶⁴⁷ Ashbery, “Hotel”, 16.

¹⁶⁴⁸ Collins-Cromley, *Alone*, 20.

¹⁶⁴⁹ John Ashbery, “Rivers and Mountains”, *CP*, 127; 126.

¹⁶⁵⁰ Ashbery, “Rivers”, 127; 126; 126; 126; 126.

¹⁶⁵¹ Bartczak, *Search*, 31.

¹⁶⁵² Ashbery, “Skaters”, 171.

now for a general understanding of/ The meaning of all this. The meaning of Helga, importance of the setting, etc”.¹⁶⁵³

This matter of “setting”, Ashbery maintains, is “the subject of this poem”, or rather, it is an integral “portion of the subject”.¹⁶⁵⁴ The latter description, or more precisely the qualification it represents, reflects the conventional view of apartments and mass-dwellings as incomplete or of little intrinsic value. Indeed, despite the widespread critical acknowledgement of the poem’s apartment imagery, the implications and “importance” of this “setting” have not been considered for the poem as a whole. For a poet whose work is frequently suggested to exhibit deliberate “resistance [...] to analysis”,¹⁶⁵⁵ the declaration that such images hold an underlying “meaning” is unusual, especially given that Ashbery traditionally encouraged readers to accept his poems “for what there is on the surface, without searching their ‘depth’ for hidden meanings”.¹⁶⁵⁶ This description is particularly relevant to “The Skaters”, which derives its title from the “metaphor of the mind not penetrating the world, but moving along its surfaces”.¹⁶⁵⁷ In this manner, Ashbery returns to the same negotiation between surface and depth, implied profundity and revealed superficiality, which led him to characterise *Hotel Lautréamont* as “the new flatness”. He appears to perceive meaning in spatial or even quasi-architectural terms, that which he calls the “extra dimension” of the poem: “as long as the reader is aware that there is something ‘more [...],’ and then is tempted to find out what”, to “go deeper”, “this is just a way of conveying more meaning”.¹⁶⁵⁸ In this context, we cannot be certain if Ashbery is being sincere or tongue-in-cheek in telling us that “these things are of some importance”.¹⁶⁵⁹

¹⁶⁵³ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 172.

¹⁶⁵⁴ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 172.

¹⁶⁵⁵ Hickman, *John Ashbery*, 116.

¹⁶⁵⁶ Bartczak, *Search*, 219

¹⁶⁵⁷ Bartczak, *Search*, 31.

¹⁶⁵⁸ Bartczak, *Search*, 219; 220.

¹⁶⁵⁹ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 161.

Nonetheless, he encourages us to consider that the traditionally nondescript apartment could be invested with a deeper meaning. Under the burden of this alleged significance, both Helga and her apartment take on the form of “emblemized” or “representational figures”.¹⁶⁶⁰ The specific image of a single occupant and their apartment space is actively generalised. The individual becomes the “all”, standing as a symbol for the more “general” or widespread relationship between apartment and apartment-dweller.

In similar mode to the poet’s other depictions of multi-unit architecture, “The Skaters” emphasises apartments as essentially “collective places”: as sites designed to house “a multitude”, in which people naturally collect or “congregate”.¹⁶⁶¹ The apartment building is described as “the cement mixer”, a metaphor which stresses both the concrete construction of the complex itself and the “mixed situation” it houses within.¹⁶⁶² This reflects the duality of “cohesion and difference” which Collins-Cromley states mass-housing ultimately manifests.¹⁶⁶³ In the same way that Ashbery characterises multi-unit architecture based on its “many rooms” and the “many different kinds of people all doing different things” inside, “The Skaters” emphasises the inherent heterogeneity which apartments symbolise. The building mirrors the “varied assortment” of its occupants.¹⁶⁶⁴ However, rather than contrast these disparate elements, it brings them together into a larger whole. As the speaker divulges, “the more assorted they are, the/ Vaster [the] experience” the apartment complex is able to integrate within itself.¹⁶⁶⁵ The structure encompasses “the lives of many individuals”.¹⁶⁶⁶ However, though this may stress its inherent diversity, it also erodes the divide between the multitude and the one, or the individual and the collective. Like the pantoum of “Hotel

¹⁶⁶⁰ Laurent Milesi, “Figuring out Ashbery”, *Revue d’Etudes Américaines* (01/1996), 46; 45.

¹⁶⁶¹ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 163; 165.

¹⁶⁶² Ashbery, “Skaters”, 149; 166.

¹⁶⁶³ Collins-Cromley, *Alone*, 8.

¹⁶⁶⁴ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 153.

¹⁶⁶⁵ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 153.

¹⁶⁶⁶ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 171.

Lautréamont”, the complex constitutes a “pre-existing” structure, “into which being enters, and is apart”.¹⁶⁶⁷ Yet, though the occupant stresses their continued ability to exist “apart”, Ashbery suggests that the very act of entering a structure which is “ma[de] for masses” compromises that independence.¹⁶⁶⁸ Immediately they are transformed from “one” to “one of us”.¹⁶⁶⁹ This exemplifies the inherent duality of isolation and community which apartments signify, in much the same way that Ashbery described feeling alone whilst in a crowded sublet, or “The Ecclesiast” claims we may simultaneously be “together [yet] far apart” within the “many walls” of the “sunflower”. Multi-unit architecture may divide or unite those who dwell within it interchangeably, as either a literal symbol of “your living apart”, or of one’s “being/ connected”.¹⁶⁷⁰

To live in its collective structure is therefore to exist in a state of simultaneous interconnection and disconnection, a dualism which “The Skaters” reflects through its extended analogy of the “apartment” as a “desert island”.¹⁶⁷¹ On numerous occasions the speaker refers to their dwelling as “this island” – a space which reflects their isolation within the built environment.¹⁶⁷² This depicts their solitude as a direct result of the apartment-cum-island itself, from which they “feel cut off from the life in the streets”.¹⁶⁷³ However, this concept is soon undermined when we are presented not only with “another island-dweller” but an entire “island economy”.¹⁶⁷⁴ The so-called desert island, traditionally a symbol of solitariness, is revealed to be “crowded”, leading the speaker to admit that “In reality of course the middle-class apartment I live in is/ nothing like a desert island”.¹⁶⁷⁵ This statement appears to reference “Meditation XVII” (1624) by the Metaphysical poet John Donne: “No

¹⁶⁶⁷ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 147.

¹⁶⁶⁸ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 147.

¹⁶⁶⁹ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 147.

¹⁶⁷⁰ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 166; 163.

¹⁶⁷¹ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 171.

¹⁶⁷² Ashbery, “Skaters”, 170.

¹⁶⁷³ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 171.

¹⁶⁷⁴ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 171; 159.

¹⁶⁷⁵ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 171.

man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main".¹⁶⁷⁶ As Nancy Selleck concludes, Donne's words express a sense of "fundamental connection", expanding "beyond the individual" to encompass "all mankind".¹⁶⁷⁷ Even the single self is reliant on the larger collective, to the extent that "any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde".¹⁶⁷⁸ To live is to be inherently connected. In this regard, Selleck indicates that the poem's message can be summarised by another of Donne's maxims: "nothing singular, nothing alone".¹⁶⁷⁹

In this context, Ashbery inverts the image of the island or apartment from one of isolation and disconnection to one of connectivity and community. As Herd writes, even the apartment dweller's concept of isolation is reliant on the idea of a wider collective, as it reveals their "defining sense of self [ultimately] as something porous and so dependent on others".¹⁶⁸⁰ As the speaker of "The Skaters" states, "None of this makes a difference to professional exiles like me, and that includes everybody in the place".¹⁶⁸¹ The state of exile traditionally implies a sense of isolation as it indicates displacement from one's native land (or, in the context of this analysis, dwelling space): that which the speaker defines as home. Consequently, the identity of those exiled is predominantly defined by the place in which they no longer reside, much as the poem primarily characterises the residents of "hotels" as "refugees" from "the house".¹⁶⁸² The state of exile applies to "everybody in the place". Residence in the complex marks one as uprooted or decontextualised from one's original setting in

¹⁶⁷⁶ John Donne, "Meditation XVII", *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. John Sparrow (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1923), 98.

¹⁶⁷⁷ Nancy Selleck, "Donne's Body", *Studies in English Literature* (Winter, 2001), 166; 171; 170.

¹⁶⁷⁸ Donne, "Meditation", 98.

¹⁶⁷⁹ Selleck, "Donne's Body", 166.

¹⁶⁸⁰ Herd, *John Ashbery*, 108.

¹⁶⁸¹ Ashbery, "Skaters", 171.

¹⁶⁸² Ashbery, "Skaters", 159, 159, 177.

much the same way that “guests” in the “Hotel” are disconnected from their native environment.¹⁶⁸³ The trope of the desert island is rendered architectural. However, the result is not separation but commonality, as the “crowded” structure unites those inside in a shared experience of exile. Concepts of community are suggested to be spatially or architecturally defined. To inhabit the collective construction of the apartment building is to be surrounded by others “like me”, in much the same way as the idea of a collection implies a shared identity which unites the things being collected. To this end, the poet indicates that multi-unit architecture represents both literal and figurative “common” ground, a space in which “You will wear the same clothes, and your friends will still want to see you for the same reasons – you fill a definite place in their lives, and they would be sorry to see you go”¹⁶⁸⁴

Relationships are navigated through architecture, and even our individual role within the community is depicted in spatial terms. Our occupancy of the apartment complex is equated with the significance we hold in our neighbors’ lives, as the building’s multi-unit structure becomes a metaphor for the network of personal connections which unite its inhabitants. The residents are described as “partners” in dwelling, as though the act of occupancy is sufficient to create a sense of intimacy. Neighbors become an integral “part of you the minute they appear” simply by residing in the shared space of the complex.¹⁶⁸⁵ People actively seek out human contact through mass-dwelling, in order to achieve a sense of

being

connected [...]

You can talk to your friend in the next room, or around

¹⁶⁸³ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 176; 157.

¹⁶⁸⁴ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 172.

¹⁶⁸⁵ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 150; 173.

corners.¹⁶⁸⁶

5.3.2. “Washes/ my pure identity from me”: The diminishment of the individual.

Ashbery characterises apartment buildings not only as inherently “collective places” but also connective ones, which facilitate “vital contact” and “connections” among their inhabitants.¹⁶⁸⁷ This is especially evident when contrasted with an existence spent “separate” or “alone in [the] house”.¹⁶⁸⁸ “In My Way/ On My Way” (*Hotel Lautréamont*) labels houses as fundamentally “selfish buildings”: solely concerned with (and designed for) the individual self to the exclusion of all others.¹⁶⁸⁹ This represents the opposite of the “accommodating” architecture which Ashbery suggests multi-unit buildings such as hotels and apartments represent, to the extent that, in their pursuit of the apartment building, Ashbery’s speakers are suggested to be seeking not only mass-dwelling but collectivity itself. This is reflected by the speaker of “A Blessing in Disguise” (*Rivers and Mountains*), who not only equates “I” with “isolation” but repeatedly calls out to the collective “you” to save “me from myself”.¹⁶⁹⁰ They wish to be liberated from their solitude, but also their inherent singularity and individuality: “I prefer ‘you’ in the plural, I want ‘you’”.¹⁶⁹¹ This multitudinous mindset is conceivably a direct reflection of mass-dwelling. Herd labels the “apartment” complex of “The Skaters” as the “explicit setting for most of the poems in [*Rivers and Mountains*]”.¹⁶⁹² Indeed, the speaker of “The Skaters” voices a similar longing for plurality: a sense of “knowing myself/ insufficient”.¹⁶⁹³ However, the price of collectivity is the loss of individual

¹⁶⁸⁶ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 163.

¹⁶⁸⁷ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 160.

¹⁶⁸⁸ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 177.

¹⁶⁸⁹ John Ashbery, “In My Way/ On My Way”, *HL*, 133.

¹⁶⁹⁰ John Ashbery, “A Blessing in Disguise”, *CP*, 139.

¹⁶⁹¹ Ashbery, “Blessing”, 139.

¹⁶⁹² Herd, *John Ashbery*, 104.

¹⁶⁹³ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 148.

identity and the capacity for independent thought. “So much has passed through my mind [...] That I can give you but a dim account”, the speaker states, to the extent that they become increasingly uncertain of their own existence (“I have a dim intuition that I am”).¹⁶⁹⁴ The mind and self appear so overwhelmed that eventually they begin to break down entirely. First memory is compromised (“I cannot remember”), then thought (“I cannot think any more”), before the individual self finally realises it has degraded beyond all hope of repair (“I am condemned”).¹⁶⁹⁵

As Ashbery writes in “Cop and Sweater” (*Hotel Lautréamont*), “we have no mind:/ each of us has sampled so many of the others”, to the extent that the “individual” has been washed away by the flood of “the universal”.¹⁶⁹⁶ However, the poet asserts that this loss of the individual self is due not only to collective identity, but the impersonal nature of apartment-dwelling. As he writes in “The Skaters”:

But there’s no personal involvement:
 These sudden bursts of hot and cold
 Are wreathed in shadowless intensity
 Whose moment saps them of all characteristics.¹⁶⁹⁷

Rather than an individualised home space, the apartment is described as a featureless “cube repeated”, simply “one in an infinite series” of identical units.¹⁶⁹⁸ However, the same could equally be said of those who occupy the apartment complex. The apartment is so impersonal that the identity of the individual resident is compromised merely by living there, as it “saps

¹⁶⁹⁴ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 149.

¹⁶⁹⁵ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 147; 153; 156.

¹⁶⁹⁶ John Ashbery, “Cop and Sweater”, *HL*, 22; 22; 23.

¹⁶⁹⁷ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 155.

¹⁶⁹⁸ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 152; 147.

them of all characteristics". This inverts the ostensible relationship between a person and their dwelling space. Rather than adapting to reflect the personality of its occupant, the apartment actively drains them of all individuality. If home is a reflection of the self, Ashbery indicates, then mass-dwellings erode the individual selfhood of their inhabitants, until they come to resemble the featureless architecture of the building which houses them. As the speaker reflects, "My cheeks as blank walls", their body literally merging with the anonymous structure in which they dwell.¹⁶⁹⁹ In the same manner that those who inhabit the "The Old Complex" are "reduced" to a homogenous "paste", to live in the apartment of "The Skaters" is to have one's distinguishing personality traits erased. These are suggested to represent a "dissonant" note in an otherwise "melodious" symphony, the individual likened to a single, untuned "musical instrument" which threatens to reduce the entire "performance" to an "awful/ pandemonium".¹⁷⁰⁰ This embodies the same wish to impose order over disorder, or homogeneity over heterogeneity, represented by the pantoum form of "Hotel Lautréamont". In this interpretation, the structure of the apartment complex is the "metronome" which regulates the individual "notes" or occupants.¹⁷⁰¹ All deviations from the pattern must be eradicated, to the extent that the ultimate goal is suggested to be not harmony, but "monotony" – a single, sustained note repeated ad infinitum.¹⁷⁰²

Whilst Stitt echoes the widespread view that "Ashbery writes about everything and nothing" simultaneously,¹⁷⁰³ it may be more accurate to state that his poetry covers "everything in general and nothing in particular".¹⁷⁰⁴ The individual is suggested to represent the "particular, part of the welling that is you".¹⁷⁰⁵ However, just as the individual is

¹⁶⁹⁹ Ashbery, "Skaters", 149.

¹⁷⁰⁰ Ashbery, "Skaters", 149.

¹⁷⁰¹ Ashbery, "Skaters", 149.

¹⁷⁰² Ashbery, "Skaters", 172.

¹⁷⁰³ Stitt, *Uncertainty*, 14.

¹⁷⁰⁴ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 178.

¹⁷⁰⁵ Ashbery, "Skaters", 148.

subsumed by the collective, these particular details become lost in the larger generality. In attempting to encompass everyone, Ashbery indicates that we ultimately succeed only in identifying nobody, or rather no one in particular. As David Bergman writes “to be everything is to be nothing”.¹⁷⁰⁶ “Korean Soap Opera” (*Hotel Lautréamont*) equates this form of “communal” or “composite portrait” to literal “self-abolishment”, as it serves only in “making of me nothing”.¹⁷⁰⁷ In a similar fashion, throughout the course of “The Skaters”, the “one” is degraded to the vaguer “someone” or “anyone”, or even outright negated to “no one”.¹⁷⁰⁸ As the speaker questions “How much of any one person is there?”¹⁷⁰⁹ “How much of any one of us survives?”¹⁷¹⁰ Whilst the apartment building houses “many individuals”, they are revealed to hold no independent significance outside of the collective whole:

in the form of falling snow:

That is, the individual flakes are not essential to the
 importance of the whole’s becoming so much of a truism
 That their importance is again called into question, to be
 denied further out, and again and again like this.
 Hence, neither the importance of the individual flake,
 Nor the importance of the whole impression of the storm, if
 it has any, is what it is.¹⁷¹¹

¹⁷⁰⁶ David Bergman, “Our Fathers: Gender and Identity in Whitman, Ashbery and Richard Howard”, *American Literary History* (Summer 1989), 387.

¹⁷⁰⁷ John Ashbery, “Korean Soap Opera”, *HL*, 79; 79; 78.

¹⁷⁰⁸ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 147; 154; 157; 157.

¹⁷⁰⁹ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 155.

¹⁷¹⁰ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 147.

¹⁷¹¹ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 153.

Ashbery encapsulates the relationship between the “individual” and the “whole” through the metaphor of a snowflake. Each is unique, endlessly variable in structure and design. However, Ashbery suggests, this distinctiveness is ultimately irrelevant. A single snowflake holds no real significance amongst the swirling masses of the storm and, regardless of their individual singularity, all are inevitably consumed by it, leaving no “impression” behind. A symbol of that which is individual is therefore subsumed by the collective, as that which is distinct, or distinctive, is reduced to something nebulous and indefinite: “From abstract [...] to a slightly less diluted abstract”.¹⁷¹² That which is individual, “The Skaters” indicates, ultimately becomes indistinguishable amongst the cumulative mass of the many, what Vincent describes as an “absorption into a generality that knows it is general and therefore sees no need to be particular”.¹⁷¹³ Unable to ascertain individual characteristics, the best we can hope to achieve is a cumulative “impression”: that which Ashbery describes as the underlying “rhythm of the series”.¹⁷¹⁴ Once again, the term “series” could apply to either apartment or occupant, both being represented as part of a larger, collective structure. In much the same way that the snowflake is considered in the context of the storm, the individual is categorised according to the same pattern of regular, repeated or prominent qualities which characterise “the most distinct part of the whole”. In this interpretation, the collective represents the average, baseline identity of all the individual elements of which it is composed.

5.3.2. “Unstated Circumference”: the dichotomy of assimilation and exclusion.

¹⁷¹² Ashbery, “Skaters”, 153.

¹⁷¹³ Vincent, *John Ashbery*, 76.

¹⁷¹⁴ Ashbery, “Skaters”, 153.

Apartments are associated with “standardisation”: what Nelson terms the cliché of “the one-size-fits all” environment, designed for the “stereotypical Mr and Mrs Average”.¹⁷¹⁵ In the context of the relationship between multi-unit architecture and identity, the individual or personal is subsumed by the universal. This fits into Ashbery’s general reputation for vagueness, or what Andrew Epstein refers to as the “quintessential Ashberyan vague allegory”, in which what is specific is “generalized and depersonalised so as to have the widest possible application”.¹⁷¹⁶ However, through themes of collectivity or communality, Ashbery’s work also draws on “experiences that, the poet hopes, are universal”: aspects of individual experience which, although specific, are nonetheless commonly shared by the vast majority of people.¹⁷¹⁷ In this respect, he stresses the collective nature of human experience, private or otherwise, by “alluding to common experiences which everybody has”.¹⁷¹⁸ We see this in the poet’s comments on “Soonest Mended” (*The Double Dream of Spring*), which he stated was “about my youth and maturing but also about anybody else’s”.¹⁷¹⁹ “I’ve often characterised it as my ‘One-Size-Fits-All Confessional Poem’. Since it’s not really about me but about [...] what Gertrude Stein called ‘everybody’s autobiography’”.¹⁷²⁰ Ashbery’s reference to Stein holds intriguing implications in this context, given that Stein wrote *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) in the guise of an autobiography authored by Toklas herself. Just as Stein reinterpreted and parodied ideas of autobiography, Ashbery contrasts and combines concepts of the general and the specific, the personal and the impersonal, the “all and the none”,¹⁷²¹ or the autobiographical and what he terms the “anti-biographical”.¹⁷²²

¹⁷¹⁵ Nelson, *Small*, 60.

¹⁷¹⁶ Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies* (UK: Oxford UP, 2006), 159.

¹⁷¹⁷ MacArthur, *American*, 148.

¹⁷¹⁸ John Murphy, “John Ashbery”, *Poetry Review* (08/1985), 21.

¹⁷¹⁹ Murphy, “John Ashbery”, 25.

¹⁷²⁰ John Tranter, “John Ashbery in Conversation”, (05/1988), *Jacket Magazine* <http://jacketmagazine.com/02/jaiv1988.html> (Accessed 02/02/03).

¹⁷²¹ Stitt, *Uncertainty*, 14.

¹⁷²² MacArthur, *American*, 148.

As Ashbery stated in a 1981 interview with the poet Alfred Poulin Jr., “What I’m trying to get at is a general, all-purpose experience – like those stretch socks that fit all sizes”.¹⁷²³

Chapter 6. “Unimportant details”: John Ashbery’s suburbia.

In July 1952, John Ashbery and fellow poet James Schuyler were travelling along New York State’s Sunrise Highway.¹⁷²⁴ To stave off boredom, they decided to collaborate on a novel by contributing alternate lines, out loud. As “the exurban landscape”¹⁷²⁵ gave way to what Ashbery described as the “archetypal suburban”¹⁷²⁶ communities of New York City’s outskirts, he contributed the first sentence, “Alice was tired”.¹⁷²⁷ With those words Schuyler and Ashbery embarked “on a project that would keep us entertained for months and years to come”, culminating 17 years later in the publication of *A Nest of Ninnies* (1969).¹⁷²⁸ The pair “worked on the novel sporadically” during get-togethers in New York City.¹⁷²⁹ Nonetheless, that initial journey set the tone for the book as a whole, as both its location and characters were inspired by what was then a still freshly emerging suburban tradition. As David Herd writes, “the ninnies are a group of friends and neighbors, living in the kind of generic American suburb Ashbery and Schuyler were passing through as they began the book”.¹⁷³⁰ Its fictional setting of “Kelton, New York”¹⁷³¹ was based on the real-life suburb of Smithtown,

¹⁷²³ A. Poulin, “The Experience of Experience”, *Michigan Quarterly Review* (Summer 1981), 251.

¹⁷²⁴ See John Ashbery, “Preface”, in John Ashbery and James Schuyler, *A Nest of Ninnies* (USA: Dalkey, 2008), 5. (Hereafter cited as Ashbery, *Nest*).

¹⁷²⁵ Ashbery, “Preface”, 5.

¹⁷²⁶ Ashbery, “Preface”, 5.

¹⁷²⁷ Ashbery, *Nest*, 9.

¹⁷²⁸ Ashbery, “Preface”, 5.

¹⁷²⁹ Ashbery, “Preface”, 6.

¹⁷³⁰ David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (UK: Manchester UP, 2003), 62.

¹⁷³¹ Ashbery, *Nest*, 50.

New York, where the pair had spotted a “suburban white house with green shutters that we decided would be the home of our protagonists”.¹⁷³²

Such details appear to root *A Nest of Ninnies* in the suburban tradition, to the extent that the book’s characters declare it to be an ode to “America and her tragic suburbs!”¹⁷³³ Notwithstanding this emphasis, the novel’s actual depiction of suburban space has not been discussed. This is perhaps not surprising, given that *A Nest of Ninnies* has received markedly little critical attention. In one of the rare articles dedicated to the novel, “Reality Show: Ninnies and the Critics” for *The Jacket Review*, James Wallenstein reflects that, “in light of the considerable scholarship devoted to John Ashbery’s and James Schuyler’s poetry, it may seem odd that little ink has been spilled over their novel”.¹⁷³⁴ He suggests that, due to the widespread view that both writers “are truly poets”, first and foremost, the vast majority of criticism is “devoted to Ashbery’s or Schuyler’s poetics”.¹⁷³⁵ Works in other genres are traditionally treated as secondary, not necessitating a “serious critical response”.¹⁷³⁶ This is particularly the case with *A Nest of Ninnies*, which has repeatedly been dismissed as clichéd and one-dimensional, especially compared to the notorious complexity of Ashbery’s poetry. Wallenstein writes: “Though it is made from the stuff of novels” it does not contain the “stuffing — the characters are stick figures, the settings interchangeable, the episodes without dramatic significance”.¹⁷³⁷ The result, he summarises, is that “those who don’t have to touch *A Nest of Ninnies* tend not to, and those whose projects are too comprehensive to avoid it [...] don’t do much more than touch it”.¹⁷³⁸

¹⁷³² Ashbery, “Preface”, 5.

¹⁷³³ Ashbery, *Nest*, 79.

¹⁷³⁴ James Wallenstein, “Reality Show: *Ninnies* and the Critics” *Jacket* (07/2007), <http://jacketmagazine.com/33/wallenstein-ninnies.shtml> (Accessed 04/01/20).

¹⁷³⁵ Wallenstein, “Reality”.

¹⁷³⁶ Wallenstein, “Reality”.

¹⁷³⁷ Wallenstein, “Reality”.

¹⁷³⁸ Wallenstein, “Reality”.

Little has been done therefore to explore the relationship between the only Ashbery novel ever published and the rest of his work. Even Wallenstein, who proposes that a study of the novel “may be valuable to a consideration of Ashbery’s poetry”, seeks solely to “review [its] critical reception” rather than the text itself.¹⁷³⁹ Neglect of the novel has arguably compounded, and in turn been compounded by, the neglect of suburbia in Ashbery’s poetry, which has itself generally been addressed only in passing. Critics like Barbara Everett have noted the presence of “suburban glimpses” in Ashbery’s poetry.¹⁷⁴⁰ Yet, whilst it is generally acknowledged that Ashbery “considers the suburbs” in his work, few have delved deeper.¹⁷⁴¹ Peter Monacell calls attention to this, stating that “no critic of any stripe has yet offered a thorough account of suburbia’s presence in Ashbery’s work”.¹⁷⁴² As section one of this chapter suggests, this is due in part to the cultural and critical view of suburbia itself. In *Making Sense of Suburbia through Popular Culture*, Rupa Huq writes that “suburbia is [seen as] something of a cultural void” and requires constant “justification in academic circles as [a subject] worthy of being taken seriously”.¹⁷⁴³ This feeds into broader issues regarding suburban poetics within literary criticism. Whilst there have been few in-depth studies of “suburbs and suburban literature” Jo Gill reports that “the poetry of the American suburbs has, as yet, received almost no scholarly scrutiny”.¹⁷⁴⁴

The critical reception of *A Nest of Ninnies* mirrors this prevailing cultural attitude towards suburbia. This chapter takes the novel as a starting point for an exploration of Ashbery’s portrayal of suburbia, as the last of three chapters dedicated to the poet’s depiction of domestic space. Whilst the previous two chapters centred on specific edifices or forms of

¹⁷³⁹ Wallenstein, “Reality”.

¹⁷⁴⁰ Barbara Everett, “Book Review”, *The Independent* (20/02/1993) <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/book-review-blue-snow-and-green-cream-hotel-lautreanmont-john-ashbery-carcenet-795-pounds-1474126.html> (Accessed 20/11/19).

¹⁷⁴¹ Patricia Jones, “The Stories, The Lights: Remembering John Ashbery”, *Bomb* (08/09/2017) <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/remembering-john-ashbery-3/> (Accessed 01/02/20).

¹⁷⁴² Peter Monacell, “John Ashbery and Hyperpastoral Suburbia”, *Contemporary Literature* (Spring 2015), 82.

¹⁷⁴³ Rupa Huq, *Making Sense of Suburbia through Popular Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 6; 3.

¹⁷⁴⁴ Jo Gill, *The Poetics of the American Suburbs* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 11.

residential architecture within the built environment, suburbia is a more diffuse form of residential architecture. In *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, Kenneth Jackson states that there are no agreed-upon criteria for what constitutes suburbia. Rather, the term signifies a wider “residential pattern” within the built environment.¹⁷⁴⁵ Whilst traditional “homes” and even “apartments” have their own “separate, specialized structures”, suburban space represents something far broader, encompassing “the physical organisation of neighborhoods, roads, yards, houses” and so forth.¹⁷⁴⁶

A Nest of Ninnies “is peculiar in that, being co-written by James Schuyler, it is Ashbery's only long collaborative work”.¹⁷⁴⁷ However, this potentially creates issues for those seeking to explore the novel in a context specific to Ashbery, given that the duo not only contributed alternating lines and passages, but “needed to be in each other’s presence” in order to write.¹⁷⁴⁸ As Daniel Kane writes, this method of composition blurred “the boundaries of authorship in the sense that no one line of the novel is identifiable as specifically belonging to either Ashbery or Schuyler”.¹⁷⁴⁹ Indeed, in his 1984 interview with Ross Labrie for *The American Poetry Review*, Ashbery acknowledged that “our voices were really interchangeable [...] there are many passages which neither of us knows which one of us wrote now”.¹⁷⁵⁰ It could thus be argued that “the book’s author is neither Ashbery nor Schuyler”, that it is equally a product of both or that it is the result of a “third entity fashioned in the process of collaboration”.¹⁷⁵¹ Given the purview of this thesis, however, this chapter considers the novel’s portrayal of suburban space solely in relation to Ashbery and his poetry. To this end, whilst *A Nest of Ninnies* is my main source, I also explore the novel in

¹⁷⁴⁵ Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier* (NY: Oxford UP, 1985), 4.

¹⁷⁴⁶ Jackson, *Crabgrass*, 3.

¹⁷⁴⁷ Brian Evenson, “The Art of Curling”, *Conjunctions* (2007), 275.

¹⁷⁴⁸ Ashbery, “Preface”, 6.

¹⁷⁴⁹ Daniel Kane, “‘Angel Hair’ Magazine, the Second-Generation New York School and the Poetics of Sociability”, *Contemporary Literature* (Summer 2004), 351.

¹⁷⁵⁰ John Ashbery and Ross Labrie, “An Interview by Ross Labrie”, *American Poetry Review* (May/June 1984), 30.

¹⁷⁵¹ David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde* (USA: Anchor Books, 1999), 82.

connection with Ashbery's depiction of suburbia in two specific poems, "The One Thing That Can Save America" from *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975) and "Pyrography" from *Houseboat Days* (1977).

Though they stem from different genres of the Ashbery canon, all three of these works were selected due to their emphasis on suburban imagery. As previously stressed, "Nest is peculiar in being the book that Ashbery's critics speak the least about", to the extent that it has come to be viewed as being only "marginally attached to Ashbery's oeuvre".¹⁷⁵² By contrast, "The One Thing That Can Save America" and "Pyrography" are arguably two of Ashbery's more critically reviewed poems, with critics such as Herd and Marjorie Perloff citing them amongst his "finest"¹⁷⁵³ or most "exceptional"¹⁷⁵⁴ works. As Ashbery himself reported in his 2002 interview with *The Kelly Writers House*, both are not only amongst his most "anthologised" and widely cited writings but are often considered among his most "representative" or "indicative" poems.¹⁷⁵⁵ Unlike Ashbery and Schuyler's novel, both poems have therefore elicited considerable academic interest, and their use of suburban imagery has occasionally been noted. However, as with Ashbery's poetry in general, analysis of suburban themes has remained mostly superficial, and little has been done to explore these particular poems from a specifically suburban angle. In turn, despite the fact that both "The One Thing That Can Save America" and "Pyrography" were published less than a decade after *A Nest of Ninnies*, possible connections between these poems and the "verbal tour de force of suburban Americana" which the novel is purported to represent have remained unconsidered.¹⁷⁵⁶ In exploring these works, I will suggest how *A Nest of Ninnies*

¹⁷⁵² Evenson, "Art", 275.

¹⁷⁵³ Marjorie Perloff, "'Fragments of a Buried Life': John Ashbery's Dream Songs" in *Beyond Amazement*, ed. David Lehman (NY: Cornell UP, 1980), 83.

¹⁷⁵⁴ Herd, *John Ashbery*, 159.

¹⁷⁵⁵ Al Filreis, "John Ashbery", (25/05/2002), *Kelly Writers House Archive* <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/wh/people/fellows/ashbery.html> (Accessed 01/09/20).

¹⁷⁵⁶ The Dalkey Archive, "A Nest of Ninnies", *Dalkey Archive Press*, <https://www.dalkeyarchive.com/product/a-nest-of-ninnies/> (Accessed 10/04/20).

enabled Ashbery to experiment with “possibilities that are manifest in other forms in his poetry” and, by extension, how suburbia serves as a discursive landscape for Ashbery, through which he explores concepts of significance, culture and meaning.¹⁷⁵⁷

The chapter is divided into three sections. Section one investigates the broader critical and cultural context underlying Ashbery’s suburbia. Section two focuses specifically on *A Nest of Ninnies*, establishing how the novel’s depiction of suburbia evokes ideas of significance, insignificance, and related interpretations of space and place. Section three then considers the implications of these themes for Ashbery’s poetry. In particular, it explores how his use of suburban imagery plays on the relationship between that which is geographically central and that which is culturally central, in order to explore concepts of centrality and peripherality.

6.1. “Such a cliché”: the cultural and critical context of Ashbery’s suburban imagery.

When asked to write what would become “Pyrography” as part of the US Department of the Interior’s “America 1976” exhibition, Ashbery states that he initially “thought ‘I can’t do this’, and turned it down”.¹⁷⁵⁸ Andrew Epstein writes that Ashbery may have been hesitant to accept “the task of writing about ‘America’ as a whole”, as the commission called for a piece showcasing America and its culture to accompany a travelling exhibition of American landscapes.¹⁷⁵⁹ However, despite feeling “self-conscious about being asked to play Whitman”, Ashbery eventually agreed.¹⁷⁶⁰ Featuring the line “This is America calling”,¹⁷⁶¹

¹⁷⁵⁷ Evenson, “Art”, 275.

¹⁷⁵⁸ Mark Ford, *John Ashbery in Conversation* (UK: Between the Lines, 2003), 59.

¹⁷⁵⁹ Andrew Epstein, ““This is America calling”” (05/07/13), *Locus Solus: The New York School of Poets*, <https://newyorkschoolpoets.wordpress.com/2013/07/05/this-is-america-calling-john-ashberys-pyrography-on-the-4th-of-july/> (accessed 01/06/20).

¹⁷⁶⁰ Epstein, “This is America”.

¹⁷⁶¹ John Ashbery, “Pyrography”, in *Collected Poems, 1956-1987*, ed. Ford, Mark (UK: Carcanet, 2001), 495 (Hereafter cited as *CP*).

“Pyrography” has come to be viewed as Ashbery’s “elliptical commentary on America”.¹⁷⁶²

The poem circumvented the nation’s more iconic features in favour of its “invisible” landscape: the forgotten topography of American life.¹⁷⁶³ Ultimately, Ashbery submits, “the United States is found not in monuments [...] but in the everyday” built environment.¹⁷⁶⁴ America is “not just the major events but the whole incredible/ Mass of everything”.¹⁷⁶⁵ To achieve its true portrait, “It would be necessary to model all these unimportant details/ So as to be able to include them”.¹⁷⁶⁶

Written less than a year after the publication of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, “Pyrography” echoed one of that collection’s signature works, “The One Thing That Can Save America”, which similarly sought to re-integrate the “forgotten” parts of America’s built environment.¹⁷⁶⁷ Both poems create “a strong sense of the random clutter of the American landscape”.¹⁷⁶⁸ In doing so, both draw on one particular genre of space which Gill argues has traditionally been “overlooked and even disavowed”¹⁷⁶⁹ in discussions of American poetry: “the gyrating fans of suburbs”,¹⁷⁷⁰ a sleepy suburban neighborhood passed through en route to the “enfolding [...] darkness of cities” beyond.¹⁷⁷¹ Suburbia is depicted as the synecdoche of this “unimportant” landscape, the so-called “back country” relative to “the circuit” of the urban centre.¹⁷⁷² Cities may be the nation’s major attractions, but Ashbery suggests that it is perhaps suburbia which is more representative of 20th-century America. As “The One Thing That Can Save America” concludes,

¹⁷⁶² Paul Frankl, *Words and Music: An American Landscape* (27/09/2009) *BBC Radio 3 Archive*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00hwwrv> (Accessed 21/08/10).

¹⁷⁶³ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 59.

¹⁷⁶⁴ Epstein, “This is America”.

¹⁷⁶⁵ Ashbery, “Pyrography”, 496.

¹⁷⁶⁶ Ashbery, “Pyrography”, 496-497.

¹⁷⁶⁷ John Ashbery, “The One Thing That Can Save America”, *CP*, 457.

¹⁷⁶⁸ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 59.

¹⁷⁶⁹ Gill, *Poetics*, 16.

¹⁷⁷⁰ Ashbery, “Pyrography”, 495.

¹⁷⁷¹ Ashbery, “Pyrography”, 495.

¹⁷⁷² Ashbery, “Pyrography”, 497.

The damp plains, overgrown suburbs,
Places of known civic pride, of civil obscurity.

These are connected to my version of America.¹⁷⁷³

Described as “Ashbery’s most self-consciously ‘American’ works”,¹⁷⁷⁴ these two poems express what the historian Jon Teaford indicates is the fundamental tenet of suburban history: “the United States is a suburban nation”.¹⁷⁷⁵ Yet, despite the ever-increasing prominence of suburban space across the nation’s built environment, Teaford stresses that the concept of suburbia remains nebulous for most Americans. Much as Ashbery’s “The One Thing That Can Save America” labelled the suburbs “obscure”, “few can decode the shapes of these landscapes or define where they begin and end”.¹⁷⁷⁶ This ambiguity is reflected in both cultural and critical concepts of suburban space. In general terms, this chapter follows the blanket definition of suburbia given by the architectural historian Robert Fishman in *Bourgeois Utopias*: a “residential community beyond the core of a large city”.¹⁷⁷⁷ Rather than any fixed spatial or architectural specifications, it is this understanding that “suburbs are predominantly residential districts” which most sets them apart within the American landscape.¹⁷⁷⁸ Beyond its strong association with the idea of homeownership, suburbia is frequently portrayed as a “wholly domestic environment”,¹⁷⁷⁹ unlike more multifaceted rural or urban climes, in which “working and living spaces were often completely integrated”.¹⁷⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷³ Ashbery, “The One Thing That Can Save America”, 457.

¹⁷⁷⁴ Epstein, “This is America”.

¹⁷⁷⁵ Jon Teaford, *The American Suburb* (USA: Routledge, 2008), ix.

¹⁷⁷⁶ Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia* (USA: Pantheon, 2003), 3.

¹⁷⁷⁷ Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias* (USA: Basic Books, 1987), 5.

¹⁷⁷⁸ Huq, *Making Sense*, 7.

¹⁷⁷⁹ Fishman, *Bourgeois*, 9.

¹⁷⁸⁰ Jackson, *Crabgrass*, 15.

Indeed, Fishburn describes suburbia as the “most radical rethinking [of space] in the history of domestic architecture”.¹⁷⁸¹ The suburb, he argues, is not just “predominantly” but “wholly residential”, as it is fundamentally “a residential district from which commerce and industry have been excluded”.¹⁷⁸² These characterisations depict suburbia not only as the “dominant residential pattern” or “distinguishing residential feature of American culture” but as the ultimate embodiment of residential space.¹⁷⁸³ In this context, suburbia has developed a reputation as the so-called “bedroom of America”,¹⁷⁸⁴ something reflected in *A Nest of Ninnies*, where “these suburban communities are called ‘dormitories’”.¹⁷⁸⁵

Traditional concepts of suburbia are therefore based on the relationship between the residential periphery and the urban centre, just as Fishman defines suburbia in terms of its connection to “the core of a large city”. Consequently, the current chapter relates Ashbery’s portrayal of suburbia to ideas of the centre and the periphery, much as “for Americans, the notion of city limits has been vital to the concept of suburbia”.¹⁷⁸⁶ Teaforde suggests that city-centric views of the built environment have directly fed into the “long history of negative associations and countless derogatory critiques of suburbia”.¹⁷⁸⁷ The view of suburbia as “devoted to a single function” likely contributes to the stereotype of suburbs as one-dimensional, with the image of “parasitical bedroom communities” reinforcing the idea that they are “simply peripheral areas” or “complements to the city”.¹⁷⁸⁸ In *Places on the Margin*, Rob Shields argues that, when it comes to peripheral spaces, “marginal status may come from out-of-the-way geographic locations” or the perception that such places represent “the other pole to a great cultural centre”.¹⁷⁸⁹ As a result, the “geographic dualism of Central/ Marginal”

¹⁷⁸¹ Fishman, *Bourgeois*, 3.

¹⁷⁸² Fishman, *Bourgeois*, 8; 8; 7.

¹⁷⁸³ Jackson, *Crabgrass*, 4; 7.

¹⁷⁸⁴ Teaforde, *American Suburb*, ix.

¹⁷⁸⁵ Ashbery, *Nest*, 176.

¹⁷⁸⁶ Teaforde, *American Suburb*, ix.

¹⁷⁸⁷ Teaforde, *American Suburb*, no page number given.

¹⁷⁸⁸ Teaforde, *American Suburb*, xii.

¹⁷⁸⁹ Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin* (UK: Routledge, 2002), 3.

operates in much the same way as the “cultural classification” of “High/ Low” culture.¹⁷⁹⁰ As such, we tend to equate these concepts, leading to the “cultural categorisation of geographic spaces”.¹⁷⁹¹ Spaces which are topographically peripheral are traditionally associated with “cultural marginality”.¹⁷⁹² Much as the suburbs of “Pyrography” can survive only by being “plugged into the circuit” of “cities”, the stereotype of suburbia is that it has no culture or identity of its own.¹⁷⁹³ Instead, it is characterised solely by its ever-increasing ubiquity and monotony: a “featureless blob, stretching on seemingly forever in an undifferentiated sprawl”.¹⁷⁹⁴

Teaford indicates that the majority of Americans have only a “superficially simplistic” understanding of suburbia, one based on the multitude of “myths and stereotypes” surrounding suburbs rather than their social or architectural reality.¹⁷⁹⁵ Cultural characterisations of the suburbs tend to fall into one of two extremes: unrealistically idealistic or excessively negative. The first traditionally romanticises suburbia as akin to the proverbial land of milk and honey, architecturally removed from the social and financial stresses of the surrounding landscape. Indeed, Huq suggests that part of the reason that “suburbs are relatively under-researched” in spatial theory is that “they are considered to be devoid of problems”.¹⁷⁹⁶ By contrast, the second view dismisses “the area beyond the central city as a bland, homogenous zone producing dull drones in look-alike houses”,¹⁷⁹⁷ to the extent that the word suburbia has become synonymous with “dull ordinariness and monotonous conformity”.¹⁷⁹⁸

¹⁷⁹⁰ Shields, *Places*, 4.

¹⁷⁹¹ Shields, *Places*, 4.

¹⁷⁹² Shields, *Places*, 4.

¹⁷⁹³ Ashbery, “Pyrography”, 497; 495.

¹⁷⁹⁴ Teaford, *American Suburb*, Xiii.

¹⁷⁹⁵ Teaford, *American Suburb*, xiii; no page number given.

¹⁷⁹⁶ Huq, *Making Sense*, 6.

¹⁷⁹⁷ Teaford, *American Suburb*, xiii.

¹⁷⁹⁸ “Suburbia”, n. *OED Online* (06/2020) Oxford UP.

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/193233?redirectedFrom=suburbia#eid> (Accessed 06/06/20) (Hereafter cited as *OED*).

Although the present analysis acknowledges that such clichés convey a superficial portrait of suburbia, I nonetheless approach Ashbery’s portrayal of suburbia in relation to these stereotypes. There are a number of reasons for this, not least because *A Nest of Ninnies* does not present itself as a “realist novel”, but rather as a celebration of the “camped-up clichés” of 1950s America.¹⁷⁹⁹ A second reason for dealing with Ashbery’s suburbia in terms of stereotype is the aforementioned ambiguity surrounding what classifies as suburban space. As Huq writes, “in the absence of any definitive definition [of suburbia] the concept has frequently formed in the popular imagination”, or through “popular culture”.¹⁸⁰⁰ Rather than purely spatial or architectural, “suburbia [is] a sociocultural category”, and is therefore inextricably rooted in the concepts of that culture.¹⁸⁰¹ Indeed, despite decrying their inaccuracy, even Teaforde admits that “traditional conceptions” of suburbia continue to play a key role in American culture, as city dwellers and “suburbanites [alike continue to] cling to a stereotypical [idea of] suburban-ness”.¹⁸⁰² “For many Americans, the word suburb [still] conjures up an image of post-World War II single-family tract homes, the product of automobiles and superhighways”.¹⁸⁰³

Though anachronistic in terms of modern-day suburbia, this description seemingly evokes that archetypal architectural landscape that Ashbery and Schuyler were traversing when they embarked on *A Nest of Ninnies* in 1952, taking “inspiration from the suburban countryside as seen through a car’s windows”.¹⁸⁰⁴ Yet much as Teaforde suggests that the mythology of suburbia proliferated in precisely the era which inspired the novel, Ashbery’s comments reveal that his and Schuyler’s suburbia was based on cultural mythology rather than architectural reality: “What we were also attempting, perhaps without knowing it, was to

¹⁷⁹⁹ Wallenstein, “Reality”.

¹⁸⁰⁰ Huq, *Making Sense*, 7.

¹⁸⁰¹ Huq, *Making Sense*, 1.

¹⁸⁰² Teaforde, *American Suburb*, xiv; xiv.

¹⁸⁰³ Teaforde, *American Suburb*, ix.

¹⁸⁰⁴ Lehman, *Last Avant-Garde*, 81.

recreate the 1930s world of our childhoods, spent in two small towns of western New York state”.¹⁸⁰⁵ At first glance, this objective appears somewhat at odds with the novel’s choice of setting. After all, although Schuyler spent most of his childhood in the suburbs of Buffalo, Ashbery “never lived in this [type of] environment”¹⁸⁰⁶ (although Schuyler later suggested that Ashbery’s childhood in rural Sodus gave the duo something akin to a “shared history with ‘the outer suburbs’”).¹⁸⁰⁷ However, Ashbery indicates that the landscape they sought to evoke was inspired less by the actual residential environment of their youth than the depictions of suburban and small-town America in the popular culture of the period: “The radio programs (especially ‘Vic and Sade’ and ‘Easy Aces,’ which offered mildly astringent parodies of American life, small-town and urban, respectively), the magazines (*Life* and *Good Housekeeping*) [...] These were the ephemera that surfaced while we wrote”.¹⁸⁰⁸

A Nest of Ninnies therefore emerged from a culture in which “suburbs so pervaded contemporary discourse that everyone had an experience of and an opinion about suburbia, whether they lived there or not”.¹⁸⁰⁹ Indeed, much of the novel was completed while the two poets “shared an apartment” in NYC during the “winter of 1957-58”, a living arrangement which Ashbery suggests directly impacted upon their portrayal of the ninnies’ suburban existences.¹⁸¹⁰ “The fact that the apartment was a sixth-floor walk-up whose rent was \$57 a month may have contributed to the relatively affluent lifestyles we bestowed on our characters”.¹⁸¹¹ This characterisation conceivably alludes to suburbia’s reputation as what Fishman famously termed the “bourgeois utopia” of the modern built environment,¹⁸¹² due to

¹⁸⁰⁵ Ashbery, “Preface”, 7.

¹⁸⁰⁶ Monacell, “John Ashbery”, 82.

¹⁸⁰⁷ James Schuyler, quoted in Jenni Quilter, “Explicit as a Star”, *Poetry* (01/2014), 369.

¹⁸⁰⁸ Ashbery, “Preface”, 7.

¹⁸⁰⁹ Gill, *Poetics*, 10.

¹⁸¹⁰ Ashbery, “Preface”, 6

¹⁸¹¹ Ashbery, “Preface”, 6

¹⁸¹² Fishman, *Bourgeois*, 4.

the fact that the suburbs are frequently framed as “upper middle-class residential havens” regardless of real-life demographics.¹⁸¹³ However, it is equally symptomatic of the “idealized vision of traditional dwelling” which characterized the backlash against inner-city, apartment dwelling in post-1950s America.¹⁸¹⁴ This led to a paradoxical nostalgia for the very spaces that had previously been abandoned en masse in the move to the city. Growing dissatisfaction with urban life contributed to the so-called “myth of suburbia” which took root throughout the post-war period, specifically in relation to the opportunities for upwards social mobility and prosperity encoded in the American Dream. In his 1931 book *Epic of America*, James Truslow Adams defined the phenomenon as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each”.¹⁸¹⁵ Over the latter half of 20th-century, a growing number of Americans looked to the suburbs to “embody this new ideal”, to the extent that it became synonymous with “the suburban dream”.¹⁸¹⁶ Being “neither city nor countryside”, suburbia conceivably symbolised the best of both worlds or a “demographic hybrid” of the two.¹⁸¹⁷ Though none of the ninnies fit the model of the stereotypical suburban nuclear family, we are warned not to “underestimate Marshall’s satisfaction in being the head of a household – however small and inharmonious”.¹⁸¹⁸ After all, the novel informs us, the “exhaustion of commuting” remains preferable to a life spent in a “bachelor flat”, with “living in the city” likened to being always “away from home”, as though denying the capacity of the metropolis’ to provide a true sense of “home”.¹⁸¹⁹ Even Kelso, the book’s “born New Yorker” and “inveterate apartment dweller”, expresses his desire to “try the suburbs”.¹⁸²⁰ For Ashbery and Schuyler, along with millions of other urban

¹⁸¹³ Teaford, *American Suburb*, xii.

¹⁸¹⁴ Marit MacArthur, *The American Landscape* (USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 2.

¹⁸¹⁵ James Truslow Adams, *Epic of America* (NY: Little, 1931), 317.

¹⁸¹⁶ Fishman, *Bourgeois*, 4.

¹⁸¹⁷ Jim Cullen, *The American Dream* (UK: Oxford UP, 2003), 144, Kindle Edition.

¹⁸¹⁸ Ashbery, *Nest*, 88.

¹⁸¹⁹ Ashbery, *Nest*, 20; 88; 20; 20.

¹⁸²⁰ Ashbery, *Nest*, 25; 36; 25

dwellers stuck in the cramped confines of rented spaces, suburbia came to be seen as an increasingly idealized alternative. Eventually, such romanticised expectations would result in the same “cultural backlash” which, Teaford indicates, continues to determine contemporary conceptions of suburbia, as “intense excitement” inevitably gave way to “anxiety and disappointment”.¹⁸²¹ However, even after Americans discovered that suburbia was “not necessarily the ideal it had once seemed”, Gill writes, the “romantic concept” of the “suburban dream” continued to pervade and “shape American culture”.¹⁸²² As “The One Thing That Can Save America” concludes, the quintessential American space is always to be discovered

Now and in the future

In quiet small houses in the country,

Our country, in fenced areas, in cool shady streets.¹⁸²³

6.1.1. Suburbia in Ashbery Criticism and the Place of Suburban Poetics in Literary Criticism.

In her introduction to *The Poetics of The American Suburbs*, Jo Gill states that considering Ashbery’s poetry in a suburban context would strike many as “unexpected” or perhaps even problematic.¹⁸²⁴ Despite the numerous occasions throughout his work where he “engages with the conditions of post-war suburban life as [he] saw it”, she writes, Ashbery “is more often associated with an urban locale”.¹⁸²⁵ As a result, she confirms that there has been little analysis of his use of suburban imagery. Gill includes a short synopsis of “The

¹⁸²¹ Gill, *Poetics*, 52; 6; 6.

¹⁸²² Gill, *Poetics*, 6; 22; 6; 186.

¹⁸²³ Ashbery, “One Thing”, 458.

¹⁸²⁴ Gill, *Poetics*, 8.

¹⁸²⁵ Gill, *Poetics*, 8.

Bungalows” (*The Double Dream of Spring*, 1970) in order to assert that Ashbery does indeed consider suburbia in his poetry. However, she principally references his work to demonstrate how the theme of suburbia remains relatively overlooked throughout American poetry criticism as a whole, even in relation to the work of “well-known writers” like Ashbery.¹⁸²⁶ Although she is one of the few critics who deliberately attempts to frame Ashbery in a specifically “suburban context”, Gill remains typical of Ashbery critics insofar as she does not consider the implications of these suburban themes for his writing generally, nor does she consider whether his suburban imagery may hold additional layers of meaning beyond being simply a generalised trope of American “postwar poetry”.¹⁸²⁷

A second study of note is *How Poets See the World* by Willard Spiegelman, which explores the use of description in contemporary poetry. Though he does not directly address the portrayal of suburbia in his chapter on Ashbery, Spiegelman considers the relationship between the poet’s portrayal of landscapes and concepts of perspective. He reflects that Ashbery criticism tends to be split into two camps: those who “sense that he is primarily a city poet” and those who argue that his work predominantly “elicits country images”.¹⁸²⁸ In relation to this divide, Spiegelman comments that “it might be most accurate to call Ashbery a suburban poet”: a poet of the “periphery” who straddles the line between urban and rural themes.¹⁸²⁹ Rather than building on this concept to highlight the role of suburbia in Ashbery’s work, however, Spiegelman primarily uses the suburbs as a passing metaphor for the postmodern or decentralised self.

The only critical work to date which considers Ashbery’s portrayal of suburbia in any depth is “John Ashbery and Hyperpastoral Suburbia” by Peter Monacell, which investigates

¹⁸²⁶ Gill, *Poetics*, 8.

¹⁸²⁷ Gill, *Poetics*, 1.

¹⁸²⁸ Willard Spiegelman, *How Poets See the World* (UK: Oxford UP, 2005), 1890, Kindle Edition.

¹⁸²⁹ Spiegelman, *How Poets*, 1890.

“the centrality of suburbia to Ashbery’s pastoral poetics”.¹⁸³⁰ Like the present analysis, Monacell references Ashbery’s poetry circa the 1970s. However, he favours a more generalised overview over close readings of individual poems, as part of a wider study which draws from the majority of Ashbery’s 1970s collections (namely *The Double Dream of Spring*, *Three Poems*, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* and *Houseboat Days*). Although Ashbery is seldom considered in conjunction with suburban themes, Monacell suggests that his poetry throughout this period “frequently imagines suburbia and uses suburban speakers”.¹⁸³¹ However, Monacell does not consider suburbia in spatial or architectural terms but rather mainly as a symbol of Ashbery’s natural or pastoral themes. As a result, his interpretation of “suburbs’ [as] synonymous with ‘country’” or “countryside” frames suburbia as an extension of the poet’s “rural” imagery, rather than as a distinct space in its own right.¹⁸³² This feeds into the trend previously outlined by Spiegelman, whereby individual critics champion the importance of Ashbery’s rural or urban imagery respectively but overlook his portrayal of the so-called American “middle-landscape”.¹⁸³³ Moreover, Monacell does not reference *A Nest of Ninnies* or its implications for Ashbery’s poetry throughout this period.

In “The Elusive Soul of the Suburbs”, Philip Nicholson evokes the cultural argument against suburbia: “Who sings the song of suburbia? Where is its poet?”¹⁸³⁴ Rather than offering an in-depth examination of the state of suburban poetry, Nicholson mainly employs poetry as a metaphor for cultural value. Ultimately, he concludes, there are no poets of suburbia, because suburban culture is insufficient to inspire them. “There is no official school or philosophy of suburban culture; just as there is no poet, artist, or sculptor to present its

¹⁸³⁰ Monacell, “John Ashbery”, 82.

¹⁸³¹ Monacell, “John Ashbery”, 82.

¹⁸³² Monacell, “John Ashbery”, 83.

¹⁸³³ Huq, *Making Sense*, 10.

¹⁸³⁴ Philip Nicholson, “The Elusive Soul of the Suburbs” in *Suburbia Re-Examined*, ed. Kelly Barbara (NY: Greenwood P, 1989), 206.

voice”.¹⁸³⁵ Though it draws on poetry only in superficial terms, Nicholson’s argument reflects many of the attitudes towards suburban poetics found in literary criticism. Critics such as Jed Rasula argue that “poets have been disadvantaged by novelists when it comes to contending with the suburban milieu”.¹⁸³⁶ However, others including Gill insist that it is rather that literary criticism as a whole tends to view “‘poetry’ as a genre that has nothing to say about suburbia”.¹⁸³⁷ This assessment arguably has less to do with the actual merits of suburban poetics than with how we measure cultural value. Gill suggests that “‘poetry’” is traditionally viewed as a gatekeeper of high culture, as a genre reserved for addressing “canonical” or “heavy” themes.¹⁸³⁸ In this context, suburbia is frequently held to be an unsuitable subject matter for poetry, because of the “shared vision of the suburbs as somehow inauthentic”.¹⁸³⁹ As a result, “discussions of the suburbs in American literature have largely ignored poetry”¹⁸⁴⁰ and, when the theme of suburbia is addressed at all, the “emphasis is exclusively on novels and short stories”.¹⁸⁴¹

In the same manner that Ashbery and Schuyler’s novel on “America and her tragic suburbs” has repeatedly been dismissed as one-dimensional, when suburban poetry is addressed, it is traditionally in terms of “caricature”¹⁸⁴², “literary cliché”¹⁸⁴³ or as an extension of the same suburban stereotypes that pervade contemporary discourse. Consequently, studies have focused on the “perceived limitations of a suburban poetic” rather than its possibilities.¹⁸⁴⁴ For example, whilst Marilyn Chin acknowledges that modern

¹⁸³⁵ Nicholson, “Elusive”, 208.

¹⁸³⁶ Jed Rasula, *The American Poetry Wax Museum* (USA: NCTE, 1996), 429.

¹⁸³⁷ Gill, *Poetics*, 3.

¹⁸³⁸ Gill, *Poetics*, 3.

¹⁸³⁹ Gill, *Poetics*, 10.

¹⁸⁴⁰ Peter Monacell, “In the American Grid”, *Journal of Modern Literature* (Fall 2011), 122.

¹⁸⁴¹ Gill, *Poetics*, 11.

¹⁸⁴² Gill, *Poetics*, 13.

¹⁸⁴³ Teaford, *American Suburb*, xiii.

¹⁸⁴⁴ Gill, *Poetics*, 11.

American “poetry has moved to the suburbs”,¹⁸⁴⁵ she condemns the resulting poetry as embodying the same negative stereotypes of “apathy and introspection” which characterise postwar suburbia.¹⁸⁴⁶ Much as suburbanites are viewed as shallow and materialistic, suburban poems are invariably “self-centered, shortsighted; [and] don’t extend to larger concerns”.¹⁸⁴⁷ Such blanket criticisms of suburban poetics are a possible reason why “poetry has been overlooked in general studies of the suburbs”.¹⁸⁴⁸ Though there is no specific school of poetry associated with suburbia, “the widespread contempt with which suburban culture [is] treated” may have led suburban poets to remain “guarded about their origins”.¹⁸⁴⁹

6.1.2. The Poetry of Suburbia: Two Examples Relevant to Ashbery.

Aside from these critical arguments, there are two figures from American poetry whose work conceivably influenced Ashbery’s suburban imagery: William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens. In his 1989 Charles Eliot Norton Lecture, Ashbery listed both Stevens and Williams amongst the “most important” of the “major poets whom I feel as influences”.¹⁸⁵⁰ He had been in “the front row” when “Stevens made a rare public appearance at Harvard” in 1947,¹⁸⁵¹ an event which the young Ashbery later joked had secured Stevens a position on “Ashbery’s Definitive list of major modern poets”.¹⁸⁵² Ashbery also began to be heavily influenced by Williams around this period, particularly after he “read [the first instalments of] Williams’ *Paterson* [in 1950] (and loved the prose passages)”.¹⁸⁵³ When

¹⁸⁴⁵ Marilyn Chin, “Translating Self”, in *After Confession*, eds. Kate Sontag and David Graham (USA: Graywolf, 2001), 6.

¹⁸⁴⁶ Gill, *Poetics*, 4.

¹⁸⁴⁷ Chin, “Translating”, 6.

¹⁸⁴⁸ Gill, *Poetics*, 10.

¹⁸⁴⁹ Gill, *Poetics*, 10.

¹⁸⁵⁰ John Ashbery, *Other Traditions* (USA: Harvard UP, 2000), 4.

¹⁸⁵¹ Karin Roffman, *The Songs We Know Best* (USA: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2017), 144.

¹⁸⁵² John Ashbery, “Letter from JA to SG, March 8, 1947”, quoted in Roffman, *Songs*, 144.

¹⁸⁵³ Roffman, *Songs*, 191.

asked about Williams in his 2003 interview with Ford, Ashbery responded: “I like him very much. In fact, in my early years I went through a period of being enchanted by his work”.¹⁸⁵⁴

Of the two poets, Williams’ connection to suburbia is the best established; not least because he “explicitly identifie[d] himself as a suburbanite”¹⁸⁵⁵ at a time when writers were expected to feel an inherent sense of “embarrassment at being suburban”.¹⁸⁵⁶ His hometown of Rutherford, “a bedroom-suburb of New York City”,¹⁸⁵⁷ was “of vital import to Williams the poet”,¹⁸⁵⁸ frequently serving as the default setting for much of his work. He repeatedly strove to “represent his suburb as an appropriate subject for modern poetry” and to explore suburbia’s wider creative potential as “a distinctively American landscape”.¹⁸⁵⁹ An oft cited example of this suburban focus is one of Williams’ best known works, “To Elsie”,¹⁸⁶⁰ the opening lines of which Ashbery directly quotes in his interview with Ford: “the pure products of America go crazy!”¹⁸⁶¹ The poem centres around “some hard-pressed/ house in the suburbs”, which is elevated from a nondescript outskirts on the fringe of the big city to one of the suggested “pure products” of America itself.¹⁸⁶²

Yet, despite being viewed as the “chief proponent” of suburban poetics, Williams also voiced “his anxiety about writing poetry in the suburbs”.¹⁸⁶³ In his 1951 autobiography, he parrots the attitudes of his New York literary friends: “You live in the suburbs, you even *like* it. What are you anyway? And you pretend to be a poet, a POET!”¹⁸⁶⁴ By refusing to condemn suburbia, Williams is suggested to have compromised his overall creative integrity.

¹⁸⁵⁴ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 33.

¹⁸⁵⁵ Monacell, “American Grid”, 129.

¹⁸⁵⁶ Robert Von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture* (USA: Harvard UP, 1985), 239.

¹⁸⁵⁷ Monacell, “American Grid”, 125.

¹⁸⁵⁸ John Marsh, “Thinking/ Of the Freezing Poor”, *Williams Carlos Williams Review* (Fall 2007), 99.

¹⁸⁵⁹ Monacell, “American Grid”, 129; 125.

¹⁸⁶⁰ William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*, 1923.

¹⁸⁶¹ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 66.

¹⁸⁶² William Carlos Williams, “To Elsie”, *Academy of American Poets* <https://poets.org/poem/elsie> (Accessed 13/05/20).

¹⁸⁶³ Monacell, “American Grid”, 125; 126.

¹⁸⁶⁴ William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (NY: New Directions, 1967), 157.

Whilst largely tongue in cheek, these comments also gave voice to Williams' own fears that the "mundane suburban setting" of his "'middling' domestic environment would affect his literary goals".¹⁸⁶⁵ This is reflected in his long poem on the relationship between man and the built environment, *Paterson* (published in five instalments between 1946 and 1958), the piece which first attracted Ashbery to his work. In the book's foreword, Williams states that he decided to base the poem around the actual landscape of Paterson, a small city which neighboured his native Rutherford, after he realised that "my own suburb was not distinguished or varied enough for my purpose".¹⁸⁶⁶ Rather than undermining Williams' reputation as the so-called poet laureate of "the age of suburbia",¹⁸⁶⁷ such apprehensions are arguably a hallmark of suburban poetry. Even when deliberately foregrounding suburban themes, it often remains "characterized by this anxious sense of unease about the validity of the subject position from which the poetry is written".¹⁸⁶⁸

Ashbery and Schuyler actively seek both to contradict and to engage with such cultural biases throughout *A Nest of Ninnies*. One suburbanite proudly boasts that "no artists have been sighted in this district" since its inception, whilst a local cellist is likened to the "Sarasate of the suburbs", his musical talent immediately rendered banal by his association with suburbia.¹⁸⁶⁹ The characters even take scenic walks around Kelton's "Walt Whitman Shopping Plaza",¹⁸⁷⁰ as the figure deemed by many to be the "greatest American poet"¹⁸⁷¹ is reduced to a symbol of the mass-consumerism synonymous with suburban sprawl. In this respect, the novel could be said to echo aspects of Allen Ginsberg's "A Supermarket in

¹⁸⁶⁵ Monacell, "American Grid", 126.

¹⁸⁶⁶ William Carlos Williams, "A statement by William Carlos Williams about the poem *Paterson*", *Paterson* (USA: New Directions, 1995), no page number given.

¹⁸⁶⁷ Monacell, "American Grid", 125.

¹⁸⁶⁸ Gill, *Poetics*, 17.

¹⁸⁶⁹ Ashbery, *Nest*, 98; 151.

¹⁸⁷⁰ Ashbery, *Nest*, 129.

¹⁸⁷¹ Mark Edmundson, "Walt Whitman's Guide to a Thriving Democracy", *The Atlantic* (May 2019) <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/05/walt-whitman-leaves-of-grass-american-democracy/586045/> (Accessed 07/07/20).

California” (1956), in which the speaker addresses Whitman as they wander through a “neon fruit supermarket”, “shopping for images” amongst the “brilliant stacks of cans” and assorted produce.¹⁸⁷² Yet, at the same time, the suburbanite characters of Ashbery and Schuyler’s novel are depicted as voracious consumers of high-art and culture, in contrast to Teaford’s stereotype of suburbanites as “materialistic” and “shallow bourgeois hordes”.¹⁸⁷³ Rather, “for all their obsessing over ice boxes and fake fur coats” they fill “their conversation with confident borrowings from French and Italian” literature and “knowledgeable references” to the arts.¹⁸⁷⁴ The result is that “a whole study could be made just of the [book’s] cultural references”.¹⁸⁷⁵ Indeed, Ashbery joked that its obscure allusions meant readers would constantly be “closing one book and opening up another” in an effort to keep up.¹⁸⁷⁶ This gives the novel a somewhat meta-literary quality, the authors “each trying to outdo the other for allusive and outrageous wit”.¹⁸⁷⁷

A poignant example in this regard occurs when a visiting character declares that “a walk through Kelton at midnight never fails to inspire me”, a statement met with complete shock on the part of the suburbanites.¹⁸⁷⁸ This incident arguably serves as an ironic in-joke by the authors, who ridicule suburbia’s capacity to inspire while writing a novel inspired by that same suburbia. These instances simultaneously evoke and subvert the stereotypical image of suburbia as a cultural void, transforming it back into an “arena in which the imagination can continue its transformative work”.¹⁸⁷⁹ It is in this specific context that we perhaps find the most fitting parallel with Stevens, who explores how the “suburbs can accommodate and

¹⁸⁷² Allen Ginsberg, “A Supermarket in California” (1956), *The Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47660/a-supermarket-in-california> (Accessed 10/11/21).

¹⁸⁷³ Teaford, *American Suburb*, xiii.

¹⁸⁷⁴ Herd, *John Ashbery*, 63.

¹⁸⁷⁵ Carl Little, “Interview with James Schuyler”, *Agni* (1993), 13.

¹⁸⁷⁶ John Ashbery, quoted in John Emil Vincent, *John Ashbery and You* (USA: Georgia UP, 2007), 25.

¹⁸⁷⁷ Daniel Katz, *American Modernism’s Expatriate Scene* (UK: Edinburgh UP, 2007) 150.

¹⁸⁷⁸ Ashbery, *Nest*, 188.

¹⁸⁷⁹ Monacell, *American Grid*, 137.

inspire modern poetry” in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (1937).¹⁸⁸⁰ The poem transforms “the typical industrial suburb, stained and grim”¹⁸⁸¹ into a mythic landscape worthy of the classics, as “Oxidia, banal suburb”¹⁸⁸² becomes a modern day “Olympia”.¹⁸⁸³ Through the “powers of the imagination”, writes Bonnie Costello, suburbia is able to fulfil “the objectives of ‘pure poetry’, however modified”.¹⁸⁸⁴ Rather than idealising or condemning suburbia, “the poetry complicates the caricature, sometimes by inverting it and sometimes [...] by elaborating and thereby exposing its terms”.¹⁸⁸⁵

Given my focus on Ashbery the poet and the potential implications that *A Nest of Ninnies* holds for the suburban imagery of his poetry, my aim is to consider the possible influence that American suburban poetics may have had on both the novel and Ashbery’s wider portrayal of suburban space. Before addressing the novel itself, however, I want to acknowledge the potential benefits of considering Ashbery and Schuyler’s book in relation to other depictions of suburbia in the 20th-century American novel. Despite arguing that suburban poetry has been overlooked in favour of its prose counterpart, Gill accepts that “suburban prose [and] poetry”¹⁸⁸⁶ benefited from a form of cross-pollination over the latter half of the 20th-century, citing Richard Yates and John Cheever (“the Chekhov of the suburbs”)¹⁸⁸⁷ as novelists whose work helps inform our understanding of suburban poetics.¹⁸⁸⁸ In *White Diaspora*, Catherine Jurca writes that, just as cultural attitudes towards suburbia began to shift between the pre and post-war period, suburban literary tradition followed a similar arc. The early, idyllic image of the “little suburban house” which drew

¹⁸⁸⁰ Monacell, *American Grid*, 132.

¹⁸⁸¹ Wallace Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (USA: California UP, 1996), 788-90.

¹⁸⁸² Wallace Stevens, “The Man with the Blue Guitar”, *Collected Poems* (USA: Knopf, 1954), 181-2.

¹⁸⁸³ Stevens, “Man with the Blue Guitar”, 181-2.

¹⁸⁸⁴ Bonnie Costello, “Stevens’ ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’ and Auden’s ‘The Sea and the Mirror’”, *Wallace Stevens Journal* (Fall, 2013), 188.

¹⁸⁸⁵ Gill, *Poetics*, 13.

¹⁸⁸⁶ Gill, *Poetics*, 11.

¹⁸⁸⁷ John Leonard, quoted. in Robert Collins, “From Subject to Object and Back Again”, *Twentieth Century Literature* (Spring, 1982), 2.

¹⁸⁸⁸ See Gil, *Poetics*, 53.

Edith Wharton's ire in "The Great American Novel" was slowly displaced by a more nuanced and often disaffected portrait of suburban life.¹⁸⁸⁹ Given the period in which *A Nest of Ninnies* was written, it is feasible that Ashbery and Schuyler's portrait of "America and her tragic suburbs" was influenced by both sides of this still evolving tradition. Indeed, Brian Evenson suggests that, for an "American comedy of errors", there are times when the novel's portrayal of suburban life is perhaps just as "anxious" as it is "comic".¹⁸⁹⁰ Jurca concludes that "in the postwar novel, hating the suburb is precisely what it means to live in a suburb".¹⁸⁹¹ She cites Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (1961) which "brilliantly defines the postwar suburbanite as the ant suburbanite", with the main characters being "dedicated to distinguishing themselves as an 'embattled, dwindling, intellectual underground' against the culture" of suburbia itself.¹⁸⁹² Yet this disaffection, Yates hints, is ironically the purest encapsulation of suburban identity there is. True suburbanites, it appears, may be those who believe that they are "not really suburbanites" at all, but rather people who just "happen to live in a suburb" who don't "belon[g] there".¹⁸⁹³

6.2. "Fifty miles from a great city": significance, insignificance and suburbia in *A Nest of Ninnies*.

In "Reality Show: Ninnies and the Critics", Wallenstein notes the resemblance between the opening line of Ashbery's collaboration with Schuyler and the first sentence of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll: "Alice was beginning to feel very

¹⁸⁸⁹ Edith Wharton, "The Great American Novel", *Yale Review* (July 1927), 655.

¹⁸⁹⁰ Evenson, "Art", 278.

¹⁸⁹¹ Catherine Jurca, "Tales of the Suburb", in *Redefining Suburban Studies*, ed. Daniel Rubey (USA: NCSS, 2009), 175.

¹⁸⁹² Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora* (USA: Princeton UP, 2001), 148.

¹⁸⁹³ Jurca, *White*, 148.

tired”.¹⁸⁹⁴ For Wallenstein, this serves as potential evidence of the novel’s self-conscious preoccupation with accumulating literary and “cultural references”.¹⁸⁹⁵ As one of the lines confirmed to have been contributed by Ashbery himself, however, this connection potentially holds intriguing connotations for the poet’s concept of suburban space. In his 1969 review for *The New York Times Book Review*, the poet W.H. Auden also compares the novel to “the *Alice* books”, in the sense that “the world it depicts is an imaginary” one.¹⁸⁹⁶ Yet as the opening scene unfolds, it becomes increasingly apparent that it is not suburbia which is the subject of this “wonder”, with the reader being positioned firmly on the more pedestrian side of the proverbial looking glass.¹⁸⁹⁷ The novel begins: “Alice was tired. Languid, fretful, she turned to stare into her own eyes in the mirror above the mantelpiece before she spoke. ‘I dislike being fifty miles from a great city. I don’t know how many cars pass every day and it makes me wonder’”.¹⁸⁹⁸

Analysis of the novel has traditionally revolved around the question of character development, or rather the distinct lack thereof. Either “there is no characterization in *A Nest of Ninnies*”¹⁸⁹⁹, or the ninnies appear to undergo unexplained “personality shifts”,¹⁹⁰⁰ which parody the “instability of their characterisation”¹⁹⁰¹ to the point of metafiction. Herd consequently suggests that the novel’s “generically American group of friends identify themselves most clearly by accepting what they are not”: foregrounding the very instability which serves to “undermine the possibility of identity”.¹⁹⁰² Yet the same could also be said of the novel’s setting which, given that the narrative opens in medias res, is not immediately

¹⁸⁹⁴ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (UK: W.B. Conkey, 1920), 1.

¹⁸⁹⁵ Little, “Interview”, 13.

¹⁸⁹⁶ W.H. Auden, “Review: *A Nest Of Ninnies*; By John Ashbery and James Schuyler”, *The New York Times*, (04/05/1969), <https://www.nytimes.com/1969/05/04/archives/a-nest-of-ninnies-by-john-ashbery-and-james-schuyler-191-pp-new.html> (Accessed 12/12/2021).

¹⁸⁹⁷ Ashbery, *Nest*, 9.

¹⁸⁹⁸ Ashbery, *Nest*, 9.

¹⁸⁹⁹ Wallenstein, “Reality”, *Nest*, 9.

¹⁹⁰⁰ Herd, *John Ashbery*, 64.

¹⁹⁰¹ Herd, *John Ashbery*, 64.

¹⁹⁰² Herd, *John Ashbery*, 64.

obvious. Rather, we realise that we are in suburbia solely based on the referenced proximity to “a great city”, with the use of the indefinite article further blurring our sense of the vague landscape. Regardless of particulars, even the suggested presence of a “city” beyond the horizon is enough to make the surrounding suburban terrain appear nebulous and insignificant to Alice by comparison. This results in a form of reverse identification whereby, much like the ninnies who reside there, we are faced with a place which is chiefly “discernible in what”, or rather where, it “is not”.¹⁹⁰³

Just as Herd indicates that *A Nest of Ninnies* is potentially a book without a protagonist or even “major characters”, Ashbery and Schuyler present us with a place which is not the subject of its own narrative.¹⁹⁰⁴ This interpretation is supported by the fact that, though New York is revealed to be the “great city” in question part way through chapter one, the authors do not ascribe a name to the ninnies’ suburban community, “Kelton, New York”, until chapter four: as though any details beyond its status as part of the city’s commuter belt are largely incidental.¹⁹⁰⁵ In this context, the book appears to embody the predominantly urban-centric viewpoint which Teaford argues characterises contemporary discourse on the built environment, whereby suburbia is “dominated by the need or desire to be *the* city, the dominant hub of a region”.¹⁹⁰⁶ Alice specifically personifies such motifs of “suburban marginality”.¹⁹⁰⁷ If the ninnies are rudimentary “stick figures”, then her defining characteristic is her idolisation of nearby NYC, which she “longs for to the point of unhappiness”.¹⁹⁰⁸ Nonetheless, it is through her eyes that we catch our first glimpse of the “archetypal suburban” neighborhood that the ninnies call home. “Alice went to the window and looked out of it, as though commenting on the view which it disclosed. On the six-lane

¹⁹⁰³ Herd, *John Ashbery*, 64.

¹⁹⁰⁴ Herd, *John Ashbery*, 64.

¹⁹⁰⁵ Ashbery, *Nest*, 50.

¹⁹⁰⁶ Teaford, *American Suburb*, Xi.

¹⁹⁰⁷ Katz, *American Modernism's*, 151.

¹⁹⁰⁸ Wallenstein, “Reality”.

superhighway just beyond the hedge, cars thundered by, bound for dramatic New York”.¹⁹⁰⁹ As our first description of Kelton, the scene is charged with potential significance, the authors “commenting on the view” as though inviting us to do the same. Yet the scene is arguably most telling in what it does not show. Our perspective moves directly from the house’s interior to the “six-lane superhighway” which roars by just feet from the front door, skipping over suburbia entirely. We are left with the sense that we have been side-lined, both geographically and narratively. As Wallenstein writes, throughout the first chapter, we are “busy doing what we do at the beginning of novels, gathering the information we think we’ll need to follow the plot”: namely, “that Alice and Marshall live in a suburb fifty miles from New York”.¹⁹¹⁰ As the narrative continues, however, it becomes apparent that any other “information we’ve been gathering is irrelevant”, or at the very least “incidental”.¹⁹¹¹ As Alice passively observes those heading towards “dramatic New York”, the place in which we as readers are positioned is suggested to be “without dramatic significance” by comparison.¹⁹¹²

Suburbia, the novel suggests, is never the destination, but merely a place to be glimpsed on the way to somewhere else, to the extent that its defining quality is not just its precise distance from the city, but the minutiae of exactly “how many cars pass every day” on their way there. As a result, the ninnies are described as actually “living on a six-lane highway”, with the entirety of suburbia reduced to just two elements: house and road.¹⁹¹³ This symbolises the two basic concepts that we associate with suburbia, that of the residential and that of transit to the urban centre, with the rest of Kelton reduced to little more than an amorphous void. The novel therefore exhibits a strong sense of awareness regarding the

¹⁹⁰⁹ Ashbery, *Nest*, 10.

¹⁹¹⁰ Wallenstein, “Reality”.

¹⁹¹¹ Wallenstein, “Reality”.

¹⁹¹² Wallenstein, “Reality”.

¹⁹¹³ Ashbery, *Nest*, 27.

circumstances of its own composition, “given [Ashbery and Schuyler’s] location” on just such a highway, “driving past houses exactly like Alice’s” when they began the book.¹⁹¹⁴ Their characterisation of suburbia is equally as fleeting and one-dimensional as their own experience of the suburban environment that inspired the novel’s setting, presenting a surface level experience of space and place. Just as the authors once “passed a house along the way” to New York, imagining the lives of the inhabitants within, they begin by coming full circle, paradoxically portraying one of those suburban characters as she speculates about those driving through her community.¹⁹¹⁵

6.2.1. “It is of no importance”: stressing suburbia’s insignificance.

A Nest of Ninnies is notorious for the fact that “nothing much happens”,¹⁹¹⁶ with Evenson emphasising that “it is not a book which can be said to ‘mean something’ or explore grand themes”.¹⁹¹⁷ However, rather than fail to create meaning, it is perhaps more accurate to say that it “doesn’t try [...] to ‘mean’ something”,¹⁹¹⁸ with the novel skirting the line between evoking the clichés of vacuous suburbanites and “warding off inconsequentiality by fully engaging in it”.¹⁹¹⁹ Whilst the question of significance is a recurring one, the narrative constantly stresses its own insignificance, purposely flouting efforts to establish meaning. This calculated shallowness has been one of the main facets of the novel commented on by critics, with Jenni Quilter stressing that the ninnies’ characterisation exhibits a “refusal to engage in conventional interior ‘depth’”.¹⁹²⁰ This has largely been attributed to the novel’s

¹⁹¹⁴ Quilter, “Explicit”, 369.

¹⁹¹⁵ Herd, “John Ashbery”, 33.

¹⁹¹⁶ Lehman, *Last Avant-Garde*, 81.

¹⁹¹⁷ Evenson, “Art”, 277.

¹⁹¹⁸ Evenson, “Art”, 276.

¹⁹¹⁹ Wallenstein, “Reality”.

¹⁹²⁰ Quilter, “Explicit”, 384.

reliance on “B-movie conversation [and] clichés”,¹⁹²¹ none of which are “‘important’ in terms of pushing the plot forward or revealing something significant”.¹⁹²² However, this cultivated superficiality is arguably even more pronounced in terms of setting. Given that “*Ninnies* is 90 percent dialogue”,¹⁹²³ there is very little external description and the suburb is perfunctorily outlined as a largely featureless and “somber landscape”.¹⁹²⁴ The only sites of note are the requisite “shopping center” and a peppering of generic, big-name chain businesses like “Howard Johnson’s” or “J.C. Penney’s”.¹⁹²⁵ Beyond such landmarks, Kelton blends together until even the suburbanite ninnies cannot navigate it, each street being “just alike”.¹⁹²⁶ “‘Elm Avenue is one way,’ [...] ‘I thought this was Spruce Avenue,’ Victor said. ‘It happens to be Seminole Path,’ Marshall said. ‘I couldn’t imagine where you were going.’ Victor turned off the path into a likely looking driveway”.¹⁹²⁷ This reflects the stereotype of “clichéd, pre-fab suburbia”¹⁹²⁸ as an undifferentiated landscape consisting of “homogenous cubical houses”.¹⁹²⁹ The ninnies’ inability to recognise their own homes, simply guessing which is most “likely” to be the correct one, belies the emphasis suburbia places on residential life, especially in terms of homeownership. However, it is not just Kelton’s architectural uniformity which is to blame, but the fact that it is simply not significant enough to be worth noticing. In chapter seven, Mrs. Bridgewater looks around her neighborhood without recognition, only to be informed she simply “didn’t notice” its features up until this point.¹⁹³⁰ “‘I don’t think I’ve ever been on this street before’. ‘You’ve been on it hundreds of times,’

¹⁹²¹ Herd, *John Ashbery*, 63.

¹⁹²² Evenson, “Art”, 272.

¹⁹²³ Lehman, *Last Avant-Garde*, 81.

¹⁹²⁴ Ashbery, *Nest*, 32.

¹⁹²⁵ Ashbery, *Nest*, 13; 13; 129.

¹⁹²⁶ Ashbery, *Nest*, 16.

¹⁹²⁷ Ashbery, *Nest*, 18.

¹⁹²⁸ Katz, *American Modernism’s*, 151.

¹⁹²⁹ Monacell, “Hyperpastoral”, 90.

¹⁹³⁰ Ashbery, *Nest*, 84.

[...] ‘Uhhh,’ Mrs. Bridgewater said, as though agreeing that the street offered little enough that might catch her attention”.¹⁹³¹

Ultimately, Kelton “is of no interest whatsoever. Not even a sledgehammer could reduce it to viable fragments”.¹⁹³² Consequently, whilst Monacell maintains that Ashbery’s depiction of suburbia is unerringly “dystopian”, Kelton lacks the necessary distinctiveness to be a truly negative environment.¹⁹³³ Indeed, regardless of Alice’s malaise, the majority of those who reside there profess to “like it here”,¹⁹³⁴ something which Auden found to be simply “extraordinary”.¹⁹³⁵ “Though many of them live in suburbia, they all seem, believe it or not, to be happy and, though sometimes bitchy, actually to like each other”.¹⁹³⁶ Removed from the negativity suburbia is stereotypically associated with, Auden’s perception of Kelton morphs into one of peace and plenty. “The world it depicts is an imaginary Garden of Eden, a place of innocence from which all serious needs and desires have been excluded”, removed from the “sufferings and evil of the real world”.¹⁹³⁷ Yet this lack of threat is not due to any potentially utopic qualities suburbia may have but because its “episodes [are] without dramatic significance”.¹⁹³⁸ “There is no brooding or angst [...] no elaborate deceptions, no intense betrayals”.¹⁹³⁹ Simply put, it is not a place where significant things happen. In this context, the most “extraordinary” thing that one can take away is the banal suburban contentment which the ninnies exude at living in what is really “quite a pleasant place”, albeit, they acknowledge, a “mediocre” one.¹⁹⁴⁰ This is evoked by the somewhat ironic moniker of “storied Kelton”, a title which implies significance associated with legend.¹⁹⁴¹

¹⁹³¹ Ashbery, *Nest*, 84.

¹⁹³² Ashbery, *Nest*, 118.

¹⁹³³ Monacell, “Hyperpastoral”, 100.

¹⁹³⁴ Ashbery, *Nest*, 190.

¹⁹³⁵ Auden, “Review”.

¹⁹³⁶ Auden, “Review”.

¹⁹³⁷ Auden, “Review”.

¹⁹³⁸ Wallenstein, “Reality”.

¹⁹³⁹ Evenson, “Art”, 274.

¹⁹⁴⁰ Ashbery, *Nest*, 14; 182.

¹⁹⁴¹ Ashbery, *Nest*, 139.

Kelton is literally “storied”, both as the book’s principal setting and as a reflection of the “myth” that suburbia has come to represent.¹⁹⁴² However, this description sardonically stresses the suburb’s inauspiciousness as a setting for fiction. Its “storied” status is revealed to stem entirely from its role as a “commuters’ paradise”, with Auden’s perceived “Eden” being once again reduced to the banality of good transit links and proximity to the urban centre.¹⁹⁴³

Ashbery and Schuyler’s suburbia is therefore characterised largely through its distinct lack of characterisation. Kelton conceivably meets many of the basic criteria for what the anthropologist Marc Augé terms “non-places”, as a space devoid of sufficient significance to be classified as a place in its own right.¹⁹⁴⁴ However, whilst Kelton may be a pastiche of the nondescript nature of suburbia, it equally operates as a stand-in for space or place. Just as Alice overlays her real-life environment with her imaginings of New York, Ashbery and Schuyler arguably invite us to do the same: coaxing the reader to superimpose their own concept of suburbia over the blank hole where Kelton should be. They therefore conceivably succeed in portraying a place without ever actively describing it, relying on preconceived, clichéd notions about suburbia to fill in the proverbial and architectural gaps. This imbues the novel’s setting with a sense of what the authors’ friend, the artist Jane Freilicher, termed “profound universality”.¹⁹⁴⁵ In envisioning a place “almost exclusively characterized” according to suburban stereotypes, Ashbery and Schuyler simulate a generic “suburban milieu” which, in being both anywhere or nowhere, is suggested to be “utterly representative” of “suburban America”.¹⁹⁴⁶

¹⁹⁴² Ashbery, *Nest*, 171.

¹⁹⁴³ Ashbery, *Nest*, 139.

¹⁹⁴⁴ Marc Augé, *Non-Places* (UK: Verso, 2009), VIII.

¹⁹⁴⁵ Jane Freilicher, quoted in Quilter, “Explicit”, 371.

¹⁹⁴⁶ Evenson, “Art”, 277.

6.2.2. “Her thoughts were elsewhere”: suburbia vs. the hypothetical “other” space.

Daniel Katz suggests that the primary implication of *A Nest of Ninnies* is that “romantic adventure [is to be] found beyond the confines of suburban Kelton”.¹⁹⁴⁷ Just as the city, not suburbia, is the source of “wonder” in the book’s opening scene, the reader is left to “wonder” alongside Alice at the more “dramatic” narratives which may be taking place beyond her suburban community. Alice appears to break the so-called fourth wall, “let’s stop kidding ourselves. I want to go to the city”, as though the narrative is echoing that there simply must be more to this story than Kelton has to offer.¹⁹⁴⁸ Katz continues: “a structural implication of the novel is that [its] claustrophobic, suburban [setting] is narrow to the point of incestuousness”, especially when measured against more “cosmopolitan”, “densely historical” sites within the built environment.¹⁹⁴⁹ For Katz, this narrowness is again expressed through the ninnies’ lack of character depth, paired with their intrinsic lack of diversity as a community. However, it is equally applicable to the novel’s depiction of suburbia, which is suggested to be such an inherently “claustrophobic environment” that it actually induces “agoraphobia”, both cultural and spatial.¹⁹⁵⁰ Within its confines, Alice’s days are spent dreaming about what life would be like if she “lived in New York” to the extent that it completely overshadows every experience of her actual surroundings.¹⁹⁵¹ “In the house I think about how much I want to get to New York, and when I’m outside I think about how it will be when I do get there. You know, the way I’ll fix the apartment and evenings at concerts”.¹⁹⁵²

¹⁹⁴⁷ Katz, *American Modernism’s*, 150.

¹⁹⁴⁸ Ashbery, *Nest*, 10.

¹⁹⁴⁹ Katz, *American Modernism’s*, 151.

¹⁹⁵⁰ Ashbery, *Nest*, 172; 173.

¹⁹⁵¹ Ashbery, *Nest*, 42.

¹⁹⁵² Ashbery, *Nest*, 29.

Alice conceivably embodies a reversal of the same kind of wish fulfilment that characterises the suburban dream: idealising the city as an escape from the confines of suburbia in much the same way that many in post-war America romanticized suburbia as an alternative to urban life. This brands her as something of an anomaly amongst the ninnies, the rest of whom, being forged from the more stereotypical suburban mould, seem not to understand her “mysterious reason for wanting to be in New York”.¹⁹⁵³ Whilst Alice dreams of “settling down in a skyscraper,” the majority of the book’s characters maintain that they “couldn’t stand living in New York”, citing the expense and discomfort of living in a “small apartment”.¹⁹⁵⁴ Nonetheless, even those actively “averse to going into the city” remain trapped in its orbit, as they still “have to go there every day”.¹⁹⁵⁵ The narrative consequently contrasts the view of suburbia as a “refuge away from the negative aspects of the city” with the concept that it is increasingly “a place to escape *from*”.¹⁹⁵⁶

Rather than the ultimate site or subject of adventure, New York is just the novel’s opening example of the symbolic “elsewhere [that] its characters seek”: the first in a long line of “exoticized, valorized other stages” or more appealing “elsewheres” which emerge throughout the story.¹⁹⁵⁷ On an abstract level, Alice’s reverie is reminiscent of how the young Ashbery had “always wanted to live in a metropolis”,¹⁹⁵⁸ which he too associated with “dreams of escape from a dull world”,¹⁹⁵⁹ albeit a rural rather than a suburban one. In this respect, Kelton could indeed be said to evoke the so-called world of childhood and small-town life that Ashbery suggests the novel sought to encompass. Just as Alice’s “thoughts were elsewhere”¹⁹⁶⁰ whilst surveying her suburban hometown, Ashbery suggested in his

¹⁹⁵³ Ashbery, *Nest*, 69.

¹⁹⁵⁴ Ashbery, *Nest*, 42; 20

¹⁹⁵⁵ Ashbery, *Nest*, 10; 42.

¹⁹⁵⁶ Huq, *Making Sense*, 10.

¹⁹⁵⁷ Katz, *American Modernism’s*, 150; 151.

¹⁹⁵⁸ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 30.

¹⁹⁵⁹ MacArthur, *American*, 204; 167.

¹⁹⁶⁰ Ashbery, *Nest*, 143.

interview with Labrie that his childhood in small town America led him to reside “in a sort of fantasy world”.¹⁹⁶¹ “Everything around me seemed dull and pedestrian, and I was always imagining that things were more interesting [...] somewhere else”.¹⁹⁶² Ashbery and Schuyler’s suburbia is dependent on the concept of this hypothetical elsewhere or “hitherto unknown”, against which Kelton is constantly measured and usually found to be wanting.¹⁹⁶³ Suburbia, the novel suggests, is not just defined by its relationship with the elsewhere, but by the specific fact that it is seen to hold less significance than other places.

6.2.3. “What in the world would you go there for?”: searching for significance.

It is this longing for significance which drives the ninnies to travel beyond the confines of peripheral suburbia, first to the city, then within the wider United States, and finally to Europe - in search of a place with “more profile, more definition”.¹⁹⁶⁴ As Herd writes, “the structure of the novel is situational, the action (if one can call it that) starting in the suburb, and proceeding through various unannounced shifts of location [...] before ending up back in the suburbs”.¹⁹⁶⁵ Consequently, what little plot there is is driven almost entirely by location. Yet the significance of these locations becomes increasingly incidental, to the extent that Mrs. Kelso dismisses the group’s visit to France as a mere “bump of locality”.¹⁹⁶⁶ There remains “no real creation of place”, and such changes of location tend to be treated as narrative afterthoughts, not just by Ashbery and Schuyler but by the ninnies themselves.¹⁹⁶⁷ The

¹⁹⁶¹ Ashbery and Labrie, “Interview”, 29.

¹⁹⁶² Ashbery and Labrie, “Interview”, 29.

¹⁹⁶³ Ashbery, *Nest*, 172.

¹⁹⁶⁴ Ashbery, *Nest*, 181.

¹⁹⁶⁵ Herd, *John Ashbery*, 162.

¹⁹⁶⁶ Ashbery, *Nest*, 114.

¹⁹⁶⁷ Ashbery, *Nest*, 272.

characters routinely lose track of their location, asking “does anyone have any idea where we are?” or “why are we here?” only to be asked in turn “what difference does it make?”¹⁹⁶⁸

The answer, it appears, is very little. Chapter four, for example, opens with an apparently run-of-the-mill discussion about the ninnies’ suburban neighbours until Victor, in a seeming non-sequitur, inquires about poisonous snakes: “‘Why do you want to know?’ Alice asked. ‘Because we’re in Florida, home of the coral snake’”.¹⁹⁶⁹ Yet even this unexpected bombshell barely pauses the ninnies’ conversation long enough for them to pay their “customary respects to the new surroundings”.¹⁹⁷⁰ Whatever their destination, the ninnies engage in the same patterns of behaviour and conversation. They “all travel there in a body” and, on multiple occasions, either run into neighbors from home or encounter locals who suddenly ask after mutual acquaintances from Kelton, coincidences upon which “everyone expressed shock, but in fact, no one was too surprised”.¹⁹⁷¹ In an inversion of normal touristic practices, rather than sending postcards to those back in the American suburbs, they themselves receive a reminder of home - a postcard of New York’s Chrysler Building. Compounding this tug homewards, they find that their hotel is next to a street “called New York”, being informed that “that street over there should make you feel homesick [...] I have an aunt who lives in it [...] Well, near it”.¹⁹⁷² The focus still remains elsewhere, with even the more significant destinations the ninnies travel to being overshadowed by the spectre of an ever-unreachable central hub. Yet what is arguably most familiar is not just their proximity to a place named New York, but their continued peripherality to it. Much as Herd indicates that the novel presents “hosts of minor characters”, all of whom are barely introduced and the majority of “whom we do not expect to meet again”, the novel proceeds through “various

¹⁹⁶⁸ Ashbery, *Nest*, 112; 137; 94.

¹⁹⁶⁹ Ashbery, *Nest*, 46; 137.

¹⁹⁷⁰ Ashbery, *Nest*, 14.

¹⁹⁷¹ Ashbery, *Nest*, 57; 94.

¹⁹⁷² Ashbery, *Nest*, 98.

unnamed but vaguely recognisable minor French and Italian towns”.¹⁹⁷³ Nadia attributes this to their devotion to authenticity, suggesting that they “often find little out- of-the-way places” out of a desire to see the “real” Europe beyond the “usual tourist stuff”.¹⁹⁷⁴ Yet rather than hidden gems, these peripheral places are revealed to hold no more significance than Kelton. This idea reaches its zenith when the group travel to Rome, only to end up in a nondescript, residential suburb on the outskirts of the “old city”.¹⁹⁷⁵

“What wonderful tourists you are [...] Most Americans, when they come to Rome, want to see only the Forum and the Spanish Steps. You have seen parts of the city that many Romans never see.” Dr Bridgewater swelled a little. “I find standing here, in Parioli, just as interesting as standing in the Pantheon. The one is the world of today; the other, of yesterday.” Baroness Oscari looked at him with incredulity. After a long pause she said, “Well, there is no accounting for tastes”.¹⁹⁷⁶

Regardless of matters of “taste”, the authors suggest, there is a hierarchy of significance which governs the built environment, one in which suburbia is suggested to be empirically less “interesting” and less significant than the Pantheon. Ashbery here relates suburbia to concepts of history and time, much as “Pyrography” relates suburbia to the idea of “fake ruins” and America’s architectural past.¹⁹⁷⁷ Dr Bridgewater’s assertion that the “real” Rome is to be found in its suburbs rather than the monuments of the city centre is reminiscent of the message of “Pyrography” and “The One Thing That Can Save America”: that “America” is to be found not in “major” landmarks but in the “unimportant details” of

¹⁹⁷³ Herd, *John Ashbery*, 162.

¹⁹⁷⁴ Ashbery, *Nest*, 116; 105; 103.

¹⁹⁷⁵ Ashbery, *Nest*, 105.

¹⁹⁷⁶ Ashbery, *Nest*, 105.

¹⁹⁷⁷ Ashbery, “Pyrography”, 496.

“obscure suburbs”. Yet, as Evenson writes, “presumably one travels to an ancient city to stay in a charming hotel near the historic centre, not to find oneself in a suburb very much like the one whence one came”.¹⁹⁷⁸ Indeed, one character admits, “I don’t know if you’d call that travel” at all.¹⁹⁷⁹ The new or adventurous is reduced to the familiar or mundane, with Alice gazing at her unaccustomed surroundings only to reflect that “somehow I feel as if I’ve seen this all before”, professing to be “apathetic”.¹⁹⁸⁰

A Nest of Ninnies uses suburbia as a means to deconstruct concepts of significance and insignificance, or to challenge the ways in which we as a culture ascribe meaning in spatial or architectural terms. A location will declare itself to be a “suggestive scene”, only for the narrative to reveal that it is ultimately “impossible to make out the subject” or discern the message behind it.¹⁹⁸¹ Though something may “look full of meaning”, too often we find that simply “there is none”.¹⁹⁸² Much like the ninnies, we are therefore engaged in a search for significance which yields no concrete results or measurable catharsis. Unlike Ashbery, Alice never makes the move to New York and, although she does manage to “see something of the world”, she nonetheless ends up settling down in the suburb she appeared so desperate to leave.¹⁹⁸³ Despite arguably being the closest that the novel comes to a central, albeit still intrinsically “minor”, character, Alice and her dreams of urban life are ultimately just as peripheral to the narrative as those of the other ninnies. This, more than anything, represents the novel’s lack of traditional narrative progression, to the extent that one of the ninnies laments “to think that [it] should end – *here*”.¹⁹⁸⁴ Despite the “intriguing prospects” these more exciting elsewherees are suggested to represent, they are revealed to be no more

¹⁹⁷⁸ Ashbery, *Nest*, 154.

¹⁹⁷⁹ Ashbery, *Nest*, 97.

¹⁹⁸⁰ Ashbery, *Nest*, 98; 93.

¹⁹⁸¹ Ashbery, *Nest*, 151.

¹⁹⁸² Ashbery, *Nest*, 173; 113.

¹⁹⁸³ Ashbery, *Nest*, 29.

¹⁹⁸⁴ Ashbery, *Nest*, 180.

significant than Kelton itself, and the book concludes in the same bathetic and banal landscape where it first began.¹⁹⁸⁵ As Fabia remarks to Alice, “you always talk about New York as though it were a thousand miles away [...] you know you can go there any time you want to”.¹⁹⁸⁶ Alice, however, remains silent, continuing to stare through her suburban surroundings as if she does not see them. On the one hand, this evokes how the city continues to shimmer like a mirage on the horizon, so near yet still “so very far away”.¹⁹⁸⁷ Yet, perhaps, the novel suggests, rather than its reality, it is merely the idea of New York and the abstract possibilities it represents which truly call to Alice. Rather than an achievable prospect, it embodies an idealised fantasy of escape which is as much of a “myth” as suburbia itself.

6.3. “Is anything central?” The central, and the suburban in “The One Thing That Can Save America” and “Pyrography”.

In their portrayal of suburban Kelton, Ashbery and Schuyler expand upon the geographical relationship between the centre and the periphery in order to evoke wider ideas of the significant and the insignificant. The question of what is or is not “central” persists throughout the novel, the ninnies asking “is there any central theme to all of this?” as though attempting to grasp some common thread to unite the novel’s disjointed narrative.¹⁹⁸⁸ Yet Spiegelman suggests that it is Ashbery’s preoccupation with centrality which potentially demarcates him as a “suburban poet”.¹⁹⁸⁹ Ultimately, Spiegelman writes, Ashbery is a poet for whom “everything is on a periphery”.¹⁹⁹⁰ “As in the United States where contexts fluctuate or have positively disappeared, in Ashbery’s poetry the lack of a centre signifies the

¹⁹⁸⁵ Wallenstein, “Reality”.

¹⁹⁸⁶ Ashbery, *Nest*, 13.

¹⁹⁸⁷ Ashbery, *Nest*, 35.

¹⁹⁸⁸ Ashbery, *Nest*, 83.

¹⁹⁸⁹ Spiegelman, *How Poets*, 1890.

¹⁹⁹⁰ Spiegelman, *How Poets*, 1890.

lack of a centered self and of a central culture”.¹⁹⁹¹ Within the context of *A Nest of Ninnies*, this is evinced through the aforementioned lack of stable characterisation, both in terms of the ninnies and the suburban environment they call home. However, in “The One Thing That Can Save America”, Ashbery again contrasts and combines the idea of “the central” with that of “centrality”, as the speaker introduces the reader to “my version of America”.¹⁹⁹² Monacell and MacArthur interpret this as a symbol of the relationship between the “private self” and the “larger public”: that which matters to us as individuals and that which is important to us as a society.¹⁹⁹³ This evokes the same relationship between self and culture which Spiegelman suggests distinguishes Ashbery as a poet of the “periphery”. However, the poem deliberately frames this discussion in spatial terms, asking not just *what* is central but *where*.

Is anything central?

Orchards flung out on the land,

Urban forests, rustic plantations, knee-high hills?

Are place names central?

Elm Grove, Adcock Corner, Story Book Farm?

As they concur with a rush at eye level

Beating themselves into eyes which have had enough

Thank you, no more thank you.

And they come on like scenery mingled with darkness

The damp plains, overgrown suburbs,

Places of known civic pride, of civil obscurity.¹⁹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁹¹ Spiegelman, *How Poets*, 1890.

¹⁹⁹² Spiegelman, *How Poets*, 1893.

¹⁹⁹³ MacArthur, *American Landscape*, 190. See Monacell, “Hyperpastoral”, 101.

¹⁹⁹⁴ Ashbery, “One Thing”, 457.

The poem plays on the relationship between that which is geographically central and that which is culturally central, as suburbia's peripheral status within the built environment is suggested to mirror its "obscurity" or lack of wider significance. One of the few agreed-upon critical criteria for suburbs is that they are explicitly "non-central", with the "notion of [...] centrality" conventionally being reserved for "preeminent central cities".¹⁹⁹⁵ Chiefly outlined in terms of their contrast with such architectural "centrality", suburbs are invariably seen to be "peripheral areas" in both cultural and topographical terms.¹⁹⁹⁶ In this context, suburbs are held to be peripheral or minor places with equally peripheral or minor concerns, much as the suburbs of "The One Thing That Can Save America" are "soon to be forgotten" once one has made the short commute into the more central domain of the "city".¹⁹⁹⁷

Jacek Gutorow consequently states that "the poem seems to be guided in a distracted way by the notion of centrality, searching for it in odd places, unsystematically", as though questioning how "the one thing that can save America, whatever is 'central' [could be] located [in such] unremarkable places".¹⁹⁹⁸ In a narrative which echoes the origins of *A Nest of Ninnies*, the stream of scenery rushing by gives the impression that we are "driving along a highway", during which "the speaker of the poem encounters three [...] small towns or suburban developments".¹⁹⁹⁹ Once again, Monacell maintains that the poem's depiction of suburbia is inherently "dystopian", particularly in regard to the "modernistic despair" encoded in this listing of "hyperpastoral 'place names'", which he suggests evoke everything from "diseased trees" to the "repression of sexuality".²⁰⁰⁰ However, this is symptomatic of a wider fascination with suburban "place names" throughout Ashbery's work. These often

¹⁹⁹⁵ Teaford, *American Suburb*, ix; xi; ix.

¹⁹⁹⁶ Teaford, *American Suburb*, x.

¹⁹⁹⁷ Ashbery, "One Thing", 457.

¹⁹⁹⁸ Jacek Gutorow, "The Poem: John Ashbery's 'The One Thing That Can Save America'", *Body* (09/12/14), <https://bodyliterature.com/2014/09/12/jacek-gutorow-on-john-ashberys-the-one-thing-that-can-save-america/> (Accessed 10/09/20).

¹⁹⁹⁹ Monacell, "Hyperpastoral", 100.

²⁰⁰⁰ Monacell, "Hyperpastoral", 100; 97; 100.

trade on ideas of indeterminacy, like the “anonymous blue collar suburb”²⁰⁰¹ of “All and Some” (*Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*) or, in a later example from the poet’s canon, “the town with the relaxed, suburban name”.²⁰⁰² References such as these are reminiscent of the blandly named Smithtown, the “archetypal” yet anonymous suburb which first inspired Ashbery and Schuyler’s novel. Yet whilst a quick glance at Smithtown led the authors to imagine, however indistinctly, the suburban community that lay beyond, in “The One Thing That Can Save America” the reader is left to fill in the gaps both literally and metaphorically.

Whilst *A Nest of Ninnies* initially presents us with a suburb without a name, here Ashbery provides us with a string of suburban “place names” without the supporting representation of space. Rather than actual locales, they represent little more than signposts for turnoffs the speaker could make but never does, symbolic indicators for places they could experience yet never will. This reinforces the view of suburbia as a place to be glimpsed purely on the way to somewhere else, never as a destination or subject in its own right. The first two names are generic, conjuring a generalised image of what could be any one of the nondescript suburbs or small towns which litter the American landscape. Rather than the more negative imagery Monacell claims that these names suggest, they are arguably more emblematic in what they do not evoke. As symbols of their own suburban “obscurity”, the significance of such places is paradoxically derived from their very lack of individual distinction, especially when juxtaposed with the kitschy, over-idealised pastiche represented by “Story Book Farm”. Nonetheless, whilst this last name conceivably pokes fun at the romanticised view of suburbia which pervaded post-war American culture, it holds no more individual significance within the context of the poem than the other, more banally labelled suburbs it is grouped with. The suburbs struggle to superimpose themselves above one

²⁰⁰¹ John Ashbery, “All and Some”, *CP*, 471.

²⁰⁰² John Ashbery, “Strange Occupations”, *Your Name Here* (UK: Carcanet, 2000), 36.

another. They “concur with a rush at eye level”, with none having the individuality to stand out or apart from its surroundings.

Suburbia is therefore literally “overgrown”, spilling beyond the confines of the periphery to sprawl across the nation as a whole. As Gutorow writes, “everything is all mixed together, and [the reader] cannot discern what is central, what is important”.²⁰⁰³ Yet, such characterisations fail to take into account suburbs’ “centrality to the lives of a regional population”.²⁰⁰⁴ This divide between localised significance and wider anonymity is expressed by the poem’s description of suburbs as “places of known civic pride, of civil obscurity”, in which the speaker resorts to technicalities in order to stress the “mostly limited” nature of suburbia’s significance.²⁰⁰⁵ Whilst the statement initially appears somewhat contradictory, here Ashbery conceivably plays on the subtle difference of terminology: between civic (relating to concepts of “community and citizenship” at a “municipal” or highly localized level)²⁰⁰⁶ and civil (which, though largely similar, can also pertain to wider and more “general uses”, stretching beyond the purely regional to encompass ideas of “country or state”).²⁰⁰⁷ This distinction stresses just how limited and localized suburbia’s significance is, to the extent that even the slightest broadening of scope renders it once again obscure, all significance lost amongst the multitude of identical spaces which make up the “mingled” mass of the American landscape.

That which is “central”, Ashbery indicates, is largely dependent on locality, much as “places” may be “known” to those who reside there and yet remain obscure beyond their own architectural boundaries. This idea evokes the ties which bind us to a specific landscape, that which the poem describes as the “private” significance or “roots” which render a place

²⁰⁰³ Gutorow, “Poem”.

²⁰⁰⁴ Teaford, *American Suburb*, xi.

²⁰⁰⁵ Ashbery, “One Thing”, 458.

²⁰⁰⁶ “civic”, adj. *OED*

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/33569?rskey=WDvj6I&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid> (Accessed 12/09/20)

²⁰⁰⁷ “civil”, adj. *OED*.

“central” to us as individuals, regardless of its wider lack of notability.²⁰⁰⁸ As discussed in chapter four, Ashbery repeatedly uses the imagery of “roots” to suggest a personalised relationship with a specific landscape or to evoke the individualised significance of a place, often in relation to the idea of home. In questioning “where are these roots?”, “The One Thing That Can Save America” could be seen to query the likelihood of forming an attachment to such a “remote” and nondescript environment, as though doubting the capacity of suburbia to be truly “central” even at such a localized or personal level.²⁰⁰⁹ In this vein, Monacell suggests that the poem ultimately “symbolizes detachment” and “estrangement” from one’s surroundings in the absence of a “connection to a nourishing pastoral home”.²⁰¹⁰ However, as the poem continues, it appears that such obscure suburban communities may be where America’s roots truly lie, mundane as they may be. After all, the architecture of the suburbs, its “small houses”, “fenced areas” and “cool shady streets” are stressed to be crafted from “the lumber of life, or of lives”, embodying the day-to-day existence of the average American citizen.²⁰¹¹

This is arguably what differentiates what Ashbery terms “my version of America” and the more all-encompassing image suggested by “this is America calling” from “Pyrography”. Both poems explore the inherent significance of otherwise unimportant places, and both employ suburbia as a symbol of this unexceptional middle landscape, in which nothing “is, of course, central, except to itself”.²⁰¹² In this respect, both poems stress the fundamentally “limited” nature of suburban significance and, by extension, the inherently localized nature of significance as a whole, an idea which is also fundamental to Williams’ suburban poetics. Yet while “Pyrography” sees suburbia as the epitome of the “unimportant details” which

²⁰⁰⁸ Ashbery, “One Thing”, 457.

²⁰⁰⁹ Ashbery, “One Thing”, 457.

²⁰¹⁰ Monacell, “Hyperpastoral”, 101.

²⁰¹¹ Ashbery, “One Thing”, 458; 458; 458; 457.

²⁰¹² MacArthur, *American*, 190.

must be taken into account if one is to achieve a true impression of the whole, “The One Thing That Can Save America” uses America’s suburbs to express the impossibility of ever reducing the nation to just “one thing”, “version” or even one landscape. In a built environment which operates on so many different levels of meaning, the private and the public, the centre and the periphery, the suburban and the urban, how does one ultimately ascribe significance? In this “dispersed, postmodern America”, Ashbery suggests, how are we to ascertain what is truly central?²⁰¹³

6.3.1 “Exemplary, like a star”: “The One Thing That Can Save America” and concepts of literary significance.

The idea that suburbia is not reflective of the central culture is one that has been applied to Ashbery’s work. In “Contemporary Poetry, Alternate Routes”, Jerome McGann uses the term “suburban” to describe Ashbery’s poetic style throughout the late 1960s and 70s, the same timeframe in which *A Nest of Ninnies*, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* and *Houseboat Days* were published.²⁰¹⁴ Monacell suggests that the number of suburban references in Ashbery’s poetry increased during this period, contemporary with the “resurgence of suburbia’s ideological forces [and an] exponential expansion of suburban space”.²⁰¹⁵ However, rather than reflecting Monacell’s argument, McGann uses “suburban” as a synonym for “localized”, defining “the poetry of the suburbs” as “an attempt to define ‘social’ and ‘political’ within a limited, even personal, horizon”.²⁰¹⁶ In an era which saw the

²⁰¹³ MacArthur, *American*, 190.

²⁰¹⁴ Jerome McGann, “Contemporary Poetry, Alternate Routes”, *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 1987), 628.

²⁰¹⁵ Monacell, “Hyperpastoral”, 83.

²⁰¹⁶ McGann, “Contemporary”, 625; 626; 626.

rise of “political” or “ideological” poetry, McGann argues, Ashbery’s work “moved instead along the lines of [more] suburban and personal interests”.²⁰¹⁷

Whilst he does not explore the actual portrayal of suburbia in Ashbery’s poetry, McGann evokes the same concept of “centredness” which preoccupies “The One Thing That Can Save America”, labelling Ashbery’s work “suburban” due to its perceived refusal to engage with the “central” literary and “cultural ideas” of the time.²⁰¹⁸ This reflects the supposed “mentality” of suburbia itself, whereby “‘suburban’ implies stasis, narrowness, and the refusal to look beyond rather limited boundaries, or to engage with political and historical realities”.²⁰¹⁹ After all, as “The One Thing That Can Save America” explores, that which is “central” is determined by the boundaries of space and “place”. Yet, much as the poem is preoccupied with that which is locally or privately meaningful, its meditations on suburban obscurity potentially held a personal significance for Ashbery as a poet. As MacArthur writes, “it is hard to remember that, when Ashbery wrote [*Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*], he was fairly obscure outside poetic circles” and had “almost despaired of reaching a large readership”.²⁰²⁰ In this context, the speaker’s musings about suburbia and their inability to “translate private experiences into the public sphere” are conceivably an analogy for Ashbery’s struggle to communicate with a wider audience, or his own anxieties about his ability to be “central”.²⁰²¹

I know that I braid too much my own

Snapped-off perceptions of things as they come to me.

They are private and always will be.

²⁰¹⁷ McGann, “Contemporary”, 626; 627; 628.

²⁰¹⁸ McGann, “Contemporary”, 626; 628.

²⁰¹⁹ Gill, *Poetics*, 4.

²⁰²⁰ MacArthur, *American*, 191.

²⁰²¹ Monacell, “Hyperpastoral”, 101.

Where then are the private turns of event
Destined to bloom later like golden chimes
Released over a city from a highest tower?
The quirky things that happen to me, and I tell you,
And you know instantly what I mean?²⁰²²

In the same way that McGann uses the term “suburban” as a means to consider Ashbery’s relationship with American poetic culture, “The One Thing That Can Save America” therefore maps not just the nation’s topographical or cultural landscape but also its literary one. In its sweeping description of America, the poem has been suggested to be a “gentle allusion”²⁰²³ to Whitman - considered by many to be “the central poet of the American tradition”²⁰²⁴ - specifically his poem “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” (1865). This comparison plays on Whitman’s reputation as an “inclusive, representative, universalist poet”: a symbolic figure of the American democratic individual who is often seen to speak directly to all, for all.²⁰²⁵ Critics who have suggested that “The One Thing That Can Save America” may be read as a response to Whitman’s poem tend to focus on potential parallels in natural imagery, such as Monacell who suggests that Ashbery evokes Whitman in order to voice his distance from his own “rural origins”.²⁰²⁶ However, much as “Pyrography” channelled Ashbery’s anxieties about being “asked to play Whitman [in] writing about ‘America’ as a whole”, here Ashbery arguably uses the specific image of suburbia as a means to orientate his own poetic position in relation to the so-called “Whitmanian model”.²⁰²⁷

Whitman’s poem was written as an elegy for President Abraham Lincoln after his assassination in 1865, through which the poet “float[s] his song” of mourning across

²⁰²² Ashbery, “One Thing”, 457.

²⁰²³ Herd, *John Ashbery*, 159.

²⁰²⁴ Monacell, “Hyperpastoral”, 101.

²⁰²⁵ R.W. Butterfield, “Walt Whitman’s America”, *Journal of American Studies* (04/1997), 127.

²⁰²⁶ Monacell, “Hyperpastoral”, 102.

²⁰²⁷ Monacell, “Hyperpastoral”, 457.

America, “over my cities shining all, enveloping man and land”.²⁰²⁸ Yet whilst Ashbery too desires to broadcast his art from the city’s “highest tower”, his “ultimate meaning cannot be grasped”.²⁰²⁹ Gutorow therefore argues that “the poem [is] a manifestation of its own impossibility. The message cannot get through to the reader and it disseminates into unrelated images”.²⁰³⁰ However, rather than “unrelated”, such images are arguably a topographical manifestation of this inability to connect. Like a “letter that never arrives”, Ashbery’s message is unable to reach its intended destination, ending up lost and untethered on an aimless journey around the American landscape.²⁰³¹ Like Whitman’s, his message is “flung out on the land”, only to become lost in the “obscure” terrain of “damp plains [and] overgrown suburbs”.

MacArthur writes that, in his quest to connect, Ashbery turns to the “American landscape as a source of common meaning and reference”.²⁰³² However, alongside engaging with the nation’s common preoccupation with its rural past, he uses the idea of its middle landscape as a means to express “self-accusations of obscurity”.²⁰³³ In this respect, the poem is arguably reminiscent of Ashbery and Schuyler’s depiction of clichéd suburbia in *A Nest of Ninnies*, which Ashbery states started as a “private joke”²⁰³⁴ with “no apparent potential audience”.²⁰³⁵ Both poets were “unknown and unpublishable at the time”, and neither believed that their work “would ever see the light of day. Especially *A Nest of Ninnies*”.²⁰³⁶ Ashbery consequently appears to have associated the image of suburbia with his own literary obscurity, playing on both the idea of suburbia as a place without significance or inherent

²⁰²⁸ Walt Whitman, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” (1865), *The Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45480/when-lilacs-last-in-the-dooryard-bloomd> (Accessed 23/10/20).

²⁰²⁹ Gutorow, “Poem”.

²⁰³⁰ Gutorow, “Poem”.

²⁰³¹ Ashbery, “One Thing”, 458.

²⁰³² MacArthur, *American Landscape*, 191.

²⁰³³ MacArthur, *American Landscape*, 190.

²⁰³⁴ Herd, “John Ashbery”, 33.

²⁰³⁵ Ashbery, “Preface”, 6.

²⁰³⁶ Herd, “John Ashbery”, 33.

meaning and the view that such shortcomings render it an insufficient subject for poetry. Whilst Whitman claims kinship with “my land”,²⁰³⁷ “my cities”,²⁰³⁸ “my own Manhattan”,²⁰³⁹ Ashbery thus indicates that his “version of America” is a far less “central” one, with the poet expressing his own “distance from the central”²⁰⁴⁰ through the imagery of the built environment. The struggle to identify what is “central”, Ashbery suggests, is therefore ultimately a search to ascertain “whether we shall be known/ And whether our fate can be exemplary, like a star”.²⁰⁴¹ Yet whilst Whitman’s “great star” stands as a symbol of Lincoln and the nationwide mourning after his assassination, Ashbery’s star is a suburban and therefore “limited” one.²⁰⁴² Much as Williams worried that his association with suburbia meant he could not truly be a poet, Ashbery suggests that, being firmly planted in this nondescript middle landscape, his poetry may perhaps be as fundamentally “obscure” as the suburbs themselves.

6.3.2. “Out in the middle”: “Pyrography” and the American architectural mean.

Throughout “The One Thing That Can Save America”, Ashbery uses the idea of suburbia as a means to deconstruct concepts of meaning or significance, both spatial and poetic. That which is “exemplary” is implicitly understood to hold significance, either due to its own “outstanding” qualities, or as that which is chosen to serve as an “illustrative example” for a wider or more “general rule”.²⁰⁴³ However, the image of “obscure suburbs” serves to counterbalance or even cancel out this implied significance, standing as a symbol of

²⁰³⁷ Whitman, “When Lilacs”.

²⁰³⁸ Whitman, “When Lilacs”.

²⁰³⁹ Whitman, “When Lilacs”.

²⁰⁴⁰ Monacell, “Hyperpastoral”, 101.

²⁰⁴¹ Ashbery, “One Thing”, 458.

²⁰⁴² Whitman, “When Lilacs”.

²⁰⁴³ “Exemplary”, *adj.* and *adv.* *OED*, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/66049?rskey=qhlAbt&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid> Accessed 12/10/20).

Ashbery's inability to either communicate or identify meaning. In this respect, the suburb of "The One Thing That Can Save America" exists in a "a never-ending play of foreground and background", referencing both "actual places and place names that are arbitrary and have nothing to do with places".²⁰⁴⁴ In this context, the poem is again reminiscent of "Pyrography", which opens with the line "Out here on Cottage Grove it matters", in which significance is once again stressed to be dependent on space and place.²⁰⁴⁵ Whilst "The One Thing That Can Save America" lists an archetypal selection of potential "names of obscure towns" and "suburbs", in his 2007 interview with MacArthur for The New School's *LIT 12* journal, Ashbery confirmed that the motivation behind the landscape of "Pyrography" was more specific.²⁰⁴⁶ When he began writing "Pyrography", he was "thinking of Cottage Grove Avenue in Chicago [...] a long thoroughfare [that] stretches out into [...] the streetcar suburbs, as they used to call them, the first suburbs".²⁰⁴⁷ This conjures up an impression of "classic suburbs, middle landscapes built on the edges of cities",²⁰⁴⁸ and the poem evokes this scene, with commuters "returning home/ On streetcars after a satisfying day at the office".²⁰⁴⁹ Yet despite citing real-life locations in the built environment, the poem deliberately cultivates the same sense of detachment from place exhibited throughout both *A Nest of Ninnies* and "The One Thing That Can Save America", again revolving around "the image of Ashbery as passenger".²⁰⁵⁰ To see America is to embark on a never-ending "slow boxcar journey", "gradually accelerating" outwards through the "gyrating fans of suburbs", with the poet firmly planted at the window as the entirety of the nation flashes past.²⁰⁵¹ Like the cars passing through suburban Kelton, there is no interaction with this world, as the viewer never

²⁰⁴⁴ Gutorow, "Poem".

²⁰⁴⁵ Ashbery, "Pyrography", 495.

²⁰⁴⁶ MacArthur, *American Landscape*, 190.

²⁰⁴⁷ John Ashbery and Marit MacArthur, "Interview by Marit MacArthur", *LIT 12* (Spring 2007), 195.

²⁰⁴⁸ Monacell, "Hyperpastoral", 104.

²⁰⁴⁹ Ashbery, "Pyrography", 496.

²⁰⁵⁰ Ernesto Suárez-Toste, "'The Tension is the Concept'", *Style* (Spring 2004), 8.

²⁰⁵¹ Ashbery, "Pyrography", 495.

stops long enough to form any kind of emotional attachment to his surroundings. The American built environment is described as a “creaking revolving stage”, a Muybridge machine or zoopraxiscope endlessly looping the same identical scenes.²⁰⁵² The scenery is “circling [...] always circling”, “returning,” and repeating to the extent that it is in constant danger of blurring together.²⁰⁵³ City becomes “cities”.²⁰⁵⁴ “Home” becomes “millions of homes”, as if the land is merely a “recurring tic” of identical structures broken only by “sligh[t] changes”.²⁰⁵⁵

If cities truly represent the “‘center’ of identity and expressivity”, Monacell indicates, then the “‘extremities of life’ are suburbs themselves”, as they embody spaces “without a center”.²⁰⁵⁶ As such, anything of import simply “cannot exist beyond them”, with significance once more operating in spatial terms.²⁰⁵⁷ In a similar fashion, “Pyrography” draws a parallel between the topography of the centre and the periphery and the cultural map of the central and the peripheral. The further one travels outwards, the speaker suggests, the less there is to be found, as one heads “toward the nothing of the coast”.²⁰⁵⁸ Removed from the coalescing, centripetal pull of the central hub, the land begins to collapse in on itself, “pulling away” from the centre and undergoing a “vast unravelling/ Out toward the junctions and to the darkness beyond”.²⁰⁵⁹ As Spiegelman writes, “it’s hard to know exactly where we *are* at any given moment, although Warren, Ohio, and Bolinas, California, get a mention”.²⁰⁶⁰ Within the vague and ever-expanding world of the poem, these are the sole signposts to help us situate ourselves. Yet Ashbery appears to have specifically chosen these places for their comparative lack of pre-eminence or distinction. In his interview with Ford, Ashbery recalled

²⁰⁵² Ashbery, “Pyrography”, 495.

²⁰⁵³ Ashbery, “Pyrography”, 496.

²⁰⁵⁴ Ashbery, “Pyrography”, 496.

²⁰⁵⁵ Ashbery, “Pyrography”, 496; 496; 495; 496.

²⁰⁵⁶ Monacell, “Hyperpastoral”, 83.

²⁰⁵⁷ Monacell, “Hyperpastoral”, 83.

²⁰⁵⁸ Ashbery, “Pyrography”, 495.

²⁰⁵⁹ Ashbery, “Pyrography”, 497.

²⁰⁶⁰ Spiegelman, *How Poets*, 2029.

an exchange with a reviewer who questioned whether these geographical references constituted a disbarring case of localisation. How was an average “reader supposed to know what Warren is like?”²⁰⁶¹ Ashbery’s response was typically wry: “I’ve never been there either” he admitted, but “I think I have a pretty clear notion of what it’s like”.²⁰⁶² A lack of familiarity with the place in question is suggested to not only be beside the point, but arguably the entire reason why Ashbery chose Warren for such a position of prominence in the first place.

In a similar fashion, Ashbery was “not sure he ever saw Cottage Grove”, but simply wished to evoke a “similar” quasi-suburban environment.²⁰⁶³ When seeking to establish a model for the quintessentially American space, the poet indicates, the specifics do not matter, relegated to the status of “unimportant details” which would only detract from a place’s overall genericness. In narrative terms, Huq argues that suburbia always signifies a form of generic space which alludes only to a hypothetical “somewhere unspecified”.²⁰⁶⁴ In a similar fashion, through its flux of the general and the particular, “Pyrography” presents suburbia as both “everywhere and nowhere at once”.²⁰⁶⁵ In the language of “The One Thing That Can Save America”, what makes places like Warren “exemplary” is not that they are exceptional, but rather the reverse. Like the prospective “universality” of Kelton, such spaces are, because of their overall lack of individual significance, unpretentiously typical of the American landscape as a whole. Jackson argues that critical views of suburbia tend to “generalise about the American residential experience”,²⁰⁶⁶ much as Ashbery described the house in Smithtown where they decided they would “have the characters live”²⁰⁶⁷ as a “typical American

²⁰⁶¹ Ford, *John Ashbery*, 59.

²⁰⁶² Ford, *John Ashbery*, 59.

²⁰⁶³ MacArthur, *American Landscape*, 192.

²⁰⁶⁴ Huq, “Seeking Culture”, 25.

²⁰⁶⁵ Spiegelman, *How Poets*, 1893.

²⁰⁶⁶ Jackson, *Crabgrass*, 6.

²⁰⁶⁷ Herd, “John Ashbery”, 33.

house”.²⁰⁶⁸ Yet if Ashbery frames suburbia as the “archetypal” or “exemplary” American space, it is not due to any quality of distinctiveness or significance, but rather because it is simply the most ubiquitous - so widespread that it has become the nation’s default landscape.

In asking what constitutes the “central”, Ashbery trades on the different meanings the term holds in our culture, evoking not just “the physical centre”, or even that which is “most important or significant”, but the concept of the “median”.²⁰⁶⁹ Suburbia represents the American architectural mean: the built environment reduced to its average space. Yet it is this very lack of individual character which allows suburbia to “become transparent”, blending with and embodying the sprawling, indistinguishable landscape of America itself.²⁰⁷⁰ Or, as Ashbery and Schuyler conclude in *A Nest of Ninnies*, “It is just right: it is so ‘with it’ as to be invisible; one cannot see it until its time is past. More definition would crush some part of the public - make them self-conscious”.²⁰⁷¹

²⁰⁶⁸ Herd, “John Ashbery”, 33.

²⁰⁶⁹ “central”, adj. *OED*,
<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/29680?rskey=l81DDm&result=3&isAdvanced=false#eid> (Accessed 12/09/20).

²⁰⁷⁰ Ashbery, “Pyrography”, 496.

²⁰⁷¹ Ashbery, *Nest*, 181.

Conclusion: “We built it”.

In *What Americans Build and Why*, Ann Sloan Devlin states that those seeking to ascertain a true “understanding of America” must first comprehend “how vast and young its built environment is”.²⁰⁷² “Much has happened to affect the American landscape” over the course of the nation’s short history, she indicates, and as the “natural [or ‘default’] environment” of its past has shifted into the more “built landscape” we know today, concepts of what America “is” have evolved alongside it.²⁰⁷³ Throughout this thesis, I have explored Ashbery’s portrayal of this shifting architectural landscape, to suggest how, by focusing on the centrality of space, place and the built environment in his poetry, we may also establish an entry-point through which to approach his work as a whole. As stated in the introduction, the analysis has been presented as a form of “construction” in and of itself: a “building up” or putting together of parts, offered in an attempt to explore larger meanings.²⁰⁷⁴ In seeking to summarise Ashbery’s architectural imagery, however, I return to the poem which concluded the last chapter of that analysis, “Pyrography”. As previously stated, “Pyrography” was originally commissioned to accompany a touring “exhibition of paintings of American landscapes” by 45 of the nation’s most celebrated artists, as part of the US Department of the Interior’s “America 1976” project.²⁰⁷⁵ Yet in providing us with his own poetic portrait of America, Ashbery presents us with not only one of his most explicit treatments of space,

²⁰⁷² Ann Sloan Devlin, *What Americans Build and Why* (USA: Cambridge UP, 2010), xii.

²⁰⁷³ Devlin, *What Americans*, xi.

²⁰⁷⁴ “construction”, n. 1-2, *OED Online* (October 2021) Oxford UP, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/39899?redirectedFrom=construction#eid> (Accessed 03/11/2021).

²⁰⁷⁵ Mark Ford, *John Ashbery in Conversation* (UK: Between the Lines, 2003), 59.

place, and “construction”, but a meaning which lies at the centre of his portrayal of the built environment as a whole: “The land wasn’t immediately appealing; we built it/ Partly over with fake ruins, in the image of ourselves”.²⁰⁷⁶

When America is exhibited, Ashbery suggests, we are faced with a nation with two recognizable spatial identities. The nation’s past is depicted alongside its present, the untouched landscape of “bare fields”, “lakes and swamps” being called back into existence for a fleeting moment before the focus again returns to all that has been “built” to take its place.²⁰⁷⁷ In this respect, the poem echoes the opening of Robert Frost’s “The Gift Outright”: “The land was ours before we were the land’s”.²⁰⁷⁸ In both poems “the speaker, speaking in the present, offers us a meditation on America’s past”.²⁰⁷⁹ Yet much as Frost suggests that mere ownership of “the land was not enough to achieve national identity”, Ashbery indicates that the American landscape has been actively “built” into the form it takes today.²⁰⁸⁰ “America”, the poem indicates, is an architectural creation, with Ashbery tying the country’s origins to the construction of its built environment. This recalls a 1983 profile on the sculptor and architect Siah Armajani which Ashbery wrote for *Newsweek* magazine, in which he likens America’s “native-vernacular architecture” to “principles formulated by” such iconic national figures as “Tom Paine and Jefferson, Emerson and Thoreau, Whitman and Robert Frost”.²⁰⁸¹ The nation’s “democratic landscape”, he suggests, is to be found not in its “monumental constructions”, but in the “plain buildings” and “secret spaces” of its everyday built environment.²⁰⁸² Such structures, Ashbery indicates, represent the “building blocks” of

²⁰⁷⁶ John Ashbery, “Pyrography”, in *Collected Poems, 1956-1987*, ed. Mark Ford (UK: Carcanet, 2001), 496 (Hereafter cited as *CP*).

²⁰⁷⁷ Ashbery, “Pyrography”, 497.

²⁰⁷⁸ Robert Frost, “The Gift Outright”, *The Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/53013/the-gift-outright> (Accessed 10/12/21).

²⁰⁷⁹ Hamida Bosmaiian, “Robert Frost’s ‘The Gift Outright’”, *American Quarterly* (1970), 96.

²⁰⁸⁰ Bosmaiian, “Robert Frost’s ‘The Gift Outright’”, 98.

²⁰⁸¹ John Ashbery, “Siah Armajani”, in *Reported Sightings* ed. David Bergman (USA: Harvard UP, 1991), 347 (Hereafter cited as *RS*).

²⁰⁸² Ashbery, “Siah Armajani”, 347; 347; 348; 347.

America.²⁰⁸³ In documenting the nation's "history" through the creeping emergence of "cities", "suburbs", and a "million homes all over the land",²⁰⁸⁴ "Pyrography" also strives to encapsulate the "drive to build"²⁰⁸⁵ which lies at the heart of architecture itself.

Man's natural response to his surroundings, Ashbery suggests, is to build. Deeming the natural landscape to be "[un]appealing" or insufficient on its own, he shapes it to better suit his needs. Marit MacArthur describes this same passage from "Pyrography" as Ashbery's "attemp[t] to civilize the country through architectural works" to the extent that the chief way we as people interact with space and place is by remaking it in the "image of ourselves".²⁰⁸⁶ Much as "The Bungalows" frames "architecture" as a vehicle for a more abstract meaning, the constructions of "Pyrography" stem from a desire not just to "inhabit" the landscape in question but to have that landscape serve as a reflection of that which we, as a culture, find meaningful.²⁰⁸⁷ As this thesis has consistently argued, Ashbery's architectural imagery repeatedly serves an emblematic or metapoetic function, through which the poet not only explores the relationship between aspects of architecture, "built" and "unbuilt", but wider ideas of time, identity, art, and culture.²⁰⁸⁸ Similarly, "Pyrography", with its landscape of "fake ruins", portrays the built environment as a key part of how people find meaning in the world around them or, in its absence, attempt to establish it. Faced with the immaturity of its built environment in a world which tends to view a country as "invariably the sum of its artifacts and antiquities",²⁰⁸⁹ Ashbery's America constructs its own architectural history, one destined "never [to be] completed/ And only partially designed".²⁰⁹⁰ This description, Herd suggests, may reflect Ashbery's wish "to put together a tradition to build on where none had

²⁰⁸³ Ashbery, "Siah Armajani", 348.

²⁰⁸⁴ Ashbery, "Pyrography", 496; 495; 495; 496.

²⁰⁸⁵ Merrill Schleier, *The Skyscraper in American Art 1890-1931* (USA: Da Capo, 1986), xix.

²⁰⁸⁶ Marit MacArthur *The American Landscape* (USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 193.

²⁰⁸⁷ John Ashbery, "The Bungalows", *CP*, 225.

²⁰⁸⁸ John Ashbery, "Aldo Rossi" in *RP*, 335.

²⁰⁸⁹ Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* (USA: MIT Press, 1984), 59-60.

²⁰⁹⁰ Ashbery, "Pyrography", 496.

existed”, with the “construction” of the poem’s landscape operating as a metaphor for the poet’s art.²⁰⁹¹ However, in having the nation construct the foundations for that new architectural and cultural tradition, “Pyrography” also emphasises the importance which society places on the built environment as such.

“All architecture”, Ashbery indicates, has the potential to serve as a “concrete basis” for things of more abstract significance,²⁰⁹² just as “The Bungalows” frames “construction” as a process through which that which is naturally “meaningless” may be rendered “meaningful”.²⁰⁹³ As I have explored throughout this thesis, this process takes many forms over the course of Ashbery’s work, with the poet merging literal and figurative concepts of place and space in order to express many of the major, often more metaphysical themes typically associated with his poetry. Ultimately, he suggests, the true difference between what we consider a meaningful construction and a meaningless one depends on the significance which we, as a culture, invest in that structure. Whether they consist of skyscrapers or suburbs, houses or hotels, the built environments of Ashbery’s poetry invite us to envision “architecture as something quite different than what we commonly take it to be”.²⁰⁹⁴

²⁰⁹¹ David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (USA: Manchester UP, 2003), 103.

²⁰⁹² Ashbery, “Aldo Rossi”, 335.

²⁰⁹³ Ashbery, “Bungalows”, 224; 225; 225.

²⁰⁹⁴ Ashbery, “Aldo Rossi”, 334.

Appendices:

Reproduction of images and collages by John Ashbery under the fair dealing exception for illustration or instruction (CDPA s. 32). [Redacted for E-thesis submission]

Chapter 2:

Appendix 1: John Ashbery, “The Acrobats” (circa 1972), in John Ashbery, *They Knew What They Wanted: Poems and Collages*, ed. Mark Polizzotti (China: Rizzoli Electa, 2018), 56.



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Appendix 2: “Lunch atop a Skyscraper” (1932). Photographer unknown. Rockefeller Center archives. Available at Ben Goldberger, “Time 100 Photos: Lunch atop a Skyscraper”, *Time 100 Photos*, <http://100photos.time.com/photos/lunch-atop-a-skyscraper>



Appendix 3: John Ashbery, “Moon Glow” (2008), in John Ashbery, *They Knew What They Wanted: Poems and Collages*, ed. Mark Polizzotti (China: Rizzoli Electa, 2018), 120.

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Appendix 4: John Ashbery, “The ‘Little’ Tower of Babel” (2010), in John Ashbery, *They Knew What They Wanted: Poems and Collages*, ed. Mark Polizzotti (China: Rizzoli Electa, 2018), 85.



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Appendix 5: John Ashbery, “Promontory” (2010), in John Ashbery, *They Knew What They Wanted: Poems and Collages*, ed. Mark Polizzotti (China: Rizzoli Electa, 2018), 122.



Appendix 6: John Ashbery, “The Painter” (2014), in John Ashbery, *They Knew What They Wanted: Poems and Collages*, ed. Mark Polizzotti (China: Rizzoli Electa, 2018), 59.



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Chapter Three:

Appendix 1: The Irene Hixton Whitney Bridge. Courtesy of *The Walker Art Center*. Photo by Paul Schmelzer. Available at <https://walkerart.org/magazine/siah-armajani-manifesto-public-sculpture-in-the-context-of-american-democracy>



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Appendix 2: The Irene Hixton Whitney Bridge. Courtesy of *The Walker Art Center*. Photo by Paul Schmelzer. Available at <https://walkerart.org/magazine/john-ashbery-siah-armajani-bridge-poem>



Appendix 3: The Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge. Courtesy of *The Walker Art Center*. Photo by Paul Schmelzer. Available at <https://walkerart.org/magazine/john-ashbery-siah-armajani-bridge-poem>



Appendix 4: Example of original page layout for “Litany” in John Ashbery’s *As We Know* (US: Viking Press, 1979).



Appendix 5: Original 1979 format and cover for John Ashbery’s *As We Know* (US: Viking Press, 1979), featuring “St. Mary’s Square and St Mary’s Church, Utrecht” by Pietre Jansz Saenredam (1597-1655).



Chapter Four:

Appendix 1: *Midwife to Gargoyles* (1996). Oil on canvas with mixed media by artist Jane Hammond, produced in collaboration with John Ashbery. Available at <http://janehammondartist.com/work/painting/the-john-ashbery-collaboration/>



Chapter Five:

Appendix 1: Cover of John Ashbery's *Hotel Lautréamont* (USA: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), featuring the collage *Untitled* (c.1930) by the artist Joseph Cornell.



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