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A Hybrid Medium—Life (and Love) in John Ashbery's Poetry

Abstract

The article focuses on the form of John Ashbery's long poems, with a view to discussing it as a vitalist formula. Ashbery continues the American romantic vitalism by bringing it close to perspectives provided by contemporary post-secular thought. In this context, Ashbery is a poet of what the Polish post-secular scholar Agata Bielik-Robson calls "life enhanced"—a position achieved by human subjectivity that becomes conscious of its immersion in materiality, while also retaining an individuating distance from the orders of nature and death. However, given Ashbery's American transcendentalist heritage, his is a modification of the post-secular position. In it, life is a quality of the poetic medium which develops a hybrid connecting negative transcendence, essential to Bielik-Robson's "life enhanced," with the immanently materialist flow of experience. On one hand, Ashbery's hybrid mediums can be associated with the immanence of the flux of experience described in William James's concepts of "radical empiricism." On the other, Ashbery is also a poet of negativity that disturbs the flow of immanence—a longing for completion that is a remnant of transcendentalist models informing romantic thought. The hybrid medium of Ashbery's long poems is a form of subjective life in which the psychological complications of the transcendence-based models—skepticism or solipsism—are modified as traces of transcendence merging with the flux of experience. The result is an environment in which material life obtains resolution, while the psychological subject recognizes its connectedness to the material habitat.

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"This life is lit
with all the sleep it can absorb."

(Ashbery, "World's End," *And the Stars Were Shining* 28)

Life is "legendary," as John Ashbery says in the poem I quote above (28). We are in it, but struggle to get around it, as though we were trying to get out of our own skins and grasp ourselves, the complete shapes of our lives, and thus their meaning, from a hypothetical external vantage point. But no such perspective is available. There is an ironic circularity in this—while we never get very far in trying to name the point of life, our lives are occupied with just this very task. Our attempts to grasp the point of living fail, as the formulations they offer quickly become cliches. Paradoxically, the very passage of the failures turns out to be nourishing.

John Ashbery's poetry delights in this irony. It collects the failures—his poems are filled with platitudes on life, not out of spite, but, on the contrary, out of care. Ashberian irony is warm, kind, but also brilliant, which is unexpected, since kindness stopped being identified with cognitive power. His poems recycle the cognitive content of used metaphors, and obtain the substance of the poetic space—nothing short of the life of the poem. As Fred Moramarco points out, "the sweeping banalities" about life receive a special treatment in Ashbery, who "embed[s] [them] in imagery of intermittent life and motion" (39), and as a result "create[s] a body of work that is 'a living thing,' both for him and for his readers" (38). The idea of poetic creation being a "living thing" sends us to Whitman, who famously declared: "This is no book, / Who touches this, touches a man" (611). The implied referent of Whitman's "this" is life. It hovers between "man," a living organism, and "book," an object. Both organism and object are material beings, but they are matter that comes to life when "embedded" in the poetic packaging. Such is Ashbery's reading of the vitalist American tradition that precedes him, and it is also a cue from which I take my topic. The encounters of life and the material world in Ashbery's work call forth and delineate an enticingly evasive area. Recalcitrant to any single theoretical paradigm, this vitalist area—haunted by tensions between the external world and the mechanisms of psychology—constitutes the core preoccupation of Ashbery's poetry.

Any claim of this sort risks ridicule. Does Ashbery's output have a "core"? The poet himself refused to explicate the meanings or themes of his poems. Born out of variables of the New York avant-gardes, his is an unabashedly self-centered poetry of the aesthetic experience itself—of the poetic mind's onerous task of always having to restart itself

anew. A journalist caught this mode well when she observed: "He has an indistinct, meagre notion in his head. . . . Or else his mind is blank" (MacFarquhar 87). Lack of themes is a theme in itself. "A lot of what is found in my poems gets there so that the poem may start" (Ashbery, Interview 379), as the poet himself said, in an interview granted years ago to an avid Polish reader.

A survey of Ashbery's academic reception will not grant any more centered thematic focus. Harold Bloom saw him as one of the belated *ephebes* of the romantics, laboring with, but also against, the ambiguous gifts of the "anxiety of influence" (*Anxiety* 142–46). Marjorie Perloff, an inveterate champion of the modernist experimentation resurgent in contemporary poetic dictions, enlisted him in her group of followers of "the poetics of indeterminacy," inaugurated by Rimbaud (7–13). Helen Vendler confessed how "irritating and seductive" it was for a critic like her, an advocate of central lyric traditions, to tune herself to "Ashbery's wavelength," a critical feat that "can't be willed" (130). Charles Altieri, to provide an example of a prominent critic who tried to sever Ashbery from romantic or historical avant-garde predecessors, set him, alongside painters like Jasper Johns or Robert Rauschenberg, in the project of refitting the phenomenology of mental acts for the demands of postmodernist consciousness (53–81). The thematic *foci* found in Ashbery's writing keep proliferating among younger commentators: he has been a poet located "on the outside" and "looking out" on his autobiography (Shoptaw); of the consciousness formats or "attention spans of the citizens of the age" (DuBois xiv); an evasive agent of the "unit of the book" (Vincent 22) which conjures "livable space for queer readers" (19); or, on a note that is closest to my interests, of an "invisible terrain" where poetry engages nature non-mimetically (Ross).

Another initial difficulty—what is life? In this paper I am going to treat Ashbery as a representative of vitalism that runs deep in the veins of the American Emersonian tradition. But a qualification like this sounds hopelessly broad. Is Ashbery a transcendentalist poet? What do we achieve by saying, as Harold Bloom did a long time ago, that Ashbery is a poetic son of Whitman and Stevens? If Ashbery is a poet in the grand American transcendentalist lineage, what shape does this take in his creative output?

Rather than historical lineage, I am going to focus on Ashbery's form, and treat his poems, especially the textual space of his longer works, as a form of life—living spaces fleshing out the vitalistic processes and flows as they traverse indeterminate spaces between inorganic matter, bodies, and thought. By focusing on Ashbery's poetic medium, I intend to present him as a poet of life, a specific understanding of this concept, one theorized in the messianic variety of post-secular thought, which in Ashbery's case adds a new chapter to the Whitmanian line of

vitalism. Some strands of post-secular thinking speculate about a return of religion in connection to literature, amounting even to forms of "religious awakenings" (McClure 334). However, as the Polish scholar Piotr Bogalecki has demonstrated, post-secularism is a rethinking of the legacy of various religious traditions, as they have been taken up by a diverse group of contemporary philosophers, rather than an outright declaration of the return of religion in its original form (14–21). Closer to this concept, Agata Bielik-Robson has seen post-secularism not as a "full return of the religious, with its dogmatic setting of revelation," but as a much more nuanced search for the traces of "enhanced life" (Afterword 350), which is a form of unfulfilled messianism, a promise of genuine *exodus* from the dominant orders of being—nature and death—as a result of which life comes fully to its own right, transcending any ontologically closed order (353). When it does that, life is revealed as a feature of a singular human subjectivity, coming to terms with its embodied and final form, enjoying its individuation from the realm of nature (358).

Ashbery's vitalism takes the American transcendentalist poetic line into this post-secular territory. Life in Ashbery is a psychological urgency that responds to the pressures of material exigencies with aesthetic means. The living form of this poetry creates a specific space, a medium in which the psychological processes, related to certain philosophical positions, enter reciprocal relations with the material world. This form is clearly anthropomorphic, without being anthropocentric—other material beings participate in it. While definitely engaging the materials of the world, Ashbery's poems are not ecopoetry—they simply shun the thematic focus characteristic of this poetic.[1] Ashbery's treatment of nature insists on thinking about how forms of transcendence, not reducible to any immanence, still have something to tell us about how we interact with our physical environments.

[1] The recurrent motifs in definitions of ecopoetry and ecopoetics emphasize foregrounding nature, addressing environmental issues, and overcoming anthropocentric conceptual schemes. In Leonard M. Scigaj's early definition, ecopoetics is a program which rallies poetry under the banner of responding to the broadly understood climate crisis. As the crisis of ecosystems has become more and more of a fact, "we will need a poetry that does not ignore nature," which, in turn, leads to a call for a kind of poetry-writing that accords nature "its own voice, separate or at least equal to the voice of humans" (Scigaj 5). More recent approaches further stress the need to redress the earlier imbalances by moving beyond the anthropocentric perspective toward forms of ecocentrism. Derived from the American Romantic experiment, ecopoetry strives to overcome the dualistic mind/body schemes and build a "commitment to a vital natural world" (Fiedorczuk 1). These formulations depend on fluctuating philosophical models of materiality and agency. Against this view, Ashbery's poetry is a paradox. It remains shamelessly "textual," "linguistic," and "aestheticizing," revealing no particular "commitment" to any given aspect of being, or life, or experience. And yet, it is not oblivious to nature. In short, it interacts with nature, without the programmatic imperatives clearly present in the field of ecopoetry.

TOWARD ASHBERY'S POST-SECULAR VITALISM—A MIX OF TRADITIONS

Ashbery's post-secular vitalism cuts across various sectional divisions. If it strives toward Bielik-Robson's "enhanced life," this affinity is derived from the Emersonian lineage, not from Jewish philosophy, the starting point of Bielik-Robson's position. Further, his poetry's engagement with natural surroundings is not an outcome of an academically or theoretically prescribed agenda—under whatever name it comes to us nowadays. While it does not have a program or a politics that one could join, it definitely has a strong predilection—one for turning aesthetic experience into a form of habitation. The variety of post-secular thought that we encounter here is a strongly aesthetic one. The Ashberian medium within which vitalism negotiates its position toward the *physis* of the world, both matter and time, originates from aesthetics—from the poet's ingenuous cross-pollination of vast ranges of aesthetic experience. His formal mediums are devices which turn the basic variety of religious experience—the Jamesian term which, I would claim, is the earliest known post-secular gesture of translating traditional religion into the language of vitalism—into a variety of aesthetic experience, wherein matters of life and death become matters of the post-secular messianic treatment of life.

Thus, I am focusing on the mediums themselves, treating them as the poet's primary preoccupation. Life acquires topical condensation in Ashbery through the formal filter of the poetic format. It is with the study of the movements initiated within his amply formatted poetic mediums that we see in what sense Ashbery engages, and reinterprets, the American transcendentalist lineage. Life, conceived of as the movement of thought, which the poem merges with the movements of psycho-rhetoric, vehemently clashes with its physical surroundings, to dazzling aesthetic—but also cognitive, philosophical, spiritual, theological, psychological, political, and cultural—effects across the archives of the American Transcendentalist poetic mind. "Life only avails—not the having lived" (129), proclaimed Emerson in "Self-Reliance," and whenever one looks in his proleptic essays, one finds those vitalist transitions catalyzed by material constellations of nature. "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life" (61), announces Thoreau in the opening of his *Walden*, and the deliberation requires transaction with material nature. Whitman and Dickinson achieve poetic power when the sensations of their poetic psychological selves coalesce into states of enhanced aliveness through collisions with their physical contingencies. Within this lineage, the messianism described in Bielik-Robson's post-secular version is modified. The exodus of life—self-assured

after it had freed itself from the repetitiousness and mechanicity of death and nature—means individuation from nature followed by a return to the material environment in order to infuse it with vitalist energy.

Ashbery, for his part, is the most reticent representative of the line, which, of course, I have drawn here rather selectively. What he hides is tension. Where the transcendentalist tradition aims at high plateaus of intensity, Ashbery is the poet of the flow, often deceptively languid, where not a single specific psychological or aesthetic position lasts long, bathos giving way to seriousness, and nonsense to most surprising insight.

It is this flow, and the way it is hybridized with remnants of the transcendental, that I would like to examine below. We begin to sense that hybridity when we treat the poetic format as the meeting ground of two vast dimensions, without a priori treating them as emanations of one substance. These dimensions are the vitalist flows of energy, responsible for the movements of thought and language, and the presence of material nature, both at the level of objects and of vaster natural orders, such as the flow of time. To speak of hybridity is, of course, to immediately take a position within current debates. Ashbery's flows become poetic mediums of life—spaces of transaction between thought, affect, language, and the material dimension. However, while falling in the vicinity of models based on the metaphor of the stream, Ashbery's formats evade the Spinozian and Deleuzian singularity of substance on which many current ecological and post-humanist varieties of vitalism are based. Engaged with the aesthetics of the stream, Ashbery's formats engage immanence, in order to interfere with it; here, the stream is interrupted or conjoined with traces of negativity in a manner that is not a dialectical abolishing of the negative. Yet, never reducible to the material aspect of the flow, Ashbery's traces of negativity do not thwart the processes of inhabiting a material or natural world. On the contrary—life in Ashbery's poems consists in their uncanny ability to position negativity in such a way that, instead of thwarting the formation of subjectivity that inhabits a material world, it is rather a key factor enabling the inhabitation. An Ashbery poem is a hybrid medium, a poetic "milieu"—the term I borrow, via Bielik-Robson, from George Canguilhem's philosophy of biology—wherein psychology meets time and matter, resulting in a vitalism that transcends the biological genealogy of the term. In Canguilhem, as in Bielik-Robson's post-secular messianism, life is something much more than mechanical reproductivity; rather, it is an element endowed with a transgressive "knowledge" of itself, which makes it a vibrant center of its biological *umwelt*, one that, confident in its powers, "does not resolve into its environment" but keeps experimenting against all mechanical tendencies inherent in the "crossroads of influences" (120).

To illustrate how Ashbery is a poet of this kind of vitalism, I intend to focus on the forms of his longer poems, primarily the prose pieces in *Three Poems*, with the assumption that the features of those forms extend over the encounters between psychology and matter in his subsequent longer works. As I am going to show, these forms are hybrid mediums which arrange non-dialectical entanglements of material positivity with forms of negativity; as a result of these encounters, they precipitate into vitalist habitats, enlivened by an intense form of participation or belonging, one metaphor for which is love.

THE POEM AS ENVIRONMENT AND ASHBERY'S AVANT-GARDIST "NEW REALISM"—TOWARD THE IDEA OF ASHBERY'S VITALIST POETIC MEDIUM

To think of the poem as a medium is to think of it primarily as space of distributed agency rather than merely an utterance of subjectivity that is prior to the emergence of this space. The concept treats the linguistic event of the poem as an opening of a group of correlations which organize disparate elements into *an environment*—a space of a certain degree of coherence, where various physical correlations are obtained. The idea that the poems in the American tradition, connecting Whitman to Ashbery and also including such foreigners as John Clare, form such spaces was put forward by Angus Fletcher. In a book entitled, tellingly, *A New Theory for American Poetry*, Fletcher analyzes how the linguistic artefacts of those writers, based on specific kinds of rhetorical innovation, are attempts to create correlations between language, thought, and the sense of vastness and diversity found in nature. The formally arranged space withdraws the immediately recognizable subject to give way to encompassing forms of consciousness, no longer belonging to a single individual, delineating a span of mutual dependencies. What emerges, according to Fletcher, is the "environment poem" (9).

Particularly important to the genre is Whitman's grammar. The Whitman poem is based on the unit of the participle phrase. This "participial thinking" (112) enhances the grammatical mode of the middle voice, which bespeaks a withdrawal of any "strong sense of the subject" (108). The middle voice pushes the poem *en route* to a constant transition that is also an accumulation of observation. Elements of all kinds enter an "aggregation and the forming of the ensemble" (112), which is a state in which aggregates of diversity are experienced in their immediate contemporaneity. The seemingly fragmented grammar accrues toward an immediacy, a "continuous present" (ibid.). In this way, the poem encircles spaces of belonging,

where the interaction between subject and material acquires immediacy, a poetic mode that is much different from a mere description. The poem becomes a space where diversity is provided with a bond. The poem is not just a poem; it is an "environing symbolic and semiotic space" (124) that the reader enters in order to participate in multiplicity and diversity. The natural and social dimensions enter reciprocity and a "social coherence" correlates with "the coherence of the living environment" (114). Ashbery belongs firmly in this tradition, together with his contemporary Ammons, and his long poems particularly are such poems-environments, or, more emphatically, "living systems" (119), with a "capacity . . . to develop [their] own ensemble character" (206).

There are two features of Fletcher's model that I would like to highlight. First, it joins the artifice of rhetorics to nature. The environment poem is an ecological projection based on rhetoric: a grammatical position connects aesthetics and the cognitive sphere. Not being a mere description or imitation of nature, the "environment-poem" is an "imaginative product" (116). Secondly, the space of such poems joins matter with mental predisposition, which, further in the process, opens to forms of transcendence. Such a poem points to the "vastness of our ecological home" (ibid.); however, for that space to become a "home," another element is needed—longing and belief. The poem-as-environment is never a "literal fact," but an "imaginative discovery and an imaginative product" (ibid.). It is a search for further states of coherence and belonging, which are physically missing in contemporaneity but already haunt the physical ground as traces of a future. A model of metaphysics and transcendence is an ingredient in this ecology, and it is one that reverses Plato. Fletcher uses Deleuze's analysis of how individual sensation in Proust is set in motion: "The individual, subjective associations are here only to be transcended in the direction of Essence" (Deleuze qtd. in Fletcher 131). This is consistent with Deleuze's own reading of Whitman, in which the philosopher credits the poet with the discovery that nature is "a process of establishing relations," which makes the transcendental idea of Whole a derivation of relations, not their source (Deleuze 59). Fletcher stresses how this signals endless process. Whitman's poem establishes relations which tend toward unity, just as the poem itself is *en route* to the identity of its voice, "a seduction of the reader into a search of the author" (120).

Stephen J. Ross, a critic who addressed the problem of Ashbery's relation to nature more recently, is sympathetic to Fletcher's "environment poem," but notes two related problems. Does the term "environment poem" make Ashbery an eco-poet? Such a view would be at odds with Ashbery's pronounced interests, which focused on artifice rather than naturalness. To redress the balance, Ross undertakes to

show how Ashbery's use of metaphors using nature aligns with his strong debt—unmentioned by Fletcher—to European and American avant-gardes. The avant-gardist Ashbery is an artist focused on his materials, of "auto-reflexivity [built] into the matter and manner of his poems" (Ross 26), which is a very sensible following up on Ashbery's drawing of unceasing inspiration from such artists as Joseph Cornell, Giorgio de Chirico, Yves Tanguy, or Raymond Roussel, in whose intensely artificial imaginary habitats or landscapes, "matter and manner fuse to form one element" (Ashbery, *Sightings* 17). Ross reminds us that Ashbery's target was always a "new kind of realism" (Ashbery qtd. in Ross 17). It is correct that natural landscapes are paradoxically frequent in this poet of artifice, but he is a poet of "nature without ecology," one who avoids "the false ideology of nature worship" (Ross 30) where "the natural is elevated over the textual" (35). Instead, Ashbery works with the avant-gardist fiction of being "inside and outside itself at the same time" in which nature is treated as "an aesthetic resource" (29).

Ross is right—Ashbery is not a poet of nature. Natural landscapes—rivers, mountains, trees—appear in his poems, a fact overlooked by earlier phases of his reception, but they become materials in an attempt at new realism, the fiction of being inside and outside a poem at the same time, with which Ashbery synthesizes two traditions: romantic vitalism and the avant-garde's perennial fiction of bringing art close to life. In this fiction the natural elements become part of poetic matter or substance that saturates the canvasses or texts of his favorite artists to such a degree that they spill over to haunt our so-called reality, and, so far as nature is concerned, return to it, affecting it in ways that give us greater sense of ecology—*a more comprehensive perception of the agential processes with which and by which we have a world*.

If ecology is rumination on dwelling, Ashbery's larger ecology includes what escapes our dwelling's conscious architectures. It is surprising that neither Fletcher nor Ross reaches for a language, deeply ingrained in the American tradition, which synthesizes nature, aesthetics, language, and a sense of metaphysics, which is the language of American pragmatism. Particularly, it is the language of William James, his idea of life as the flux of experience, in which we participate by means of predispositions—linguistically modulated beliefs—the central among which treats the universe as a "personal form," a "Thou," instead of an "It," as he put it in his seminal "The Will to Believe" (*Writings 1878–1899* 476). I am not claiming that Ashbery is drawing on James—although the connection is viable, because of his finding inspiration in Gertrude Stein, James's student. I am suggesting, however, that Ashbery's poetry redraws all the lines and traditions mentioned above. He amply illustrates his proximity

to the Jamesian idea of life being a flux of experience, but enriches the flux with the negative element—a transcendental remnant in the form of longing for something that is missing in the material construct of the flux.

In light of those redrawings, my term—*Ashbery's hybrid medium*—modifies Fletcher's and Ross's thinking about Ashbery and the material world. Fletcher's environment-poem is based on the "esemplastic circle" (9), which recalls the romantic search for organic unities, steeped in Neoplatonic mysticism. But Ashbery's poetics develops a more complex amalgam. Here, the romantic Neoplatonism, with its panoply of resultant transcendentalisms, merges with models based on the stream, as an outcome of which both paths are changed. It is true, as I note above, that Fletcher is aware of that quality, attempting to include Deleuze's reversal of Plato. But the reversal does not do justice to Ashbery's variety of oneiric transcendence: his negativity—a trace of a negative ingredient, absent in the very midst of the flow—does not stem from, nor does it reduce to, the stream; rather, I propose to view this *negativity as a pervasive form of longing*, neither prior nor subsequent to the stream. The sheer characteristic of this ingredient is that its consciousness *attends to the passage of the stream*.

Further, in relation to Ross, my idea of the medium emphasizes interaction, catalyzed inside Ashbery's uncanny landscapes, between the psychological and the material. The medium is a poetic "milieu"—neither the Neoplatonist circle, nor the Spinozian/Deleuzian pure stream of single substance, but an uncanny, unexplained event in which the psychological trauma of being in the world organizes itself against—but also thanks to—the facticity of its material contingencies. Life occurs in such a medium at the point where psychological negativity nears the material, visits it—never to be entirely defined by it. Ashbery's poetic trajectory is one in which romantic philosophical solipsism, the famous Hegelian "beautiful soul," receives modulation, through art, which allows the subjectivity emerging from the poems to attend to matter. Unlike other varieties of negative thought, Ashbery's modified solipsism attends to the materials of our world to prevent them from disintegrating into mechanicity and reification. The solipsistic soul uses art to visit matter, see itself in it; matter needs the medium of the poem, to be something more than mechanism.

ASHBERY'S HYBRID MEDIUMS—THE PHYSICAL WORLD AND ITS TEMPORALITY

Ashbery's long poems work as spaces which bring together the physical world and consciousness, primarily human. But they are also an inquiry into their status and distribution. The ingenuous construction of those

poetic apparatuses stems from Ashbery's taking a *licentia poetica* kind of liberty with two philosophical models, each with different psychological ramifications, and gearing his imaginative product to the parameters of both. One of them is the Neoplatonic model which fueled Romanticism, and which leads to forms of transcendental subjectivity, plus its attendant varieties of negativity. In it, the practical inaccessibility of the level of transcendence—one is never one with one's transcendental subject, always sliding back to the level of empirical engagements—leads to a panoply of philosophical or psychological skepticisms. The strongest recent example was Paul de Man's brand of deconstruction with its concept of absolute irony—an extreme evolution of the Hegelian construct of the "beautiful soul," which is "self-enclosed and perfectly transparent to herself" (Bielik-Robson, *Saving Lie* 194), but which can never touch the world around it, fearing contamination. On the psychological level, the model results in skepticism and solipsism. The skeptic/solipsist undertakes a move to touch the world but sees all of the fruits of their action as mere empirical fiction, a trope always dissolving into unreality. While such forms of skepticism result in methodological paralysis—de Man's irony was theory's dead end—or in existential depression, Ashbery's brilliance rests in his ability to utilize this position to poetic effects not only of stunning beauty but also of psychological efficacy.

The other model is one of the stream, flow, or transitiveness. Here, on the American ground, the source is Emerson and the modulation his metaphysics receive within pragmatist discourse. The transcendental level in Emerson is already a hybrid. In it the Neoplatonist Oneness is merged into the stream of material experience. The vertiginous task of the Emersonian self-reliant soul is to get in touch with the stream, while also retaining the contours of the transcendental subjective individuality. The pragmatist reply to that romantic fiction was Williams James's "radical empiricism": the individual getting in touch with themselves as they navigate their way within the transitionality inscribed in the flux of experience. Here, both the individual and the material world are modalities of focused selection. The ploy is supposed to keep the Emersonian ideal of immediacy in the game—the individual self performs a selection, of itself and the world around it, from the flux/stream of experience. The stream concept by-passes the potential negativities of the Neoplatonist models, where the ONE, never quite reached, can become an empty space. James's idea of the stream, his "'pure experience'" or "the immediate flux of life" (*Writings 1902–1910* 782), is immune to this kind of negative mutation; it constitutes the immediately accessible base of reality in which the individual is fully immersed. The human life is a matter of attending to the relations obtaining within the stream—their selection and cultivation.

The aesthetic potential of the stream model is as great as that of the Neoplatonic one. Jonathan Levin showed how the Emersonian-pragmatist model generates an aesthetics of transitiveness, a way of intercepting and mobilizing the "transitional dynamic that runs through [William James's] psychology and philosophy" (9). Levin continues: "[T]he novelist . . . is someone . . . on the lookout for every incipient transition . . . some element in the overall field of relations, which . . . will deepen . . . the fabric of the fiction" (ibid.). The result, in the novel, is the concept of the character as Henry James's famous "center of consciousness"—an entity that comes to the fore as a controlling center of relations and transitions. What if we concentrated, instead, on the fabric itself—on the substance of the stream as represented in its fluidity and transitiveness—starting to detect the distributions of consciousness that are internal to it? And, further, what if the resulting centers of consciousness revealed types of withdrawal, skepticism or negativity tantamount to the models based on transcendence? The result would be Ashbery's hybrid medium.

The first level at which we notice the effects of this hybridity is Ashbery's curious, aesthetically and psychologically fascinating treatment of one of nature's most encompassing entities—temporality. It is one of Ashbery's mediums' central tasks to explicate the coherence of the individual self that is immersed in the temporal flow. A phenomenology of temporality occurs here: the subject aligns itself with the flow while at the same maintaining a fiction of manipulating it. In a word, the goal is the capacity, which should legitimately be called poetic, of our profiting from change in time. This is the topic of many of Ashbery's longer poems, but it is particularly emphasized in the two long prose pieces in the volume *Three Poems*, "The New Spirit" and "The System."

Instead of Whitman's unit of the phrase, the texts operate on the units of the long sentence and the entire paragraph. Just as in the case of Whitman, the precise subject of those sentences recedes, becomes hidden, or, and this is one of the main points, becomes distributed in the fabric of the medium. The (implied) individual subject is immersed in the ample substance called forth by the progression and accumulation of the sentences, which shuttle between the observation of the material detail and abstraction. This matter, belonging both to the grammatical and aesthetic plane of language and psychology, constitutes the basic material building substance of the medium. Ashbery occasionally turns our attention to it, by metaphorizing it as environing entities submerging the individual. They are a "medium through which we address each other" (*Three Poems* 13), or a "greenish aquarium light" (33), or "a dimensionless organism like the wind's" (61). In those, Ashbery's insistent textualism seeks life-enhancing metaphors merging the fleeting

character of consciousness with the evanescence normally related to the items of the physical world, light or weather.

These metaphors suggest enclosure, but this is just one aspect of the hybridity in question, the other being the flow-like transitivity. The substance is a *res extensa*, a medium for the flow to happen in. The resultant effect is one of capturing the phenomenology of change in time—the unceasing passage of it in which we are caught—while at the same time retaining a sense of permanence. Ashbery enhances the sense of the flow and change by ironizing our being immersed in temporality. At the same time there is a subjective faculty responsible for producing this sense, and its constant coming to be voiced creates an anchoring in the flow, a level of awareness that oversees the empirical sequentiality:

> One is plucked from one month to the next; the year is like a fast-moving Ferris wheel; tomorrow all the riders will be under the sign of February . . . Just to live this way is impossibly difficult, but the strange thing is that no one seems to notice it. (65)

In Ashbery's poetics, the paradoxical, perhaps deeply ironic, quality of our being in the flow (do we really fit in it?) hides solipsistic machinery. The motion of the flow is here instigated, propelled, and maintained by a curious dynamic stemming from the heterogeneity of the voice. The identity of the speaker, once it comes to the fore, is stretched between two poles. One is the more empirically anchored self—a subject immersed in the material world, interacting with objects, meeting friends, observing others. The other is a more distant and mysterious "you," who is often addressed in the prose, and whose identity remains to be revealed. This "you" is clearly a hypothesis of a whole—a larger consciousness, belonging to the flow as such, indicating its edge, or surface, implying the circularity characteristic of transcendentalist models. The interactions between the two poles occur throughout Ashbery's early and middle phases, and the prose of the "The New Spirit" is a case in point.

There is a clear tension, noted frequently in this prose, between inside and outside—an opposition which has no place in the philosophical models of the stream, inside and outside being mere interchangeable modalities of the ontology of the flow or stream models. In "The New Spirit," the flow of the prose is speckled with declarations of wishing to go out, to reach the external world, a movement that seems arrested at the stage of mere observation or wish, as if the speaker were separated from the flow. At the beginning of "The New Spirit," the speaker is enclosed in "common memories, remembering just how the light stood on the water that time," and the power of memory creates a thin but steady pane of separation between him and the external

world: "Outside, can't you hear it, the traffic, the trees, everything, getting nearer" (5). Approaching the outside—such is the predominant, not exclusive, situation of the speaker. The approach becomes a "continual pilgrimage" (5).

"Pilgrimage," the romantic trope of quest for transcendental subjectivity, is here merged with the flow of the medium. This results in a double perspective: elements of the flow are both immediately accessible to the part of the self that might be called empirical, while a sense of remoteness remains as a parallel track. An element of externality is built into the very fabric of the poem, which also creates an interplay of dynamism and stasis. Movement and change are basic reality, but the hypothesized transcendental subjectivity represents stasis, or permanence of the movement itself. There are moments when the movement is called into question: "It is only that you are both moving at the same rate of speed and *cannot apprehend the motion*. Which carries you beyond. . ." (ibid., emphasis mine). That skepticism of the movement, calling attention to a whole which (hypothetically) encloses it, is a trace of the transcendental dimension, the idea of the self-enclosed and self-transparent whole, remaining in its place. This quality was recognized, early on, by John Koethe, who, referring to Wittgenstein's idea that the subject is "a limit of the world," rather than being in it, argued that "the conception of the self underlying Ashbery's poetry is . . . that of the transcendental or metaphysical subject" (96).

But this conception, with its philosophical lineage that spans Descartes, Hume, Kant, and early Wittgenstein in Koethe's early diagnosis, receives a psychological expansion when it is merged with James's "flux." A doubleness occurs, a tension of inside/outside, which we already noted at the beginning of "The New Spirit." It reappears much further in this non-narrative flow, with another instance of the difficulty of going out into the world: "You can feel the wind in the room, the curtains are moving in the draft and a door slowly closes. Think of what it must be outside" (Ashbery, *Three Poems* 23). This repeated difficulty signals a plethora of skeptical and psychological divisions inside the self and produces solipsistic distance that will later fuel Ashbery's ekphrastic "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." After registering the difficulty of the outside—its being there, unreachable—the internal psychological division is openly thematized, in the context of the continual transformation in time:

> So there is no need to wait to be transformed: you are already. I am aware of it, because I see you like a star, that mild friendly, and warming presence, so many trillions miles away, and this suits me because I would have you only in this way: as you are, as you are to me. . . . And therefore we are to travel abreast, twin riders dazzled and disintegrating under the kaleidoscopic performance of the night. (*Three Poems* 23–24)

This double traveling is the mark of transcendentalist distance being transposed onto the flux and flow of experience. The internal division has a philosophical and psychological explanation. First, we have the position of the hypothetical transcendental subject, akin to the Hegelian "beautiful soul," fearing the outside—the empirical world. Its distance to the world has a psychological solipsistic structure: a subject hypothesizes its own perfect (spherical) version, distanced from the world, synthesizing experience, a transcendentalist base for the interactions that occur on the level of empirical engagements. The perfect, transcendental subject of the beautiful soul is, as we have seen "transparent to itself," as a self-knowing entity, but, in the medium of Ashbery's prose, it receives a counterpart—the empirical self that participates in the experiential flow, and both poles hypothesize each other's existence. Ashbery modifies the solipsism modeled on transcendentalism: here, the transcendental aspect of the self senses its empirical counterpart and becomes apprehensive of the physical change. At first, the distance between the two aspects of the self produces a sense of separation, a vacuum, an emptiness, unknowing and unreachability. We find this negativity mentioned at the beginning of the text: "To formulate oneself around this hollow, empty sphere" (5). It is from this fictitious, rhetorical "formulating oneself around" the vacuums and rifts of our psychological being that the passage of Ashbery's poetic substance stems.

The two aspects of the self, "travelling abreast," are "dazzled and disintegrating," but the "warming presence" of their mutual attraction must now be seen as the very fabric of the flow. This allows for the fiction of continuous commentary on the fact of change, from a projected stable vantage point, which, on a different level, constitutes the very cognitive reception of one's participation in the temporal change—in short, our awareness of time: "And so a new you takes shape" (21). Temporal change is accompanied by physicality of space: "It is not necessary to sanctify the gods in order to live in the suddenly vast surroundings that open out among your features" (ibid.). A reciprocity occurs here: solipsistic distances, signaled by the phrase "your features," merge with actual physicality; conversely, the physicality of space is acknowledged without metaphysical justification. Returned to the flux of experience, the internal conundrums open up to the abundance of physical space, registered in its granularity. The two poles of the self, seeking each other out, are now aspects of the flow, which results in internal or external landscapes coming into focus:

> To be your breath as it is taken in and shoved out. Then, quietly, it would be as objects placed along the top of a wall: a battery jar, a rusted pulley, shapeless wooden boxes, an open can of axle grease, two lengths of pipe. We see this moment from outside as within. (*Three Poems* 5)

Ashbery's romantic subject, with its transcendentalist remoteness, apprehensive of the outside, is rescued by the flow of the empirical, which, in turn, receives a focus. This quality returns in "The System," the central piece of *Three Poems*. Again, at a point of confrontation with the plurality of the things of the world, which would have resulted in another removal of the transcendental aspect of the self from the empirical level in the de Manian deconstructive models, this self remains in touch with the flow, held there by the longings of its empirical counterpart. The empirical pole of the self prevents that separation, and uses the idea of the whole to conceptualize the plurality of objects. A cognitive mechanism appears that registers singularity as well as congeries of objects:

> Just the absorption of ourselves seen from the outside, when it is really what is going on inside us—all this overhead chatter and speculation and the noises of the day as it wears into the calm of night. . . And so all these conflicting meaningless details are transformed into something peaceful that surrounds, like wallpaper. (82)

The metaphor of the wallpaper is another example of the persistence of the skeptical frame—isn't wallpaper a levelling out, a flattening, which, again, erases the singularity of the material object in the world? Such flattening out is a remnant of the purely solipsistic and skeptical models, but Ashbery attenuates the possibility of the loss of the world, by highlighting the effort with which the skeptical apparatus is merged with material reality. The effort is signaled as the difficulty of seeing—the transitional movement of the medium itself, which contains, envelops, and begins to override the tropes of the traditional solipsism, is a device whose workings are recognized through a characteristic visual blurring.

The result is fluctuating visual focus. The vector of the poetic mediums is one of overcoming solipsistic blockages and delegating the agency of the individual mind's faculties onto the flow of the medium itself. The unstable visuality is "the proof that you are there" (7). There is a "casual, poorly seen new environment" which acts as a "new kind of arbitrariness for you, one that protects and promotes" (9). It is an "impregnable order of the day" which "surrounds you as the artless gestures of a beautiful girl surround her with nobility" (ibid.). Tropes of non-skeptical acceptance of the ordinary ("casual," "artless") are interwoven with traces of the transcendentalizing conceptual frame—the unreachability of the abstract entities, like "impregnable order" and the synthetic abstract wholeness of a person and her gestural mannerisms.

Such "poorly seen landscapes" are the medium which becomes the primary epistemic stage. The dynamic of the prose stems from the rhythm

created between the belief in its completion and the attendant falling away from it. Moments in which such completion is achieved occur in selected passages, particularly in "The System," where registering the outside world is no longer the task burdening individualist subjectivity, but is delegated to the presence of the medium. They are represented as apparent dissociations from reality, loss of contact with it, moments "of inattention and incapacity or unwillingness to understand" (80). However, and this is the Ashberian paradox, they do not sever the subject from the outside world. On the contrary, they create a new formula of connectedness:

> As the discourse continues and you think you are not getting anything out of it, as you yawn and rub your eyes, and pick your nose or scratch your head. . . this knowledge is getting through to you, and taking just the forms it needs to impress itself upon you, the forms of your inattention, and incapacity or unwillingness to understand. (ibid.)

Understanding, being in touch with reality, happens here outside of conscious individual subjective agency. It would be a mistake, though, to place this agency with any form of the unconscious mind or larger systemic entity raised by various theoretical frames, such as, for instance, the labyrinthine presence of language, regarded, very abstractly, as a whole. The only "whole" hypothesized by Ashbery's formula is the event of the poem, which, in this case, is the passage of its medium. It is the "knowledge" that belongs to this medium—produced by it and carried within it—that will be the bond of the "poorly seen environment," the growing sense of the self's gradually more fully realized, anti-solipsistic belonging to its adjacent spaces.

The transposition of cognitive powers onto the presence of the medium is frequently thematized in Ashbery in connection with the motif of love. Love in Ashbery is the name for a psychological state in which the individual subject's cognitive powers align with the cognitive powers of the medium itself. A few pages after noting the role of "moments of inattention," a different moment of crisis comes into view. The subject is paralyzed, unable to start a conversation with a lover, but the paralysis is overcome, again, with the acknowledgement of the agency of the medium, which, however, is now fully participated in by the subject:

> But as you continue gazing embarrassedly into the eyes of the beloved, talking about extraneous matters, you become aware of the invisible web that connects those eyes to you, and both of you to the atmosphere of this room, which is leading up to you after the vagaries of the space outside. (95)

A new substance defines space and perception here, a "web of connections," and it overtakes the tasks of constituting reality from the apparatus of the transcendentalist model, without, however, nullifying the individual. Importantly, the flow of this substance does not consist in completely erasing the earlier, solipsistically distanced self. The flux itself is organized and steadied, receiving a definition, when it is contaminated with the "vagaries," forms of inattention, gaps, losses, and vacancies that attend the psychology derived from the transcendentalist models. In the moment of restarting contact with the lover, which is also regaining connection with the world, the fluent matrix of the new hybrid medium—not just of the impersonal, philosophically postulated "flux of experience"—is bound, brought into a resolution, by a forgotten "word," which is hypothesized to have been uttered in the pre-history of the moment:

> Suddenly you realize that you have been talking for a long time without listening to yourself; you must have *said it* a long way back without knowing it, for everything in the room has fallen back into its familiar place, only this time organized according to the invisible guidelines that radiate out from both of you like the laws that govern the kingdom. Now there is so much to talk about. (ibid., emphasis mine)

Here love is an overcoming of solipsist separation, but let us note that the traces of centrality do not vanish. The center is a variety of intersubjectivity which is also posited here as the very fabric of reality—it is intersubjectivity distributed as the "invisible web" from the previous fragment. Centrality—the old romantic dream—is here beautifully reconfigured. The center is absent presence of the mysterious "word," the unpronounced "it" that now organizes space. Who, or what, does it belong to? Can we trust that the subject really "said it"? Only a tendency toward it, an expectation, a longing toward it existed, was felt or intimated. *It is this longing that now becomes a vital part of the medium*. It has no "author"; it exists only as a foreboding of externality, an echo, now merged with but not fully dissolved in the flow of empirical reality.

Ashbery's medium is a non-dialectic interaction of the flow of experience with the traces of radical alterity. This non-dialectic tension is most emphatically thematized in "Self-Portrait in the Convex Mirror." Stemming from the clash between the solipsistic and narcissistic circularity of Parmigianino's construct—his famous self-portrait—and the influx of urban distraction also imposing itself on the subject, the poem is a further stabilization of the medium. Parmigianino's potent visage represents the transcendentalist wish of abandoning empirical temporality—the perfect roundness of his painterly construction represents the power of solipsistic/

transcendentalist synthesizing capacity to dwell outside of time. It becomes "life englobed" (*Self-Portrait* 69), a materialization of the device which injected traces of permanence in the change-navigating medium of *Three Poems*. Here, it becomes a strong fantasy of the "whole . . . stable within / Instability" (70), which has an absolutist program of eliminating contingency, constructed "so as to perfect and rule out the extraneous / Forever" (72).

The poem's thrust is to confront this oddity: the flow brings in the minutiae of daily existence experienced by the poet's empirical persona, the irregularities and contingencies of urban environs, the extraneous "filiations and shuttlings" (*Self-Portrait* 75) by which, as Ashbery puts it, "our business is carried out" (ibid.), into confrontation with Parmigianino's solipsistic/narcissistic, self-enclosing, but stunningly influential artistic contraption. Ashbery's subject is fascinated with the painter's concept, but also understands that Parmigianino's is a "life-obstructing task" (80). Thus, he endeavors to develop his own response, one that would actually accommodate the indefiniteness of growing into moments, not by levelling all of them out into the homogenous "magma of interiors" (71)—the product of Parmigianino's optics—but by appreciating their indeterminacy and granularity. Parmigianino's time-freezing globe is confronted with "life . . . stocked there / In recesses no one knew of" (76). The push is toward rediscovering the singularity of "lapidary / Todayness," a presence acknowledged in its freedom from the blueprint of the "whole," in which "no previous day would have been like this" (78). The stake of the game is to register the spatiotemporal definiteness of one's immediate environments, with their actual texture. The poem wants to be able to absorb, without levelling out, the messiness of difficult, "uncharted" everydayness, the metonymic representation of which are the very physicality in which writing happens—"desk, papers, books / Photographs of friends, the window and the trees" (71). It is those, that are to be saved from melting into the "magma of interiors."

And yet, in this poetics, the saving action does not consist in eliminating Parmigianino's transcendentalist construction. On the contrary, his visage, indeed the entire conceptual frame it represents, keeps haunting the medium of the poem. Each movement is accompanied by Parmigianino's spherical "argument" reappearing, returning, as the repressed contents of our narcissism, our wish for a whole that would hold off extraneity and save our sense of the coherent self from vanishing. Ashbery imagines a formula of hybrid optics—the extraneity and nuance of our physical spaces are acknowledged; at the same time, this very texture becomes possible within a connective substance which provides a necessary bonding, and whose other aspect is longing. The individualities of physical spaces

emerge in their separateness when touched with a haunting presence of transcendentalizing nostalgias. The passage of the poem—always bent on spontaneity, contingency, nuanced high-resolution—is sealed by the unexpectedly strong trope of "cold pockets / Of remembrance, whispers out of time" (83).

Ashbery's poetic mediums offer landscapes by enmeshing the transcendentalist longings into the fabric of the poem. The method is perfected in the long poem "A Wave," and then in the extreme book-length exercise of *Flow Chart*. In those works, natural or urban terrains, material objects and elements of landscape receive focus and organization within the poem as a medium which hybridizes empirical flow and a transcendental sense of externality. The emergence of such "landscapes" is the main theme of "A Wave." In earlier phases of Ashbery's reception, critics described those landscapes in terms of mental activity—as thought-mappings. In postmodernist fashion, these were "horizontal, self-referential," resulting in "constructed landscapes of knowledge" (Costello 68), which, however, were regarded as merely a mental reverie, a repository for "unaccommodated thoughts" (61). According to Bonnie Costello, these highly artificial vistas are more of an anticipation—dreams of landscapes, not landscapes themselves, reveries whose self-referential construction becomes available to the reader in the poet's "pellucid moments" (68–69).

Costello is right about the anticipatory quality. However, in the view that I am proposing, this position itself plays a vital part in creating a very real habitat. The longing and anticipation punctuate and structure the flux of experience; they redistribute the desire contained within it in order to slow it down, to organize it into more palpable fixtures, thus turning it into a "ground" or space within which the exact objective and thingly character of the world emerges. Such an emergence of the palpable within the hybrid milieu of the poem occurs amply in "A Wave" and *Flow Chart*. In both cases the terrain that emerges within the ground of the hybrid medium is everydayness—the immediate ordinary surroundings, mostly urban, someone's flat, or the vaster city tracts and grids.

At one point in "A Wave," the very presence of the wooden furniture on which the writing action takes place is acknowledged: "we sit down to the table again / Noting the grain of the wood this time and how it pushes through / The pad we are writing on" (*Wave* 73). The wood itself is not *the ground*. In fact, the material object acquires something of a ghostly quality that we saw earlier as belonging to Parmigianino's visage. But it does not mean that the furniture is unreal. On the contrary, Ashbery is re-configuring the idea of material reality: matter comes to life, matter matters—it becomes vitally interrelated, or, as currently viable academic discourses would have it, "vibrant" or "entangled" with the human subjectivities which are also

present in the milieu. *It is the milieu of the poem that is the ground*. In *Flow Chart*, it is the entire city, as a sort of a large object, that is implied to be the underlying haunting participant of the medium of this book-length poem. It emerges from the poem's gargantuan digressive flow, at the end of it. Just as the grain of wood "pushed through" the writing pad in the fragment of "A Wave," now it is the very material presence of the city that comes into view, to seal the writing action of the poem's milieu in its last syntactic bits: "By evening the traffic has begun / again in earnest, color coded. It's open: the bridge, that way" (*Flow Chart* 216).

Critics have written a lot about Ashery's alternative rhythm of clarity and confusion. As we have seen, Bonnie Costello noted Ashbery's "pellucid moments," which are "charged with strangeness." They are proleptic, "not beyond knowledge, but ahead of it" (68). Much has been written, in the same vein, about Ashbery's "transparency." For Bloom, it was a trope of enhanced seeing boosted by "transcendental influx . . . [a] visionary flame" (Introduction 8). Ross plays down this high rhetoric and reminds us of Ashbery's debt to French avant-garde traditions where "transparence" is a feature of style which tends to abolish the boundary between world and art object (43–44).

All of those ideas converge in the concept of Ashbery's poetic medium as the vitalist, post-secular milieu. Here, the pellucid moments are circular indexes of the vitalist rhythms of the milieu—the poem itself as medium and environment—as it centralizes into its own self-consciousness. On the level of the human participants of the milieu, these moments register as surges of consciousness of our being changed by our surroundings as we change them. These are non-skeptical moments of world regaining, happy returns of our sense of belonging, which result in care, sustenance, and world-enabling nourishment. The strongest possible metaphor for this sense is "love":

> love determines us, and we look the same
> To others when they happen afterwords, and cannot even know
> We have changed, so massive in our difference
> We are, like a new day that looks and cannot be the same. (*Wave* 81)

This passage belongs in "A Wave." The title of the poem thematizes the powerfully transforming and yet barely perceptible passage or growth of this kind of subjectivity attendant on world-sustaining awareness. Let us note the subtle ironies and conceptual contradictions the fragment carries. The change in question is both massive and imperceptible; the day is new while also being the same as others. These are all transcendentalizing tropes—indexes of conceptual wholes which are hypothesized, never reached. Now,

they are re-engaged with the flow of daily experience. As this happens, their previous alterity—their transgressive otherness—is also transformed and reconceptualized as "love." Love is the state that the medium as a whole achieves when the various strands of the self and the material world come together. It is as if the speaker of this fragment became one with the medium/milieu of the poem itself. Love becomes a name for the non-absolutizing and caring oneness of humans and their very ordinary finite world.

CONCLUSIONS

In her post-secular messianic position, Agata Bielik-Robson has developed a concept of life as a self-aware form of tension or energy which is capable of holding off its dissolution into the large ontological orders of nature and death. Bielik-Robson's vitalist messianism debunks the determining powers of those orders. Death, understood as perfect nothingness, cannot be any kind of determining principle, since nothingness contains no founding intentions; nature, understood in traditional ways, is a "homeostatic isolated system operating with the economic minimum of energy" (*Finitude* 2). This is the nature of Aristotelian *phusis* and Darwinian "natural selection," where the life of an entity is exhaustively defined by the necessity of being born and dissolving under the auspices of the same ambivalent determinants—what brings life also causes death. Against this, Bielik-Robson reaches for Georges Canguilhem philosophical biology, in which life is an operative principle that does not reduce to the conditions of physical environment. Instead, it is a "transgressive force investing in more and more freedom of responses of the 'living subjectivity' to the surrounding world" (4).

Canguilhem saw life as a principle concentrated in the action of that living being, which, rather than being a mechanical recipient of stimuli, becomes a "machinist"—a force that organizes the vital milieu around itself (111). The living organism is thrown into its environment, but its task is to nourish it by its responses—the living being "composes its milieu" (ibid.). As such, the organism is the "milieu"—in the sense of "the middle" (center)—of its environment. Life, in this biology, is a creative action of selection, not just mechanical adaptation to stimuli, it is a "significative being" (113). As such, it is a form of knowledge—it is experimental, transformative, and, as Bielik-Robson's reading of Canguilhem stresses, transgressive—an experiment aiming at individuation from the prevailing orders.

Ashbery's vitalism aligns with this position. It consists in the composition of a poetic form—the medium of the poem—the ultimate goal of which is to produce an intense sense of belonging. What stands

as forms of longing for alterity and transgression in post-secular philosophical positions is redefined in Ashbery as "love"—a strong state that reconfigures both the forms of subjectivity and its physical surroundings. These emergent states provide a nourishing, transgressive ingredient, preventing the mechanical deterioration of the networks of our worldly engagements. His medium tends toward, prepares ground for, and composes a sense of finite human belonging—and active and caring coexistence—with its very finite and material surroundings. In Ashbery's "pellucid moments" longing re-enters the finite world and the individuating and individuated subjectivity is a feature of the entire hybrid medium, now fully come to life.

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