

FLOW CHART, AN INTRODUCTION

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Given the «city» theme of this conference, I wish to speak of the city as teacher, and more specifically to offer the example of one urbane poet-teacher, John Ashbery, a poet of the avant garde. I would hope that this talk could serve as a small introduction to his recent long poem, *Flow Chart* (1991).

I feel odd taking up Ashbery in present company. The city, any city, teaches much more than the avant garde. Two writers in our audience today, William Kennedy and Philip Levine, have learned much from the city and have taught us quite different things from any instruction we find in Ashbery. Levine describes himself as a poet who writes for people who have no poems, especially for working people left out of literary culture. Ashbery, in turn, could be described as a poet who writes for people who already have too many, for readers jaded toward poetry. For all their differences, Levine and Ashbery are poets of the same generation in the United States, and so are colleagues, even friends. That they, not to mention still more disparate people, walk the same city streets is one more way in which the city is often our surprising teacher.

In a recent interview, the novelist Marilynne Robinson mentioned that «Arthur Gordon Pym and Moby-Dick have the same —and for that matter, Huckleberry Finn— have that characteristic pattern of so much American literature where people go through a journey that leads to a kind of realization that is just at the limits of their ability to comprehend or articulate, and after that, there's an openness where earlier experience becomes impossible, and you're abandoned into a new terrain without being able to use your old assumptions about how to find your way.» So A. Gordon Pym, Ishmael, and Huckleberry Finn all light out for the territory, and even though each returns to tell his story—How would we have those first person accounts otherwise?—no one of them returns as our companion. Each has transcended that. Pym, the earliest in the series, is said to write from Illinois, far off in the northwest territory, which may seem funny now, with my having just flown in from Iowa, still farther west, but in 1839 Iowa was not yet a state, and Illinois was a strange place indeed to Poe, a resident of Baltimore.

Of course Dickinson negotiated an inward counterpart of this same journey simply by climbing her stairs. And Robinson herself, in *Housekeeping* (1980), has Ruth and Ruth's mentor and odd guardian aunt, Sylvie, make a parallel passage into the ghostly status of wanderers, this in the dark of the night, across a railroad trestle, over a mountain lake so profound as to be known to have swallowed a train.

Though hardly unique to US literature, one of our most deeply held beliefs would seem to be in the authority of the wanderer who has ventured beyond the pale. That pale is usually seen as the frontier, as in the case of Huck Finn who heads off into the «territory», which probably meant Oklahoma and the southwest. Melville and Poe are more extreme, seeing beyond any existing frontier to the distant Pacific and to the Antarctic, still more remote. And of course no frontier is more disturbing than the privacy of an original soul, such as Dickinson. Each of these examples, distilled to its essence, suggests open space, lots of it, and so loneliness, literally and figuratively, the absolute opposite of cities.

Consequently this belief finds its counterpart, and ironic opposite, in the writer moving into the city rather than out of it, writers who move in never to return, for they too have found themselves «abandoned into a new terrain without being able to use old assumptions about how to find your way». Gertrude Stein, H.D., Henry James, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Marianne Moore, Hart Crane, Ralph Ellison...John Ashbery. From small towns and regional capitals they come, to New York, Paris, and London. They come to change and to be changed. From the point of view of their origins, they too have passed beyond the pale. Each has seen the disturbing shapes and light shows of the urban Antarctic. Not a one would seek retirement in the Sabine Hills. They locate themselves instead to send news of what is really happening, where they find that it happens, in the city, that great catalyst of the avant-garde. Ashbery epitomizes this movement. A doctor's son from Rochester, he went to Harvard, that is, to Cambridge and Boston, then to Paris, and finally located in New York. Aside from being a poet, he has been an art critic, a mediator of avant-garde painters of his own time and place.

The city, as metropolis, represents problematized space and so becomes one of the great stimuli of our literature and art. It is the place of continuous dialectic, of the most significant interaction of Self with Other. It is the seat of colonial power, the center from which diasporas occur, the refuge of those suffering their own dislocation. The emblematic dwelling places of the city are the penthouses of the rich, the brownstones of the bourgeoisie, the lofts and garrets of bohemia, and the ghetto. The city forces continuous interaction among them all as versions and subversions of each other. The Armory Shows of all eras have been mounted in cities, the natal place of the underground, of subversion in its most potent forms, and of the avantgarde. So the uptown galleries of Manhattan stand always in relation to those of Soho.

By avant-garde I mean simply that which calls itself experimental, and by experimental, that which, in the case of poetry, bids to be considered poetry though not at

first read as such. Thus it is composed as a challenge to whatever we have become accustomed to reading. Literary history revels in one such challenge after another. In any given time, avant garde works tend to share a style. No one active in US poetry today better suggests an avant-garde style for our time than Ashbery.

Stevens foresaw elements of this style in his «Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.» «It must be abstract», he said, «it must change», and «it must give pleasure.» How better to describe the values of the city or, for that matter, of Ashbery? The city forces abstraction and change upon us. It congregates the materials for many kinds of pleasure. Italo Calvino's «*Six Memos*» for the Coming Millenium—essays on Lightness, Quickness, Exactitude, Visibility, Multiplicity, and Consistency—extend Stevens's demands and underscore visual experience.

In the city, we stagger under the psychic weight of visual imperatives. The city is the place of our most fraught visual relations. In the city our seeing is burdened, guilty, and often exciting. It is where we look and learn not to look, where we both notice and learn to subvert our gaze. We find that looking can be inopportune though seeing is both necessary and unavoidable. One can hardly help being a voyeur just as one is always, or nearly always, especially in a city, aware of watching one's self. City dwellers not only fear being mugged but often feel guilty, afterwards, for having been careless and so having, in some sense, permitted the attack.

Depending on your politics, looking in the countryside may be as guilty as in the city, but we are less inclined to insist that that is so. In the country, we feel less intrusive and that it is permissible to pause for a view. Though bird watching can be interpreted as exercising hegemony over nature, it still enjoys a high order of cultural approval even though it requires staring, one of the foremost impolitenesses of urban living. Farming can certainly be seen as deriving from our rapacious gaze upon the land. But we need to eat, so we cultivate a regard for manual labor and encourage the farmer's benevolent stewardship of that land.

Habits of seeing in the country lead in time to literary conventions. In the country, or in our small towns, we are more likely to greet strangers and to meet their gaze. We can learn not only to notice but to name and study those birds. In time, such study may lead to our seeing the bird differently, as a convincing metaphor, perhaps—of love, or hunger, or longing. In the city, in contrast, we hesitate to linger over a view. So we learn to look out of the corner of our eye. We study peripheral vision and find more fleeting meanings there. In time we experiment with foregoing metaphor, which tends to fix a meaning, for metonymy, which notices but lets go. Quickness, Visibility, Multiplicity; it must change; it may give pleasure.

We could speculate that there is something essentially rural about metaphor. It requires the equation of things under the umbrella of a larger order that holds, such as that of seasons and their changes. In extended metaphor, part holds with part and tends to stabilize meaning all the more. Metonymy on the other hand steps more quickly. It foregoes the whole to revel in the part, or parts. Setting aside a broad interest in an

army, it sharpens its sword. The sword may signal a larger order, but it will not attempt to comprehend it.

Not long ago, poetry was all but equated with metaphor. It was signaled by a complex of suborders—rhyme, meter, the consistent development of imagery and of theme. Now to have all these orders in place at once is almost a signal of the antipoetic, a forlorn nod to an old order that does not hold us under its spell. Any one of them can do now, can be more than enough. Lines, for example, can be defined by nothing more than their arbitrary, ragged right boundaries. One might call this a visual metonym of the older poetic line. Similarly, occasional or oblique rhyme may be a metonym of rhyme as we remember it, and as such of poetry as it once was. For generations, now, metonymies have been creeping in to challenge the domination of metaphor in poetry. No poem could be a better example than «The Red Wheelbarrow», a city poem if there ever was one:

So much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

Williams offers a series metonymies, three of them, suggesting but refusing to reveal one convincing metaphor. Not that metaphorical readings haven't been advanced, making much of the colors of innocence and martyrdom, for example, or of a rainfreshened conjunction of the machine with nature. But none has been satisfying. Hardly a city poet, and much given to metaphor himself, Frost saw these lines as a «fragment», which would imply that the metaphor he sought by which to read them had not come into view. Nor would it, and so, for Frost, the poem cannot be whole.

The lines hold together though like a traditional poem, even a poem of Frost's. Notice the consistent balance of four (and in one case three) syllable lines against two. Notice the play of assonance from low back vowels, «o» and «u», through mid vowels, «a» and «e», to the high front «i.» Notice the «d», lifted to some degree of stress in each stanza, thus providing a chain of consonance through the whole. Notice the muted though suspended rhyme: «depends / upon... chickens.»

The poem frustrates our desire to seek a metaphorical meaning. But it is multiple in its imagery, visible, and quick; it is light on its feet and changes. My private fantasy

is that Williams composed it one afternoon after his pal, Pound, burst into his room with news of the last exciting thing of which he had learned—the Great Vowel Shift. «Pound rests on the middle ages», Williams would say later. Anyway, absorbed as he was in something more material, anatomy very likely, Williams, to get rid of Pound, said «Oh, you mean like this» and improvised «The Red Wheelbarrow» as a metonymy of philological lore.

In any case, it can be read as a series of metonymies for the casual juxtapositions of contemporary living, arrangements not limited to but unavoidable in the city. Ashbery, among many others, has noticed. In *Flow Chart* he alludes to the wheelbarrow—«oh take this wheelbarrow far from my sight and bury it on yonder height» (65-6)—as he does to the broken bits of green bottle in the cider alley (72), another of Williams' metonymies. He refers to Williams' habit of being «out riding, pointing at something.» «Why is it too late to be simple?», he asks (71), affirming that, from his own point of view it most certainly is.

II

Time is too short for me to attempt more than a glancing reading of Ashbery. He is one of those rare cases in which, though associating himself with the avant-garde and advancing a poetics in terms of the antipoetic, has been taken up in his own lifetime as a benchmark of poetic achievement, respected by his fellows, honored by many more, imitated and copied by all and sundry, anthologized by rivals in our domestic tribalization of poets and poetries, and the recipient of nearly all the national prizes for poetry one can name. He has published at least fifteen separate volumes of poetry with his pace having accelerated to nearly one per year. In some views, such productivity is a crime against poetry, which dismay promotes in turn a certain mystery about his methods and conjectures that are no doubt apocryphal.

My favorite among those, and this perhaps stimulated by a portrait of Ashbery by Larry Rivers, in which the poet sits before a manual typewriter on a coffee table staring at something unseen but very likely a tv in the middle distance of a living room, would have Ashbery compose in just such a position daily, with a twenty-four hour movie channel on in the background so that whenever he is at a loss for word or image he merely records whatever catches his eye on the screen. I have no reason to believe this tale. Yet it pleases with a hint of plausibility, for it seems to explain first the mysterious profusion of his poems and then their constant flow that rarely settles on a subject but seems to catch instead a moment of flight, of transition between or among subjects, though it would not explain the range of his subjects or his language. A related conjecture would be that Ashbery has taken to heart the lessons of mid- to late-century theory, especially about readers participating in if not dominating the construction of a poem, by which he has found the confidence to offer any kind of mix, betting on our dogged determination to find meanings for it whether he cared to see any or not.

You will not be surprised, then, to notice as distinguished a critic as John Bayley saying that Ashbery «constantly suggests meaning without ever being so banal as to attempt it.» Or for Helen Vendler to liken his poetry to Zeno's paradox: «No matter how you hasten toward your goal, you will always be unable to reach it.» Or for me to be reminded of a remark of John Cage's, said about the works of Joyce, Sati, and Duchamp, that they «resisted the march of understanding and so are as fresh now as when they were first made.» Or for a recent student of mine to suggest that Ashbery «would watch the universe mutate at random.» Vendler, after all, cites Ashbery quoting Henry James, as «one of those on whom nothing is lost», and she applies the line to the poet. Nor does Ashbery discourage such suggestions when, for example, on the first page of *Flow Chart*, he places this small passage:

It seems I was reading something;

I have forgotten the sense of it or what the small
 role of the central poem made me want to feel. No matter.
 The words, distant now, and mitred, glint. Yet not one
 ever escapes the forest of agony and pleasure that keeps them
 in a solution that has become permanent through inertia. The force
 of meaning never extrudes. And the insects,
 of course, don't mind.

«It must be abstract.» There is a strong sense of abstraction here in that ideas of reading and of a poem are more evident than examples of either. A forest of agony and pleasure is no forest we know though the phrase suggests the nature of forests. Manuscript evidence shows that Ashbery cut two lines between the last two sentences quoted, perhaps to reinforce the association of «meaning» as it can be imagined to «extrude»—like toothpaste, or sausage from its casing, or excrement—with the insects that would crawl all over it if it did. It seems characteristic that the image given by «insects» and «extrudes» is explicitly denied by the sentences in which they appear. There is no extrusion rather than some, and the insects «don't mind» being denied their natural due. Again we are in the realm of ideas rather than among examples. These are not the ants of Thoreau. By now, moreover, one becomes aware of having been drawn away from the earlier lines, which must be at least as important, for they are not only about reading, but about the nostalgic idea of a «central poem», in which well joined, that is «mitred» words «glint.» Of course that phrase also means words dignified as bishops and so decked out in fancy headdress. Reading Ashbery is a continuous adventure of negotiating such passages, in which the verbal landscape is always shifting—It must change!—and wondering how often one might return through them to discover pleasures one has missed.

Flow Chart is a poem of 214 pages divided into six unnamed sections indicated by Roman numerals and subdivided further by intermittent white space and by white

space enhanced by a typographic squiggle. These divisions often appear random, perhaps merely a record of places he stopped for sleep, or for coffee breaks, or when the movie changed on the tv, and not always coming to a full stop grammatically when he does. One passage toward the end is a tour de force that is becoming famous; it is a double sestina, based on Swinburne. The first of its dozen stanzas precedes one of those squiggle dividers, and another page and a half follows the sestina's coda before the section V ends. That is the kind of move that suggests casualness about division, or private determinations, or a desire to deflect us from noticing that a sestina has begun. The first time I read the poem, I did not notice it at all. I merely saw that some words were being repeated. «Sunflower» struck me, and I wrote in my margins, «lots of sunflowers here.»

It is treacherous to quote from Ashbery, for every quotation extracted denies passages before and after that might be as fruitful. Here though are a few that may give a sense of Ashbery, or at least of what caught my eye while reading him:

Words, however are not the culprit. They are at worst a placebo
leading nowhere (though nowhere, it must be added, can sometimes be a cozy
place, preferable in many cases to somewhere). (24)

Repetition makes reputation.
Besides, it's something you build with. You need no longer inspect the materials
when you buy them in bulk. (133-4)

What if [poetry] were only a small, other way of living,
like being in the wind? or letting the various settling sounds we hear now
rest and record the effort any creature has to put forth to summon its spirits for a
moment and then
fall silent, hoping that enough has happened? (145)

It's my Sonata
of Experience, and I wrote it for you. Here's how it goes: the first theme is
announced, then fooled around with for a while and goes and sits over there. (172)

One detects a note of parody in all this. I've chosen passages that suggest Ashbery's writerly sense of his work, his toying with that, and his provoking both himself and his readers by mulling over revolutionary ideas. Each passage sparkles with subversive thinking. Each, in my view, «glints», as does this longer one, in about the same tone, that defines as well as anything I know the spirit of the avant-garde while threatening equally to deflate it:

I can tell you a story about something. The expression will be just right,
for it will be adjusted

to the demands of the form, and the form itself shall be timeless though hitherto unsuspected. It will take us down to about now, though a few beautiful archaisms will be allowed to flutter in it—«complaint», for one. You will be amazed at how touched you will be because of it, yet not tempted to find fault with the author for doing so superlative a job that it leaves his willing but breathless readers on the sidelines, like people waiting for hours beside a village street to see the cross-country bicycle riders come zipping through in their yellow or silver liveries, and it's all over so fast you're not sure you even saw it....

But you won't mind that either, since his literature will have performed its duty by setting you gently down in a new place and then speeding off before you have a chance to thank it. We've got to find a new name for him. «Writer» seems totally inadequate; yet it is writing, you read it before you knew it. And besides, if it weren't, it wouldn't have done the unexpected and by doing so proved that it was quite the thing to do. (185-6)

This passage all but immediately precedes the double sestina, which seems destined to become emblematic of this poem. The sestina begins ten lines later with «We're interested in the language, that you call breath», «breath» being the first of the dozen end words Ashbery takes from Swinburne and employs in precisely the same pattern as he, in his «Complaint of Lisa», which in turn bears as epigraph a reminder of Boccaccio, Lisa's complaint being central to the seventh tale of the tenth day of the *Decameron*. One never knows when to quit when citing intertextualities, but let it be said that Boccaccio's tale is one of throwing, projecting, or transmitting one's voice through intermediaries and surrogates, which idea bears more than a little relation to taking Swinburne as one's example, choosing Swinburne's rare double sestina, and dropping «language» into its first line which will end with «breath.» It has everything to do with a «timeless» form «hitherto unsuspected», coming down from Boccaccio to «about now», with a few «beautiful archaisms» being «allowed to flutter in it.»

Lisa, an apothecary's daughter, falls in love with her king, whose love is a hopeless love, the king being married already and high above her station. So she falls into lovesickness. The king, a sympathetic figure, hears of this and sends his minstrel to inquire. The girl tells the minstrel her story and he, much moved, promises to carry it to their king. Interestingly, a smart technical complication occurs at this moment, for the minstrel, either incapable of or finding it unthinkable to compose his own «original» song, employs a songwriter to do that for him before he returns with the scripted, practiced version to the king. What are we to suppose here, that Derrida was also a reader of

Boccaccio and Swinburne? Or that Derrida tells an old story in newer, more abstract language? Anyway, the minstrel sings his, her, their, sad tale to the king who, much moved himself, decides to visit such an obviously virtuous and tender maid. He does. Being not only noble but of good heart, and pure enough mind, it never enters into the story that the king might do other than serve her well, that is, to arrange her marriage to a suitable courtier. This he will do at the cost of one kiss from the maiden. And that she will grant only if his queen does not object. All ends happily all the way around, and the teller concludes with a reminder that kings, though all powerful, are able to behave well now and then.

I just said «it never enters into the story», but the breath of corruption was there all along. We read the story well aware of other turns it might have taken. It hints of an audience prepared to hear a different story, of a less virtuous maid, or of a rapacious king, or of both, and so of this story being layered, as it were, on another unheard but well remembered. And that is all the more reason for it to draw the attention of readerly and writerly poets like Ashbery.

Like Ashbery, the king did the unexpected and «by doing so proved it was quite the thing to do.» Say he was king of a benign avant-garde. For the moment, anyway, Ashbery seems king of our national poetry, and given the small space I have to work with here, his double sestina seems a good choice to represent his sprawling and complex work. So I will finish by telling a different story of it.

Last year, I wrote Ashbery to say that a class would be reading *Flow Chart* with me, and I asked whether he could spare copies of one or two draft pages. This seemed a happy way of getting a class to begin talking about a poem. I didn't know Ashbery, and I expected no reply, so I was overwhelmed by his generous response. An assistant called me, asked what passages I was interested in, and when, nonplused, I had no concrete suggestions to make, suggested the double sestina and two others. That's when I learned to go back and look for that sestina.

Soon I received a passage from the beginning, in which I found the cut between «insects» and «extrudes», a middle passage, and material including the double sestina and running on to the end. There were twenty-nine pages of typescript, densely single spaced, more than sixty pages of the final text, almost one third of the poem. It is labelled «original manual typescript», as if it were first written in a posture much like the portrait by Rivers. I do not know how many scripts or of what kind preceded it. Nor how many others followed. There are changes and cuts, plenty of them when you begin listing, but the overwhelming impression is of Ashbery's letting things stand, of line after line moving entirely from «original manual typescript» to the printed text although one whole page of couplets has been lost that would have added about three new pages just below the middle of the present page 66. This was probably because a typist turned over two leafs together by accident and noticed no disjunction. That failure to notice is easy to understand.

The sestina began, apparently, by Ashbery typing the twelve end words down

the right margins of his pages, for the spaces are irregular between those words and the lines that reach out to them. He must have done that for all twelve stanzas, placing «breath», «sunflower», and the other words in the same sequence Swinburne had settled on, which always meant taking the twelfth end-word of one stanza and making it the first end word of the next, and placing the first end word then as the second. But Swinburne improvised after that rather than lacing back and forth, 12, 1, 11, 2, 10, 3, mechanically, as the strict sestina form requires. Ashbery follows Swinburne's improvisations, exactly, with this exception: in the coda he omits one of the key words, «day», and uses two others, «way» and «sun», twice. The twelve words, by the way, could pair off as rhyming couplets, though they never once do though occasionally abba or abcb quatrains come through.

Swinburne wrote in meter. He not only got to those words in the successions he chose, but he got to each in an exact periodicity of meter. Ashbery dispenses with that. His shortest line is «to want thee what would be done», or «to others, to the sun and to me», which is equal to the first if you count characters and spaces, longer if you count syllables. The longest may be, «Early in the morning, rushing to see what has changed during the night, one stops to catch one's breath», though several are of about the same length and I haven't checked by syllables. There is certainly no meter in any of this, and the impression is of Ashbery's having improvised line after line with whatever it took to get to its destined end. At that he is awfully good. Only fifteen times in 150 lines does he refashion by hand the ways he finds to get to and through those end words.

This is a metonym of a sestina, of a double sestina, of the whole tradition that has brought sestinas from the middle ages through Pound to now. Metonymic rather than metaphoric in relation to the sestina, it gives fewer contours of the original form. Thus it is an abstraction of a sestina, and it changes. «Hitherto unsuspected», it hurries off before you notice. At least it did so for me the first time. And if you like, which I find I do, it gives pleasure and so proves «quite the thing to do.»

Flow Chart is a curious title. It indicates engineering as in mapping an electrical system. It also indicates a chart mapping the flow of authority and information within a corporation or university or government. Perhaps the closest usage to Ashbery's is that of Raymond Williams who speaks of the «total flow» of television, its continuous emission of information and sensation enveloping viewers in its stream. But the poem is much more than that. It is a way of thinking. Not all is sensation or whimsy. I have only the evidence of his pages to go on and a certain freedom to conjecture, but Ashbery would seem to be always thinking about the nature of and possibilities for contemporary art, especially poetry. Over time certain ideas about contemporary needs and uses of the past must have rooted within him, ramifying, leafing out, touching nearly everything. Consequently a great deal of what he happens upon, witnesses through the mutating day or on the tv screen, proves suggestive to these concerns and prompts a kind of rolling consideration and reconsideration in which he has become fluent. The «sunflower» double sestina is only one instance but a brilliant one, and to touch on i

once more as a close might be a metonymic way of writing critically about this poem.

The end-words in this passage include «sun» and «sunflower», «bed», «death», «day», «breath», «dead», and «done.» We also find «her», «me», «thee», and «way.» Ashbery was well prepared to hear resonances in these words that come filled with poetic associations. There's the traditional baggage of sun and day against bed and dead, of life and breath against death and all being done, as any flower comes to be, none more poignantly than a flower of the sun. There's more then with her and me, with a «thee» thrown in, and whoever's way together. There is the association of breath with poetry, as inspiration from the first, as «projected» or breath-controlled lines more recently.

In Ashbery's poetic universe, to bring up any such thing is to question it instantly. Thus he questions «me», the traditional lyric location of point of view and feeling, by putting it on the spot as «the *culte du moi* . . . a dead thing, a shambles», as quickly as his second stanza. Again and again a few lines that at first seem incidental blossom with idea and concern as soon as one reads them in terms of the craft being practiced. Picking our way over «language», «breath», and «expressing», we come by line three to «the way / has been so hollowed out by travelers it has become cavernous. It leads to death.» There again, the traditional complaint of the avant-garde. The point is not to track Ashbery's thinking as if he were offering a new thesis. His is a familiar argument anyway; there is a tradition of the avant-garde. The point is instead, I believe, at least provisionally, to watch the play of mind in attendance upon these ideas. Ashbery is at home with avant-garde thinking. Stimulated by that, he allows himself to be stimulated simultaneously by much of the flow of the world's sensation, its visual and oral stimuli, some of which is private and insulated from our inspection, some of which, such as I have touched on here, is less so.

The private part would require another kind of investigation. In the longish passage quoted above, for example, one can imagine Ashbery having seen those bikers racing through a French village. Perhaps one day he noted specifically «yellow and silver liveries» and went home afterward to «eat a dish of plain vanilla ice cream», as he mentions just where I placed the ellipsis. It would seem likely that Ashbery has found freedom with his memories such as I have imagined him making of the tv screen, that his recollections mix constantly with his more aesthetic and programmatic concerns, making the poem, insofar as it is a document of the avant-garde, one densely textured with the record of an individual's life. Hence it is also a profoundly autobiographical poem, radiant with feeling, although most of that the reader can only guess about. And in that it is a traditional lyric poem as much as it is not.

I'm not about to work through all 150 lines of this double sestina, laying out the connections and possible paraphrases I find. What point I can make I've made already and it is time to close with two more pleasures. Call them jokes if you like. But note this near pun placed while writing a double sestina: «there was plenty to do at night, while

during the day- / long siesta one dreamed, and brooded not, and felt fairly good» (189). «Siesta» is too close to «sestina» to be free of association. «Day-long», through a line break, doubles its length, if you will. Or then this droplet of Shakespeare: «Perhaps in a few years' time we would have forgotten all that, to live, sunflower / and sun, in periods of rain and drought, as they do in Africa, and never fear the sun. / It is written» (190). The lead-up through Africa deflects Shakespeare's note, «Fear no more the heat o' the sun», as does the full stop after «sun», which sets off the key assertion, that this is, has long been, and long will be written. The written-ness of *Flow Chart* is full of particulars that trigger both associative and speculative thinking. So, for this reader anyway, the poem seems a rich attic of the mind, a storehouse of accumulating pleasures, much more than many siestas would exhaust.

Note: Though *Flow Chart* appeared in 1991, I've been quoting from the paperback version, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1994. Pages are cited in parenthesis. Marilynne Robinson's interview appears in *The Iowa Review* (22/1, 1992, p. 6). Bayley's remark comes from his *Selected Essays* (Cambridge, 1984, p. 33). Vendler's can be found in *Soul Says: on Recent Poetry* (Harvard, 1995), pp. 134-35. John Cage was quoted by Richard Kostelanetz in *The Iowa Review* (17/3, 1987, p. 115). Williams's remark can also be found in *The Iowa Review*, in an otherwise unpublished prose document called «Rome», (9/3, 1978, p. 24.) Tabitha Pederson is the student whose sentence I quote next. Another student, Julie Markussen, pointed out Ashbery's references to Williams. Metonymy and metaphor have a long history of discussion, but let me note Kenneth Burke's idea that abstract language and the metonymic go together («Four Master Tropes» in *A Grammar of Motives*, 1945, pp. 503f) and the observation by Welleck and Warren that metonymy may characterize «poetry of association by contiguity» as opposed to metaphoric «poetry of comparison» (*Theory of Literature*, 2d ed., 1956, pp. 184-85). Frost's reference to «The Red Wheelbarrow» as a fragment, comes from Paul Mariani's literary biography, *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked*, (New York, 1981), p. 453.