

tached, and his poetry was low-keyed. Roethke described Van Doren accurately as a "careful craftsman with a sharp eye for the homely and a mind aware of the profound implications of the casual." Peter Viereck (b. 1916) is a critical foe of Romantic emotion who writes best when he surrenders to it, as in "Well Said, Old Mole." The thoughtful, academic verse of John Ciardi (b. 1916), John Frederick Nims (b. 1913), and Robert Fitzgerald (1910–85) also extends the Romantic reaction I am tracing in this chapter. The three last-named poets are also skilled translators.

Because of his direct methods, narrative skills, and use of Southern regional materials, James Dickey (b. 1923) has affinities with Robert Penn Warren, who has championed Dickey's poetry. Like Warren, Dickey is also a novelist and critic. After serving in the air force from 1942 to 1946, Dickey graduated from Vanderbilt University. Except for five years as a copywriter with an advertising firm, he has made his living as a college teacher; he is now Professor of English at the University of South Carolina. He started reading poetry while he was in the air force, and his first publications came in the 1950s. *Buckdancer's Choice* (1965), his finest volume thus far, was awarded a National Book Award. During the 1970s Dickey put his strength into prose. His novel *Deliverance* (1970) was made into a well-known film, but his reputation as a poet declined, partly because his later poems in longer lines and looser forms are less successful than his tighter, earlier ones in strong rhythms. Also, his affirmation of life began to seem too easy and uncritical, and his macho pose in many poems gave offense.

Byron was one of Dickey's favorites in childhood, and both his liking for Byron and his success as an advertising copywriter suggest some of Dickey's virtues as a poet. Whether they are ballads, visions, or dreamlike sequences, his poems are purposefully plotted with direct and accessible phrasing. His emotions are Romantically mystical; he reveres natural instinct and seeks communion with wild nature and regeneration through it. "Listening to Foxhounds," for example, expresses his empathy with animals and with hunting. "The Heaven of Animals," Dickey's finest poem, voices both the joy of the predatory animal as it leaps on its victim and the "acceptance, compliance" of the hunted animals. All that happens as a part of nature is good,

and there is no death: the torn prey "rise, they walk again." Dickey is an important influence on many younger poets in the South, such as Dave Smith.

Louise Bogan (1897–1970), Babette Deutsch (b. 1895), and May Sarton (b. 1912) write reflective poems with careful craftsmanship. Deutsch often composes in modern forms, but with the earnestness, dignity, and sadness of the late Victorian, elegiac imagination. She has translated German and Russian poets and written comprehensive surveys of modern poetry (*Poetry in Our Time*, 1952, revised 1956, 1963). Deutsch's poetry is emotionally reserved, and seems the more so if compared with Sarton's, which can be sentimental. Bogan, the best of these poets, was poetry editor of *The New Yorker*. The poems she wrote toward the end of her career are especially moving as they express the difficulties of a woman facing old age alone.

For Muriel Rukeyser (1913–80) writing a poem was a process of collecting "surfacings" from the unconscious. When "collected" these were criticized and revised, but these activities did not essentially modify her product. Her poems are difficult if one seeks intelligibility, but not at all for readers satisfied with vague, intense, idealistic emotion. Her themes were frequently political—the Depression, the Second World War, the war in Vietnam, feminism. She combined an imprecise idiom with committed emotions. A Chinese proverb warns against whipping an ox that is already running, but this is what Rukeyser does. Her poems move persons who share her emotion before they read the poems.

THEODORE ROETHKE

Theodore Roethke (1908–63) went to the University of Michigan and briefly as a graduate student to Harvard. He lived thereafter the typical career of a contemporary American poet as a teacher of "creative" writing and poet-in-residence at Lafayette, Michigan State, Pennsylvania State, Bennington, and the University of Washington. In addition to teaching he supported himself in later life by fees for public readings, fellowships, and poetry prizes with cash attached. His education and information were almost entirely literary, although, beginning

in his forties, he also read religious writers, such as Tillich, Buber, and Kierkegaard, and he picked up psychoanalytic concepts during treatment for the mental breakdowns he recurrently suffered. He wrote constantly, for his manic-depressive illness left him manic most of the time and he had enormous energy. Moreover, he was intensely competitive with other poets and determined to be foremost. He kept notebooks into which he copied poems and passages he liked, remarks about poetry, drafts of his own poems, and innumerable lines, phrases, metaphors, images, and the like, bits that might someday be fitted into some poem, though only a very small percentage of them ever were. He would interrupt a conversation to jot down a phrase or rhythm that had just come to him. When a poem was finished and he knew it was good, he would, he said, weep for joy and kneel down, though as for kneeling, he never made up his mind about God and never stopped thinking about Him. In dry spells, when he couldn't write, he felt like a fraud, he didn't exist. When he was writing, "At last I was somebody again." Though his poetry sought God or Being, in a more immediate and psychological sense his salvation was to write.

In Roethke's first volume, *Open House* (1941), the title poem proclaimed, "I'm naked to the bone, / With nakedness my shield," but this was hardly the case, for he was clothed in predecessors. The volume included poems sounding like Auden, Frost, Dickinson, Elinor Wylie, Leonie Adams, Louise Bogan, the Metaphysical Poets, and Yeats; each of these styles was followed with proficiency. That the book makes a period rather than an individual impression did not harm it at the time, needless to say. In his review Yvor Winters singled out "The Adamant" for favorable analysis, and, given the date and the critic, the last stanza shows why:

Compression cannot break
A center so congealed;
The tool can chip no flake:
The core lies sealed.

But by 1938 Roethke was himself tired, he told his notebook, of the "well-made poem." "Modern poetry," he wrote, "has been cursed with too many 'well-written' poems: the tiny emotion ex-

panded ludicrously beyond its own shape and size." He spoke at about the same time of "Elemental poems—when we are outside ourselves." His dissatisfaction resulted, ten years later, in a famous volume.

The Lost Son (1948) begins with an extraordinary group of poems recollecting the greenhouses of his father, who was a nursery florist. Roethke empathizes with the plant cuttings and the effort involved in poking new nubs through the sand:

I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing,
In my veins, in my bones I feel it,—
The small waters seeping upward,
The tight grains parting at last.
When sprouts break out,
Slippery as fish . . .

In a 1945 letter Roethke said, "I am trying to avoid the sentimental and literary diction of the Georgians or the earlier *Floral Offerings* of the nineteenth century, and write a natural sensuous poetry with some symbolical reference in the more complex pieces." Since rejection of Georgians and Victorians had now been a critical routine for thirty years, the remark was out of date, provincial, but certainly Roethke's vegetation has qualities unknown in the seemlier poetic posies of the past. The passage quoted above uses orgasm as a metaphor. The "Root Cellar" has a grotesque vitality, fertile, erotic, stinking, and obscene. Plants in the moist heat of the "Forcing House" sweat, pulse, and swell. "Black hairy roots . . . hanging from drain holes" are "lewd monkey-tails" ("Weed Puller"). Not all the poems center on plants. "Moss-Gathering" and "Child on Top of a Greenhouse" recall childhood experiences in a Wordsworthian way; In "Old Florist" and "Frau Baumann, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartz" (a poem added later to the group) the greenhouse workers become mythical presences to the child.

The five parts of the title poem, "The Lost Son," enact a psychological and spiritual pilgrimage from death-haunted paralysis to illumination and vision. The sequence ends with an injunction to wait in trust and serenity:

A lively understandable spirit
Once entertained you.

It will come again.
Be still.
Wait.

The poem is also a journey back in memory, for in his "hard time" the speaker recollects his childhood relation to Being. In a way that is typical of Roethke he even recalls and imaginatively reenters an earlier phase of existence:

I feel the slime of a wet nest.
Beware Mother Mildew.
Nibble again, fish nerves.

The parts of the poem deploy different styles and methods, and some parts contrast brief, stanzaic lyrics with passages in longer lines or freer verse. The ellipsis and parataxis of his writing in this poem characterized most of his poems from this time on, and so did his frequent shifts from statement to exclamation, question, command, or wish. He also made effective use in "The Lost Son" of forms and rhythms associated with childhood—question and answer, riddle, nonsense—and his next volume developed these possibilities more boldly.

The general conception of "The Lost Son"—a five-part sequence enacting a spiritual quest—was taken from the *Four Quartets*. In fact the final movement may be read as a variation, in the musical sense, on portions of "East Coker" and "Little Gidding." But Roethke does not express himself within the vocabulary of Christian thought. Neither has he Eliot's allusiveness. Because Eliot's poem refers to St. John of the Cross, Dante, Juliana of Norwich, seventeenth-century poets and preachers, the Bhagavad-Gita, and so forth, the emotion seems not merely personal. What the protagonist voices has objectivity and authority from its recurrence in the experience of other men and women at other times. For better or worse, Roethke's protagonist has the authority only of his own experience and feeling. And Roethke lacks Eliot's reflective passages. We may recall that Auden, after meeting Roethke, remarked that he was totally bereft of general ideas, but we should add that Roethke deliberately rejected Eliot's method, thinking it ineffective. He aimed for "dramatic" poetry, "with the mood or the action on the page, not talked-about, not the meditative T. S. Eliot kind of thing."

Similar poems in three to five parts followed "The Lost Son"

in that volume and the next, *Praise to the End!* (1951). The poems in the latter book were conceived as a single "sequence of dramatic pieces," Roethke said, "beginning with a small child and working up. A kind of tensed-up *Prelude*, maybe: no comment; everything in the mind of a kid." In referring to the *Prelude*, Roethke meant that his theme was Wordsworth's, "the spiritual history of a protagonist." "Tensed-up" because, among other things, childhood is not presented by recollection, description, narration, or discourse, as in Wordsworth, but by the child's speech or interior monologue. "Blest the infant Babe," says Wordsworth, and describes the babe in his mother's arms. "Sing me a sleep-song, please," writes Roethke, becoming the baby. His identification with a child permits uses of babble—"Mips and ma the mooly moo." From childhood he proceeds to sex-ridden adolescence ("I dream of nothing but boards; / I could love a duck") and on to later agitations of love, mindfulness of death, searching for Being. Each poem, Roethke said, "is a stage in a kind of struggle out of the slime; part of a slow spiritual progress; an effort to be born, and later, to become something more." But the stages are by no means easy to distinguish; the plot, if there is one, is involuted; and each poem in the sequence enacts its own movement toward illumination and affirmation. For these poems are also "tensed-up" Eliotic quartets. The themes come "alternately, as in music," Roethke said, "and usually" there is "a partial resolution in the end." As in Eliot's long work—and Wordsworth's—the imagery of *Praise to the End!* is incremental. Images of water and of creatures associated with it—otters, frogs, fishes—of light, seeds, bones, and so forth, recur in different contexts and thus develop through the work into symbols, nodes of complex association and suggestion.

Besides Wordsworth and Eliot, a third poet especially presides over both *The Lost Son* and *Praise to the End!* The fame of Dylan Thomas was rising to its height when these volumes were composed, and Thomas' quasi-mystical feeling of union with Life or Being helped evoke in Roethke a similar emotion. "Reason," Roethke snorts, that "hutch for grubby schoolboys!" "The hedgewren's song says something else." "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower," as Thomas phrased it (and that Wordsworth remembered in his childhood self and intuited in periwinkles, and Whitman in everything) sings for Roethke in

the hedgewren. Roethke's quest for oneness with this "force" led him back in memory to childhood, down into the unconscious and archetypal, and out into the world of natural things; Thomas had already blazed these paths.

Morning-fair, follow me further back
 Into that minnowy world of weeds and ditches,
 When the herons floated high over the white houses,
 And the little crabs slipped into silvery craters.
 When the sun for me glinted the sides of a sand grain.

The lines just quoted are from Roethke's "The Shape of the Fire," but Roethke always risked sounding too much like other poets, and these lines might almost have been written by Thomas.

Acts of psychological identification asserted Roethke's oneness with Being in its particular manifestations, and a sequence of identifications was Roethke's mode of quest. Like Thomas, but more effectively and clearly, he tried to imagine existence in its more primitive modes. He represented, as I said, his state of mind as a child. He entered imaginatively into a tree, a pond, or even a pebble. A typical gesture was to descend the steps of evolution, identifying his way back down through lambs, the "fat lark," and "pulsing lizard," until he came to salmon, herring, minnows, and more primitive watery forms—snails, worms, scum—"With these I would be. / And with water: the waves coming forward . . ."

But these passages are not merely solemn, or not always so. Roethke struck surprise and wit from his theme. "Bless me and the maze I'm in," he said, detaching himself from himself with good-humored irony. Even in a worm, he noted, the hind parts are livelier, and "I've traced these words in sand with a vestigial tail." To follow his discontinuities requires nimbleness of mind, as in the passage from "I Cry, Love! Love!" I've been quoting:

Reason? That dreary shed, that hutch for grubby schoolboys!
 The hedgewren's song says something else.
 I care for a cat's cry and the hugs, live as water.
 I've traced these words in sand with a vestigial tail;
 Now the gills are beginning to cry.
 Such a sweet noise: I can't sleep for it.

Bless me and the maze I'm in!
 Hello, thingy spirit.

Like Thomas, in other words, Roethke incorporated some elements of the intellectual lyricism against which he also reacted.

At this point Roethke changed again. He entered what is usually but much too simply called his Yeatsian period. The wet, sticky push of Being became less prominent, and he wrote more about aging and death. Probably the more traditional and firmer forms he used after 1953, the public voices, intellectual antitheses and generalizations were, as in Yeats, a retreat from the now less auspicious realm of nature and organic process. Probably his change of style was also motivated by a fear of descending too deeply into his own psyche, for by the end of the 1940s he had undergone three mental breakdowns. He now typically composed a poetry of abstraction:

Wisdom, where is it found?—
 Those who embrace, believe.

He wrote memorable poems in which he invoked the predecessors he emulated, such as "Four for Sir John Davies," in which he alluded not only to the Elizabethan poet of the title but also to Dante and Yeats ("I take this cadence from a man named Yeats").

Roethke's final, posthumous volume, *The Far Field* (1964), included a "North American Sequence" of poems that returned in some ways to the mode of his earlier sequences. Now, however, he did not attempt to enter a child's mind or to retrace the stages of consciousness. Hence his language lacked the novelty of those earlier sequences. The beauty of these poems lies in their limpid diction, descriptive care, long, elegiac cadence, incremental symbolism, and moving significance. In one passage, for example, Roethke describes the edge of the sea:

Where the yellowish prongs of grass poke through the blackened ash,
 And the bunched logs peel in the afternoon sunlight,
 Where the fresh and salt waters meet,
 And the sea-winds move through the pine trees,
 A country of bays and inlets, and small streams flowing seaward.

The subject of these poems is the journey of the spirit out of frozen self-disgust, darkness, fragmentation, and isolation into

vital wholeness and union with Being. They are written under the awareness of approaching death: "The self persists like a dying star"; "The dry scent of a dying garden in September/ The wind fanning the ash of a low fire"; "I feel a weightless change, a moving forward." These poems, with their wealth of particular detail and changing mood, are a late, long look at what can be loved, a last effort to live.

How slowly pleasure dies!—
The dry bloom splitting in the wrinkled vale,
The first snow of the year in the dark fir.
Feeling, I still delight in my last fall.

ELIZABETH BISHOP

Elizabeth Bishop (1911–79) spent her early childhood on her grandparents' farm in Nova Scotia. Her father died when she was eight months old, and her mother, after repeated breakdowns, became incurably insane. At the age of six Bishop was taken from Nova Scotia and settled with other relatives in Massachusetts. A period of fearful ill-health followed—bronchitis, asthma, eczema, and other symptoms—and since she could not attend school regularly, she filled her life with books. At the age of sixteen she was able to go to boarding school and then to Vassar. She lived thereafter in various parts of the world and especially in Brazil (1951–67) until in 1974 she returned to the United States and taught at Harvard. She published only four small volumes of poetry (in 1946, 1955, 1965, and 1976).

Her work is brilliantly varied, and particular poems unify opposite qualities. She is plain, witty, realistic, imaginative, objective, dreamlike, idyllic, pessimistic, associative, intellectual, and extremely averse to making generalizations. Her assessment of life and its possibilities is clear-eyed to the utmost degree, both in general and on every particular occasion. Her mind is troubled, open, and exploratory.

Bishop, who was influenced by Marianne Moore, was famous for close, particular, and witty descriptions of objects: the "lines of pink cloud" in the sky at dawn like "wandering lines in marble"; the buzzards ("thirty or more") she sees floating down

in the sky "like stirred-up flakes of sediment / Sinking through water"; and the irises of fish (in "The Fish"),

backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.

Despite her grip on existential reality, Bishop liked to imagine simple, innocent goodness. One thinks of her charming, almost idyllic depiction in "Manners" of her grandfather's rural courtesy; of "Cape Breton," where human life so little disturbs the natural environment; of the "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore" in which Manhattan, to entice Moore, "is all awash with morals this fine morning"; and of "The Moose," in which everyone on the bus feels a "sweet/ sensation of joy" at the animal's unafraid nearness. "Jeronimo's House" is one of several poems in which the organization is partly that of a picture and frame. The picture is one of those idylls of coziness with which Bishop occasionally delights us; the furnishings and decor of the house are bright, pleasant, innocent, and comfortable, like similar interiors in Dickens. "The Map" pictures the earth with a similar feeling, and "Filling Station" both expresses and questions the emotion. Ultimately the idyllic element in these poems lies in the loving care, as in pastoral, that is implied. Somebody waters the hirsute begonia of the filling station. Yet Bishop never becomes sentimental and is sometimes satiric. In "Roosters," for example, she bristles at male assertion and perhaps even more at feminine admiration of it. "Cries galore" of the roosters

come from the water-closet door,
from the dropping-plastered henhouse floor,

where in the blue blur
their rustling wives admire,
the roosters brace their cruel feet and glare . . .

In her poems there is usually an undertone of disappointment, depression, existential *Angst*, and psychological vulnerability, in short, of potential threat and horror. In "At the Fish-houses," for example, we find Bishop singing Baptist hymns to a seal in the harbor: "I also sang 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.'"

MEDITATIONS OF THE SOLITARY MIND:
JOHN ASHBERY AND A. R. AMMONS

ASHBERY and Ammons are our most important contemporary poets in the meditative mode. They do not render actions or characters, or write overtly about their experiences. Their poems are trains of thought, interior ruminations addressed to no audience. Ashbery enacts the mind's always baffled pursuit of reality; so does Ammons, but he also explores particular dilemmas and beliefs in epistemology and metaphysics. Neither poet is especially given to abstract terminology, but both convey philosophical *Weltanschauungen*. Ashbery represents the Impressionism of the 1880s and 1890s in a late, extreme form. In Ammons naturalistic premises conflict with the Romantic pantheism, transcendentalism, or organicism toward which he is also pulled.

The interior excursions of Ashbery and Ammons may be initiated by their doing or noticing something, but are in principle independent of the external world. The mind begins and continues on its own, as one idea, association, or memory evokes another in endless succession, and a poem, in their convention, is merely the written record of these mental acts. Both poets, in other words, could in theory and may in fact start writing with no preconception of the poem. To take Ammons, the simpler case, as an example, one may imagine him looking at puddles in

his driveway, or walking along a tidal inlet, or watching a goldfinch in a cherry tree. He observes something, but it is an ordinary, familiar object, one that would not interest most persons. In it he sees motions, patterns, complex balances, details within details, and infinitely graduated transitions. Such, he tells himself, is reality. How, then, can the mind's paradigms ever correspond to it? The slightest thing, he reflects, is alive with particulars and processes; presumably they are infinite in number. Yet there is unity amid this multiplicity. Or is there? Is there something "underlying" that "weaves in and out" of all things ("Identity") or an "Overall" or "accounting" of the infinite particular accounts ("Corson's Inlet")? If there is a "center," can one ever be at it? Would one wish to be at the center, or, instead, at the circumference, the realm of the richly multiple and diverse? There is no reason except fatigue why such a meditation should ever end.

In Ashbery and Ammons the meditative mode coalesces with open form, which I described in Chapter 21, and much that was said in Chapter 21 is closely relevant to Ashbery and Ammons. The transformations of Ashbery's pronouns (an "I," for example, may become a "you" or a "they"), and the restriction of Ammons' punctuation to colons (an incomplete close indicating that more is to come) has naturally caused much comment, but such devices are widespread in contemporary poetry. Both Ashbery and Ammons tend to avoid climax, which they associate with closure. Ashbery produces grand effects and dissipates them in the same moment. Ammons usually prefers many phrases to one; a condensed phrase is a node, momentarily arresting our momentum through the poem, while many phrases, as in lists of objects or qualities, keep us moving onward at a steady pace. Ammons wants to flow "without flashing" like a brook in "abundant / tranquility" ("Easter Morning"). Both poets, then, subordinate climax to values of vital spontaneity and continual transition. Both tend to write longish to very long poems. Ashbery did not adopt the diary mode of the 1960s and 1970s, but Ammons did so egregiously. On December 6, 1963, he started jotting daily entries on an adding machine tape. By January 10, 1964, the tape was used up and the poem thus ended. He published it as *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (1965).

Yet though they share a meditative mode and have other fun-

damental features of style in common, Ashbery and Ammons cannot easily be discussed together. For as soon as we descend from general observations and seek to characterize them more particularly, we are confronted with their differences.

JOHN ASHBERY

John Ashbery (b. 1927) grew up on a fruit farm in upstate New York. At the age of fourteen he was a radio Quiz-Kid. He met Kenneth Koch and Frank O'Hara at Harvard, where he majored in English and wrote his senior honor's thesis on Auden. Living in New York as a graduate student at Columbia University, he caught O'Hara's enthusiasm for contemporary painting and music. Both arts influenced his technique in poetry. His first volume, *Turandot and Other Poems* (1953), was obscurely published by an art gallery and is now a collector's item. The poems of *Some Trees* (1956) are characteristic and charming, though Auden had some misgivings about them when he chose the volume for publication in the Yale Younger Poets series. In 1955 Ashbery went to France as a Fulbright scholar and stayed for ten years. He translated poems and other writings from French into English, supplied art criticism to the Paris edition of the New York *Herald Tribune* and to *Art News*, and of course he composed verse. A special interest at this time was the work of Raymond Roussel (1877-1933), an eccentric stylist who was then virtually unknown. "Europe" (1960) differed greatly from the poems in *Some Trees*, for it was a long collage with extreme fragmentation. Together with similar poems in *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) it made a distinct phase in Ashbery's career, and some readers prefer it to the more discursive poems he wrote later. Ashbery told an interviewer that in composing "Europe" he "would sit down and cover pages without really knowing" what he had written. "I'd get American magazines like *Esquire*, open the pages, and get a phrase from it, and then start writing on my own. When I ran out, I'd go back to the magazine. It was pure experimentation." We must believe this account, but should not suppose that the collage of "Europe" was therefore random. It expressed, as we shall see, conscious artistic intentions and meanings.

In 1965 the death of his father brought Ashbery back to the

United States. He settled in New York City and worked as executive editor of *Art News*. Later, when the magazine was sold, he became a professor of English at Brooklyn College, where he teaches poetry and the writing of it. He also writes art criticism for *Newsweek* magazine. By 1965 his poetry was already known and admired by many young poets, but his reputation had not yet spread to university English departments and to the general public. *Rivers and Mountains* (1967) was remarkable especially for "The Skaters," a long poem of marvelous verve in which Ashbery's methods were as expansive as they had been the opposite in "Europe." In "The Skaters," he later said, he was trying "to see how many opinions I had about everything." In *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970) Ashbery first mastered the apparently discursive yet still disorienting style that has generally characterized his work since. I may quote as an example the conclusion of "Sunrise in Suburbia": as morning returns and the dreams of night are dispelled,

The thieves were not breaking in, the castle was not being stormed.
It was the holiness of the day that fed our notions
And released them, sly breath of Eros,
Anniversary on the woven city lament, that assures our arriving
In hours, seconds, breath, watching our salary
In the morning holocaust become one vast furnace, engaging all tears.

What the lines mean is a puzzle, but they have the air and form of traditional poetic meditation, somewhat resembling both Stevens and Auden, with legato syntax, seemingly mellow, affirmative attitudes, and emotional climax and finale. Typically the longest poem of this volume was entitled "Fragment." Ashbery continued the formal methods of *The Double Dream of Spring* in his next book, *Three Poems* (1972), except that these poems were in prose. He then went as far as he has yet gone toward straightforward reflective utterance in the title poem of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975). The book won several prizes, including the Pulitzer. As if in compensation for this relatively traditional and earnest poem Ashbery amused himself in *The Vermont Notebook* (1975) with collages and parodies. The poems of *Houseboat Days* (1977) mainly continued along lines familiar to Ashbery's readers since *The Double Dream of Spring*, but *As We Know* (1979) began with a "Litany" of almost seventy pages com-

posed in two separate columns. The columns are theoretically to be read simultaneously. Since this is impossible, a reader may at any point read down the column or across the page. Each time you go through "Litany," you do it in a different order. Reading down one column, you are aware at every moment that the text is incomplete, since there is also the other side of the page. To read across from one column to the other violates the syntax of Ashbery's sentences, which flow down each column. If you leap from a sentence or paragraph to another in the facing column, the text is discontinuous and disorienting, though in many passages there are parallels or contrasts of theme and imagery. A poem could hardly be more indeterminate and "open." *Shadow Train* (1981) swung in an opposite direction; the fifty poems, each with sixteen lines in four stanzas, resemble a collection of sonnets. In this volume the novelty and challenge to Ashbery lay in repeating the same form, which he had never done before.

Since Ashbery's poems often seem obscure at first reading, something must motivate us to the second and later readings in which the difficulties of his texts gradually clarify themselves. At this point, therefore, some *trouvailles* may be quoted as a type of writing that attracts immediately: a poet who is like a "lewd/ Cloud placed on the horizon"; pleasure that persists "like a dear friend / Walking toward one in a dream"; music as "innocent and monstrous / As the ocean's bright display of teeth." Many a single line could be detached from its context and exhibited as though it were a poem in itself. "Our star was brightest perhaps when it had water in it" expresses lifeless dryness, belatedness, and nostalgia with incertitude ("perhaps"). "The winter does what it can for its children" wistfully assesses our limited possibilities. Typically these phrases are touched with rueful fantasy: "You have slept in the sun / Longer than the sphinx, and are none the wiser for it." Often Ashbery startles us into thought by reversing a cliché. That what we know does not necessarily modify our feelings or behavior is a stock observation from antiquity to the present: "I know all this/ But can't seem to keep it from affecting me."

Ashbery's mind percolates continually, surprising us with apt insights: "the loveliest feelings must soon find words, and these, yes, / Displace them." Why do diary keepers note the weather

and the time of day in their entries? "Surely it is," he suggests in "Grand Galop,"

because the ray of light
Or gloom striking you this moment is hope
In all its mature, matronly form.

For the most part Ashbery keeps to a middle range of feeling, flowing in a colloquial, freely varying tone of voice, but at times he is capable of grandeur, as at the conclusion of "Evening in the Country":

We may perhaps remain here, cautious yet free
On the edge, as it rolls its unblinking chariot
Into the vast open, the incredible violence and yielding
Turmoil that is to be our route.

THE NATURE OF THE REAL

Ashbery's subject matter is similar to that of his favorite poet, Wallace Stevens. Both poets write of the mind forming hypotheses about reality in general, about the ultimate truth or nature of things. Stevens, as I said earlier, took for granted that we cannot know reality in itself. Whether we conceive of it as a colorless, featureless continuum, like a gray haze on a winter afternoon, or as a "jostling festival" of concrete, particular identities, like a morning in June full of birdsongs, we are in either case forming an imagination of reality. We have no ground for believing that either the wintry realist (to use Stevens' metaphors) or the Romantic sentimentalist—or anyone else—is closer to the truth. And in the course of time whatever imagination of reality establishes itself will inevitably be dispelled and replaced by a new one. In metaphors, fables, and meditative commentary Stevens dramatized and reflected upon these acts of the mind, these structurings and restructurings of reality. Unlike Yeats, Eliot, and Pound, Stevens did not himself attempt to imagine or propose a particular structure of reality. He was a metacritic of such "fictions," and thought about the qualities they must possess if they are to be "credible" and about the human needs they serve. And he rendered the differing emotions and moral conditions of the psyche that might accompany different versions of reality,

from the imagination of a "great disorder" to that of a totally structured reality or "supreme fiction." One should keep in mind that, though for Stevens a "supreme fiction" could not be ultimately true, it would seem "credible" in its epoch, and he pondered what characteristics might confer credibility in the present.

This question has no relevance for Ashbery. He dwells on the impossibility of credibly imagining any reality. Putting it another way, we might say that for both Stevens and Ashbery the imagination creates, destroys, and immediately creates another vision of reality, but that in Ashbery the process is enormously speeded up. His envisionings of reality are not merely provisional; they transform themselves and disappear in the very process of being proposed, leaving, as he puts it, "Nothing but a bitter impression of absence." His readers often explain this by supposing that the "grand march of intellect," as Keats called it, has advanced further into skepticism since Stevens' time, but from one point of view Ashbery's notions about the nature of reality are firmer than those of Stevens. For though neither poet believes that reality can be known, Ashbery is much more committed than Stevens to postulates that explain why it cannot be known.

Ashbery's ideas on this subject are typical for contemporary intellectuals, but since they underlie his poetic forms, a brief sketch of them may be useful. For Ashbery is attempting to resolve a formal dilemma that has been implicit in some modes of Modernism from the start. If reality is either incoherent or entirely unknowable, any form—so far as it is form—must be inauthentic. But a poem that corresponded to reality by being itself incoherent would produce no aesthetic effect, would not be a poem. Hence Ashbery has used procedures which produce neither formlessness nor form but a continual expectation of form that is continually frustrated.

"With the approach of the holidays," Ashbery writes in a deliberately zany passage, "the present is clearly here to stay." This, of course, is exactly what the present either never or always (by definition) is; the logical disconnection between the first half of the sentence and the second makes the point that we must always be moving on to a new beginning. Flux, the *glissade* of "ever-changing minute adjustments," is fundamental to our experi-

ence as Ashbery conceives it. We try, of course, to orient ourselves to these "adjustments" as they are taking place, but are always too late: "No use charging the barriers of that other:/ It no longer exists." We may attempt to perceive an object, but since it is always in motion, always forming and reforming itself, we can never say what it is. Our attempts to describe it may resemble the dialogue of Polonius and Hamlet watching a cloud: "By the mass, and 'tis like a camel . . . a weasel . . . Very like a whale." No principle—neither of cause and effect nor any other—governs the flux of experience, which is merely random. Even to speak of a flow implies a higher degree of organization than Ashbery intends. His metaphors often picture reality or experience as a blank, colorless continuum without phase, direction, or differentiation, like the sea or the sky. A stubble field and endless falling snow are among his alternative metaphors.

Even if we could focus on a present moment, it would contain more than we could apprehend. Any instant of experience is multiple, diverse, swarming with aspects. We cannot take it in. Since we cannot grasp the whole, our expression must falsify through its selectivity. But precisely the definiteness of this conclusion violates Ashbery's sense of truth, and he typically undermines it by a contrary premise. Thus in *Three Poems* he posits that details, "no matter how complete, can give no adequate idea of the whole," and can "easily become fetishes," yet adds that "any detail is a microcosm of the whole." Such writing is not argument but a sophisticated parody of it. Brought into contact, the opposed premises explode and vanish, and so does any hope we might have harbored that reasoning will take us anywhere.

At times Ashbery thinks that if he takes many separate views of the object and superimposes them, he may build up a description that corresponds to the reality. But he rejects this project, for such a portrait would be painted over time. Hence it would be a generalized representation, and would not reflect the reality of any particular moment.

What abides amid the flux, multiplicity, and contradiction of our experience is *Angst*. Finding ourselves without any grasp of the real, we are, Ashbery assumes, morally and emotionally adrift. In one of the many extended, almost allegorical metaphors in *Three Poems* Ashbery speaks as someone suddenly aware that he is lost. "The landscape isn't making sense any more; it is

not merely that you have misapplied certain principles not meant for the situation in which you find yourself, which is always a new one that cannot be decoded with reference to the existing corpus of moral principle, but there is even a doubt as to our own existence." We have, he suggests repeatedly, no basis for judging what is important and what unimportant. We are unsure what we ought to feel or even, in fact, what we do feel. "This severed hand," as Ashbery puts it in "Worsening Situation,"

Stands for life, and wander as it will,
East or west, north or south, it is ever
A stranger who walks beside me.

We become spectators of our own lives, and watch from a distance the kaleidoscope of selves within us, the many "I's" or, worse, the "they" into which we are fragmented. In our uncertainty and self-alienation we feel uneasily guilty. "One day a man called while I was out," Ashbery writes in the poem just quoted,

And left this message: "You got the whole thing wrong
From start to finish. Luckily, there's still time
To correct the situation, but you must act fast."

We feel that we ought to be not spectators of our lives but actors filled with passion and purpose. Or better still, we ought not to be in the theater at all, but should live naively, as in the "world of Schubert's lieder." And while we are not living, time is passing and death is approaching; we are always aware of it as "The background, dark vine at the edge of the porch." The conclusion of "Grand Gallop" is:

But now we are at Cape Fear and the overland trail
Is impassable, and a dense curtain of mist hangs over the sea.

As we read Ashbery we sense that he views all this as truism, a cluster of assumptions he takes for granted. He is a postnihilist, post-Existentialist writer, and the questions he addresses are: Where are you when you have gone through these and arrived nowhere? How do you feel when you are not sure what, if anything, you feel? What seems worth doing when you have no ground or motive for doing anything? Ashbery's position can only be described in paradoxes. If he negates everything, as he

said to an interviewer, it is in order to "get on to what is left." As he put it in his "Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox," "one must move forward/ Into the space left by one's conclusions."

His poetry strangely fills this "space" with hopefulness. Ashbery has, of course, no "reason" for this disposition. So far as his hopefulness is not merely pose and parody—a point I am coming to—it can only be explained by lucky glands. But, he tells himself, if reality has no structure, we are free! To "ride" on the rapid flux is exhilarating. "These sails are life itself to me," he writes in "The Skaters," and elaborates in gush that pokes fun at gush: "Here I am then,"

continuing but ever beginning
My perennial voyage, into new memories, new hope and flowers
The way the coasts glide past you.

Naturally there are mentions of pain, grief, repulsion, and despair, but Ashbery touches on such states only from a distance. The general tone of his feeling is mildly positive—interest, curiosity, amusement, vivacity, happy inventiveness.

UNSAYING WHAT YOU SAY WHILE YOU ARE SAYING IT

In the preceding few pages I described Ashbery as holding certain ideas and conveying a recognizable tone of feeling. Yet I might have argued that no ideas or feelings can be attributed to him at all. To accept this view would finally be false to the experience of reading Ashbery, but the reasons for it help suggest why his poetry is intriguing and problematic. One cluster of problems centers around his use of what we might provisionally call "parody." In interviews Ashbery denies that he parodies, and if by the term we mean the echoing of a voice for the sake of ridiculing it, we may concede that his phrasing is seldom merely parodic. Like Eliot in *The Waste Land* and Pound in the *Cantos* he adopts or alludes to a style in order to invoke the tone of feeling associated with it, and in comparison with Eliot and Pound, he is less likely to bring to bear literary styles of the past, though he draws on these also. But more frequently he exhibits the modern colloquial voices of different types of people and the styles of

contemporary journalism, advertising, bureaucracy, business memos, scientific reports, newspapers, psychology textbooks, and the like. Since these styles are relatively graceless and inactive, we sense a certain irony as we encounter them in one of Ashbery's poems. The irony intensifies when the text shifts quickly from one style to another, exhibiting each in contrast while committing itself to none.

A similar irony is present in Ashbery's deliberate use of stock ideas and phrases. This pervasive technique conveys, among other things, his fear that in all our thought and speech we are helplessly trapped in the ready-made. Our minds cannot get beyond the systems of convention that fill them, and these codes divorce us from reality. Hence every utterance must be spoken with recognition and apology that the words and concepts are to some degree clichés, and this is what we find in Ashbery's texts. But the degree of this irony varies enormously. Some phrases are obviously exhibited as inadequate; at the other extreme the irony is scarcely detectable. "Definition of Blue" begins:

The rise of capitalism parallels the advance of romanticism
And the individual is dominant until the close of the nineteenth
century.

In our own time, mass practices have sought to submerge the
personality. . . .

These are not serious historical generalizations but ironic mockeries of such generalizations. They are not false, of course. They are truisms. They say what every textbook says in the inert way ("rise of capitalism," "advance of romanticism") a textbook might put it. But the lines are not written to score satirically against textbooks. Ashbery is much too intelligent and serious to seek so easy a victory. The passage samples the intellectual counters ("romanticism," "capitalism") we use and must use, having no others, and thus it creates, among other things, a depressing feeling of the inescapability of the cliché. Later in the poem Ashbery refers to such generalization as "packaging" and adds that there is "no remedy" for it. A different example is "Syringa":
Orpheus

didn't mind so much about his reward being in heaven
After the Bacchantes had torn him apart, driven
Half out of their minds by his music, what it was doing to them.

Here the language does not enact the emotions it refers to but expresses, instead, the rather bored, unfocused state of mind of the narrator, who tells what happened in such a way as to deprive it of significance.

But the main single difficulty in interpreting Ashbery is that his texts simultaneously deny what they predicate. A paradox can usually be read by understanding one or both of its terms in special contexts or senses. Thus in *Ash Wednesday* Eliot writes, "Teach us to care and not to care," and we assume that the prayer is to care for some objects, such as God, or in some ways, such as *caritas*, but not for oneself anxiously. Of course, no paradox can be completely resolved; the contradiction continues to activate the mind to discover new meaning. But when in "Everyman's Library" Ashbery writes, "there is no freedom, and no freedom from freedom," the figure is not paradoxical. It is an oxymoron; opposite assertions, each possibly true, are brought into conjunction and cancel each other. So also with the intriguing message (in "The One Thing That Can Save America") whose "truth is timeless, but its time has still/ Not arrived." But such glaring self-contradictions are less typical. A subtler, more representative example may be found in the final lines of "As You Came from the Holy Land." If, somewhat simplifying, we say that in this passage "it" refers to a present moment, "it" can never come about. When we ask "what time it is," "that time is already past." "Today" is only a "gap . . . filling itself with emptiness":

it can never come about
not here not yesterday in the past
only in the gap of today filling itself
an emptiness is distributed
in the idea of what time it is
when that time is already past.

The contradiction comes in the third line of the quotation. The word "only" must mean, "it can never come about . . . only in . . ."; in other words, it can come about. The weight of Ashbery's assertion is clear—it "can never come about"—but as he expresses it, the opposite is said also. The text asserts what it denies, denies what it asserts, and thus leaves itself semantically open—and this within a passage of which the rhythm and feeling powerfully suggest resolution and closure.

Continually in reading Ashbery we lose the thread of his meanings. What distinguishes Ashbery from most other poets who are also discontinuous is that, at least in his work after "Europe," he leads one to expect continuous sense. Because the expectation is disappointed, we feel the absence all the more, and the creation of expectation is as important to his effects as the frustration of it. Encountering conventional grammar, for example, we anticipate no deformation at the semantic level. A sentence such as "Meanwhile the whole history of probabilities is coming to life, starting in the upper left-hand corner, like a sail," is startling as no agrammatical juxtaposition of fragments would be. In the sentence, "no hope of completing the magnitude which surrounds us/ Is permitted us," the disorienting moment comes at the word "magnitude." The context of it is so conversationally bland that the word almost slips past us and we do a double take. Logical or chronological sequence also generates expectation: when a passage begins in one of these, we assume the sequence will continue, but in Ashbery this is seldom the case. Chronology is violated. "The Skaters" concludes,

The constellations are rising
In perfect order: Taurus, Leo, Gemini.

But this is not the order in which these constellations arise. So also the logical next step seldom comes. "Thus" and "hence" are usually false markers. I cannot leave the subject of false logic without remarking what fine confusions Ashbery creates by predicating logical impossibilities: the two faces of a wall "were separated by a third"; "each house/ is noticeably a little nicer than the rest."

Or Ashbery's sentences may begin in correct grammar that suddenly lapses. A verb arrives in the wrong person, tense, or number. Or the wrong pronoun sends us back to the start of the sentence to see where we went astray. In "And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name" a passage addressed to "you" concludes, "so much for self-analysis." Through the course of a poem "it" is especially likely to refer indefinitely and variably. Grammar also becomes confusing through omission of punctuation and through the piling up of relative clauses, appositions, and parentheses. Analogous misroutings and branchings out as in a delta take place in larger structures of narrative and argument.

Ashbery's metaphors similarly transform themselves as we read. We must keep forming new hypotheses as we follow them. For example, night brings "doubts/ That swarm about the sleeper's head." This figure from "Spring Day" seems almost too obvious: doubts that trouble us at night are like mosquitoes, or maybe like gnats or no-see-ums. Yet the next line narrates that the swarming doubts "are fended off with clubs and knives," which seem an improbable defense against mosquitoes, though possibly effective against harpies. In "Fragment" we read of a "hole, towering secret." Since a hole cannot tower, we attempt to resolve the contradiction, hypothesizing, perhaps, that this hole is like a tower in that it is large, visible, and impressive. This interpretation is far-fetched and unsatisfactory, so Ashbery's phrase continues to tease us until we come, two lines later, to the adjective "square"; since this adjective would not apply to a hole, it compels us to recognize that the hole is also a tower; it is one or the other depending on circumstances. When first poked into, in the uncertain light of the present, it is a hollow; when you see it behind you in reflection it has become a definite, looming shape:

That hole, towering secret, familiar
If one is poking among the evening rubbish, yet how
Square behind you in the mirror . . .

At the conclusion of "Pyrography," to take a final example, Ashbery speaks of a "vast unravelling/ Out"; this "unravelling" becomes a journey toward "junctions," places of intersection and of new departures in different directions, and from "junctions" toward darkness and bare fields. Since there are no buildings on them the fields are metaphors of open potentiality, yet in a typical contradiction the final phrase affirms that they are "built;"

only a vast unravelling
Out toward the junctions and to the darkness beyond
To these bare fields, built at today's expense.

To explain such apparent contradictions we could say that Ashbery keeps opposing points of view in mind simultaneously, or, alternatively, that his mind changes at high speed, so that what appears to be a contradiction is actually an ellipsis.

Ashbery's long poems tend, as I noted, to avoid climax. The

thoughts, images, and illustrations that replace one another seriatim may keep to much the same level of significance and emotion. The effect is rather like the garden and speech of "Scheherazade" in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*:

In all this springing up was no hint
Of a tide, only a pleasant wavering of the air
In which all things seemed present, whether
Just past or soon to come. It was all invitation.

There are innumerable good passages, but in comparison with most poets Ashbery shuns epiphanies, catastrophes, or other peaks of intensity.

The nonarrival of such privileged moments provides one of the richest themes of Ashbery's comedy. In "Grand Galop"

Someone is coming to get you:
The mailman, or a butler enters with a letter on a tray
Whose message is to change everything, but in the meantime
One is to worry about one's smell or dandruff or lost glasses—
If only the curtain-raiser would end, but it is interminable.

In "Silhouette" we are in the ambience of a detective story, except that the murder will not out (Ashbery here also alludes to the familiar metaphor of Henry James that compares the plot of a novel to the pattern in a carpet):

The catastrophe
Buried in the stair carpet stayed there
And never corrupted anybody.

Sometimes the revelation may actually be taking place but cannot be seen, as in the passage noticed earlier from "As You Came from the Holy Land":

the time is ripe now and the adage
is hatching as the seasons change and tremble
it is finally as though that thing of monstrous interest
were happening in the sky
but the sun is setting and prevents you from seeing it.

READING ASHBERY

Since Ashbery's poems are difficult, it may be helpful to exemplify in a couple of passages the procedures by which he is

read. "Europe" belongs to the group of collages he created around 1960, and though at first these poems seem harder to read than the quasi-discursive ones that soon succeeded them, yet within the Modernist tradition "Europe" represents a more familiar type of poetry. By 1960 discontinuous, heterogeneous juxtaposition had been an accepted poetic method for almost forty years. The fragmentation and disconnection of modern consciousness had repeatedly been displayed from *The Waste Land* on. *Paterson* had been composed from fragments of the most familiar and ordinary materials, and the *Pisan Cantos* had shown how brief the fragmentary units of meaning might be. Ashbery was somewhat interested in Surrealism in the 1950s, and he caught suggestions toward formal procedures in poetry from modern painting, including collage, and from the music of such composers as Schönberg, Webern, and Cage.

Section 35 of "Europe" begins with four lines that might have been assembled by scissoring and pasting from a newspaper:

The sheiks protest use of
aims. In the past
coal has protected their
O long, watchful hour.

However Ashbery produced these phrases, their significance and effect could not have been obtained by random selection. And yet, any number of quite different phrases might have been collected without changing the meaning in general. The controversies surrounding *The Waste Land* long since taught readers that such verses are to be understood as presenting the heterogeneity, fragmentation, and incoherence that characterize their subject—in this case Europe—a scene of newspaper headlines ("sheiks protest . . ."), of appeals to a nonexistent or irrelevant past ("In the past"), and of economic and sentimental clichés ("coal has . . ."; "O long . . .") in which nothing connects with anything else and banality is all-pervading. The verbal scraps joined together are individually inert, drab, and dry (except for "O long" in the last line), and appear to come from types of writing, such as journalism, to which everyone is boringly accustomed. The literary convention of this passage is the familiar Modernist one that stylistic features of the text—syntactical discontinuity, fragmentation, juxtaposition of the heterogeneous, banality—represent similar qualities in experience.

The other tradition from which Ashbery derives is that of the later Stevens and Auden, of Stevens after *Harmonium* and Auden after the 1930s, when both became major meditative poets. Ashbery's work after "Europe" fuses meditative discourse with discontinuity. In a passage from "No Way of Knowing," for example, he posits that as we seek to interpret reality or experience, we have

No common vantage point, no point of view
Like the "I" in a novel. And in truth
No one never saw the point of any.

The second sentence is of course highly questionable, and its pert, dismissive phrasing may suggest role-playing. The speaker seems a somewhat petulant Modernist on the defensive. "This stubble-field," the next sentence begins, picturing experience as an already-harvested field,

Of witnessings and silent lowering of the lids
On angry screen-door moment rushing back
To the edge of the woods was always alive with its own
Rigid binary system of inducing truths
From starved knowledge of them. It has worked
And will go on working. All attempts to influence
The working are parallelism, undulating, writhing
Sometimes but kept to the domain of metaphor.

"Screen-door moment" refers to someone banging the screen door angrily as he leaves a country house and rushes to the edge of the woods; it is a metaphor of any moment receding into the past. A stubble-field looks somewhat like a computer grid and this one has, it turns out, a capacity of inducing "truths." The word is used ironically, and the proliferating metaphors—"rigid binary system," inductive logic, "starved knowledge"—suggest that the "truths" turned out by the "system" do not correspond to the complexity and swift transition of the real. Nevertheless the system "has worked"—the cliché again suggests that Ashbery is role-playing—and will continue to operate. Attempts to make its results ("influence the working") less mechanical and more adequately complex ("writhing" includes a pun on writing) produce no effect. Among other things Ashbery alludes here to the fact that in actual living we assume a much simpler, more knowable world than we posit intellectually. As epistemological

inquirers we cannot be sure just who the figures we see on a morning may be; in actual practice we greet them as neighbors. But the fact that we drawl "hallo" to them does not mean that they are neighbors. We cannot know who or what they are, and whatever they are, they may change. Our "hallo" does not inaugurate a persisting manner or "style."

There is no way of knowing whether these are
Our neighbors or friendly savages trapped in the distance
By the red tape of a mirage. The fact that
We drawled "hallo" to them just lazily enough this morning
Doesn't mean that a style was inaugurated.

Winding toward a close, or the illusion of it, Ashbery again speaks in an assumed voice, one that suggests mental slackness and complacency ("Kind of"): "Anyway evening/ Kind of changes things," but, of course, it does not change "things" at all. It—the sense that time is running out and that our possibility of "witnessing" will soon be at an end—merely changes us by stimulating "a general anxiety to get everything all added up." This is impossible, and the "vehicular madness"—our too rapid ride along the constantly changing—"Goes on." But in wish and imagination we entertain a different relation to experience or reality, one in which we are spectators from a fixed "vantage point," from a balcony. In the last lines we are, in typical contradiction to what has gone before, actually on the balcony, or almost ("one may"), and the sunset, instead of obscuring "things," is "just starting to light up."

Anyway evening
Kind of changes things. Not the color,
The quality of a handshake, the edge of someone's breath,
So much as a general anxiety to get everything all added up,
Flowers arranged and out of sight. The vehicular madness
Goes on, crashing, thrashing away, but
For many this is near enough to the end: one may
Draw up a chair close to the balcony railing.
The sunset is just starting to light up.

In its ironic use of ready-made diction, its rapid slide from diction of one kind to another, its phrases that are implicitly acknowledged to be banal and inadequate formulas, its discursive ongoingness with self-contradiction, distraction, logical impasse,

and double take, and its continuous transformations of story, speaker, grammatical structure, and metaphor, Ashbery's form enacts his vision of experience. He pictures consciousness responding to the flying penumbra of ungraspable events, the fast "ride" of our own lives in which we sit as spectators. Naturally poems so difficult must be read many times. And even so there is always some "strangeness in the proportion," to adopt a phrase from Bacon's essay "Of Beauty," and the poem is not completely interpretable. But Ashbery is not more difficult to read than great Modernist predecessors such as Yeats and Pound; the difference is merely that there is not yet a critical tradition attached to his work. There is no pleasure in remarking limitations in work of such brilliance, but if one were to be named, it is not obscurity but tedium. Through all his volumes Ashbery elaborates the same fundamental insights. That his subject, moreover, is not doings in the world but in the mind means that his poetry, like that of Stevens, largely forgoes the interest that attaches to human character and fate. He grips us by the profundity of his premises and by the brio of his expression, but when his skill as a stylist fails, he is boring. But when Ashbery writes well, no living poet in English can rival him in fresh, apt, surprising phrases. His attitudes and emotions are indescribably gallant as he mingles humor with pathos, resignation and elegy with hope, and maintains his relaxed, equable, fluent, wonderfully imaginative speech despite premises that might have led to despair.

At this point I may mention two other poets who have each published one excellent book. Amy Clampitt had published fugitively before *The Kingfishers* (1983), but she had attracted little notice, and thus her public career began in middle age. She has a virtuoso power of description and astonishing wealth of thought, metaphor, illustration, and association. She is not a poet of penetrating single insights but of lavish ongoingness; one thing leads her to another, or, more exactly, she has several things in mind at once and they all evolve simultaneously. She is a poet of wit, fecundity, and rich ornament, and her chief defect is the excess of her virtue, for she can overburden her syntax, losing momentum in amplification and decoration. Her meditations begin in her personal experience, and are, in a sense,

about it, but they are discreet, and move from the personal and experienced to the general and intellectual.

Douglas Crase (b. 1944) published his first book, *The Revisionist*, in 1981. Certain features of his poetry suggest that he has absorbed Ashbery. I am thinking of Crase's bland tone, his occasional deliberate vagueness as to who is addressed or what is referred to, the clear, even intelligence of his writing, which is continually observant, thoughtfully generalizing, mildly witty, and at the same time comfortable, friendly, and low-keyed. No one else writes quite like Crase in these respects, but if I had to name predecessors, they would be Ashbery and Auden. The resemblances are not close, for the outward world is less present in Ashbery's poetry, while Crase describes it abundantly, vividly, and delicately. Moreover, Crase's subject matter—American history as it is reflected in particular places—is not Ashbery's. In fact one might argue that Crase takes more from Whitman than from any other poet, that he is trying to gather as much of Whitman's hope for America as can still be gathered in our time. Yet to me it seems that America and its history are only formally his subject matter, that the deeper meaning of his poetry lies in his vision of process, of unresting, somehow orderly change in natural things and also in buildings, cities, or "history." This sense of omnipresent process allies him with both Ashbery and Ammons. Crase and Clampitt are meditative poets in the sense I defined in my discussion of Stevens and in this chapter: they are very different poets, but both enact in their poetry the continual transition of thought, the inherent power of the mind to proceed on its own momentum.

A. R. AMMONS

A. R. Ammons (b. 1926) grew up on a farm in North Carolina. Some of his poems recall his childhood—his mule Silver, his hog, the unfortunate Nellie who lives with his family. He served in the navy at the end of the Second World War, took a B.S. degree at Wake Forest College, and then became principal of a small elementary school in the coastal town of Hatteras, North Carolina. While in the navy he had started writing poetry, and

probably his interest in poetry was what now led him to study for two years at the University of California at Berkeley. His first collection of poems, *Ommateum* (the word refers to the compound eyes of insects), was published in 1955. Biblical and Whitmanian sublimities are frequent in this volume: "The pieces of my voice have been thrown/ away I said turning to the hedge-rows . . . for I am broken over the earth" ("The Pieces of My Voice"). Some of the poems are brief, philosophic parables resembling those of Stephen Crane. *Ommateum* contained a few lyrics, such as "So I Said I Am Ezra" and "Bees Stopped," which are frequently anthologized, but Ammons had not yet found his characteristic style. Meanwhile he had moved from California to southern New Jersey, where he worked as a business executive. A second volume, *Expressions of Sea Level*, was not published until 1964, nine years after *Ommateum*. In the same year he accepted a job at Cornell University teaching classes in the composition of poetry.

Along with meditative poems, his major genre, Ammons has continued to compose lyric parables. "Mountain Talk" may be quoted in illustration, together with Ammons' interpretation of it.

I was going along a dusty highroad
when the mountain
across the way
turned me to its silence:
oh I said how come
I don't know your
massive symmetry and rest:
nevertheless, said the mountain,
would you want
to be
lodged here with
a changeless prospect, risen
to an unalterable view:
so I went on
counting my numberless fingers.

The poem, Ammons explained to an interviewer, tells

a very simple story. . . . A person is walking along a dusty highroad. What does a dusty highroad mean? It's almost in a religious realm—you know, *dust, height, abstraction, separation* from the landscape, in a

sense of perhaps being lost in it. And then, the moment of recognition when the person who is walking along becomes aware of a presence near him and he turns and it is not something that is wandering at all. It's a mountain that is always there. It occupies a single position and, as the poem says, it retains a single prospect. So the narrative then becomes the play of these two possibilities, of being stable and of occupying a massive view about things that is unalterable; or being tiny enough to go up and down pathways, to become lost. And the speaker finally prefers that mobility, that changeability, to occupying a single space.

Ammons' meditative poems vary enormously in length, quality, and style. Some take just a few lines; others are book length (*Tape for the Turn of the Year*, 1965; *Sphere: The Form of a Motion*, 1974). Many passages are eloquent and vital; others are extremely uninteresting. Ammons' descriptions of nature are delicate and vivid. His humor is sly, charming, witty, and often astringent, and he is fetching in folk modes of humor, in tall tales and extravagant metaphors, as in "Cut the Grass":

I'm nervous: my morality's intricate: if
a squash blossom dies, I feel withered.

Ammons can write with the polysemous wit and intricate interrelation of images that was typical of the New Critical mode, and he can be directly rhetorical and prophetic, as in "The City Limits." In a typical meditative passage he sounds like this:

oh, it's spring, and I'm more transparent than ever:
I heard the white-breasted nuthatch gurgle over the trunk
bark today, and tonight everything is so clear it's

going down to zero: my idealism's as thin as the sprinkled
sky and nearly as expansive: I don't love anybody much:
that accounts for my width and most of my height: but

I love as much as I can and that keeps me here but light.

In his poetry Ammons pursues philosophical intuitions inherited from the Romantic tradition, especially from Wordsworth, Emerson, and Whitman. He has also, he says, "read a good deal" in Emerson's sources in "Indian and Chinese philosophy." He does not share the social preoccupations and faiths of the great Romantic writers but does share their dialogue with the universe. Moments of belief—in man's power of transcendent in-

tuition, in our oneness with nature and the cosmos—were already fugitive and precarious in those writers. In Ammons, who is also wedded to scientific naturalism, disillusion has gone further. In other words, though he addresses Romantic premises, hopes, visions, and quandaries, he lacks the Romantic afflatus. Yet he remains drawn to it, and permits himself as much as he honestly can.

"Mechanism" is a typical Ammons poem both in its theme and its method. Taking a slight subject—a goldfinch in cherry bushes—Ammons applies mind to it reflectively, and continues volubly through forty-eight lines. The poem involves a quasi-philosophical issue, the opposition of aesthetic and scientific perspectives, but does not pose the issue in general terms. On the one hand, the bird is beautiful; in hyperbolic defiance of scientific naturalism Ammons even affirms that the beauty of the goldfinch startles a hawk. On the other hand, the goldfinch is a system of chemical reactions. As he considers the goldfinch, Ammons perceives it as a process organizing an infinite number of more particular and local processes. The catalogue of natural processes in the goldfinch, which the poem gives, is introduced and governed by the imperative verb "honor" ("honor the chemistries, platelets . . . honor the unique genes"). Though the poem suggests no reason to honor this mechanism except that it is "working right," "honor" is not voiced ironically. Ammons is not asserting a humanist criticism of science. He is not suggesting, for example, that mechanistic fact—for example, that living things are chemical systems—is irrelevant to value judgment and emotion. Instead, he is attempting to synthesize the opposed points of view.

"Corson's Inlet" is a landscape poem in the Romantic tradition. Walking along this tidal inlet, Ammons observes its "flowing bends and blends," "disorderly orders," transitions without demarcations, and gradual, continual change through the whole system as the tide rises and falls. The landscape is a "field" of action/ with moving, incalculable center," a "working in and out, together/ and against, of millions of events" simultaneously. As such it is, like the goldfinch in "Mechanism," both an instance and a symbol of nature or reality and also a symbol of the structure and process of the human mind.

A poem itself is also such a field of myriad processes. As an

open form it receives "the becoming/ thought," stakes "off no beginnings or ends," spreads out "sharpness" and allows it "to occur over a wider range," and is at no point predictable or forced. In a poem as in nature every event exists in a context of infinitely numerous other events, and these are simultaneous and impinging. And, finally, every event is inexhaustible in the sense that it involves processes within processes; it repeats in its organization the organic form of the whole in which it is a part. Elaborating these principles implicitly as he describes the landscape, Ammons prescribes how a poem should be. More effectively than any other single poem, "Corson's Inlet" is the *Ars Poetica* of Olsonian open form. Its fundamental assumptions are that there is an ontological continuity between reality or nature and the human mind and that the poem is a spontaneous act of mind.

"Corson's Inlet" includes images of Darwinian strife: a

gull, squawking possession, cracked a crab,
picked out the entrails, swallowed the soft-shelled legs, a ruddy
turnstone running in to snatch leftover bits.

"Terror pervades," the poem acknowledges, but adds that the terror

is not arranged, all possibilities
of escape open: no route shut, except in
the sudden loss of all routes.

These passages illustrate how Ammons conceives the darker aspects of existence. If everything is part of an infinitely manifold context, evil cannot occupy the eye exclusively. The lines just quoted from "Corson's Inlet" are unblinking, but are part of a diverse "field." In general Ammons does not foreground suffering and death, as so many modern writers do, but he does not deny them either. He perceives them as elements of larger orders; they are present to his mind but not dominant for his emotion.