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Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

**“A BLESSING IN DISGUISE:”
SPIRITUAL PEDAGOGY IN EARLIER ASHBERY**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LITERATURE

by

Kayla Krut

September 2025

The Dissertation of Kayla Krut is approved:

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Kayla Krut

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Abstract

Kayla Krut, *"A Blessing in Disguise:" Spiritual Pedagogy in Earlier Ashbery*

"A Blessing in Disguise" is a study of Contemplative Criticism that explores affinities between the difficult histories of mysticism and alternative spirituality in the academy, the forms and functions of the poetry formerly known as "Lyric," and the so-called Psychedelic Renaissance, with the purpose of suggesting applications for insights about these relationships directly to the university classroom by means of what bell hooks, in the spirit of Buddhist activist Thich Nhat Hahn, called "engaged pedagogy."

Although grounded in conventional Literary Studies, the project draws from an emergent field in the History of Religion called Contemplative Studies in order to demonstrate the inherently spiritual, even "mystical," operation of the poems of John Ashbery (1927—2017), concentrating on a selection of poetic works from the first half of his seven-decade career. A series of sustained close readings show the inextricability of Ashbery's "countercultural" religious-historical context from a full appreciation of his poetics. This appreciation requires a reappraisal of the new alternative spiritual movement labeled "the New Age," a California-cored cultural phenomenon that has generally been avoided in academic criticism, for reasons that are thoroughly investigated.

Following the radical call of Contemplative Studies, which require both first-person subjective discourse and critical adherent discourse to honor and understand the liberatory possibilities of spiritual experience, the book suggests that a "Contemplative Critical" approach to literary criticism, one that acknowledges

religiosity especially in its postmodern, “postsecular” forms, would not only revitalize the study of poetics and democratize the uses of poetic theory, but also provide methods and materials—starting with Ashbery—for teachers looking to connect more vitally with students in the university classroom, thereby empowering our students (and ourselves) to cultivate “ways out” from deep within.

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PEOPLE

Relationship as the ultimate spiritual practice:

“Heaven is a place on Earth with You”

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PLACES

Location as practice—as continual “action of situating,” as Giscombe would say.

To the places that sheltered me, including those unnamed / liminal / on-the-road places, while I prepared this work; and to the people in all these places (in addition to those named above) who “made” and “held” space for this work to happen

Significant sites are listed here chronologically:

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Seitenberggasse 20, Vienna, AT
454 Requeza, Encinitas, CA
1826 Guy Street, San Diego, CA

Spiritual practice is the basis for all social action.

—Thich Nhat Hanh

Foreword

In February 2023, my mentor and dissertation chair, Rob Wilson, was giving a course on the Beat poets out of the UCSC Literature Department, and I was his Teaching Assistant. With the pandemic and online education (mostly) behind us, this was my first job back in person, on campus in Santa Cruz, since 2019. I was commuting six hours per class day (from Oakland) for the job, and risking the winding 17 Highway left me drained and scatterbrained. I lived for the richness of Rob's lectures, and my mind and spirit were sustained that quarter almost exclusively from those hours.

One Tuesday, Rob mentioned a title I scratched into my notebook, which I forgot about by the time I made it home. It is May 2025, and I am finishing this dissertation draft in Vienna. I recently reveled in paging through a stack of notebooks from 2021—2023 that I had brought when we left the US last year. This title Rob had mentioned one Tuesday called out to me from those hundreds of pages of notes, so I finally looked it up, and right in time, too. It provides the perfect reminder that this dissertation project is neither unique, remote, nor isolated: it is a classically "Santa Cruz" project, and the spiritual pedagogy of poetry has roots and lineage there, as I do. Conceived, like me, in California, this manuscript was compiled seemingly all over the world—I followed what affordable housing was out there in order to get it done.

This last-minute rediscovery reassures me that the project is doing place-based work, allied by like minds, though I didn't know this in the midst of

composition, and suffered for not trusting.¹ I am very grateful to have found out now. The book Rob referenced is William Everson's 1982 *Birth of a Poet: The Santa Cruz Meditations*. It is a Black Sparrow Press book (printed in Santa Barbara and Ann Arbor, where I wrote my Poetry MFA). It contains transcriptions of talks given by Everson when he was invited to be Poet-in-Residence at UC Santa Cruz. *Birth of a Poet* was delivered to undergraduates as a series of meditations on the vocation of the poet, the place of the poet in academia and in greater society, and the place of spirituality in the poet's personal and social formation.

In his Foreword, Everson begins by connecting the private religious act of meditation with the public "secular" act of giving a lecture, reflecting on the contemplative nature of both vocations:

The word meditation has religious connotations and doubtless seems strange in an academic context. In the classroom the corresponding term is lecture and one who teaches is a lecturer. The monastery has its classrooms and those who teach are also called lecturers, but meditation is associated with the chapel. However, a meditation is not the same as a sermon or homily. According to a commentary in the Oxford English Dictionary, traditionally "the sermon was a discourse developing a definite theme; the homily pursued the analytical method and expounded a paragraph or verse of scripture." Neither, however, required the meditative method,

¹ The primary wound of this dissertation is how isolated the conditions of its creation were felt to be: the psychological repercussions of perceived isolation. Appropriate for a pandemic document, perhaps. Yet Everson too addresses this when he cites Auden distinguishing between the social status of the "clerkly" poet caste in Europe versus the stateless status of the solo poet-pioneer in the U.S. national container. It is likely I refused or was unable to access available help for this writing project due to internalized elitism, conditioning, and shame.

"To some degree every American poet feels that the whole responsibility for contemporary poetry has fallen upon his shoulders, that he is a literary aristocracy of one," writes Auden.

Everson responds with compassion:

"But what pressure this places on the American poet in terms of originality and nonconformity! The almost insane isolationism and egoism! The megalomaniacal psyche of the American poet! There is only one world—himself and Nature. He is Adam trying to create Eve out of his own rib without the help of God! [...] These are, then, the American energies. They are in you, and you can't wish them away. You cannot create for yourself a clerkly caste, not even by joining the university and becoming an academic." (from "Meditation Nine: The New Adam," pp110-111)

which is closer to prayer but differs in its object. "In meditation we converse with ourselves; in prayer we converse with God." Meditation, then, is the art of talking to oneself.² This is something everyone can do privately; it takes a special gift to do it in the presence of others.

[...]

Suffice it to say that when I left the monastery for academe the method I brought with me was meditative rather than discursive. For I had learned how concepts seemingly exhausted by endless repetition could suddenly, under the probe of intuition, blossom into life. I decided that if this method worked with divine truths there was no reason why it would not be equally effective with human ones. Taking a common subject, one of concern to all my students, the problem of vocation, I began to meditate on it as I would on the Word of God.

In his Introduction, Lee Bartlett (adorably) points out that Everson was a "triple Virgo," i.e., a person with three significant natal planetary placements in the sixth sign, like myself. Bartlett remarks that curiously, despite Everson's personality chart being dominated by "the sign of the critical intelligence, his vocation has not been, in the main, that of critic or teacher, but that of poet."³ Even among the astrologically-minded, who theoretically aspire to a nondual experience of the cosmos, the creative/critical split is at issue. Everson's Sun, Moon, and Mercury (like my Mercury, Venus, and Mars) were all at his moment of birth in Virgo, an Earth sign characterized by devotion and precision. Virgo is analytical, discriminating; a bit frenetic, harsh if harried, but generally motivated by the desire to be useful. The sign's motto: "I serve." Another key phrase might be: "divinity is in the details." Virgo is Mutable, ruled by Mercury, the messenger and trickster of the zodiac (Mercury also rules Gemini, the twins).⁴ There is something of the "holy fool" in the communications of the Virgo archetype. Bartlett contextualizes:

At Midnight Mass on Christmas of 1948, Everson, who until that time had a rising reputation as a poet of the California Central Valley, had an intense religious

² Talking to oneself is a classic description of the genre of the lyric poem.

³ Everson vii.

⁴ Signs in astrology are categorized by elements and modality. Elements are four: fire, earth, air, water; Modalities are three: cardinal, fixed, and mutable.

experience which impelled him into monastic life. He eventually became a Dominican, and over the next years published book after book of poetry as Brother Antoninus, replacing his early concerns with man's relationship to the land with man's relationship to God. He became the leading exponent of erotic mysticism in the Church, and with Thomas Merton enjoyed a reputation as one of the two finest Catholic poets since Gerard Manley Hopkins.

After leaving the Order in 1969, Everson accepted an offer to become poet-in-residence at Kresge College at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Perhaps as a combination of his own lack of formal university training and the eighteen years he spent as a Dominican, in his course he sought to redefine the academic lecture in terms of that with which he was most comfortable—the meditative tradition—hoping to build a series of meditations around the theme of the poet's vocation.

Vocation remains an open question as this dissertation draft comes to its conclusion.

This book, *A Blessing in Disguise*, is a work of critical prose—I like the label “Contemplative Criticism”—about alternative spirituality, lyric poetry, psychedelics, and liberatory pedagogy. It is written by a poet whose star chart attracted her to academic criticism and whose 1990s southern-California cultural roots imprinted a feral spirituality onto that already “devotional” nature. In the wake of the lost years of COVID—in aligning with my coursework years (and my Saturn Return), these seemed actively to prevent me from accessing those people and places which had attracted me to a PhD in the first place—I feel a reassuring affinity with Everson, whose religious faith, artistic practice, and lack of formal university training gave him the freedom to occupy contemplative space as a (spiritual) teacher. And in Santa Cruz, no less!

Letting this dissertation manuscript reflect the chaos of its situation—upheaval, poverty, illness—has been the real challenge of earning the degree, which has been my ego's drive since childhood (for the energetic clarity of self-disclosure, I may as well share the other one: be the second person in history, and first woman, to win Ashbery's 1975 “triple crown” of national poetry prizes). What

has made these years of work valuable for me personally is how sticking to this project has highlighted and reframed my relationship to consenting to the processes of writing within a system—namely, the University of California—and of committing to living outside of the system while writing. I hope that in approaching the inherent contradictions of this book—an anti-institutional document compiled for institutional approval; a poet doing criticism—you enjoy reading it, and find it useful.

D.H. Lawrence, too, was a Virgoan, and Virgo is certainly the sign of the craftsman; yet Lawrence stood as an emphatic anticraftsman. The answer to this paradox is that Virgo also rules the solar plexus, and Lawrence became its apostle. In a sense he had it both ways. By passing beyond superficial Virgoan preoccupation with detail, with craftsmanship, he could touch the wellspring of plexus power and let the native penchant inherent in his sign take care of the tidying up process, even as it emerged.

N.b.

Throughout the following text, I have distributed quotations from various sources, marked off by section breaks. These are intended to supplement the text and to enrich it, problematize it, help contextualize, and to give readers a break from my voice and the driving of my argument.

If you like, think of each quotation as an opportunity to take a break from one sort of reading (reading critical prose) and to rest in another sort of contemplation, taking in the quotations without trying to understand them or coerce them into the project's narrative.

I also quote Ashbery's poems extensively throughout the book, and would likewise encourage readers to try to engage with those citations in as relaxed, nonjudgmental, and open-hearted a way as possible.

I have italicized his full poems (and longer excerpts) in order to mark them off as discrete experiences from the critical text, and to encourage an *emphasized* attention to that poetic language.

A Blessing in Disguise

*Yes, they are alive and can have those colors,
But I, in my soul, am alive too.
I feel I must sing and dance, to tell
Of this in a way, that knowing you may be drawn to me.*

*And I sing amid despair and isolation
Of the chance to know you, to sing of me
Which are you. You see,
You hold me up to the light in a way*

*I should never have expected, or suspected, perhaps
Because you always tell me I am you,
And right. The great spruces loom.
I am yours to die with, to desire.*

*I cannot ever think of me, I desire you
For a room in which the chairs ever
Have their backs turned to the light
Inflicted on the stone and paths, the real trees*

*That seem to shine at me through a lattice toward you.
If the wild light of this January day is true
I pledge me to be truthful unto you
Whom I cannot ever stop remembering.*

*Remembering to forgive. Remember to pass beyond you into the day
On the wings of the secret you will never know.
Taking me from myself, in the path
Which the pastel girth of the day has assigned to me.*

*I prefer "you" in the plural, I want "you,"
You must come to me, all golden and pale
Like the dew and the air.
And then I start getting this feeling of exaltation.*

I. Introduction: “I seek but what belongs to me in truth.”⁵

1. “Touching forever, water lifted out of the sea”

The History of Mysticism as an Academic Category

*Wasn't there some way in which you too understood
About being there in the time as it was then?
A golden moment, full of life and health?*

...

*How blue objects protruded out of the
Potential, dying and recoiling, returning as you meet them
Touching forever, water lifted out of the sea.*

—John Ashbery, from “Rural Objects”⁶

Whether in relational ceremony or quiet contemplation, when we fixate on our critical ideologies, even lovers of peace and truth end up helpless. The gathering power of religion is currently being activated and misused by private interests and authoritarian institutions around the world to advance corrupt, repressive, and extractive policies and governments. In 2025, in the United States and parts of Europe, popular Christofascism has alarming weight behind it, and correspondingly threatening momentum accompanies those who choose to wield it.

Meanwhile, a more anarchic religious feeling, force, and imagination stands available for use by “the left,” i.e., those left behind by Christofascist ideologies: those of us in resistance, perhaps feeling futile, deliberately seeking ways to shore

⁵ *A Course in Miracles*, Lesson 104.

⁶ *The Double Dream of Spring*, 1970.

up our creativity and resilience as we keep on desiring—that fulcrum verb, deployed twice, in Ashbery’s “Blessing in Disguise”—the utopic asymptote of liberation. It is the understanding of this document that an expanded consciousness, applied through the arts vis-à-vis “alternative spirituality,” is available for materializing—i.e., made practical and accessible—is ready to matter!—for as many people as possible, as quickly as is responsible. The desire behind this book’s argument is to guarantee refreshed stores of certain kinds of power for anyone who wants it.

According to Clifford Geertz, religion is always both a worldview and an ethos, poesis and praxis.⁷ My project’s interests lie in the individual poet’s, critic’s, or student’s valuation of the world-making practices⁸ of the reading and writing of so-called “lyric poetry”. I am curious about the ways in which uploaded echoes of mystical religiosity—especially those taken up explicitly by the mass countercultural movement known as the New Age—are already encoded into modern poetry. How can this acknowledgment of the question begged of literary studies by spirituality further illuminate and revitalize modern lyric theory? How can “respiritualized” lyric theory open up the practical, pedagogical, and psychospiritual potentials of the practice of reading poetry?

This project makes the claim that the ongoing source of power in much contemporary and modern lyric poetry is inherited from—and continues to reproduce—the poesis/praxis of a mystical contemplative tradition by means of its formal and ritualizing structures and contexts. This “modernizing” uploading of the sacred into the aesthetic has been misunderstood and feared with an energetic intensity that the erstwhile community of literary studies, because of its tentative

⁷ See Daniel Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion*.

⁸ i.e., creation and interpretation, which both can be both poesis and praxis

position in academe—and, to peer one circle wider, academe’s tentative position relative to the public sphere—can no longer afford. This book considers the accuracy of the following claim: John Ashbery’s lyric poems (taking for evidence those of his first three publishing decades, namely, the 1950s, 60s, and 70s) cannot be understood fully without adequate spiritual and religious historical context. Furthermore, I want to insist that this context must prioritize the themes and organizing principles of the decentralized and sketchy Postmodern category labeled “New Age religion.” Finally, I recommend applying a “Contemplative-Critical” interpretation to 20th+-century poetry in general, one that necessarily prioritizes spiritual-historical context, which could play a nourishing role in a revised pedagogy of personal development and holistic well-being for artists, scholars, teachers, and students.

*

I used to think...
That the present always looked the same to everybody
But this confusion drains away as one
Is always cresting into one’s present
—“Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” lines 384—387

This introduction does not presume to provide final definitions for the project’s foundational concepts—*Mysticism*, *Lyric*, *Contemplative Pedagogy*—but instead provides idiosyncratic glosses of key terms intended to orient the reader and to make the book’s position transparent. To begin, I review three broad areas of research—the history of Christian Mysticism and New Age religion (Part 1), Lyric Theory and New Lyric Studies (Part 2), and Contemplative Studies (Part 3). These rough sketches hopefully illuminate why and how I want to encourage the immediate

pedagogical application of a new “Contemplative Criticism,” plus why I chose to kick this off using the poems of John Ashbery.

Part One, “The History of Mysticism as an Academic Category,” addresses longstanding blocks in critical academic discourse and ideologies that have made clarification necessary. Part Two, “Rehashing the Lyric: New Lyric Studies and Classical Ashbery Reception,” behaves somewhat the same way, but for my home field, Modernist(ish) American poetry and poetics. Part Three, “Integrating Contemplative Studies and Reading Ashbery Psychedelically,” introduces the “Holy Spirit” or ostensible synthesis of these first two areas—namely, Contemplative Studies—and braids strands of that emergent field with certain claims of the “Psychedelic Renaissance,” another recent popular/academic phenomenon material to the book’s aims.

*

An experiential knowledge of something bigger than the author himself is always directing Ashberyan lyric inquiry, even though the existential conventions of his age require him always already to consider that this something bigger is either false, ethically compromised, and/or self-generated (and therefore sociopolitically insignificant). The expansive, compassionate inclusivity of the Ashberyan voice therefore tends invariably to combine with gestures of self-emptying (kenosis⁹) throughout his seven-decade bibliography. Ashbery’s lifelong preoccupation with the two sides of the coin of the lyric genre—the nature of the relationship between self and other, more often than not collapsed as a unity, and the experience of time and

⁹ “In Christian theology, kenosis is the “self-emptying” of Jesus—e.g., in the renunciation of the divine nature on the Cross. The word ἐκένωσεν is used in the Epistle to the Philippians: “[Jesus] made himself nothing”, or “[he] emptied himself”, using the verb form κενώω, meaning “to empty”. The exact meaning varies among theologians.” (Wikipedia)

timelessness—show up his even more basic concern for incorporating (or manifesting) the mystical. As literary critics have identified these themes as foundational concerns of the lyric, to me this opens up the possibility that lyric is essentially a *mystical* category; and John Ashbery may be that genre's latest great prophet.

Aware that the category has been judged outdated, I nevertheless find it useful to describe Ashbery's poems as *lyric* ones. It goes almost without saying that Postmodern poetry is inherently, and rightly, critical of its parent category lyric, but this does not invalidate the concept—appropriately decolonized, liberated, and reclaimed—for use in theory and the classroom. Ashberyan poetry (in a way peculiarly aligned with its cultural-historical moment) simultaneously engages in and annotates for readers the relational and intimate process of self-making through consciousness and attention (i.e., *poesis*). To the extent that the process of self-making is identical with world-making, or worlding¹⁰—and to the extent that this

¹⁰ Gloss and context from Rob Sean Wilson's abstract, "The Worlding Project" (2007): "to enact a stipulated cultural-political-creative ethos or tactic of situated opposition to the telos of globalization... Worlding is not so much a theme or subject as it is a tactic or a practice or projection of world-making, projecting forth, and life-world becoming and building-up to use a Goethe-like word for cultural formation.

"Worlding" means at once a mode of "building up a life-world palpably disclosing its lived-in modalities, boundaries, tactics, and historical processes" of survival and emergence.

Worlding stands for a range of alter-globalization and situated localization practices being projected forward out into and across the everyday world that is riddled and driven by mandates of capitalist dynamism and globalization.

Worlding-as-projection is still shadowed by residual forces and forms of 'deworlding,' as well as stands opposed to those called (by Tsing and Haraway et al) 'reworlding': that is to say, energies and practices of going and coming, breaking down and building up life-worlds. The former process (deworlding) suggests enduring impacts of empire, colonialism, and turbo-capitalism upon other life-worlds and threatened ways of being. In one compressed verb 'worlding' means building-up the life-world that is, actively worlding it.

Or, playing off from post-Heidegger or postcolonial definitions of worlding, we would offer this summarizing definition: "WORLDING (v) - a historical process of taking care, setting limits, entering into, & making world-horizons come near & become local, situated, in/formed, cared for; instantiated as an uneven/incomplete material-cultural process of world-making and world-becoming."

process is experienced by writer and/or reader as sacred—the lyric offers a unique category of religious material to turn over for insights as to how humans experience as-yet-mystifying layers of reality.

Caught up in the excitement of Contemplative Pedagogy—which boasts ambitious methods and materials for improving the study of history of religions, and for encouraging successful cross-pollination with other areas of study—I am interested in applying so-called “contemplative” methods of attention to the practices of contemporary students and teachers of poetry. As we will see, scholars of the Early Modern period, for example, already acknowledge that sacred reading functions as personal spiritual exercise; some modern literary theorists have picked this up, shrewdly scientizing it. Most, however, have not yet made explicit the transition or expansion of contemplation from theory into pedagogy; nor have they considered interweaving the spiritual insights of psychedelic drugs and states of consciousness into either their theories or pedagogies (not publicly, at least).

This book accepts the understanding that New Age religion is fundamentally a critique of Postmodern ideologies. Aware of these possibilities, I ask readers to consider whether the university study of lyric isn't in fact already functioning practically as New Age religion, the proponent of which—conscious of this particular quality of religiosity or not—picks and chooses from the modern secular world's trove of practices and beliefs in order to satisfy their own demands as subjective critic of culture. These demands are individually embodied; they are psychological and emotional as much as or even more than they are political, social, and intellectual. They are "spiritual" as much as they are "material." In my experience, there is a velocity available at this angle of entry and exit by which we may get more free.

Chapter Summaries

This book consists of four parts: a long Introduction; a long second section; a shorter third section; and a Coda. The most sustained reading of a single Ashbery work is found in Part Two, “A Permanent Now,” which reads his 1972 book *Three Poems* and looks for new ways into that now-seminal text. There, I address genre issues; provide biographical information to contextualize the years before and during his writing of the book; and theorize his criticality as a spiritual expression of the Lyric. This respiritualization is then explored in depth through six core themes that unite the New Age as a religious force, interpreting large and small portions of *Three Poems* through the following themes: channeling as articulated revelation; healing as a religious phenomenon; holism and universal interrelatedness; the popular divination modes of astrology and Tarot; the simultaneous psychologization of the sacred and sacralization of psychology; and finally, the self-conscious styling of the New Age as cultural criticism.

The shorter third section collects three discrete readings of poems from early Ashbery—two from his first book, *Some Trees* (1956), and one from his third, *Rivers and Mountains* (1966)—as further examples of Contemplative Criticism. First, in reading “The Painter,” a sestina written in his undergraduate years, I show how Ashbery is already doing self-reflective cultural criticism on the role of the poet in society in lyric form. Next, I show not only how his poem “The Ecclesiast” derives directly from the Bible, but also how he both absorbs and transforms his religious roots that way. Finally, I offer a reading of the title poem of Ashbery’s first book, *Some Trees*, doing a classical close reading that focuses on grammar and syntax to demonstrate what’s innately mystical in Ashberyan poetic structure.

In the Coda, I prepare the way for a deepening expansion of the scope of Contemplative Criticism and its place in our world. I explore two possible areas of inquiry, separable and ripe for integrative application, grouped under the headings “Psychedelic Poetics” and “Liberatory Pedagogy.” I also take a moment to reflect, using first-person subjective discourse, on recent experiences in these overlapping spheres of creativity and criticism—my poetry practices and my immersion in academia—which have led me to construct and deliver this project in this way.

As I mention in the Foreword, throughout the book, I have distributed quotations from various sources. In a tricksterish spirit, these are intended to supplement the text and to enrich it, problematize it, relieve it of its duties, and to give readers a break from my voice and the driving of my argument. If you like, think of each quotation as an opportunity to take a break from one sort of reading (reading critical prose) and to rest in contemplation, considering the quotations and their placements without necessarily striving to “get” them (or coerce them into the project’s apparent narrative).

I also quote Ashbery’s poems extensively throughout the book, without providing explicit critical interpretation. I likewise encourage readers to try to engage with those citations in as slow, relaxed, and open a way as possible. They are italicized, and undoubtedly the parts of the book that most merit your attention.

1.a. Glossing Mysticism: Three Sources

What the mystics are talking about is what lies “between” these necessary mediations [of thought and speech], if I may express it in this way.¹¹

“It is generally little-known that the noun ‘mysticism’ only appeared in the 17th century (de Certeau 1964; 1968), and that our present understanding did not come into use until the late 19th century (King 2010: 323).”¹² What follows are descriptions from a few different sources that, taken together, begin to give an impression of how “the mystical” may prove useful to the contemplative study of a postmodern American poet.

I begin with American Roman Catholic theologian and religious historian Bernard McGinn’s multi-volume history of Western Christian mysticism, *The Presence of God* series, for a specific sense of the term as it would best fit the historical context of Ashbery and the dominant lineage of study of Lyric—i.e., the

¹¹ McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism*, xx.

¹² Wilkes et. al, *Constructions of Mysticism as a Universal*, 3.

Western Christian tradition out of which was built US and European academia. I then turn to three interrelated terms outlined by Dutch historian Wouter Hanegraaff—esotericism, mysticism, and New Age religion—whose grip on these terms help paint a richer, more historicized picture of these largely befuddled categories. These glosses, as well as the bulk of the historical data and analysis found in the second section of this book, come from Hanegraaff's *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (1996).

Next in this section appear updates (to Hanegraaff and the field) from a 2021 volume that historicizes and critiques the uses of the “mysticism” construct in contemporary academia. The editors of this volume present thoughtful reflections on the way the concept congealed and has morphed throughout academic history; they also reflect on the concept’s impact on emergent 20th-century disciplines of sociology, psychology, history and phenomenology of religion, and philosophy of knowledge to demonstrate why “mysticism” as category/concept/term is ignored, downplayed, and decontextualized at scholarship’s peril.

Finally, I turn to Niklaus Largier’s recent book *Figures of Possibility: Aesthetic Experience, Mysticism, and the Play of the Senses* (2022) for an example of a contemporary framework that flexibly combines history of religion with literary studies to demonstrate the intertwinement of medieval mysticism with modern aesthetics. *Figures of Possibility* lays important theoretical and historical groundwork for my intervention into Lyric Theory that ultimately joins with new forms of knowing vis-à-vis the field of Contemplative Studies.

1.a.i. Foundations of Christian Mysticism

One traditional Christian definition of mysticism is *cognitio Dei experimentalis*: “experiential knowledge of God,” a sense of presence that stands opposed to faith or belief. In another definition, mysticism describes the practice of Neoplatonic metaphysics. This emphasis on subjective experience threatens to unleash anarchies of pantheism & self-deification (for example, as birth of Logos in the soul of the believer) which fuels both Gnostic offshoots of Christianity and the Whitmanian/Emersonian theopoesis that predates Ashbery. The mystical thus described is less arcane, and therefore more accessible, than disembodied top-down Christianity, and therefore more socially dangerous—that is, sensual, emotional, and ripe for constant reinterpretation.

In the first book of his “Presence of God” series, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (1991), Bernard McGinn approaches an understanding of Christian mysticism “under three headings: mysticism as a part or element of a religion; mysticism as a process or way of life; and mysticism as an attempt to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God.”¹³ McGinn's definition of mysticism emphasizes two essential aspects:

(1) The experience of divine presence: Mysticism involves an awareness or consciousness of God's immediate presence, which transcends ordinary perception and conceptual understanding.

(2) Transformation of the subject: A genuine mystical experience is not merely an abstract encounter with the divine; it results in a profound transformation of the individual, shaping their thoughts, feelings, and actions.

New Age religion transforms God or divinity into¹⁴ the Universe, Source, or consciousness itself, and is in many cases considered accessible directly by means

¹³ FM xv-xvi.

¹⁴ Or, in many cases, simply renames

of right relationship with other human beings (hence the co-opting of “Namaste”¹⁵).

McGinn’s third heading, “an attempt to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God,” may be applied to Ashbery’s habit of engaging the second-person singular pronoun “you” throughout his career, calling on *you* variously as erstwhile interlocutor, reader, lover, and perhaps divinity. As far as I have read, nowhere is this more succinctly, raptly done than in “A Blessing in Disguise,” and so that poem gives this project its title.

Here’s Ashbery in an interview talking (mystically) about his pronouns:

The personal pronouns in my work very often seem to be like variables in an equation. “You” can be myself or it can be another person, someone whom I’m addressing, and so can “he” and “she” for that matter and “we;” sometimes one has to deduce from the rest of the sentence what is being meant and my point is also that it doesn’t really matter very much, that we are somehow all aspects of a consciousness giving rise to the poem and the fact of addressing someone, myself or someone else, is what’s the important thing at that particular moment rather than the particular person involved. I guess I don’t have a very strong sense of my own identity and I find it very easy to move from one person in the sense of a pronoun to another and this again helps to produce a kind of polyphony in my poetry which I again feel is a means toward greater naturalism.¹⁶

Here are a few more excerpts from McGinn that can qualify and begin to texture this term (emphasis added):

Although the essential note —or, better, goal—of mysticism may be conceived of as a particular kind of encounter between God and the human, between Infinite Spirit and the finite human spirit, everything that leads up to and prepares for this encounter, as well as all that flows from or is supposed to flow from it for the life of the individual in the belief community, is also mystical, even if in a secondary sense.¹⁷

[T]he mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God.¹⁸

¹⁵ Sanskrit greeting; lit. “I bow to the divine in you” or “the sacred in me bows to the sacred in you”

¹⁶ *Poet’s Craft* 89, emphasis added.

¹⁷ FM xvi.

¹⁸ FM xvii.

The term mystical experience, consciously or unconsciously, also tends to place emphasis on special altered states—visions, locutions, raptures, and the like—which admittedly have played a large part in mysticism but which many mystics have insisted do not constitute the essence of the encounter with God. Many of the greatest Christian mystics (think of Origen, Meister Eckhart, and John of the Cross) have been downright hostile to such experiences, emphasizing rather the new level of awareness, the special and heightened consciousness involving both loving and knowing that is given in the mystical meeting. For this reason alone we can welcome the suggestions of some recent investigators who have found the term “consciousness” a more precise and fruitful category than “experience.”¹⁹

It is easy to delineate the historical development and lingering overlap between this present absence in mystical experience and the dominant concern or anxiety of modern poetry (and modernity at large). Literary criticism, especially of postmodern giants like Ashbery, tends to hyperfocus on the slipperiness of poetic language that somehow achieves an effect (dual or nondual?) of grasping the desired meaning or image while simultaneously approaching but never reaching a fixed or higher meaning; the major figures of Modernism (Eliot, Benjamin, etc) are admired by criticism for their self-awareness of their writings’ melancholic yet unceasing striving for this impossible goal that unifies perceiver with perceived, subject with object, man with absent, absconded, or disproven divine principle. It is the disappointed hope of this unity that creates much of the tension that energizes modern poetry. Consider Wallace Stevens’s “The Idea of Order at Key West,” which title speaks to the layers of mediation between the divinity of nature as imaged by the sea, the woman singer on the shore, and the narrator who observes the scene. The turn to the superficial or meaningless that seems to characterize postmodern lyric is in fact a turn to experience, not interpretation, to body, not mind, that continues to be motivated by an ultimately mystical desire to reach “new level[s] of awareness,” as

¹⁹ FM xvii-xviii, emphasis added.

McGinn says: “the special and heightened consciousness involving both loving and knowing that is given in the mystical meeting.”

A mystical Postmodern lyric theory is well stated in this excerpt from Ashbery’s most famous treatise on the paradox of representation, “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror:”

*The whole is stable within
Instability...
And just as there are no words for the surface, that is,
No words to say what it really is, that **it is not**
Superficial but a visible core, then there is
No way out of the problem of pathos vs. experience.
You will stay on, restive, serene in
Your gesture which is neither embrace nor warning
But which **holds something of both in pure**
Affirmation that doesn’t affirm anything.*

Take this together with McGinn:

[M]any mystics from Dionysius on have insisted that it is the consciousness of God as negation, which is a form of the absence of God, that is the core of the mystic’s journey.²⁰

The visible core of the whole :: the form of God’s absence: both of these versions of mystical experience offer support for an updated, postsecular theory of lyric poetry that retains ideals of Romantic and even Formalist flavor while acknowledging and integrating the expansions and corrections made by Cultural Studies since their first appearances. To the sensitive reader,²¹ who can somehow

²⁰ FM xviii-xix, emphasis added.

²¹ The sensitive reader is responding to the more-than-human world, where experiences of profound meaning, attributed to a divinity or not, are expected in the course of sincere interaction with a text. S/he may be open to treating reading as a contemplative exercise that takes for granted the possibility of ways of knowing that go beyond the hegemonic empirical models of academic institutions in the West. Indigenous knowledges (such as those transmitted by American Indian clinical psychologist Gene Hightower or Peruvian curandero Alonso del Río in their books and oral teachings, to provide two places to go look) as well as “New Age” syncretic forms of accessing the imagination (ex. articulated revelation, divination with cards, automatic writing, channeling) are two broad examples of wells from which a

experience the poem beyond its surface of words, all poems reveal their extruded architecture, offering theories and criticisms of themselves. *A visible core*: what strikes us dumbly mundane about the mystical is its omnipresence. Ashbery lyric revels in this banality, consecrates it, even once the tide of the moment inevitably draws out, even should the next line qualify or undercut the desired sacralization. Ashbery lyric is not opportunistically ecstatic; it generally does not choose self-consciously to fashion narratives²² of conversion or to boast the life of a saint. It is simply present, as at “Self-Portrait”: “*This thing, the mute, undivided present*”.²³ Herein lies his profound, all-too-easy-to-overlook radicalism.

If Ashbery is arguing for radical inclusion simultaneous with radical negation—for this koan-like quality, pressing yet “mystifying,” is unavoidable in all his works—it’s my impression that the affirmative presence of the existence of the poem helps tip the scales toward inclusion and away from cynical or “pointless” (ie, judgmental) negation or emptiness. I see “cosmic optimism”²⁴ saturating Ashbery’s oeuvre, particularly striking in light of poems that reflect bouts of intense depression and doubt. Later on in “Self-Portrait,” for example, he will give dozens of lines to the subject of Love itself, beginning a section:

*Love once
Tipped the scales but now is shadowed, invisible,
Though mysteriously present, around somewhere.*

He ends the section by defining Love as “present, unimpaired, a permanent anomaly, / Awake and silent” (362-3). Echoing this “permanent anomaly,” McGinn

“sensitive reader” may draw to develop her own contemplative reading practice. McGinn, it should be noted, uses the descriptor “contemplative” synonymously with “mystical” (FM 7).

²² He is explicitly anti-narrative, for example, at 442-3, even in the midst of a defense of the use of logic for accessing the present moment.

²³ line 439.

²⁴ to borrow a phrase from FW Conner (cf. NAR 465).

quotes modern French philosopher and activist Simone Weil (1909—1943) in his discussion of the term mysticism: “Contact with human creatures is given us through the sense of presence. Contact with God is given us through the sense of absence. Compared with this absence, presence becomes more absent than absence.”²⁵

In Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait” and elsewhere, the surprising survival of the Postmodern writing self (the self processing its experience)—survival despite the earlier era’s convincing annihilation of meaning—often shows itself in lightheartedness of tone; in self-amusing collage of ‘high’ and ‘low’ contents; and (sometimes uncanny or disturbing) in formal play²⁶, which mystical force has to transform its inherited traces of doom²⁷ in order to keep up with the fact of somehow still existing despite the doubts of Modernism. With such lightness of touch and heart, Ashbery honors his Transcendentalist lineage. I accept the rudiment of Harold Bloom’s theory of the American Sublime: that from Whitman descended Wallace Stevens, and from Stevens, Ashbery.²⁸ Arthur Versluis contends that the way Emerson took up with Eastern philosophy and religion amounted to his founding of a “literary religion.”²⁹ Walt Whitman worlds thence.³⁰ Ashbery’s capacious worldview of correspondences is decidedly Romantic,³¹ and his heavy poetic leaning on such correspondences—formally, conceptually, and in his associative, dreamlike moving among images and throughout syntax—makes it possible to read him not merely as

²⁵ FM xix.

²⁶ Line 424ff: Ashbery delivers a caustic read of “play” as a critical function of the social that is ultimately, like much postmodern criticism, “beside the point” (433). His postmodernism is beyond the typical because it never loses sight of the transcendentalist ‘visible core’ that illuminates experience and art from within...

²⁷ Kenosis spells doom for the mortal ego.

²⁸ I go further than Bloom in labeling Ashbery sublime!

²⁹ NAR 461.

³⁰ NAR 466.

³¹ See NAR 500.

an inheritor of Emerson's "literary religion," but also as embedded within a network of New Age religiosity that saturates the art world of the American 20th-century. Such a connection is the object of contemplation from which this dissertation emerges.

The paradoxical necessity of both presence and absence is one of the most important of all the verbal strategies by means of which mystical transformation has been symbolized.³²

1.a.ii. New Age Religion and Western Culture

Stepping somewhat out of the bounds of European Christianity, Dutch historian Wouter Hanegraaff understands mysticism as a specific aspect of religious experience closely related to esotericism but not identical to it. He defines esotericism as "a category in the study of religion referring to a specific set of religious beliefs and practices that emphasize the search for higher wisdom and direct contact with the divine or transcendent reality." Esotericism is characterized by the belief that hidden or secret knowledge can be uncovered through spiritual practices or initiation, leading to personal transformation and enlightenment. He qualifies this definition by highlighting four intrinsic traits of esotericism:

1. The search for "higher wisdom"
2. An emphasis on personal experience and direct contact with the divine
3. A reliance on symbolic interpretation and complex correspondences
4. The pursuit of individual spiritual perfection through transformation

Hanegraaff advocates an approach to the study of Western esotericism that is neither reductionist nor religionist/apologist, but grounded in "methodological agnosticism": an acceptance that "the existence or non-existence of divine or sacred realities is simply beyond empirical verification or falsification by scholars *qua*

³² FM xviii.

scholars.”³³ Just as “postsecular” need not mean “superstitious,” “secular” need not mean “drained of soul-making potential.”

Hanegraaff specifies that mysticism can be found within both esoteric and non-esoteric forms of religion, noting that while mysticism often involves ineffable experiences of unity with the divine/absolute, it does not require the pursuit of hidden knowledge or initiation that characterizes esotericism. I think it will be possible, if not a matter of course, to read John Ashbery as a New Age religious poet once literary scholars review Hanegraaff’s religious-historical evidence, considering that New Age religiosity is fundamentally a form of cultural criticism that owes debts to that exact 1950s United States milieu that molded Ashbery.

Hanegraaff writes that “although New Age religion calls for a ‘re-enchantment,’ its own foundations consist of an already thoroughly secularized esotericism.”³⁴ So, too, does Ashberyan lyric exist as both a ‘dis-’ and ‘re’-enchanted form of Romantic Postmodernism (often uncomfortably, especially when performing not just self but self-consciousness). Ashbery’s emergent historical context (New York City in the 1950s) positions him perfectly to absorb not only the Romanticism of his literary lineage (from Emerson and Whitman through Stevens and Moore) but also an additional current of popular Romanticized influence, spreading mostly from California, called the New Age.³⁵

It is important to try for as historically accurate an understanding of “New Age religion” as possible: the worlding ideas, activities, and texts behind the phrase are as expansive as those behind “mysticism,” “lyric,” or “psychedelia.” To repeat, New

³³ Hanegraaff 2012, 357.

³⁴ NAR 409.

³⁵ NAR 415ff.

Age religion is fundamentally cultural criticism. For my purposes, I maintain that any significant shreds of New Age religiosity (in contemporary poetry, for example) retain this essence of cultural criticism, even when denied, derided, or defanged (i.e. “secularized”). Even in its meaner, more despairing moments, Ashbery’s poetry is constantly occupied with the project of a mystical cultural criticism, a vicious and compassionate criticism of his “disenchanted” historical moment that utterly takes for granted an expectation of union 1) with a divine or divinely-imbued beloved other, or 2) with nature, or 3) with his own awareness of the unfolding of experience in the present.

He is not able to shake the feeling(s); and, his context demands that he interrogate it coolly. This is where New Age religion (understood as historically-specific cultural criticism sharpened by the volatile 1960s US moment) serves Ashbery’s lyric purposes, allowing him to express claims both Romantically and mystically, *in plain sight*, without being charged with regressiveness or naivete. Access to New Age history offers the Postmodern poet a middle way.

Here is Hanegraaff’s official definition of New Age religion:

New Age as Culture Criticism:

All New Age religion is characterized by a criticism of dualistic and reductionistic tendencies in (modern) western culture, as exemplified by (what is emically perceived as) dogmatic Christianity, on the one hand, and rationalistic/scientistic ideologies, on the other. It believes that there is a “third option” which rejects neither religion and spirituality nor science and rationality, but combines them into a higher synthesis. It claims that the two trends which have hitherto dominated western culture (dogmatic Christianity and an equally dogmatic rationalistic/scientistic ideology) have been responsible for the current world crisis, and that the latter will only be resolved if and when this third option becomes dominant in society.³⁶

Furthermore,

³⁶ NAR 517, emphasis added.

All New Age religion is characterized by the fact that it expresses its criticism of modern western culture by presenting alternatives derived from a secularized esotericism. It adopts from traditional esotericism an emphasis on the primacy of personal religious experience and on this-worldly types of holism (as alternatives to dualism and reductionism), but generally reinterprets esoteric tenets from secularized perspectives. Since the new elements of “causality,” the study of religions, evolutionism, and psychology are fundamental components, New Age religion cannot be characterized as a return to pre-Enlightenment worldviews but is to be seen as a qualitatively new syncretism of esoteric and secular elements. Paradoxically, New Age criticism of modern western culture is expressed to a considerable extent on the premises of that same culture.³⁷

New Age religion or spirituality is best understood as a cultic milieu (description to follow) that develops into a full-blown movement by the later 1970s. The New Age movement is rooted in the so-called counterculture of the 1960s, where California was an especially influential geographic region. As Hanegraaff maintains in *Rejected Knowledges: Esotericism and the Academy* (2012), modern academia was born by repeatedly and knowingly defining itself over and against “esotericism” as a superior form of knowing. Therefore, understanding New Age religion is necessary to have any understanding of the history of academia and of pedagogy on its campuses. Particularly interesting in the case of the University of California are the towns and surrounds of Berkeley and Santa Cruz, which have always been the two strongest geographical sources of cultural fuel for the New Age fire.

“The New Age is synonymous with the cultic milieu having become conscious of itself as constituting a more or less unified movement.”³⁸ Hanegraaff quotes sociologist Colin Campbell on this concept:

“whereas cults are by definition a largely transitory phenomenon, the cultic milieu is, by contrast, a constant feature of society... At the basis of the unifying tendencies is the fact that all these worlds share a common position

³⁷ 520-521, emphasis added.

³⁸ NAR 17.

as heterodox or deviant items in relation to the dominant cultural orthodoxies."³⁹

As UC Santa Cruz's Kim Lau demonstrates in *New Age Capitalism* (2000), it is important to remember that the devolution of cultural power into appropriative kitsch—that is, superficial and damaging economic ideology—can happen on “both sides” of the apparent culture/counterculture divide. For example, of the legendary New Age retreat perched on the cliffs in Big Sur, religious scholar and founder of Contemplative Studies Louis Komathy warns in no uncertain terms: “The Esalen Institute is one of the centers of cultural appropriation, spiritual colonialism, and spiritual capitalism masked as ‘counterculture’ in America.”⁴⁰ Vigilance of these three particular abuses should go without saying in any study of New Age religion, especially a locally-concerned exploration of the University of California system of ideology production and dissemination that continuously draws power from unacknowledged roots (like 1960s Esalen).⁴¹

1.a.iii. Constructions of Mysticism as a Universal

This [problem of definition] is a problem ‘mysticism’ shares with ‘religion’, but even surmounting it, because of mysticism’s attributed ineffability, the pretension to be inaccessible to usual language and only communicable by paradoxes, and the widespread notion of an unmediated, not rationally processable experience, a non-communicable sensation that is more accessible to feeling.⁴²

³⁹ NAR 517, emphasis added. Campbell’s study of the cultic milieu was published in 1972, the same year as Ashbery’s *Three Poems*, which book-length series most explicitly enacts and roots around in New Age religion.

Also important to note: “Established Christianity—definitely including its Old Testament heritage—is regarded [by New Agers] as the epitome of a non-spiritual religion” (NAR 326)

⁴⁰ https://louiskomjathy.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/SecretSchools_Komjathy.pdf

⁴¹ For an entertaining and perhaps too lenient history of that particular site, see Jeff Kripal’s *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (2007), not overlooking the fact that Kripal himself has long occupied a position as Chairman of the Board of Trustees at Esalen.

⁴² CMU 4.

*A vast wetness as of sea and air combined, a smooth, anonymous matrix without surface or depth was the product of these new changes. It no longer mattered very much whether prayers were answered with concrete events or the oracle gave a convincing reply, for there was no longer anyone to care in the old sense of caring. There were new people watching and waiting, conjugating in this way the distance and emptiness, transforming the scarcely noticeable bleakness into something both intimate and noble...*⁴³

The edited volume *Constructions of Mysticism as a Universal: Roots and Interactions Across Borders* (2021) by Annette Wilke, Robert Stephanus, and Robert Suckro “charts the fascinating history of the multiple roots and interactions which underlie the modern popular understanding of mysticism as a universal phenomenon across epochs and cultures”.⁴⁴ In their call for contributions, the editors cited “the very abstract definition of the sociologists Niklas Luhmann and Peter Fuchs who characterize mysticism as *aktuale Unendlichkeit im Endlichen und Immanentisierung von Transzendenz* (Luhmann and Fuchs 1992: 25, original 1989) – i.e. ‘perceiving infinity in the finite and converting transcendence into an immanent reality’”.⁴⁵

[M]ysticism as individualized piety as well as mystical universalism and border crossing among religions can be found already prior to the 17th century (when apparently the noun ‘mysticism’ was coined) and long before the 19th (when our modern, cross-cultural understanding emerged which subsequently became a commonplace everyday term).⁴⁶

Mysticism as a universal was defined as a transsubjective cognition of undifferentiated unity and void fullness (Stace 1960)⁴⁷ or as

⁴³ from the end of “The Recital” (*Three Poems*).

⁴⁴ Introduction abstract.

⁴⁵ CMU 7, emphasis added.

⁴⁶ CMU 3.

⁴⁷ Stace's schema of mystical experience formed the basis for the most commonly cited scale to measure reports of mystical experience, Ralph W. Hood's Mysticism-scale—see Appendix B for the Mystical Experience Questionnaire that still dominates contemporary psychedelic medical studies, despite Stace's research having been widely discredited by academics for its perennialist assumptions.

“consciousness-purity,” which was supposed to underlie both such states of unification and their varying doctrinal interpretations (Smart 1983: 117–129).⁴⁸

The universalization of mysticism—this widespread *fin-de-siècle* and early-20th-century scholarly trend that pushed for and accepted a universal “mystical experience,” as opposed to mystical philosophies and theologies—soon met its death with the rise to power of Cultural Studies, which apparently led to dropping research of the category.⁴⁹ The seductive concept of a universal mysticism, however, was elaborated into multiple emergent 20th-century disciplines, including sociology (Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch), psychology (William James), history and phenomenology of religion (Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade), and philosophy of knowledge (Max Scheler).⁵⁰ Though often rhyming with it, Wilke’s volume investigates the path of mysticism in academia in ways that update and clarify beyond Hanegraaff’s theory of “rejected knowledge”:

[U]niversal mysticism was not only a key element in various life contexts in the first three decades of the twentieth century, but also in the classical definitions of religion and theories of global religious history. But by the end of the century, mysticism moved from this haughty position into oblivion and insignificance. In fact, it became almost a category which was better avoided or discarded (at best replaced by native terms like ‘Advaita-Vedānta’ instead of ‘Indian mysticism’), while it continued to remain popular outside of academia – often flowing seamlessly into postmodern spirituality.⁵¹

Wilkes cites the overwhelming victory of constructivist-contextual Cultural Studies in banishing mysticism from academic circles on the grounds of its problematic perennialist claims;⁵² the editors present this volume in the hopes that it can make an

⁴⁸ CMU 5.

⁴⁹ Cf. how the scientific and therapeutic research being done on psychedelic drugs was halted and led to a ‘dark age’ (common description by underground researchers and therapists) in the middle of the 20th century where it became illegal to study these substances and their curative effects.

⁵⁰ CMU 7.

⁵¹ CMU 8.

⁵² CMU 8.

acceptably pluralized mysticism permissible for contemporary study by scholars of religion. Literary scholars should also update their basics of the history of religion, and in particular the history of mysticism, in order to access deeper interpretations of modern poetry.⁵³

Looking ahead to the next section on New Lyric Studies, it can be noted that the push to cancel “lyric” as a viable category in literary criticism over the last 25 years finds its energy in just such an argument. As demonstrated by Yopie Prins and Virginia Jackson in their *Lyric Theory Reader* (2014), it is the “constructions of lyric as a universal” which no longer satisfy, and indeed offend and even harm. The work of Contemplative Studies as applied in this project at least partially relaxes the grip of Poststructuralist fixation on power and economics from the throat of New Lyric Studies, beginning to allow some space for what I can only describe as spiritual pedagogy—i.e., exercises in training attention and expanding consciousness; i.e., the reading and writing of poems.

1.b. Hanegraaff’s ‘Rejected Knowledges’

As we now know, the New Age, which we can imagine to be the “mystical” form of a religion of American Postmodernism, is defined by its “position as heterodox or deviant in relation to the dominant cultural orthodoxies.”⁵⁴ The New Age reads religious culture against the grain, encouraging individual expressions of

⁵³ Separating mystical experience from its context, “according to McGinn... is impossible (at least in Christian mysticism): Mystical experience and its understanding, i.e. philosophical and theological interpretation or mystical theology, cannot be separated, but belong together in a complex mutual relationship, one feeding into the other” (CMU 8).

Philosophical approach: Michel de Certeau (1925-1986): mystical experience “has as its essential elements the ego, the ‘center of the utterance,’ and the present, the ‘source of time.’” He distinguishes mysticisms before and after the emergence of the noun form (la mystique, 17th-century France).

⁵⁴ NAR 15.

rebellion and experimentation. As will be explored in greater detail (in II.3), a frequent criticism of criticism in Ashbery's poetry finds analogy here—especially manifest in the second half of his oeuvre, once he wins mainstream academic attention in the wake of his 1975 “triple crown”.⁵⁵

*I would say this landscape
Too is a document. But
What is landscape? A procession
Across the soul that thinks*

*It's entering something?
Then the cold, dank withdrawal.
It's something that can never be read again
Or even once. What its rolled-up*

*Soul conceals is very important.
Meanwhile you know
You have to go on not
Understanding, not even trying to listen...*⁵⁶

In a surprising amount of his work, Ashbery occupies himself with descriptions of what could be called *soul movement*—inner patterns of consciousness manifest in perception, emotion, and thought—in terms of alternative spiritualities. This correlation between Ashbery's ways of being and knowing and the New Age spiritual mode has awesome implications for a richer, more interdisciplinary “New Lyric Studies.” By bringing Hanegraaff's history of rejected knowledges to bear on the status quo of poetic theory, I see potential for an empowering shift in the way we talk about Ashbery (in particular) and the way we approach and teach poetry (in general).

⁵⁵ *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975) was the first book ever to win a Pulitzer, a National Book Award, and a National Book Critics' Circle Award. I don't know if anyone else calls this the “triple crown,” but it's how I think of it. No one has won it before or since.

⁵⁶ opening of unpublished Ashbery poem “The Foggiest,” 1983.

The seemingly innate revulsion of mainstream humanist academia to these three interrelated topics—the New Age, mysticism, and esotericism—is learned (i.e., conditioned). As mentioned, Wouter Hanegraaff has charted academia's original blindness to one Othered category of knowledge in his book, *Esotericism and the Academy*.⁵⁷ He argues that this dismembering is constitutive of modern educational institutions: the keepers of our (highly selective) historical memory came to define themselves explicitly in opposition to “Pagan” forms of knowledge, and this definition-by-resistance has persisted until now.

It is for this reason that academia has historically refused to acknowledge “esotericism” as a legitimate area of research (and/or as a category of philosophical knowledge) that deserves as much attention as, for example, empirical data on the material conditions that symptomize hegemonies of political and economic power in a particular time and place. This systematic failure is neither accidental nor new: according to Hanegraaff, it is the foundation on which the academy stakes its exclusive claim to knowledge, and the means by which scholarship champions certain methods of knowledge while erasing others.

Hanegraaff sees a throughline between the rise of Christianity that underpins the Enlightenment to the neoliberal ideology that dominates Modernity and our modern educational institutions. Christianity, the bedrock of the modern university concept, rose to power in Europe in the 1500-1700s by defining itself negatively against a generalized Paganism. “Paganism” stood for the manifold Others, which combined force of alterity needed to be vanquished for the salvific reign of Christianity to emerge as an eternal (and unquestioned) corrective. Paganism, like

⁵⁷ Hanegraaff 3.

psychedelic science and therapy in the 1970s,⁵⁸ survived by going underground, by changing its names, forms, and practices. To adapt to being hunted, it transformed.⁵⁹

Protestant-derived Enlightenment ideology lauding the supremacy of rational scientific man seemed to put religiosity aside, but—as is now accepted, thanks to Cultural Studies—in fact it absorbed and reproduced mainstream Christian notions of salvation, linear time, and faith in institutions. The survival and adaptation of Paganism in the early modern period in Europe—typically in independent pockets of community resistance—has since morphed into a myriad of what scholars of the history of religion are now tentatively agreeing to call esotericism.

“Paganism”, then, the wellspring of modern and contemporary esotericism—which includes the conglomeration of new alternative spiritual movements—was systematically stigmatized and repressed by emergent university ecologies as the humanities and social sciences transformed to survive the now-hegemonic rise of STEM, complete with its attendant methods, materials, and dogma of materiality. The fields of literature, philosophy, art history, and the domains of literary-critical theories all irresistibly followed the money, “sociologizing” themselves for survival, having been developed within an exclusive institutional structure that projects itself as specifically “not Pagan”.

⁵⁸ MDMA, LSD, and psilocybin were stigmatized and outlawed as Schedule I substances by the FDA in 1970 despite decades of research proving their ability to cure all manner of mental illnesses. This backlash was in response to the CIA and Army’s inability to operationalize the substances as weapons, and in response to rising youth opposition to the Vietnam War, since psychedelic experiences of divine love were popularly seen to render people pacifists. This was not at all accurate, of course, but a powerful and persistent cultural mythos. For an example counterstudy, see J. Christian Greer’s dissertation “Psychedelic Militancy in the 1980s.”

⁵⁹ In *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013), Fred Moten and Stefano Harvey inherit and reiterate this argument in relation to the contemporary academy and those of us who have fallen out from the bottom of its machine.

In the 12 years since *Rejected Knowledges* came out, the historical materials of the New Age (as an outgrowth of Western Esotericism) have gained some ground in empirical research, but this new work, being STEM-philic, has barely begun to be integrated into modern literary criticism. The useful fiction of a matter/spirit dichotomy continues to bedevil most scholarship. As such, much of the energy in Western-esoteric scholarship has lately been drawn by the scientized swarming around the miraculous healing powers of psychedelic substances, which are being increasingly legitimized by law and subsequent mainstreaming into popular culture.⁶⁰ That burgeoning movement has its split between “scientific” and “religious/spiritual” desires and applications for psychedelics (Gk. “mind-manifesting; mind-revealing”) despite the humanist-practitioner’s understanding that these are blended, perhaps even one, in the moment of transformational or convertive experience. The proliferation of once-rejected knowledges newly available in the study of psychedelia⁶¹ is ripe for cross-pollination with literary studies and lyric theory, where I recommend we start with Ashbery, “the major poet of our minor age.”⁶²

1.c. Ashbery as ‘Figurer of Possibility’

*Perhaps we ought to feel with more imagination.*⁶³

To close the “Glossing Mysticism” circle, I turn to Niklaus Largier’s latest book *Figures of Possibility: Aesthetic Experience, Mysticism, and the Play of the Senses*

⁶⁰ For more on this, cf. <https://www.lucid.news/looking-beyond-the-psychedelic-renaissance/>

⁶¹ J Christian Greer (Stanford) prefers the neologism “psychedelicisms” to highlight the proliferation of diverse forms of culture and interaction with psychedelic substances and states of consciousness. Cf. pre-print of J C Greer, “Psychedelic Church Movement,” *Dictionary of Contemporary Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill, 2022): <https://www.jchristiangreer.com/academic-articles>

⁶² Harold Bloom (of course).

⁶³ From “The Recent Past” (*Rivers and Mountains*).

(2022) for a contemporary framework that flexibly combines history of mystical religion with literary studies in order to demonstrate the relationship between medieval mysticism and modern aesthetics. *Figures of Possibility* lays some theoretical and historical groundwork for my intervention into Lyric Theory that lends it greater energy (vis-à-vis Contemplative Studies). After excerpting perhaps too much as context,⁶⁴ I briefly read two Ashbery poems using Largier's titular conceit.

First, a few relevant excerpts for context:

To be sure, all the so-called mystical texts also produce rich archives of meaning, of scriptural hermeneutics, and of allegorical reading. They insist at each stage, however, on the fact that grace, freedom, beauty, and ecstatic absorption are not experienced through the mediation of a self in the sphere of normative orders of knowledge or allegory. As the texts show, rather than argue, these moments come about in a dramatic exposure to and a participation in the formative figures that underlie, precede, bracket, and complicate all production of meaning. Paradoxically, in this view, the figural is not opposed to the literal. Instead, it is the (hyper-)literal in its expressivity and multiplicity, perceived in the form of what I call a figural realism or a radical figuralism that moves at the limits of discourse. Thus, the mystics also challenge established modes of distinguishing the real and the imaginary, the literal and the symbolic, the material and the spiritual, the self and the other.⁶⁵

What figuration draws attention to is the fact that everything, each sensation, each affect, and each thought, can be seen as not a thing or a moment of representation but a concrete instance of participation, an expression in which we partake underneath the determined modes of meaning, understanding, or being, thus abandoning those very determinations and rejoining, in the words of Alfred North Whitehead, "the passing flux of immediate things." The mystics, radical formalists in this regard, reach down into the dark abyss of figural expression, attending to it, drawing on it, mobilizing it in its dissonances and consonances, abandoning

⁶⁴ This was the book that, when it came out during my early doctoral research, left me both totally stoked and crestfallen, because I knew he had written what I dreamed to write, from a far deeper and further position of understanding. Repairing to Ashbery was a necessary redirection and narrowing in response to this publication, so I am grateful. I am not sure, however, I want to interact with *Figures of Possibility* in any way other than reproducing extended parts of it for sustained contemplation.

The work of both Largier and Rob Sean Wilson, and many others, prove that any railing against mainstream academic thinking is ignoring the surprising, and surprisingly compassionate, voices that exist in its midst. That said: please forgive the ignorance of any such railing if and when it flares throughout this draft.

⁶⁵ Introduction 2, emphasis added.

themselves to it, and playing with it against the attachments that make up our worlds.⁶⁶

According to such an understanding of the use of figures in contemplative practice, the person who—akin to Auerbach's view of Dante's poetic practice in his love poetry—stimulates all possible forms of love and suffering in herself will reach a point where the asymmetry of the figures—that is, the sheer affirmation that we call love—takes over and acts through the person. This happens where the defamiliarizing and stimulating figures in the meditative exercise exceed the orderly world of the practitioner and, dramatically set up against the positivity of knowledge and a hermeneutics of the self, disown her in the absorbing forms of excitatio or inflammatio (arousal or inflammation). Thus, the figures of radically asymmetric love being evoked turn, overwhelmingly, into a new form of perception.

It is the very fact of this experiential absorption in its utter asymmetry—a union in dramatic difference that can take shape in many ways—that is often called mystical. The so-called mystical experience at the very core of the practices of prayer relies on these contemplative techniques, the use of rhetorical devices, in short, the figural practices that are meant to produce this very union in difference...⁶⁷

For Largier, mysticism need not necessarily imply a notion of “immediate experience,” “pure presence,” or “subjective feeling,” but rather opens up in light of key terms “figure” and “figuration.”⁶⁸ He suggests: “figures produce effects and differential intensities that precede and resist all mimetic assimilation in sensation, affect, imagination, and thought. Figure refers to what strikes us and makes us part of it;”⁶⁹ though in itself an abstraction, it is a “name for things and *moments in their concreteness* as they emerge in their formative ways. I use it not in view of a “hidden meaning” but as referring to the forceful moments that give shape to perception and that enter into a tension with the worlds of signification. Figure refers to *the forms in movement that resist all discourse and that shape us as they shape everything else.*”⁷⁰ I think we could persuasively read the lyric “I” as a figure in Largier's sense,

⁶⁶ Introduction 3, emphasis added.

⁶⁷ “Reweaving Perception”, 65 (emphasis added).

⁶⁸ FP 4.

⁶⁹ FP 6.

⁷⁰ FP 8, emphasis added.

and name it as the figure which mediates Ashbery's forms of mystical awareness, knowing, and transformation. Ashbery's love lyric in particular—reading Ashbery as a love poet, as he himself recommended—does not refer to nor promote a transcendent ecstasy that suspends time, “for time is an emulsion;”⁷¹ rather, it affirms the intense sensual experience of being in time but feeling it pass in new and different ways.

Where Largier describes as a characteristic example Musil's “man without qualities” one could easily supply the speaker of Ashbery's lyric: “the one who, in his or her lack of determining qualities, has a “sense” for the figural encounters—and for the sphere of possibilities they make emerge before they turn into sedimented orders of signification and meaning.”⁷² The plethora of tones and moods and contents marked by the (surprisingly consistent) Ashbery's voice accomplish this same expansion of possibilities.

The traditional notion of the poetic “image,” accepted building block of lyric, perhaps presages the “figural.” Ashbery tends to favor textures over images—being Impressionistic in language rather than representational⁷³—so perhaps the “figural” flows beneath the “image” as a layer which Ashbery in particular has brought up to the surface for illumination:

Figures do not evoke only chains of similes and analogies; forms of assimilation and understanding; or the exploration of possible feelings, sensations, and thought. Underneath all this, the figural effects take possession and give shape to what we are before we know or guess what

⁷¹ “Soonest Mended”

⁷² FP 5.

⁷³ unless quite explicitly making an imaginative essay or argument about representationality; see “The Painter” or “The Instruction Manual” or “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” for examples.

they might mean, breaking with the real and turning the seemingly determined historical moment into an open space of possibility.⁷⁴ Certainly Ashbery's braininess and capacity for rendering abstractions (such as thought and feeling) concrete, literal, and flat, as beneath sun at high noon, has made him seem prosaic, unpoetic, antipoetic, unRomantic; following this, he is generally barely even considered a lyric poet; certainly he eschews (or immediately undoes) any "lyrical" flights of phrase or sentiment in his typical style. In an amusing way, by registering the extreme subtleties that play beneath the stream of images and sense perceptions, Ashberyan lyric could be described as 'deeper' than (for example) Deep Image poetries, sinking beneath the surfaces of narrative and emotionality that characterize that poetic school into the networks of mind that are responsible for constructing such stories and interpreting such resonances—what William Everson, as a Jungian, would call the "symbolic whole" of the collective unconscious.

A Blessing in Disguise

The Ashbery poem "A Blessing in Disguise"⁷⁵ demonstrates this deeper-than-image soul inventorying. The poem opens:

*Yes, they are alive and have those colors,
But I, in my soul, am alive too.
I feel I must sing and dance, to tell
Of this in a way, that knowing you may be drawn to me.*

We acknowledge the visible outer world and make a show of our attempt to bring our interiority into the sightline of another. Thanks to the fourth line's conspicuously absent second comma, the speaker is compelled to artistic expression for two

⁷⁴ FP 7.

⁷⁵ from *Rivers and Mountains*, 1966.

reasons. In one grammatical understanding, he wishes to “draw” towards himself the experience of “knowing you.” In another reading, it is the “you” who is “knowing,” as a result of that song and dance—the natural world’s courtship application of personal expression—and whose knowledge therefore draws them closer to the speaker. Either way, the creative effort of sharing of ourselves proves a blessing in disguise, not least because it leads to a breakthrough beyond the duality of self and other:

*And I sing amid despair and isolation
Of the chance to know you, to sing of me
Which are you.*

As common elsewhere in Ashbery, nothing in this poem is steadily an image; rather, phrases create figural effects that “give shape to what we are before we know,” to recast Largier’s words above. Here, “me” is revealed to be a plural as well as “you”: *me / Which are you*. This simultaneous awareness of and desire for plurality will recur at the end of the poem, just as the poem crests at its resonance with the sense-image (the figure?) of something like dawn. “You see” now minds the gap between this multiply-nondual meditation and a metaphor of visibility:

*You see,
You hold me up to the light in a way*

I should never have expected...

Rather than veer off into description, this figure (being held up to light) pushes the limits of the thinking speaker, giving him reason for suspicion, causing him to seek for a ‘why’ for the identity of self and other, linking it to a memory of a conversation of eternal negotiation (*always*):

*, or suspected, perhaps
Because you always tell me I am you,
And right.*

Does the interlocutor always tell the speaker that he is right? Or is the speaker confirming that this statement of identity is right? Either way,

The great spruces loom.

I am yours to die with, to desire.

Desire separates the self and other; as such, it renames or restates “to die with.”

Before giving over to dying, the speaker contemplates the unifying edge of intimacy that blends subject and object. Ashbery’s lyric “I” desires a beloved-interlocutor who renders self-reflection obsolete, who shines beyond the self/other duality, and perhaps who recreates the Zen setting of staring at a wall to reach enlightenment:

I cannot ever think of me, I desire you

For a room in which the chairs ever

Have their backs turned to the light

Inflicted on the stone and paths, the real trees

That seem to shine at me through a lattice toward you.

This is the longest sentence in the poem and appears directly in the center, occupying the fourth (and change) of seven stanzas. In it, the self/other broken up mortally by desire in the preceding line, the speaker pulls himself apart from himself and is unable to think of himself without repeating the instance of desire: *I cannot ever think of me, I desire you*. He qualifies the desire this time, wishing for a beloved-interlocutor who makes room (literally) for contemplation: *I desire you / For a room*. The other here figures as liminal space that both affirms and disrupts the world of the speaker.⁷⁶ Perhaps the shadowy instance of soul-melding love provides a break from the demanding brightness of life’s “paths.” The spruces, both “real” and “seem[ing],” *shine at me...toward you*. Is it the silhouette of spruces, the thrown shadow of the sun, that makes lattice of the trees and sends that patterning into the room flooded with too much light, that has turned its chairs away?

⁷⁶ FP 8.

*If the wild light of this January day is true
I pledge me to be truthful unto you
Whom I cannot ever stop remembering.*

*Remembering to forgive. Remember to pass beyond you into the day
On the wings of the secret you will never know.*

A sort of compromise, “I” and “you” are here reunited by means of the alternating weave of a lattice. Amidst this, the visual interplay (and confusion) of light and shadow, self and other, gives way to a proposition that allows for the relief of a statement of certainty, a vow, itself interwoven with natural light (for only if the light is true does the pledge hold). If the outer world proves true, then so will I: a motivated “Bright Star,” “stedfast... with eternal lids apart,”⁷⁷ as he “cannot ever stop remembering.” Love, he revises immediately, is patient, and love is kind; and so what he pledges is mercy, in the form of repeated forgiveness.

Then the verb repeats, and its mood shifts abruptly: after remembering to forgive, the speaker addresses directly—who? Himself; the other; the reader—and commands that we *remember to pass beyond you...* to move around the other, ahead or above him somehow. This is only achieved by a leap of faith (“wings”), it seems, without which mystery (“the secret”) preys on intimacy. To pass beyond the

⁷⁷ Bright Star! would I were stedfast as thou art--
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night,
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,
The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen masque
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors--
No--yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft swell and fall,
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever--or else swoon to death.
(John Keats, 1819/20)

other also comes at the surrender of the self, active this time instead of just a thought as above (line 13, “I cannot ever think of me”):

*Taking me from myself, in the path
Which the pastel girth of the day has assigned to me.*

The word “path” recurs, here elaborated as an abbreviation of the wild light of the day which is somehow peculiar to the speaker, belonging to him alone; this path which takes him from himself is given as his assignment. The near-image “pastel girth” begins and ends “pa”/“th” and thereby splits the “path,” along which the speaker ends the poem with a few more statements of desire, a summoning spell built of natural correspondences, and a quasi-epiphanic lift of divine sensation in the suspended present continuous tense.

*I prefer “you” in the plural, I want “you,”
You must come to me, all golden and pale
Like the dew and the air.
And then I start getting this feeling of exaltation.*

Desire cuts three ways in this final stanza—the speaker “prefers;” he “wants;” he is moved to summon with an imperative—four if you read the last line as a gratification. Perhaps desire is the blessing in disguise.

I ran across some old theology books in my grandparents’ attic and started reading them when I was in grammar school. One day I went to my mother and said, “I don’t know, this predestination doesn’t make any sense to me, I don’t believe any of this. I guess I shouldn’t be in this church.”

Mom laughed and said, “Don’t bother about that, that’s not important, that’s just preachers’ talk. The only thing that’s important is that you’ve got to love your neighbor.” She didn’t say, “Love God,” she said, “Love your neighbor, that’s all it’s all about.” She had a very simple belief: God is love, therefore you love your neighbors. Love was a religion to her, that’s what she practiced. It was a good nondoctrinaire background, and it gave me a sense of what was right and what was wrong...

—Myles Horton, educator and socialist, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* (7)

In *Figures of Possibility*, Niklaus Largier glosses and contextualizes medieval

Catholic mysticism in a way that helps show it to be the ground of Ashbery's poesis:

As I have shown, medieval mysticism, particularly in its specific emphasis on the circulation of percepts, affects, and concepts, cannot be adequately understood outside this framework, and mysticism can in many ways be described in terms of a figural practice that engages participation and assimilation at the limits of scriptural hermeneutics. From William of Saint Thierry and Hugh of Saint Victor to Hadewijch of Antwerp, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Meister Eckhart, and many other late medieval mystics, mystical experience has its place in the context of regulated forms of reading, preaching, and prayer, above all the reading of the Scriptures and the liturgical formats that enact, recall, and perform aspects of the Scriptures. Mystical experience—understood as *cognitio Dei experimentalis* (experiential knowledge of God) based on figural partaking—is thus embedded in a specific culture of prayer and contemplation... The pedagogy that supports these practices can be found in treatises that are part of a larger monastic culture and its emphasis on experiential piety... the production of such moments of ecstatic experience is accompanied by the subtle and elaborate practices of a “discernment of spirits,” that is, again, a phenomenological approach and evaluation of the validity of the moments of experiential intensity and the absorption in love.⁷⁸

This gloss of mysticism can be transferred virtually unchanged as a description of Ashbery's poetics, seen through the hopeful lens of a regenerative New Lyric Studies, and cross-pollinated by Contemplative Studies' acknowledgment of the participation of the self-aware student/critic. We can take Ashbery for granted as a “mystical” author and move into pedagogical possibilities from there, reevaluating the regulations on reading in the humanities classroom and imagining ways that a renewed emphasis on experience could “world” and “ensoul” students who desire such practices. It is important to note that this practice of individual empowerment by means of contemplative reading has been misused as a means of control, and may not be fully possible in the context of an institution that holds its power on ideological grounds intertwined with the capitalist state. It was just this threat that led Luther to

⁷⁸ FP 163, emphasis added.

“secularize” the practice of monastic reading in an attempt to curb the unpredictable effects of the “mystical” present that can arise in the context of reading practices:

Luther’s concept of the secular replaces the medieval, essentially phenomenological practice of the “discernment of spirits”—applied on a case-by-case basis to evaluate the effects and texts produced by spiritual practices—through a normative framework that, in spite of and concomitant with the turn of the individual believer toward a highly self-centered reading of the Scriptures, is meant to limit the possibilities of scriptural exegesis, particularly the transitions from letter to image and from image to excessive and absorbing figure.⁷⁹

To me, this helps to explain why Ashbery has not yet been read as a mystical author:

the experiences of personal transformation or empowerment that are available through a contemplative reading of his poems⁸⁰ pose a fatal risk to the hegemonic literary-critical powers that be; therefore, Ashbery’s most significant interpretations and possibilities have lain in wait, “secularized,” in plain sight. His uniqueness and power in modern poetics has not gone unnoticed; but his genuine radicality is spiritual, and therefore indigestible to standard academic literary criticism.

Now with the dissolution of the humanities and higher ed at large this approach to reading Ashbery and understanding him in his New Age context seems not only permissible, but necessary as a tactical intervention: Ashberyan poetics are, first and foremost, religious cultural criticism.⁸¹ And indeed, just as “the “secular” [in

⁷⁹ FP 165.

⁸⁰ And the poems of many other modern and postmodern poets

⁸¹ “The secular order is in Luther’s view the frame that excludes spiritual enthusiasm, the law that knows the signs and that the Scriptures themselves produce to limit the hermeneutic possibilities and to control the use of mystical tropes with their specific liberating and antinomian claims.” (FP 169)

And, relatedly:

“When Max Weber defined the eighteenth-century process of disenchantment as the disappearance of “mysterious and incalculable powers” from the natural world, he was describing the attempt by new scientists and Enlightenment philosophers to finish the job of Protestant anti-pagan polemics, and get rid of cosmotheism once and for all. The attempt was unsuccessful. Cosmotheism was carried forward by Romantics into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as an alternative to the disenchantment of the world; and it appeared capable of adapting even to secular conditions, thereby mutating into strange new forms that would have been unimaginable in previous centuries.” Hanegraaff 2012, 371-2.

Luther] forms an institutional frame that is meant to contain and limit the use that can be made of the Scriptures and of scriptural exegesis,”⁸² so too does the history of literary criticism and lyric theory function to keep poetry like Ashbery’s defanged and in its box, “barely tolerated, living on the margin / In our technological society...”⁸³

Tracing the historical journey from medieval mysticism to modern aesthetics, Largier describes how Luther paradoxically secularized the practice of reading Scripture in order to prevent “inspired” or “mystical” interpretations from being interpreted with social or political consequences, and that this secularizing move was then emulated by early modern readers:

Devoid also of a politico-eschatological meaning, these texts and the mystical practices of prayer and contemplation turn into something new, the basis for what we could call an experimental poetic mysticism that is explored in many forms from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. Since this experimental poetic mysticism has its place—in spite of many political and religious conflicts—no longer necessarily within or against an authorized hermeneutics or within a devotional register of figural practices, and since its subversive political and eschatological powers have been neutralized through the distinction of the secular and spiritual, the mystical tropes are thus set free to be used in a different realm...

In extracting these tropes from the possibilities of authoritative reading, he makes them available for a new use, which in Baroque mysticism will take the form not primarily of a hermeneutical practice that explores figural asymmetries but also of a poetics of self-fashioning that is often meant to bridge the abyss between the secular order of submission and, in Michel de Certeau’s description, a marginal practice of the freedom in faith.⁸⁴

Likewise, in the 19th century, Emerson, William James, and Carl Jung had prepared the stage for the New Age metaphysics which would psychologize religion and sacralize psychology,⁸⁵ heralding the modern (and aggressively individualized/particularly American) recombination of just this “poetics of

⁸² FP 165.

⁸³ “Soonest Mended,” opening phrases. “My one-size-fits-all protest poem,” Ashbery fondly calls it.

⁸⁴ FP 173, emphasis added.

⁸⁵ NAR 224-9.

self-fashioning that is often meant to bridge the abyss between the secular order...and a marginal practice of the freedom in faith.”

Soonest Mended

In the center of one of Ashbery’s most famous poems (“Soonest Mended,” from *The Double Dream of Spring*, 1970), I see an explication of his self-fashioned practices of contemplative reading(s), of nature and as exegesis:

*Night after night this message returns, repeated
In the flickering bulbs of the sky, raised past us, taken away from us,
Yet ours over and over until the end that is past truth,
The being of our sentences, in the climate that fostered them,
Not ours to own, like a book, but to be with, and sometimes
To be without, alone and desperate.*

This is followed by his own modernized gloss of the figural:

*But the fantasy makes it ours, a kind of fence-sitting
Raised to the level of an esthetic ideal. These were moments, years,
Solid with reality, faces, namable events, kisses, heroic acts,
But like the friendly beginning of a geometrical progression
Not too reassuring, as though meaning could be cast aside some day
When it had been outgrown.*

Outgrowing meaning is natural; instead, we fantasize about presence to experience that is difficult to describe: “past truth” and beyond meaning, we are finally able “to be with” “the being of our sentences.” And this captures the liminal and personalized quality of the figural, shown in the “fence-sitting raised to the level of an esthetic ideal.” The figural for Ashbery here begins with the “moments, years, solid with reality;” he characterizes the attractive risk entailed in participation “friendly... [but] not too reassuring;” and finally, the ever-present casting of meaning aside affords us something beneath and/or beyond our historical moment.

This gloss of the figural then feeds into a pedagogical reflection on life's "learning process," where Ashbery advocates for a New-Age, SF-Zen "beginner's mind" wholly appropriate to 1970:

*Better, you said, to stay cowering
Like this in the early lessons, since the promise of learning
Is a delusion, and I agreed, adding that
Tomorrow would alter the sense of what had already been learned,
That the learning process is extended in this way, so that from this standpoint
None of us ever graduates from college,
For time is an emulsion, and probably thinking not to grow up
Is the brightest kind of maturity for us, right now at any rate.*

As the aphorism goes, "least said, soonest mended": the less mentioned about a troubling situation, the better. To the extent that remembering makes up a self,⁸⁶ this poem enacts kenosis, self-emptying, in the struggle to achieve its ambition "to step free at last;" the poem "wonder[s] whether forgetting / The whole thing might not, in the end, be the only solution."⁸⁷ The poem eventually surmises that avoiding learning may be more efficient than having to forget everything it's learned. Brightness is held up as an ideal here again, indicating a zenith of personal growth. The "flickering bulbs" of the stars echo here, as does the strange and strangely lyrical (for Ashbery) phrase from earlier in the poem, "Our star was brighter perhaps when it had water in it," which for me stands as the koan or mystical thesis that the rest of the poem exists to support and explicate.

"Soonest Mended" also falls neatly into the category of Ashberyan "spiritual journey" poems, which mystical testaments are about as conventionally "narrative"

⁸⁶ As remembering makes up the vow that co-creates the self by means of the beloved in "A Blessing in Disguise" (see reading)

⁸⁷ Lines 7-8.

as Ashbery gets. The dream of this poem's journey, paralleling the speaker's dream of Guadalajara in "The Instruction Manual," is stated early:⁸⁸

*To step free at last, miniscule on the gigantic plateau—
This was our ambition: to be small and clear and free.*

I propose that Ashbery, like Huysmanns, Bataille, and Musil before him,

also evoke[s] a specific aspect of a medieval tradition of spiritual exercises, an aspect that [Largier] call[s] a phenomenology of rhetorical effects, which, in turn, leads to a new conception of the circulation of sensation, affect, and thought. As I have argued, this phenomenology forms an element of meditative prayer and of certain techniques of contemplative reading—and of looking at the world—that focuses on the shaping of the life of the soul and the animation of its experiential possibilities in disruptive encounters with and in partaking of the figural face of the world in its concrete particularity. Thus, worlds turn into figures, liberated from the reign of discourse and undoing it time and again. Meditative prayer and contemplation use rhetorical techniques to evoke the figural and produce sensual and emotional states of experience, doing so in sharpened awareness for the irreducible tension between figural effects and all forms of assimilation, be they sensual, affective, or conceptual.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ I.e., lines 18-19 of a 74-line poem.

⁸⁹ FP 237-8, emphasis added.

2. “That sound like the wind / forgetting in the branches”⁹⁰

Rehashing the Lyric: New Lyric Studies & Classical Ashbery Reception

*You can't read poetry,
Not the way they taught us back in school.*

*Returning to the point was always the main thing, then.
Did we ever leave it? I don't think so.*

—from “Never Seek To Tell Thy Love” (*A Wave*, 1984)

“Unfortunately the pivotal term “lyric” remains a historical and theoretical morass.”⁹¹ Scholarship’s inability to stabilize the term/form/shape of Lyric has important resonance with our inability to stabilize the term/form/genre of Mysticism. Accepting a high amount of risk, both of these instabilities can be embraced for the benefit of an engaged pedagogy and contemplative criticism.

In this section, I address the contents of Stephanie Burt’s article “What is Lyric” (2016) and Jonathon Culler’s book *Theory of the Lyric* (2015) to set the standard scene for what’s called New Lyric Studies. I then consider two recent works of New Lyric scholarship by David Marno and Lucy Alford, both of which fall under the new-ish banner of Attention Studies. The former’s successfully combines history of religion with poetics, while the latter’s plants its flag as theory by toeing the STEM party line of alleged empiricism, prioritizing new developments in cognitive science to translate (and, presumably, attempt to legitimize) what are essentially personal experiences of texts. Taken as a relative of Contemplative Criticism, Attention

⁹⁰ *There is that sound like the wind
Forgetting in the branches that means something
Nobody can translate.*

—“Summer,” 1-3 (*The Double Dream of Spring*, 1970)

⁹¹ Dingler 2.

Studies might consider its recent ancestor in literary studies, reader response theory, to assist with integration into pedagogy. We can then apply the separate but related methods and outcomes of both Marno and Alford's research on lyric attention to a contemplative reading of Ashbery.

Every writer faces the problem of the person that he is writing for, and I don't think anybody has ever been able to imagine satisfactorily who this homme moyen sensuel will be. I try to aim at as wide an audience as I can so that as many people as possible will read my poetry.

Therefore I depersonalize it, but in the same way personalize it, so that a person who is going to be different from me—but who is also going to resemble me just because he is different from me, since we are all different from each other—can see something in it. You know—I shot an arrow into the air but I could only aim it.

Often after I have given a poetry reading, people will say, I never really got anything out of your work before, but now that I have heard you read it, I can see something in it. I guess something about my voice and my projection of myself meshes with the poems. That is nice, but it is also rather saddening because I can't sit down with every potential reader and read aloud to him.

—John Ashbery, *Paris Review* interview (Issue 90, 1983)

2.a. Theory of the Lyric & New Lyric Studies

Jonathon Culler's *Theory of the Lyric* (2015) is a standard departure for contextualizing the work of Ashbery and situating his oeuvre in a "mystical" vein. As Culler codifies, the speaker of a lyric poem, a poetic persona, though not identical to the author, often serves as a vehicle for exploring personal experience, emotion, and selfhood. Both the lyric "I" (constituted by the speaker) and the mystical seeker are

engaged in a process of self-exploration and transformation, recycled arising and passing away.⁹²

Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of Ashbery lyrics from across his seven-decade career imagine and/or record experiences of this seeking process. The seeking to understand and to share characterizes the essence of his poetics. Some of his more obvious examples where lyric holds space for initiations into and annotations of a spiritual journey include: "Answering a Question in the Mountains" (*Let us ascend the heart in our hearts*); "The Double Dream of Spring" (*And the song had finished: / This was the story.*); "Rural Objects" (*you return... / to take the same path again*); "As You Came From the Holy Land" (*remember you are free to wander away*); "As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat" (*I tried each thing, only some were immortal and free*); "At North Farm" (*Somewhere someone is traveling furiously toward you*); "Sortes Vergilianae" (*When you know where it is heading / You have to follow it*); "Histoire Universelle" (*we...prayed to the rocks / Overhead, and no answer was forthcoming*); and, most famously, his personal favorite of his books: *Three Poems* (which begins, *Have I awakened? Or is this sleep again?*).

Culler emphasizes the role of lyric poetry as a form of speech act or performance, comparable with "talking to oneself," as William Everson describes the act of meditation in his foreword to *Birth of a Poet: The Santa Cruz Meditations*. Like a mystical experience, a lyric poem may make more sense as an event or process rather than a static object. Poetry critics Marjorie Perloff, Helen Vendler, Ben Lerner,

⁹² Consider this moment from "A Pact With Sullen Death" in *Shadow Train* (1980):
I was going to wish that you too were the "I"

*In the novel told in the first person that
This breathy waiting is, that we could crash through
The sobbing underbrush to the laughter that is under the ground...*

and others have already written extensively on Ashbery's lyric as "a way of happening."⁹³ His most critically-celebrated poems seem to be those that reflect on this experiential philosophy most explicitly, emphasizing that the modern poem is an annotation of experience in layers of form and content: see "Clepsydra," "Soonest Mended," "As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat," and "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." Ashbery is, by and large, most appreciated by critics when these experiences he delineates are experiences of thought that run up against and appear to resign themselves to accepted limits of rationality and analytical judgment. This is perhaps as close as a secular critic may approach a relationship with the divine mystery while still retaining his claim to dispassion.

Culler also notes that lyric poetry frequently employs repetition, both within individual poems and across the genre as a whole. Consider the unpublished 1976 poem "Endless Variation" and its impatience for linear argumentation: *we know it will end in a tie again. / Yet the result is always the product of an elsewhere... these signs that build an argument / That falls short, every time.* Lyric repetition can serve to create a sense of ritual or incantation, akin to the role of repetition in mystical practices such as meditation or prayer. Ashbery's sestina "The Painter" makes this point formally and on multiple levels, underscored by his choice of the word "prayer" as one of six repetends. Consider this, too, from one of six enjambed sections of the long prose poem "The New Spirit", each of which may be read (by their form) as invitations to a critical look at the lyric:⁹⁴

*Because life is short
We must remember to keep asking it the same question
Until the repeated question and the same silence become answer*

⁹³ W.H. Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" (1940)

⁹⁴ Page 249 of the 2008 Library of America edition

Culler likewise repeats the canonical observation that many lyric poems center on themes of love and desire. Mystical texts also frequently employ the language of love and desire to describe the soul's relationship with the divine or transcendent reality (*We are together at last, though far apart* ["The Ecclesiast"]). Ashbery insisted that all of his poems could all be read as love poems—*always repeated, always the same* ("A Love Poem")—and he likewise dedicated the majority of his books, including those that became the most influential (*Three Poems & Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*), to David Kermani, his lifelong love.

Reviewing Yopie Prins and Virginia Jackson's ambitious 2014 critical anthology *The Lyric Theory Reader*, in agreement with the 1980s consensus that it's an impossible category that should be rejected, Burt's understanding of the genre characterizes lyric simultaneously as a space for intimate feelings and as a place for resisting meaning.⁹⁵ This combination of factors makes the "container" of the lyric analogous to the psychological "container" of a psychodynamic or behavioral therapy session: a trained observer assists us in being more aware of and present to our emotions, noticing their sensible qualities in our bodies, rather than treating symptomatically from a defensive distance with analysis, judgment, and attempted eradication.⁹⁶

Definitionally, the most Burt can bring herself to say is that the Lyric "I" constantly negotiates the construction and deconstruction of subjectivity. Roland Greene claims that it is with Lyric that readers, writers, and listeners may ask, "What is the value of an individual consciousness, of one person's experience?"⁹⁷ Indeed,

⁹⁵ Burt 427.

⁹⁶ *It is the law to think now* ("The New Spirit").

⁹⁷ Burt 438.

“[a]pparently, if you want to believe in “lyric,” in the most important current senses for the term, you have to believe that there are persons too.”⁹⁸ Self is implicated in lyric as the genre of interiority and intimacy; Lyric has to do with making of self, a self-worlding (*autopoiesis*) or even ensouling (*theopoiesis*). A holistic understanding of the lyric environment, one may conclude, constitutes an ecopoetics that accepts and acknowledges the significant existence of the individual self.⁹⁹

*What is meant is that this distant
Image of you, the way you really are, is the test
Of how you see yourself, and regardless of whether or not
You hesitate, it may be assumed that you have won*¹⁰⁰

This lyric self (we call the lyric “I”) both expresses itself and analyzes itself.¹⁰¹ Poetry is, as Lyn Hejinian famously defined, “the language of inquiry.”¹⁰² “Lyric worked to mark the boundaries that related interior experience to communal life”; “the process of creation of human presence through acknowledgement was in some sense the great goal of all lyric poems. “Lyric is the genre of the ‘other mind.’”¹⁰³ The other mind as perceived sensuously through my body and processed through my affects, I would clarify. As Ashbery puts it: *Loneliness / of the self for self*.¹⁰⁴ This loneliness tends to be relative to love, and binaristically profane (“unholy”): *we can split open /*

⁹⁸ Burt 438. Burt’s couching this discussion of lyric in a desire for “belief” reveals both the grip of ideology on the critical intellect and the entrenchment of Protestant religious value of “belief” that underlies that ‘secular’ intellect. A contemplative theorist would include in this discussion an acknowledgment of her own subjective perspective and insights from her own practice commitment, neither of which need have anything to do with “belief.”

⁹⁹ Apologies for inconsistent capitalization of the word “L/lyric.” It functions in myriad ways and resists consistent capitalization.

¹⁰⁰ “Clepsydra,” lines 242-244.

¹⁰¹ Burt 426.

¹⁰² *The Language of Inquiry*. University of California Press, 2000. Note her emphasis on Gertrude Stein, an important poet for Ashbery.

¹⁰³ Burt 428.

¹⁰⁴ “Sponge” 3-4, unpublished poem.

*The ripe exchanges, kisses, sighs, only in unholy // Solitude, and sample them
there.*¹⁰⁵

Some Ashbery lyric on the subject of the lyric subject (!) might be useful here. To the extent that the drama of the self or subject is easy prey for criticism—is itself subject to critique—and is therefore built by and beholden to argumentation, requiring artifices of defense and rituals practices of shoring up, Ashbery has little interest generally in subjectivity per se. He begins the poem “Imperfect Sympathies” (1985) with the impatience he often brings to his apostrophic treatment of critics of the lyric—and I do believe many of his most impatient poems, especially in the second half of his career (but also as early as in “The Painter”), are addressed to critics of the lyric:

*How minor can you get in writing about subjects:
Flowers, or stamps, or people the reader can't
Be expected to know, and still make the point that they're
Valid as subjects, or not, but the point shouldn't
Reflect that too much, touching as many bases as
Swiftly and lightly as possible? The meaning ought to
Be refreshed by all these possibilities but still
Remain slightly aloof from it all, if it's
Going to be the point it's making.
There's no argument about that. . .*

*The danger is in its turning
Into a contest with no prizes . . .*

*Isn't it supposed to be this way, that is
Not any particular way, and won't we catch
Cold if it isn't, less
Circumscribed I mean, born out of an unloved
Outline, ... uncertain
Of what to do, how to become, until we
Tear ourselves away...?*

¹⁰⁵ “The Freedom of the House” 11-13.

The narrowing of the world that criticism demands might make us sick—not fatally, as Ashbery usually treads lightly to avoid melodrama, but annoyingly, like a common cold. We won't know "what to do" or "how to become" "until we / Tear ourselves away."

Unpublished juvenilia "Seasonal" and "A Fable" provide immature examples of how the Ashberyan voice or character is seeded with a cultural-critical—indeed, mystical New Age—undercurrent. "Love" is taken for granted as the ultimate fact of existence, set against/above Reason or Mind, and support Romantic (Christian) notions of union with the natural world through the beloved. Both show Ashbery's characteristic sympathy with darkness and preference for night, shadow, and Pagan archetypes of power, like witches and oracles. In one, "[e]ach clutched at his passing ego:"¹⁰⁶ he tracks spiritual journeyhood from individual narcissist to member of something like the One World Family,¹⁰⁷ flush with the higher collective spirit of universalizing New Age holism that paradoxically (to the dualist) insists on individual self-responsibility.

Attention Studies encompasses various disciplines and perspectives on attention, including cognitive, philosophical, sociological, and cultural aspects. It is simple to draw the connection between spiritual exercise—tool for training attention with the result of development of a critically-reflective consciousness—and poem as spiritual exercise, as contemplative practice *and* object, as mystical criticism in and of itself.

¹⁰⁶ "A Fable" 13.

¹⁰⁷ Catchphrase of Escondido-based soapmaker Dr. Bronner's, known especially nowadays for his infamously exclusive crew and tent at Burning Man (weeklong desert event in Black Rock City, Nevada).

Academia is not “secular”, neither historically nor intellectually; and anyway, as Talal

Asad shows, secularism itself is religious by way of its claims to certainty (Asad 25). Specifically, its roots are in (Catholic European) religious thought and organization.

“The

modern university is generally regarded as a formal institution that has its origin in the Medieval Christian tradition.”¹⁰⁸ Poets are the mystical clergymen of the university which is itself unwittingly a religious institution. Literature departments host poets as they attempt to radicalize from the inside these institutionalized forms of worship and knowledge, but they are committed to maintaining themselves as status quo, and therefore cannot grant poets any power or authority that is not symbolic or honorary. Theology and religious studies have no comfortable place at the liberal secular humanist table unless they serve as the table itself, or the tree from which the table has been hewn and fashioned. Neither is the poet able to express this self freely and meaningfully in the environment of academia. Indirectness and negation (including ecstatic kenosis and monastic self-abnegation) are the bases of apophatic theology, which quasi-invisibility offers the mystic or poet their best chance at expression amidst orthodoxy-enforcing, inquisitorial social norms.

A religious orientation to reading has an advantage over an historicist orientation in that it brings texts into the present moment. Presence (more “spiritual” than the scientific “attention”) charges the interpretative act and foregrounds the moment of reception. Poems like those by Ashbery (or Rilke, or any number of other major modern poets) offer more to the reader when read religiously, i.e., when

¹⁰⁸ Verger, Jacques. “The Universities and Scholasticism,” in *The New Cambridge Medieval History: Volume V c. 1198–c. 1300*. Cambridge University Press, 2007, 257. via Wikipedia

reading is ritualized. Reading lyric poetry as a tool for spiritual exercise is already almost present in the literary critical world, though the “mystical” has yet to be integrated into the theory except as curiosities explained away by biography. We can see inroads toward a possible mystical turn in recent books by David Marno and Lucy Alford.

2.b. Forms of Holy Attention

Death Be Not Proud: The Art of Holy Attention (2016) “reads poetry to make an argument about devotion as a way of thinking.”¹⁰⁹ In it, UC Berkeley’s David Marno attempts “to reconstruct the art of holy attention by following the ways John Donne’s devotional poetry enacts it.”¹¹⁰ His central argument is that Donne’s poems, particularly his Holy Sonnets (also known as the Divine Meditations), aim to create a state of “holy attention” in the reader: “the goal of each poem,” he says, “is to generate a state of pure, undistracted attentiveness in which the speaker may feel as if the given idea is occurring to him for the first time, as a cognitive gift given specifically to him.”¹¹¹ Marno’s argument also has exciting implications for criticism and pedagogy of poetry: “studying Donne’s poems may offer an insight not only into the history and phenomenology of holy attention, but also into how the protocols of literary close reading are themselves influenced by devotional precedents. In other words, what is at stake in attending to Donne’s poems isn’t just the knowledge we might gain from them but also how we gain this knowledge.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ DBNP xi.

¹¹⁰ DBNP 2.

¹¹¹ DBNP 3.

¹¹² DBNP 5.

Throughout the book, Marno draws on the writings of various philosophers and spiritual thinkers, including Aristotle, St. Paul, Augustine, and Ignatius Loyola, to contextualize Donne's poetry within a broader intellectual and spiritual tradition. Very early (1948) Ashbery receives a mention:

Discussions of vocal prayer focus on the difficulty of concentrating on the words of the prayer and reflect skepticism about the possibility of eliminating all distractions. In contrast, the idea of an attentive disposition in silent prayer reminds one of John Ashbery's painter: "just as children imagine a prayer / Is merely silence, he expected his subject / To rush up the sand, and, seizing a brush, / Plaster its own portrait on the canvas." Like the artless painter, the ideal of silent prayer might be accused of a naïve belief in the efficacy of attentiveness in the sense of a passive disposition that will conjure up its subject, and of course this is precisely the error of which both Catholic and Protestant critics accused the most mystical articulations of silent prayer, the so-called pure or perfect prayer.¹¹³

In his landmark textbook *Introducing Contemplative Studies*, historian of religion Louis Komjathy glosses Christian contemplation as maintaining silent awareness of God:

In Religious Studies, "meditation" serves as a comparative category, usually without a strict definition; in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, "meditation" and "contemplation" have more technical meanings. Etymologically speaking, "meditation" and "contemplation" relate to the Latin *meditatio* ("to think over"/"to consider") and *contemplatio* ("to look at"/"to observe"), respectively (see also Sherman 2014a). The latter corresponds to the Greek *theoria*. In Catholic monastic contexts and Catholic-influenced forms of contemplative practice, the terms most often relate to types of prayer, with prayer having four aspects or stages: (1) prayerful or holy reading (Lat. *lectio divina*); (2) meditation or reflection on specific topics (Lat. *meditatio*); (3) an inward, silent or vocal response to God's message or presence (Lat. *oratio*); and (4) maintaining silent awareness of God (Lat. *contemplatio*). Christian "contemplative prayer" is thus roughly synonymous with "meditation" as utilized as a comparative category.¹¹⁴

Marno cites an influential handbook on Catholic prayer by Luis de Granada, who "went so far as to suggest that attentive thinking rather than faith was the main challenge and therefore primary objective for post-Reformation Christianity:"

¹¹³ DBNP 9.

¹¹⁴ ICS 53, emphasis added.

Prayer (to define it properly) is a petition wee make unto almighty God, for such things as are appertayning to our salvation. Howbeit, prayer is also taken in another more large sense; to wit, for every lifting up of our heart unto God. And according to this definition, both Meditation and Contemplation, and every other good thought may be called Prayer.

Granada relies here on an extraordinarily broad understanding of prayer, one that also includes meditation, contemplation, and spiritual exercises. It is in all of these acts of devotion, he suggests, that Christians should pay more attention to the very foundations of their faith; indeed, all of these acts are ways of paying attention to such foundations.¹¹⁵

Definition of the art of holy attention is something developed in response to the impossibility of perfect focus:

After Augustine the ascetic ideal of pure, entirely undistracted attention was no longer seen as an actually achievable goal of devotion. Nevertheless... it was upheld as a regulative ideal. While human actions were no longer perceived to be capable of realizing perfect attention, approaching this telos as nearly as possible became their inner logic, sometimes explicitly, though more often implicitly. Indeed, at stake here isn't mysticism or even heterodoxy but the degree to which even the most mundane exhortations to pay attention in prayer carry traces of the ascetic ideal of pure prayer. When I describe attention as a regulative ideal of religious practice, then, I mean to suggest that in Christian devotion "attention" implies an entire complex of ideas, actions, and experiences: acts of attention designed to produce the passive experience of being as undistracted as possible because the experience itself is associated with redemption. It is this entire complex that I call the art of holy attention.¹¹⁶

For this study, based on Ashbery's original cultural context in 1940s and 50s New England, we can take for our norm Christian contemplation in the vein of Marno's holy attention, uploaded into 20th-century aesthetics in the manner described by Largier in *Figures of Possibility*. Although I am less interested in the conscious religiosity of the biographical Ashbery, it is worth mentioning that in the summer before his final year as a undergraduate at Harvard, he wrote in various letters to

¹¹⁵ DBNP 104-5.

¹¹⁶ DBNP 11.

friends about his intense interest in Christianity (to be explored further in Section II, Part 2).¹¹⁷

Poetry is the oldest religion. The sacred is never dualistic. Gaiapoesis.

In the mind of the poet, all times are contemporaneous.

Maybe Stein got her continuous present from William James.

—Anne Waldman, poet and activist
(April 2022, San Francisco: Chacruna Institute Religion and Psychedelics
Forum
Panel: “Psychedelics and a Critique of Eurochristian Religion”)

“Attention equals Life, or is its only evidence.”

—Frank O’Hara¹¹⁸

Exemplifying an aggressively secular, scientizing mode of doing literary theory, Lucy Alford’s *Forms of Poetic Attention* (2021) proposes that poetic language be reconceptualized as a tool for shaping and fine-tuning the reader’s attention. She selects from a broad and eclectic spread of poetry across continents and centuries, which ranginess apparently “affirms an alternative version of what literary study might look like in an economy that values specialization, and within an academic

¹¹⁷ Roffman, *The Songs We Know Best: John Ashbery’s Early Life*, 159-60. For more on this, see later chapter “A Permanent Now,” Part 2: “You private person. Ashbery himself”

¹¹⁸ via Bill Berkson, “O’Hara and His Poems.”

climate that can often feel dominated by what Alford calls the “routine overtheorization” of historicist criticism in particular (107).”¹¹⁹

In her Introduction, Alford comments on why she does not foreground the concept or genre of the lyric in her study:

“Lyric, with its ancient roots in song, voices one aspect, one modality of poetic making—of *poiesis*. And it is this act of *making*—an act I see taking place (as event) in the medium of attention, that centers my focus on the poetic rather than the lyrical. In this sense, while Jonathon Culler attributes the “ritual” dimension of the lyric poem, its standing as event with the word *lyric*, I see the central “event” as poetic—lyric-making being one kind of poetic event. I think of poems, and thus the poetic, as dynamic, porous entities.”¹²⁰

Notice how, with this last line, the language and phenomenology of the post-animist, transpersonal New Age have already been absorbed into literary criticism. While her parsing makes sense for the psychological and cognitive-attentional arguments she will go on to make, and necessarily defends the broadly crosscultural selections of poems she uses to make them, I do not see any reason to avoid the Lyric as category so long as the texts at issue are sufficiently historicized.¹²¹

Alford argues that poetic attention serves as both a subject and an object of poetry, emphasizing the connection between poetic form and the formation of attention. She introduces scientized terminology to describe how poetic attention functions (including “attentional rhythm,” “attentional figuration,” “attentional feedback loops,” and “attentional agency”) and offers in-depth analysis of a diverse range of

¹¹⁹ Finch 123.

¹²⁰ FPA 9.

¹²¹ For a more complete understanding of John Ashbery, the historical provenance of the category still called “Lyric” matters much to the extent that the history of contemporary forms of religion and spirituality does. It is clear that the term “lyric” has deviated from its origins to assimilate and decontextualize texts from across disparate spaces and times, not unlike how institutional Christianity fueled the ideological fire of settler colonialism. Both unwieldy and mixed bags, the lyric and the religious, need to be examined directly and personally (on the part of the critic/teacher and their students, in research and classroom environments) for the sake of a ‘healing’ or ‘transformative’ postmodern, postsecular pedagogy of creativity.

poems, drawing on research from philosophy, aesthetics, and psychology of attention. She chooses to ignore religion and spirituality for the entirety of the book, reflecting a mainstream wholesale assimilation of STEM motives and methods into the study of the humanities. We thereby miss the deep, rich history of the role of attention and the role of texts in exercises for shaping attention in religious and spiritual contexts, especially those esoteric currents that emphasize practices of contemplation and meditation.¹²²

Throughout the book, Alford dissects and reconstructs various ways modern poets (especially Wallace Stevens, significant predecessor of Ashbery) experiment with form and language to engage and manipulate the reader's attention. I see this book as a carefully qualified update on reader-response theory, although Alford does not consciously acknowledge this inheritance. Ashbery's career-long conviction of the reader's central role in lyric experience and his poetry's thematization of poetry itself as a tool for shaping attention (Alford's central argument) make this book a compelling support for a contemplative pedagogy of Ashberyan lyric (or, she might rather we say, "poetry"). However, in Alford's study, the role of the poet in society, and relatedly, the role of the arts in education and public life, are avoided altogether, as if the experience of the reader were immune from those relational and social implications. This disconnect of the poet-text-reader trinity is troubling, not to mention New Critical. This dissociation stems, I think, from the disenchantment inherent in her methods and aims.

Attentiveness is the natural prayer of the soul.

¹²² She mentions kenosis, retooling the term to describe "an effect of the subject-space of poetic attention"

—Walter Benjamin, about Franz Kafka

Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love.

—Simone Weil, “Attention and Will”¹²³

*The poem goes from the poet’s gibberish to
The gibberish of the vulgate and back again.*

—Wallace Stevens, from “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”

3. “Remember you are free to wander away”¹²⁴

Integrating Contemplative Studies; Reading Ashbery Psychedelically

*Another season, proposing a name and a distant resolution.
And, like the wind, all attention. Those thirsting ears,
Climbers on what rickety heights, have swept you
All alone into their confession, for it is as alone*

*Each of us stands and surveys this empty cell of time. Well,
What is there to do? And so a mysterious creeping motion
Quickens its demonic profile, bringing tears, to these eyes at least,
Tears of excitement. When was the last time you knew that?*

*Yet in the textbooks thereof you keep getting mired
In a backward innocence, although that too is something
That must be owned, together with the rest.
There is always some impurity. Help it along! Make room for it!*

So that in the annals of this year be nothing but what is sobering:

¹²³ *Gravity and Grace*, 117.

¹²⁴ From “As You Came from the Holy Land,” *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975)

*A porch built on pilings, far out over the sand. Then it doesn't
Matter that the deaths come in the wrong order. All has been so easily
Written about. And you find the right order after all: play, the streets, shopping, time
flying.*

—“The Ivory Tower”¹²⁵

*To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn.
That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that
there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred...*

—bell hooks,¹²⁶ theorist and social critic, USA

Meditation is not an evasion. It is a serene encounter with reality.

—Thich Nhat Hahn, Buddhist monk and peace activist,
Vietnam/France

*You must love reality more than you love anything, more than your beliefs, and
especially more than your religion or your “own” ideas...*¹²⁷

—Alonso del Río, curandero (traditional folk healer), Peru

If Hanegraaff has been working to establish the materials of esotericism as legitimate for academic study, and Largier and Wilson have contributed to reinvigorating the mystical modern for religious and literary studies, one could argue that Louis Komjathy (University of San Diego, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, 2009—2019) has been working to examine, and radically apply, methods for working with spirituality in the academy. Contemplative Studies, of which Komjathy wrote the two earliest essential textbooks, refers to an emerging interdisciplinary field dedicated to research and education on contemplative practice and contemplative experience. In the following section I reproduce descriptions of the key terms and concepts required for understanding this field.

¹²⁵ From *Shadow Train*, 1981

¹²⁶ *Teaching to Transgress* 13.

¹²⁷ *The Four Altars* 21.

“Contemplative practice” ... encompasses approaches and practices more commonly referred to as “meditation,” “prayer,” and cognate disciplines. Contemplative practice refers to various approaches, disciplines, and methods for developing attentiveness, awareness, compassion, concentration, presence, wisdom, and the like. Possible connective strands or family resemblances include attentiveness, awareness, interiority, presence, silence, transformation, and a deepened sense of meaning and purpose.¹²⁸

Such practices may be based in religious tradition, spiritualist, or secular, and examples may even include “art, dance, writing, photography, research, teaching, theatre, walking, and so forth” (14). Inclusive as it is, writing poetry, reading and reciting poetry, and researching, analyzing, and teaching both the composition and interpretation of poetry all fall under this broad banner of “contemplative practice.”

Further:

One key characteristic and generally shared commitment is contemplative practice. Contemplative Studies involves, perhaps requires, practice. We may refer to this dimension of Contemplative Studies as “practice commitment.” For this type of inquiry to be fully successful, individuals need to have direct experience with personal contemplative practice. One critically investigates one’s personal experience, whether psychological or somatic, in the context of one’s own actual practice. This includes recognition of embodied, lived, sociopolitical, and other layers of practice and experience. We may refer to this second key characteristic as “critical subjectivity,” or “critical first-person discourse” (Roth 2006, 2008).¹²⁹

Critical first-person subjectivity is a required commitment on the part of the scholar and teacher (and student) in a Contemplative Studies context. It involves two related discourses:

“First-person discourse (FPD) refers to subjective perspectives. In the case of CS, emphasizes the use of “critical subjectivity” and “critical first-person approaches,” or approaches that utilize personal experience in a disciplined way. As a more inclusive and pluralistic approach, includes the possibility of “critical adherent discourse” (CAD).

¹²⁸ ICS 13-14.

¹²⁹ ICS 15, emphasis added.

Critical adherent discourse (CAD) is a form of critical first-person discourse and critical subjectivity on the part of religious adherents and representatives. Involves the systematic investigation and critical discussion of contemplative practice and contemplative experience from a lived and committed religious perspective. CAD has some rough correspondence to emic/insider perspectives and approaches. Avoids problematic tendencies like apologetics, dogmatism, evangelism, insularity, protectionism, sectarianism, and the like. Critical adherent approaches may also involve second-person discourse and interreligious dialogue.”¹³⁰

I am interested in taking up the commitments of Contemplative Studies in the context of a respiritualized New Lyric Studies partly in order to alleviate the uncritical and often harmful emotional, psychological, and sociology-pilled results of the current ‘autotheory’ trend in literary and cultural studies. It is my impression that careful application of the open-mindedness and discipline of this more radical outgrowth of religious studies (i.e. Contemplative Studies) would be able to supply the structures and encourage the development of higher levels of self-awareness on the part of the critic. The genre of this dissertation is what I am calling “Contemplative Criticism.”

3.a. Contemplative Criticism

The aim of this project is to connect contemporary forms of lyric poetry with contemporary forms of spirituality as a model for the new Contemplative Criticism, a form of scholarship evolving with the aim to serve engaged pedagogy. It is my impression that Ashbery, through his poems, provides us with the preeminent 20th-century cultural criticism of the lyric. I see his relationship to lyric’s modern western forms as analogous with the relationship of New Age religion, itself the preeminent 20th-century cultural critic of dogmatic Christianity, to its predecessors. I

¹³⁰ ICS 314.

want to consider the validity of the following analogy: just as “the New Age movement is characterized by a popular western culture criticism expressed in terms of secularized esotericism,”¹³¹ so too is the Postmodern poetry movement, exemplified by Ashbery, characterized by a popular western lyric criticism expressed in terms of secularized esotericism.

Komjathy’s flavor of Contemplative Studies is a call-for-change response to academic history of religion, a strong criticism from within the institution. While they diverge wildly in other ways, both CS and the Gnostic commitments of Harold Bloom’s 1990s “religious criticism” acknowledge the first-person subjective position underlying our individual experience of experience. The literary genre “Lyric”, erstwhile (old/white/male/settler-colonialist) category of first-person subjective experience, has been proclaimed dead (that is, uncool), as poetry is always being lamented in the popular sphere;¹³² besides, fixed genre is generally no longer fashionable. Ashbery may have been the last transcendent practitioner of the Lyric; his relentless experimentalism may have been the nail in the coffin of the category’s fixedness; both things may be true. In the same way, the embarrassing and unfashionable category of “low” culture labeled New Age has not been a viable object either for Contemplative Studies nor for a Bloom-style religious criticism, to the detriment of liberatory pedagogy.

A brief first-person subjective note: in the UCSC Literature classrooms where I taught (variously in-person, hybrid, and remote) 2019—2022, mental and physical health were of serious concern, and blocking our learning. The majority of my

¹³¹ NAR 521

¹³² see Joy Harjo, Ben Lerner, and Matthew Zapruder for recent examples of celebration and defense and Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Shelley, and Wordsworth for earlier responses to perceived threats on poetry’s relevance and value.

students were gripped by chronic fight/flight/freeze responses—or so contemptuously resistant to assumed classroom dynamics of power as to affect this shut-down state. These undergraduates, beset by debt, COVID, et al., needed to learn nervous system de-escalation tactics to relax their bodies and minds before they were capable of learning *anything*, much less undertaking a rigorous path of spiritual reworlding.¹³³ They needed to learn ways to calm down enough to bear the effort of self-reflection. It is self-awareness, won by contemplative reflection, that lays the groundwork for sustained inquiry. Ashbery’s poems do this pedagogical work on many levels, consciously and unconsciously, deliberately, explicitly, dryly, hermetically, queerly, earnestly.

Ashbery taught poetry classes at Brooklyn College in New York City and at Bard College in upstate New York. Here is his classic teaching poem “Introduction,”¹³⁴ which offers a “state of the art” on creative writing pedagogy (“I have a theory / about masterpieces”) and on literary criticism (“a vacant episode”) as it could be contextualized in a “contemplative” classroom.

Introduction

*To be a writer and write things
 You must have experiences you can write about.
 Just living won’t do. I have a theory
 About masterpieces, how to make them
 At very little expense, and they’re every 5
 Bit as good as the others. You can
 Use the same materials of the dream, at last.*

*It’s a kind of game with no losers and only one
 Winner—you. First, pain gets
 Flashed back through the story and the story 10*

¹³³ See Part IV.

¹³⁴ *A Wave*, 1984

*Comes out backwards and woof-side up. This is
 No one's story! At least they think that
 For a time and the story is architecture
 Now, and then history of a diversified kind.
 A vacant episode during which the bricks got 15
 Repointed and browner. And it ends up
 Nobody's, there is nothing for any of us
 Except that fretful vacillating around the central
 Question that brings us closer,
 For better and worse, for all this time. 20*

“Introduction” describes (introduces) the archetypal path of the spiritual seeker as he disidentifies from his limited mind and enters the flow of infinite consciousness in order to observe and expand his own point of view (conforming to the purpose of sacred altered-state ceremony as set out by Alonso del Ríó et al.). The first stanza sets out the parameters from above, with the learning objectives, and critical distance of the writerly, and promises deliverables on the process. The second stanza outlines the process—“the game,” as he calls it—and narrates what can be expected of the player (“you”, although he will open this singular self near the close to reflect its co-created interbeing (Thich Nhat Hahn¹³⁵) with others).

The first stanza warms up the student new to creative writing by speaking directly to her questions about where to begin, what materials and methods to use, before revealing the deeper layer of “spiritual seeking” that underwrites creative writing pedagogy, the narration of finding oneself in order to lose oneself, the final draft or product “ending up / Nobody’s.”¹³⁶

¹³⁵ For a full exposition of this concept, see Thich Nhat Hahn’s book *Interbeing: The Fourteen Mindfulness Practices of Engaged Buddhism* (Parallax Press, 2020), formulated during the Vietnam War

¹³⁶ Compare Emily Dickinson, Poem 260:
I’m Nobody! Who are you?

Are you – Nobody – too?

By inverting the narration of one's life, we detach from personal details until what we're perceiving becomes "No one's story."¹³⁷ The myth or illusion of singularness, that is, of individual psychic atomization, is discharged when we distance ourselves from the drama of our story. The self (our selves) haltingly move through a process of separating from the illusion of separateness, falling for spiritual bypassing technique of imagining deep change has occurred when in fact superficial houses for the small ego have simply been reupholstered, i.e., replaced by more sophisticated egoic structures, in "a vacant episode." This leads to another, similar but I would suggest subtler, recognition of No one, which becomes Nobody . . . that is, we deepen from an awareness that what we witness is "No one's story" to an awareness that these episodes are "Nobody's". . . that is, not even our bodies, the seat of those perceptual faculties and the First Altar of ceremony (material reality).¹³⁸

And it ends up

Nobody's, there is nothing for any of us

This line embeds the claim of our awareness being finally free from our experience as embodied—the material world and our identification with our physical bodies being understood as the first level of mind that must be transcended in order to enter

Then there's a pair of us!

Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!

How public – like a Frog –

To tell one's name – the livelong June –

To an admiring Bog!

¹³⁷ In my reading, it is much more likely that this phrase is an abbreviation of 'No one person's story' rather than that it refers to a greater-than-human monad or unity (the latter of which would imply he is disagreeing with the idea of an overall unity to consciousness)

¹³⁸ Cf. Alonso del Río, *The Four Altars*, pp.105ff.

the slipstream of the infinite.¹³⁹ It then goes on to make a further hint about our ultimate dispossession in the realm of the body, a hearkening to the notion that wealth of spirit can most easily be found in the world via plainness, poverty, or simplicity. To accept fully the statement that *there is nothing for any of us* would mean that belief in and addiction to ownership is no longer ruling our minds and directing our actions. *There is nothing for any of us*, including not only no money and no power but also no glory, and no consolation in spiritual things.

*There is nothing for any of us
Except that fretful vacillating around the central
Question*

As the cusp *par excellence* of Modernism/Postmodernism, Ashberyian knowledge still takes for granted a center, despite profound doubt about its value and terrible anxiety about one's personal relationship to the idea of a center. We are stressed by our condition of eternal movement, constant change. The center is itself unknown, except that we assume its existence—so we can do imaginary math, maybe, like the zero, or the idea of nothingness itself.

*the central
Question that brings us closer,
For better and worse, for all this time.*

We are brought closer at the close of this introductory lesson, whether it is our own vacillation around it or the central question itself that achieves this intimacy. In other words, by means of the de facto 'lyric' poem that serves as material and method for engaged contemplative pedagogy, the writer, reader, and text find themselves unified. Pedagogy is mystically effective, or spiritually "inspired," thereby.

Komjathy provides the following description and explication of contemplative pedagogy:

¹³⁹ *The Four Altars* 23.

“Contemplative pedagogy refers to an approach to teaching and learning informed by and perhaps expressed as contemplative practice. It is an emerging experiential and experimental educational methodology that explores contemplative practice and contemplative experience, especially with respect to their relevance and application to education and perhaps to larger existential and sociopolitical issues. ... [T]he emerging, experiential, and experimental approach referred to as “contemplative pedagogy” has some overlap with “critical pedagogy,” broadly conceived, as well as “spirituality in education.” ...

Critical pedagogy is a philosophy of education and social movement that combines education with critical theory. ... According to Henry Giroux’s explication of Freire, it is a praxis-oriented “educational movement, guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action” (Giroux 2010). ...

Spirituality in education tends to emphasize transformational teaching and learning with attention to meaning and purpose. There is concern for holistic and integrated education, with specific focus on individuals’ deeper aspirations. ... For teachers, such an approach emphasizes deeper inquiry, reflection, and vocation; for students, it emphasizes attentiveness to “cultivating spirit” (Astin, Astin, and Lindholm 2011) and “the big questions” (Parks 2011). ... This recalls the three primary characteristics of Contemplative Studies, namely, practice commitment, critical subjectivity, and character development.”¹⁴⁰

The concept of Contemplative Pedagogy can be naturally interlaced with the fundamentals of engaged pedagogy as laid out by theorist bell hooks in her classic work *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994). hooks was herself a lifelong Buddhist practitioner, introduced to the tradition (by white San Francisco Beat poet and “father of Deep Ecology” Gary Snyder) when she was an undergraduate at Stanford.¹⁴¹ Her spiritual practice commitments informed her scholarship, activism, and pedagogy directly, and which she addressed explicitly in writing and speaking throughout her academic career. The first chapter of *Teaching to Transgress* lays out her commitments and proposed expectations (excerpted below). There is significant overlap between Contemplative Pedagogy and hooks’

¹⁴⁰ ICS 159-162.

¹⁴¹ See hooks interview with The Buddhist Review *Tricycle*, “An Agent of Change” (Fall 1992), which begins, “bell hooks is a seeker, a feminist, a social critic, and a prolific writer.” <https://tricycle.org/magazine/bell-hooks-buddhism/>

“engaged pedagogy,” notably in their shared insistence on a practice commitment on the part of the educator. She opens her book with an unequivocal statement of faith:

*To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students.*¹⁴²

As Contemplative Pedagogy does,¹⁴³ hooks honors the life and ideas of Brazilian educator and author (and her personal mentor) Paulo Freire (1921—1997) as foundational to engaged pedagogy. She continues:

*Freire’s work affirmed that education can only be liberatory when everyone claims knowledge as a field in which we all labor. That notion of mutual labor was affirmed by Thich Nhat Hanh’s philosophy of engaged Buddhism, the focus on practice in conjunction with contemplation. ... In his work Thich Nhat Hanh always speaks of the teacher as a healer. Like Freire, his approach to knowledge called on students to be active participants, to link awareness with practice.*¹⁴⁴

In his book *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* (1967), Thich Nhat Hahn coined the term “engaged Buddhism,” and it is very likely that hooks drew inspiration for her own coinage from his.¹⁴⁵ Contemplative Studies is likewise interested in Thich Nhat Hahn as a monk, teacher, and peace activist whose rigorous training in and commitment to Zen Buddhism did not prevent his openness to “dialogue, experimentation, and

¹⁴² TTT 13.

¹⁴³ ICS 161.

¹⁴⁴ TTT 14, emphasis added.

¹⁴⁵ Thich Nhat Hahn: “Engaged Buddhism is just Buddhism. When bombs begin to fall on people, you cannot stay in the meditation hall all of the time. Meditation is about the awareness of what is going on—not only in your body and in your feelings, but all around you.

When I was a novice in Vietnam, we young monks witnessed the suffering caused by the war. So we were very eager to practice Buddhism in such a way that we could bring it into society. That was not easy because the tradition does not directly offer Engaged Buddhism. So we had to do it by ourselves. That was the birth of Engaged Buddhism.”

<https://www.lionsroar.com/in-engaged-buddhism-peace-begins-with-you/>

adaptation.”¹⁴⁶ For this politically active, syncretic, cultural-critical openness, New Age seekers adopted him too.¹⁴⁷

The trope of the teacher as healer may find purchase in Contemplative Pedagogy, though it must be very carefully qualified to avoid counterproductive hierarchizing and/or pathologizing of the relationship between teacher and student. The complementarity between New Age understandings of healing and hooks’ description here suggests that hooks herself could ostensibly fall under the category of New Age or spiritual figure, if only we could consider either category as capable of having critical rigor. It is here that the recent work of Hanegraaff and Komjathy can help. Unsurprisingly for the contemporary religious historian, in the New Age movement, “healing” and “personal growth” are closely linked. Practices and techniques are often both religious and therapeutic in nature, and unable to be placed only in either category.¹⁴⁸ The Contemplative Studies model sees meditation and contemplative prayer as forms of “transformational praxis,” which I suggest we loosely equate with “healing” in the New Age sense. Of “transformational praxis,” Komjathy says:

[S]ome potential characteristics of contemplative practice include attentiveness, awareness, interiority, presence, silence, transformation, and a deepened sense of meaning and purpose. ... The contemplative and religious maps of transformative praxis find some parallels in contemporary Western psychology, especially in humanistic and transpersonal psychology. Almost every contemplative approach agrees that such ways of being involve deconditioning and some form of transformation. While there are practice- and community-specific characteristics and values, contemplative traditions also provide larger insights into human possibility. They reveal both diverse capacities and shared humanity. They suggest that we may

¹⁴⁶ ICS 144.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. his 1995 book *Living Buddha, Living Christ* as an exemplary demonstration of the imaginative possibilities for interweaving Christian and Buddhist principles that appeals especially to California-based New Agers (influence of Zen imported into 1950s San Francisco that underwrote 1960s countercultural spirituality)

¹⁴⁸ NAR 46.

*become “more”; we may cultivate and embody values and patterns of interaction that support human and perhaps transhuman flourishing. They also suggest that one may determine the depth of individuals’ contemplative practice by observing their way of being and relating to others.*¹⁴⁹

Consider some of the observations in the following unpublished Ashbery poem from 1983: an elemental reverence for nature; nature’s disregard for manmade methods of information transmission; the resistance wherein life is lived; cosmic (i.e. unbounded) awareness of the place of the individual human in the environment; a note of reassurance about the inevitability of individual expression coexisting with the needfulness of (bio)diversity.

Shining the Blue

*To every thing there is a season:
Water, shining unseen in the lower lid of August;
Earth, fire, and air in their many comings and goings;
Prudence, a little always, to get you where you are;*

*Recklessness, uprooting signposts and other valuable information.
The list itself in season, pushing shoots this way and that way,
Undecisive, inclined to lose itself in work.
These make a forest for living in.*

*Sometimes you meet one of the other inhabitants.
The boundaries are unclear. And they are surprised to find you there:*

*What will we do about him? Just living is a song:
Though it stays in the record’s grooves, there is nothing
That doesn’t get coaxed out sooner or later.
Which is why it’s good to be part of any list,
Especially the more succinct ones that don’t connect
With other ones. A little variety is all you need.*

Taken with more hooks:

¹⁴⁹ CLCS 711; 714.

“Progressive, holistic education, “engaged pedagogy” is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy,” hooks writes. “For, unlike these two teaching practices, [Engaged pedagogy] emphasizes well-being, [which] means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students.”¹⁵⁰

“Not surprisingly,” she continues,

“professors who are not concerned with inner well being are the most threatened by the demand on the part of students for liberatory education, for pedagogical processes that will aid them in their own struggle for self-actualization.”¹⁵¹

It is useful to layer the valence of “critics” over “professors” here, too, for the sake of understanding the significance of undertaking Contemplative Criticism. Additionally, like critics, “most professors must practice being vulnerable in the classroom, being wholly present in mind, body, and spirit.”¹⁵²

Contemplative Studies implicates the humanities and creative arts both directly and indirectly. The academic vein of literary studies, particularly New Lyric Studies, is made more complete when it reflects two operations of the New Age:¹⁵³ as dominant new religious movement of the moment, and as transgressive culture criticism of postmodernity.

¹⁵⁰ TTT 15.

¹⁵¹ TTT 17.

¹⁵² TTT 21.

¹⁵³ implicit in the diagram in the influences “1960s counterculture” and “hybrid spirituality.”

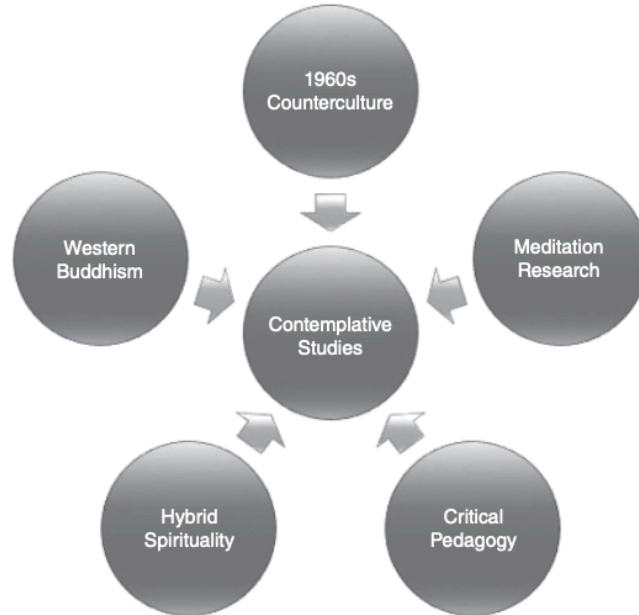


Figure 1.2 Cultural influences on the emergence of Contemplative Studies.

Fig 1.2 from ICS 25

According to Komjathy’s “meta-history” of the field, hybrid spirituality and 1960s counterculture form two of the five main cultural influences on the emergence of Contemplative Studies. Komjathy argues that the term “hybrid spirituality” functions more critically than terms like “New Age Religion” or “new spiritual movement” to correspond to those who identify as “spiritual but not religious” (abbreviated SBNR) beginning in the 1960s in the United States.¹⁵⁴

Komjathy writes:

Another key influence is hybrid spirituality (see Lewis and Melton 1992; Heelas 1996; Hanegraaff 1998; Taylor 1999; Barnard 2001; Goldman 2012; Schmidt 2012). This is not to say that all, or even most, members of Contemplative Studies are hybrid spiritualists. Rather, the ubiquity of hybrid spirituality in modern American society, with the associated secularized Protestant values of anti-institutionalism, anti-clericalism, egalitarianism, individualism, and simplification, often frames and exerts influence over the field. There are, in turn, related patterns of appropriation and commodification (see below). Here we should note that the history of such

¹⁵⁴ ICS 24.

categories as “meditation,” “contemplative practice,” and the like has yet to be written (see Engel 1997a; Gill 2005; Underwood 2005; Baier 2009; Komjathy 2015); this includes the emergence of “meditation,” and even “mindfulness,” as an independent practice and a new religious movement.¹⁵⁵

There is a pressure, a stress, on existing forms of human subjectivity. Reactionary forces contribute to these last-gasp approaches (virtual reality)... not to mention the grief, the melancholia, around the embeddedness of tech in our present embodiment.

The task, whether you want it or not, is to confront one’s own confusion, the real forces (e.g. social media) actively destroying coherence. How to increase capacity for taking on these direst aspects of existence? A somber embrace of our condition... the future is demanding something from us: not to wallow, embitter, point fingers, or submit to despair.

“The West” tried to disenchant its demons. Failing that, this whole modernity/disenchantment idea feels old. How, then, to remap the relationship between the rational and arational... how to apply reason to arational experiences? How to honor and respect this other realm but still keep your feet on the ground?

—Dr. Erik Davis, cultural historian, from a talk at the Harvard Center for Study of World Religions (“Techgnosis Today,” April 2022)

*THE ONLY WAR THAT MATTERS IS THE WAR AGAINST THE IMAGINATION
THE ONLY WAR THAT MATTERS IS THE WAR AGAINST THE IMAGINATION
THE ONLY WAR THAT MATTERS IS THE WAR AGAINST THE IMAGINATION
ALL OTHER WARS ARE SUBSUMED IN IT*

—Diane DiPrima, Beat poet

¹⁵⁵ ICS 26.

3.b. 'Appreciations' of American Religiosity

*As a literary critic, I have followed Walter Pater in writing what he called "appreciations," and as a religious critic I aspire to write the same.*¹⁵⁶

One ostensible predecessor of what I'm calling "Contemplative Criticism" is Harold Bloom's coinage "religious criticism." In his 1992 book of religious criticism, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*, Bloom introduces the idea of "religious criticism," which he distinguishes from history or philosophy of religion. He seeks to analyze the aesthetic aspects of religious expression, focusing on the religious imagination, in light of his understanding of Gnosticism, which emphasizes the pursuit of personal spiritual knowledge (*gnosis*) and direct experience of the divine. Bloom suggests that a reducible thing called the American Religion, which he sees as fundamentally Gnostic, is defined by the quest for the original self, a spark or breath in us that we are convinced goes back to before the Creation.¹⁵⁷ Gnosticism's emphasis on personal spiritual knowledge and direct experience has, he claims, inspired a variety of creative approaches to spirituality in the US. Bloom's interpretation of Gnosticism, it must be observed, has more than a little New Age nuance, not least because his interest is in the religious imagination, not any social, political, or historical contexts of Gnosticism.

The movements he explores share the following Gnostic-inspired characteristics:

¹⁵⁶ Bloom, *The American Religion*, 28.

¹⁵⁷ Bloom 21: "As the object of religious criticism, or this quest for a spirituality that survives every reduction, I have taken our unacknowledged national faith... The American Religion is pervasive and overwhelming, however it is masked, and even our secularists, indeed even our professed atheists, are more Gnostic than humanist in their ultimate presuppositions. We are a religiously mad culture, furiously searching for the spirit, but each of us is subject and object of the one quest, which must be for the original self, a spark or breath in us that we are convinced goes back to before the Creation."

1. 'Individualism': American religious movements frequently prioritize personal spiritual experience and individual interpretations of the divine, reflecting Gnosticism's focus on inner wisdom and direct connection with the divine.
2. 'Syncretism and eclecticism': Gnosticism's openness to blending elements from various religious traditions has influenced the eclectic nature of many American religious movements, which often borrow from diverse sources to create new forms of spiritual expression.
3. 'Rejection of orthodoxy': Just as Gnosticism challenged orthodox interpretations of early Christianity, American religious movements frequently critique or reject mainstream religious institutions and traditional doctrines, promoting alternative perspectives and practices.
4. 'Mysticism and esotericism': American religious movements often embrace mystical and esoteric teachings, reflecting Gnosticism's interest in hidden or secret spiritual knowledge.

With amusement and skepticism, Bloom considers the New Age a "borderline case" for religious criticism; he does not consider it a full-fledged religion the way he does the rest of his examples.¹⁵⁸ He gives by far the shortest shrift to the New Age—eleven pages, mostly of denouncement—and instead prioritizes other movements (e.g. Mormonism, Southern Baptist, Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostalism) as he makes his argument about the American Religion being fundamentally 'Gnostic,' a self-fashioning derived from Emerson and Thoreau. He has only derisive and condemnatory things to say about the New Age, despite Gnosticism being one of the roots of the movement¹⁵⁹—much more explicitly than any of the others, to which he devotes long and laudatory chapters, eager to demonstrate their Gnostic underpinnings and charismatic force.

¹⁵⁸ Bloom 183: "The warlocks and the mediums of California Orphism aren't exactly Emanuel Swedenborg or even Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, of whom W. B. Yeats sublimely remarked: "Of course she gets up spurious miracles, but what is a woman of genius to do in the nineteenth century!" The spurious miracles of the New Age are the comic outreaches of the American Religion, and might yield a few amiable insights to a properly disinterested religious criticism." It is my sense that Bloom's position in 1992 is *not* adequately disinterested, and that his conclusions would benefit from an update that revises for rigorous first-person subjective discourse, as required by Contemplative Studies.

¹⁵⁹ Western Esotericism, encompassing traditions like Hermeticism, Kabbalah, alchemy, and theosophy, is identified by Hanegraaff as the primary historical root of the New Age movement; Gnosticism fed into all of these. See NAR 517.

Bloom's career reveals his sublimatory resistance. His next book on American religiosity and Gnosticism, *Omens of the Millenium* (1996), is devoted to his fascination with the high-speed recombinatory powers of the New Age, necessarily requiring a somewhat more accepting engagement with its themes. He was already writing about Gnosticism in the 1970s,¹⁶⁰ around the same time he wrote his famous book on Wallace Stevens and perfected his theory of the imagination as spiritual-aesthetic force. Forty years later, his final book (*Jesus and Yahweh: The Names Divine*, 2005) expressed his own lifelong personal feelings about the Abrahamic God by means of an idiosyncratic character study of the historical Jesus. It seems significant to note that probably the most influential literary critic of the era was obsessed not only with religion and religious history, but with a Transcendentalist Gnosticism, one of the philosophical building blocks of the New Age.

Just as the 1960s "counterculture" has been labeled as reactive to dominant society, and just as the New Age defined itself in response to mainline Christianity,¹⁶¹ literary critics with religious investments like Bloom have consciously defined our field in opposition to the New Age, while unconsciously copping to various of its tenets.¹⁶² This resistance is key to acknowledge in order to overcome when trying to fill the gaps of modern religious history in order to enrich the study of literature. I see Ashbery writing from the religion-drenched tradition of American lyric that includes Emerson, Whitman, and Stevens before him, and accept Bloom's own suggested

¹⁶⁰ See *The Flight to Lucifer: A Gnostic Fantasy* (1979).

¹⁶¹ NAR 516.

¹⁶² This restates, albeit more specifically, Hanegraaff's argument in *Rejected Knowledges* (2012), and risks further (with the argument about critics' unconscious attraction to New Age themes).

lineage from *The Anxiety of Influence* (1972). One way to neutralize the bitterness of the New Age pill for critics, I suggest, is to update our awareness of the term and its possibilities—it is 2025, not 1996, when both Hanegraaff's *New Age Religion* and Bloom's *Omens of the Millenium* were published, and literary studies, in particular lyric studies, have not yet either acknowledged the historical research of Hanegraaff nor contemplated the implications of Bloom's Gnosticism for the field.

Contemplative Studies and Contemplative Pedagogy are the most exciting things I have found that might enliven and motivate a reappraisal of the significance of the so-called New Age for the benefit of literary studies. I constellated Komjathy and Bloom in this section to point out the kinship between their two extant modes of scholarship: their risk of first-person subjective discourse; their willingness to confess commitments. With demonstrations of "Contemplative Criticism" that comprise the following chapters, my aim is to acknowledge and accept the personal contemplative practices that are already at work in (and indeed constitutive of) the world of "secular" literary studies. What is additional in my observation is what Hanegraaff and Komjathy have both (in very different ways) made (and unmade) careers by observing: namely, the enormous consequences of overlooking the critical role that esoteric forms of religion played in the history of modern scholarship on the one hand, and the insistence on facing the risks inherent in radical Contemplative Pedagogy on the other.¹⁶³

¹⁶³ On a cultural note: it is interesting to consider Komjathy's own narration of his academic career, particularly its demise, amidst his accounts of numberless colleagues urging him to abandon CS, describing his project as social and professional "suicide." Just as the study of mysticism or any area of esotericism in the 1980s and 1990s, CS in the 2010s was an institutionally forbidden and rejected knowledge.

Karl Marx is irrelevant to many millions of [Americans] because, in America, religion is the poetry of the people and not their opiate."

—Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness & the American Sublime* (2015)

In fact, since I don't have very much free time (poets seldom do, since they must somehow make a living), I've conditioned myself to write at almost any time. Sometimes it doesn't work, but on the whole I feel that poetry is going on all the time inside, an underground stream. One can let down one's bucket and bring the poem back up.

—John Ashbery, 1983

The basic hipster gesture:

- (1) Profound alienation, and*
- (2) Whatever range of things you try to do to overcome it.*

Psychedelics, spiritual practices, as deconditioning aids...

For the poet to shamanize, then, means that he must first induce a state of trance within himself and his readers.

[He does this] by generating a series of associations all contrived to induce a suspended state of consciousness in which the insecurity is stabilized in a momentary trance, of greater or less duration, the suspension of disbelief. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

—William Everson, *Birth of a Poet* 134; 131-2

3.c. The Psychedelic Renaissance

Reading this passage,¹⁶⁴ I felt deep kinship, for I have sought teachers in all areas of my life who would challenge me beyond what I might select for myself, and in and through that challenge allow me a space of radical openness where I am truly free to choose—able to learn and grow without limits.

The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of our selves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.

—bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, final paragraphs

The New Age milieu was always a psychedelic milieu. There is a contemporary cultural movement that represents just such a reappraisal of New Age religion that I have recommended, although they're straining mightily against the anti-academic reputation of the "mystical." Today's "Psychedelic Renaissance" refers to the incredible resurgence of popular and scholarly interest in psychoactive substances and "altered states of consciousness" in the last fifteen years or so; the cultures and ideas these things have shaped and are actively now shaping in the 2020s (especially in California and Silicon Valley). In 2015, Erik Davis, San Francisco-based historian of religion and culture, identified in the Psychedelic Renaissance four distinct zones of culture and discourse: the Underground, the Grey

¹⁶⁴ hooks has just quoted Pema Chodron, Buddhist teacher and popular New Age figure, who said: "My models were people who stepped outside of the conventional mind and who could actually stop my mind and completely open it up and free it, even for a moment, from a conventional, habitual way of looking at things. . . . If you are really preparing for groundlessness, preparing for the reality of human existence, you are living on the razor's edge, and you must become used to the fact that things shift and change. Things are not certain and they do not last and you do not know what is going to happen. My teachers have always pushed me over the cliff. . . ."

Market, the Clinic, and the Jungle.¹⁶⁵ What has made psychedelics interesting for Davis as a cultural and religious historian is what he describes as “a radicalism in the experiential domain of the compounds themselves.”¹⁶⁶ Mystery, risk, profundity, and transformation are all to be expected. Of course it is my contention that Ashbery’s lyric is like this, and that these elements can be explored through his work.

Riding the wave of a positive shift in mainstream opinion, academia and “the Clinic” (allopathic medicine) have been teaming up over the last decade to to scientize, secularize, and “demystify” some of the most ancient and globally widespread methods (and materials) of poesis-praxis: the consciousness-expanding art of cultivating new and different (or accessing forgotten) forms of attention with the assistance of psychoactive plant and synthetic substances.¹⁶⁷ Berkeley/Harvard journalist/professor Michael Pollan wrote a book promoting the use of psychedelics, *How to Change Your Mind* (2018), that became a Netflix series in 2022; his latest book continues in that vein (*This is Your Mind on Plants*, 2021). Coastal California, of course—the Bay Area and Santa Cruz in particular—is a spiritual trip; now “science is proving” what indigenous cultures (and plenty of New-Age hippies) have always honored: the long-term healing effects of various substances for mental health disorders, especially depression, anxiety, PTSD, and addiction.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ talk for the San Francisco Psychedelic Society, delivered March 5, 2015. See <https://techgnosis.com/psychedelic-culture-at-the-crossroads/>

¹⁶⁶ SFPS talk, 7:40.

¹⁶⁷ The most common of these being psilocybin mushrooms, MDMA, LSD, and ayahuasca, an Amazonian plant brew that contains DMT. Honorable mentions include mescaline and the array of “designer drugs” synthesized by biochemist Sasha Shulgin in Lafayette, CA in the 1970s. Since its pharmacology is basically different, it is debated whether cannabis is a psychedelic in its own right, though it has a role to play in catalyzing acceptance of the movement and as a tool to help modulate psychedelic experiences. The progress and challenges of cannabis decriminalization can also offer insights for the future of psychedelic policy and societal integration.

¹⁶⁸ The prevalence of all four of these sicknesses in my students and colleagues—truthfully, the extent to which these things were fucking with my community and therefore frustrating my

Very recently, the new UC Berkeley Center for the Science of Psychedelics was born; a number of its faculty and student affiliates are borrowed from the Psychology department and from the Graduate Theological Union, and are actively interested in studying and teaching contemplative practices and rituals of spiritual care.¹⁶⁹ The bulk of the team, however, remains neuroscientists, pharmacologists, and brain imaging scientists who are taking the “Johns Hopkins approach” to psychedelics.¹⁷⁰ In attempting to bridge the gap between the sciences (their funding) and the rest of the world, the center at Cal has ended up involving explicitly spiritual humanists: self-described Contemplative scholars, chaplains, and researchers working with Indigenous shamans for whom sacred plant medicine is the basis of religious (that is, all) understanding.

I mention this as an example of a contemporary academic venture (with an emphasized public education program) whose mission feels compatible with my thinking and my project. My desire to make a theoretical claim about the need to revitalize lyric and literary theory by means of restoring its mystical-theological underpinnings is a desire to read (and write) poetry in spiritually significant, socially meaningful, and teachable ways. Perhaps the reemergence of scholarly interest in mysticism is related to the ‘psychedelic renaissance.’ I would love for this project to legitimize mystical lyric for therapeutic use (perhaps in university classrooms) in the same way that legislation in 2023 decriminalized growing, foraging, and eating certain mushrooms (in Oakland and Santa Cruz, anyway). Reading poetry as or for

ability to devote myself to my doctoral work!—led me to explore and include psychedelic research in this project.

¹⁶⁹ <https://bcsp.berkeley.edu/team/>

¹⁷⁰ <https://hopkinspsychedelic.org/index-1> ; most cynically, this looks like science believing they can make God an (addictive and expensive) pill you can pop (that they can patent and control)

its “mysticism”—and in the ‘secular’ academy, this radical self-responsibility must first be decriminalized—is a complementary (and free, and portable) practice in ‘holy attention’ that supplements alternative therapies like psychedelic journeying: both function by producing perceptual changes by means of accessing what Ashbery calls “other centers of communication.”¹⁷¹

Popular topics for current academic research fed by and feeding the Psychedelic Renaissance include Indigenous epistemologies, transhumanist multispecies perspectives, and interspecies communication (between self, plants, animals, cosmos, etc). Off campus, the relationship between music and psychedelia has long been a lively conversation;¹⁷² psychedelics and poetry, not yet so much. The spiritual value of each of these currently fashionable fields is the insight that it is a set of relationships that brings healing, not a few doped-up hours or days.¹⁷³ The fewer and further-between “humanistic” strands of the Psychedelic Renaissance likewise take this spiritual insight for granted, and ground their research in the personal commitments it requires.

¹⁷¹ Cf. the end of “And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Was Her Name,” lines 22-30:

*...Something
Ought to be written about how this affects
You when you write poetry:
The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind
Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to communicate
Something between breaths, if only for the sake
Of others and their desire to understand you and desert you
For other centers of communication, so that understanding
May begin, and in doing so be undone.*

¹⁷² For a recent example, see Davis: <https://techgnosis.com/toad-tunes/>

¹⁷³ “More Indigenous integration would involve group settings; humor; and a therapist who is also doing the substance: healing is relational. This is more than activism for existential comfort.”

—Bia Labate of Chacrana, “Honoring the Indigenous Roots of the Psychedelic Movement” March 8 2021 at Harvard Divinity School CSWR Series “Psychedelics & the Future of Religion”

Despite the distortions of this movement, ten years or so into the self-conscious and painfully-social-mediated process of “worlding” its’ selves, we can try to filter the Psychedelic Renaissance for insights and transpose its possible soul-birthing value for the sphere of liberatory literary studies. Following both social-justice demands and STEMified funding restriction, research in psychedelics has been predominantly focused on psychotherapeutic modalities and cognitive neurosciences. As such, there’s a certain Undercommons freedom¹⁷⁴ in researching the relationship between literary studies and these refreshed perspectives and ways of knowing—there is some space for contemplation here.

More immediately applicable than the empirically-derived history of explicitly psychedelic materials is the chance to develop psychedelic theories of ethics, aesthetics, and experience; more exciting than that is to inform and interact with psychedelic humans, to engage in and enjoy varieties of psychedelic poetic experience; to develop ourselves as transhumanist human beings. For modern purposes, accepting the limitations and shadow of the category, the Lyric can describe a uniquely dense, brief, and spiritually “bioavailable” form of language that should be used as material for this task of expanding consciousness. The theoretical fruits of such a task provide the foundation for deeper understanding of what power lies already present in the literature classroom. It is already here; artists are already undergoing alchemical processes in their composition, revision, recitation, etc. Students, researchers, and teachers can benefit from learning how to access these

¹⁷⁴ In *The Poetics of the Undercommons*, Fred Moten brings up, in the same breath as he talks about radical spiritual liberatory poetics, the *Gelassenheit* of Meister Eckhart and the emptiness/nothingness of Buddhism. Moten 2016, 22-3.

states of sensitivity and attention themselves before turning to the “world outside” to make observations or move for change.

First, a note on the relationship between the so-called “Psychedelic Renaissance” and theories that surround contemporary lyric description. The contextualizing narrative of trauma and trauma healing dominates the popular idea of the Psychedelic Renaissance and has simultaneously gained a lot of ground recently in academia.¹⁷⁵ A psychological interpretation of this new fashion would suggest that it is the perceived disconnection between the bounded separate self (“ego,” to the New Ager) and Other that causes the emotional and mental trauma that is the site of the origins of the Western love lyric. The Other, first in the case of prayer, was God; the troubadours on into the Romantics transferred their longing for union with this separate otherness onto a mortal beloved. Love lyric and pop music are modern correlates here. In both religious and “secularized” cases, *apostrophe* -- an exclamatory figure of speech, an individual's address, plea, supplication -- captures what we moderns interpret as a bid for “mystically” unifying connection across space and time. In attempting to define its genre of study, lyric theory often focuses on two complementary features of the language of the lyric poem: its manipulation of time into timelessness; and its uniquely intimate, relational quality.¹⁷⁶

In secular postmodern poetry (Ashbery, for instance), the target interlocutor is not usually divinity nor even love object, but more often the longed-for reader. This cognitive and felt imposition of dualism (self to other) addressed by Lyric is precisely what many report being dissolved, and sometimes later resolved, through the use of

¹⁷⁵ My sense is that this turning-towards is at least partially in response to the accelerated collapse of the institutional humanities as a viable workplace.

¹⁷⁶ This part of the Introduction could also be titled “Constructions of Ashbery as a Universal: Lyric Theory's Critical Kenosis.”

psychedelics. This dissolution is also the goal of Christian contemplative practice as developed alongside the medieval church and formally enacted in Meister Eckhart's sermons. And the Mystical Experience Questionnaire, of course, represented Harvard scientists' claims to measure such a unifying dissolution in a standardized way.¹⁷⁷

My observation is that this (dissolution of boundaries, building up and imploding of self, transformation of awareness of interrelatedness with others that psychedelics occasion) is what poetry has always been doing, albeit with subtler neurophysiological fireworks. Traditional literary criticism, much like the Mystical Experience Questionnaire,¹⁷⁸ seeks to impose rational order, the former often projecting ideological sensemaking of social science where there is none naturally occurring in the text or context.

We still don't understand it, so why are we trying to standardize it?

—Dr. Larry Norris (founder, Decriminalize Nature), Oakland, speaking of psychedelic experience and the Mystical Experience Questionnaire

As boundless awareness, you are hosting, accommodating, and integrating your challenges. They are benefiting you; they are ornaments to you, like clouds are

¹⁷⁷ "Reports of mystical-type experiences have been provided by religious and non-religious figures around the world and throughout recorded history (James, 1902; Stace, 1960). Common dimensions in reports of mystical experiences include the experience of profound unity with all that exists, a felt sense of sacredness, a sense of the experience of truth and reality at a fundamental level (noetic quality), deeply felt positive mood, transcendence of time and space, and difficulty explaining the experience in words (ineffability; Stace, 1960)." Barrett FS, Johnson MW, Griffiths RR. Validation of the revised Mystical Experience Questionnaire in experimental sessions with psilocybin. *J Psychopharmacol*. 2015 Nov;29(11):1182-90. doi: 10.1177/0269881115609019. Epub 2015 Oct 6. PMID: 26442957; PMCID: PMC5203697.

¹⁷⁸ See Appendix B.

ornaments to the sky. Clouds are not interfering with the sky; they are part of the beauty.

—Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, teacher (Bon Tibetan religious tradition)
“The 21 Nails” Dzogchen retreat, Berkeley, April 2023

II. “A Permanent Now:” Three Poems in/as/of New Age Religion

To wonder how is the same as beginning to know why
—from “The System” (300)

All things are lessons God would have me learn.
—A Course in Miracles, Lesson 193

“What do you want to be enlightened for anyway? You might not like it.”
—DT Suzuki, philosopher (1870—1966)

Born of the so-called “counterculture” of the 1960s, Ashbery’s *Three Poems*, an experimental book-length prose lyric, came out in 1972. The three essay-length prose poems of the book’s title are “The New Spirit,” “The System,” and “The Recital;” published today, they would likely be labeled “lyric essays.” Their contents track,¹⁷⁹ respectively, (1) a breakthrough into a new era or new age¹⁸⁰ (“The New Spirit” of the 1960s), (2) that era’s origins in the status quo¹⁸¹ (“The System” of 1950s mainline America), and (3) an anticlimax¹⁸² (“The Recital”) that simultaneously

¹⁷⁹ This is only one possible layer of interpretation of their contents, and extremely broad; as with any Ashbery poem, there are always at least three ongoing layers of meaning interwoven throughout.

¹⁸⁰ *Something is happening. The new casualness had been introducing itself, casually of course, but suddenly its credentials lay everywhere. It was a new time of being born, looking ahead almost fiercely enough to be the ripe ear, and still keeping discreetly in the early stage of noncommittal promises. It wasn’t the lily-pad stage yet, but there was buzzing everywhere as though the news had already broken out and was flooding the city and the whole country.* (275 LoA)

¹⁸¹ *Inevitable, but so often postponed. Whole eras of history have sprung up in the gaps left by these pauses, dynasties, barbarian invasions and so on until the grass and shards stage, and still the answer is temporarily delayed...It seems that the blue of the sky is a little paler each morning, as happens toward the end of each epoch...* (312 LoA)

¹⁸² *All right. Then this new problem is the same one, and that is the problem: that our apathy can always renew itself, drawing energy from the circumstances that fill our lives, but*

integrates, obviates, and makes performance of the preceding polarity. The book feels both dense and sprawling, empty and comprehensive: it absorbs, reflects, rehashes, and problematizes the methods, materials, and implications of the “spiritual but not religious”¹⁸³ mindset and cultural setting that came to dominate (at least unconsciously, often consciously) the art scenes of the US coastal elite.

I see a deeper imprint of New Age spirituality, the primary religious cause *and* effect of 1960s “counterculture,” in Ashbery’s writing—most fully realized in *Three Poems* (present throughout his 26+ books)—not only in surface mentions of knowledge and divination systems like astrology or Tarot, but much more powerfully in thematic consistencies and the playing-out of New Age religious principles and practices like holism/interconnectedness, nonduality, experiential spirituality, channeling, and emphasis on ‘seeking’ and/as ‘healing.’¹⁸⁴ I wish to signpost six generic features of New Age religion, selected from a laundry list drawn up by Hanegraaff, and to show how they are exemplified in *Three Poems*, the text Ashbery repeatedly named as his personal favorite of his many books.¹⁸⁵ I suggest that the

emotional happiness blooms only once, like an annual, leaving not even roots or foliage behind when its flower withers and dies. We are forced to recognize that we are still living in the same old state of affairs and that it never really went away even when it seemed to. Well, but what can we do about it? (320 LoA)

¹⁸³ “SBNR” as a category was not formally coined until Sven Erlandson’s 2000 book of the same name; but the characterization is often applied retroactively to the “new Romanticism” of 1960s countercultural ideas, practices, and people. The earliest use of the phrase was in an anthropology publication in 1960.

¹⁸⁴ One of Hanegraaff’s final conclusions notes that the New Age was not identified as a singular ‘movement’ until the later 1970s (521). Where does this leave a New Age-ifying reading of 1971’s *Three Poems*? Like Hanegraaff, I do not see a problem applying separable features of what would come to be called a movement to thematize a book that came out earlier in that decade which recognized New Age as a singular trend. I do not make any claims about Ashbery’s personal desire to affiliate *Three Poems* explicitly with New Age religion, not least since it did not exist as a category in 1971: I am rather signaling layers of resonance that I consider significant to a fuller interpretation of the poetry, reading them as artifacts soaked in religious and spiritual forms, themes, motivations, and orientations, and even possessing ritual applications in the realm of Contemplative Pedagogy.

¹⁸⁵ See Perloff’s blurb to the 1986 Penguin reprint; see prefatory remarks to various public readings, e.g. this reading at Oregon State in 1977:

following six features of New Age religion are fundamental to a basic grasp of

Ashbery's *Three Poems*:

1. Channeling, described more carefully as “articulated revelation;”
2. “Healing,” understood as a religious phenomenon;
3. The struggle with “holism,” framed as an intense commitment to universal interrelatedness;
4. Divination, in two popular forms (Western astrology and Tarot);
5. Simultaneous psychologization of religion and sacralization of the psyche; and
6. New Age religion as culture criticism.

This long chapter explores each of these historical-religious elements after first providing some more literary-critical overview of Ashbery studies and how these two fields may productively intertwine. First, I consider Ashbery's ostensible status as a “mystic.” Second, I address how we might usefully enter *Three Poems* more mystically, with clarification on sticky issues of modernity and formal categorization from Niklaus Largier. I then cover critical reception of *Three Poems* thus far, observing how Ashbery's poetry functions as criticism of literary criticism itself, and how that rhymes with the ethos of the New Age. I interweave close readings throughout these three sections to support my overall claim that an historical and philosophical appreciation of the cultural milieu known as New Age religion is integral to a genuine understanding of this groundbreaking, seminal, formally unique book. The fourth and final section proceeds to demonstrate just how carefully and closely Ashbery considers, invites, and “holds space for” each of the six New Age generic features mentioned above.

https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Ashbery/5-17-77/Ashbery-John_2_from-The-New-Spirit_Oregon-State-University_Corvallis-Oregon_5-17-77.mp3

Three years after *Three Poems*, Ashbery's next book, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, famously wins the "triple crown" of prestigious national poetry prizes, catapulting him to international prominence and submitting him to lifelong critical scrutiny that lasts from 1975 until his death in 2017. Once the establishment fixes its attention on him, Ashbery's fundamentally mystical application of Lyric (i.e., as religious criticism) becomes protectively obscured; that is, he will never write a book as open-handedly "far out" as *Three Poems* again.

Thus, in a half-baked kind of way, this cosmic welter of attractions was coming to stand for the real thing, which has to be colorless and featureless if it is to be the true reflection of the primeval energy from which it issued forth, once a salient force capable of assuming the shape of any of the great impulses struggling to accomplish the universal task, but now bogged down in a single aspect of these to the detriment of the others, which begin to dwindle, jejune, etiolated, as though not really essential, as though someone had devised them for the mere pleasure of complicating the already complicated texture of the byways and torments through which we have to stray, plagued by thorns, chased by wild beasts, as though it were not commonly known from the beginning that not one of these tendrils of the tree of humanity could be bruised without endangering the whole vast waving mass; that that gorgeous, motley organism would tumble or die out unless each particle of its well-being were conserved as precious as the idea of the whole. For universal love is as special an aspect as carnal love or any of the other kinds: all forms of mental and spiritual activity must be practiced and encouraged equally if the whole affair is to prosper. There is no cutting corners where the life of the soul is concerned, even if a too modest approximation of the wish that caused it to begin to want to flower be the result—a result that could look like over-pruning to the untrained eye. Thus it was that a kind of blight fell on these early forms of going forth and being together, an anarchy of the affections sprung from too much universal cohesion.

—from "The New Spirit", emphasis added

How to create interest in negative, difficult, or boring processes? Is it possible to take pleasure in frustration? To become more intimate with your own experience. Ashbery poem as guided meditation; as hypnagogic script...

Sense gate switch-ups: It's all vibration, electrical signatures. The work of listening to drone music involves picking out tones and overtones, letting these bloom...

Compare this with immersing oneself in the field of an Ashbery book-length prose poem, for example, where temporality is undermined. To train one's listening is an aesthetic art with repercussions for listening in different states of consciousness...

—notes from a Dharmanauts meetup (host Erik Davis, “The Inner Drone” 12.3.23)

0. Ashbery as Modern Mystic

Today we speak of the poet, too, as a shamanistic figure, whereas traditionally he has been compared to the prophet. This latter relates to the very strong ethical strain in English and American poetry, its trenchant moral tenor. The poetry of protest in our own day is a good instance of this, and of course Bob Dylan participates as well, his roots in the work of Woody Guthrie, the depression-era folksinger, giving him a centrality there. You understand that in referring to the prophet we are not speaking of predictability, though perhaps to a visionary view of the future. The prophet as we see him is more a figure of confrontation than of prescience.

—Everson, *Birth of a Poet* 130

Ashbery Studies has correctly paid much attention to the poet's fixation on the theme, or problem, of time, identifying it as perhaps *the* central theme of Ashbery's life's work. It's my suggestion that his fixation on time, responsible for his eternal recursion to the theme, is motivated by Ashbery's desire to affirm, and thereby dwell within, the intangibility (ineffability, un-tell-ability) of the present moment. Secondary and tertiary discussions and flights of fancy on history, historicity, and possibility that therefore occupy many of his poems have therefore occupied most of his critics, distracting them from confronting the downright mystical (and likely un-theorizable) core of Ashberyan lyric: his deeply personal, and broadly cosmic, desire to dwell in the present moment, and his simultaneous desire joyously to share this experience with us.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁶ As his friend Frank O'Hara famously concludes "Having A Coke With You" (1960):
*and what good does all the research of the Impressionists do them
when they never got the right person to stand near the tree when the sun sank
or for that matter Marino Marini when he didn't pick the rider as carefully
as the horse
it seems they were all cheated of some marvellous experience
which is not going to go wasted on me which is why I'm telling you about it*

As noted in the Introduction (1.b), there has been limited critical attention to religious and spiritual themes in Ashbery's life and work for myriad cultural and institutional reasons. Ashbery's noted complexity and abstraction also seem forbidding of traditional close reading practices—though when we apply a mystical contemplative attention, the opposite problem arises: depths proliferate, sometimes to the point of meaninglessness.

We can look for references to spirituality, divinity, or the sacred in his poems directly; or read his explorations of language, consciousness, and interconnectedness in conversation with religious and mystical traditions.¹⁸⁷ Or we can offer, in the first-person subjective discourse expected of Contemplative Studies, a "Contemplative criticism" that treats the poems as primary and theoretical text simultaneously, and as ritual object, practice, and transformative (or converting) insight, all in one.

Ashbery's emphasis on the fluidity and multiplicity of language echoes the apophatic theology found in medieval Christian mysticism, particularly in the works of Meister Eckhart and like "The Cloud of Unknowing." Apophatic theology asserts that God is ultimately unknowable and can only be described in terms of what God is *not*, emphasizing the limits of language and the need to move beyond conventional understanding.¹⁸⁸ Similarly, Ashbery's poetry often challenges the stability of

¹⁸⁷ For example, consider the satirical solemnity of the poem "It Was Raining in the Capital" (*Double Dream of Spring*, 1966), whose subject is "the intractable presence" (31) felt by "the one they called the Aquarian" (3). The "New Age" under the sign of Aquarius emerges as the positive mirror image of the Old Age (under the sign of Pisces) (Hanegraaff 331). Ashbery tropes this binaristic thinking: "*This is what my learning / Teaches, the Aquarian said, / 'To absorb life through the pores / For the life around you is dead.'*" (57-60) For the final image of the poem, Ashbery figures the new era's presaging an apocalyptic end to current society: *The sun came out in the capital / Just before it set.* (61-2) "Like holism," Hanegraaff writes, "the coming 'New Age' is a vision rather than a theory. Talk about 'the age of Aquarius' reflects the hope that the dominant culture of the present will change for the better" (NAR 333).

¹⁸⁸ McGinn 2008, p. 112

language and meaning, inviting readers to embrace constant change. His poetry, like apophatic theology, suggests that meaning is not fixed but is constantly unfolding and evolving through the interplay of language, perception, and experience.¹⁸⁹

Ashbery's interest in universal interconnectedness that elides boundaries between self and world resonates with the mystical *cognito Dei experimentalis* and supports more recent science-infused theories on the interconnected nature of reality (Lovelock's 1972 Gaia hypothesis and current interest in mushroom mycelial networks being two prominent examples). In medieval Christian mysticism, this idea is often expressed through the metaphor of the soul's union with God or the ultimate dissolution of the self into the divine.

Readers have also paid special attention to Ashbery's use of paradox, contradiction, and playfulness, all of which challenge conventional thinking and encourage deeper contemplation: the immanent/transcendent paradox invites a nuanced understanding of the divine; a Zen Buddhist koan is designed to help practitioners achieve enlightenment by moving beyond duality of meaning; and emphasis on "holy play" or spiritual joy and delight illuminate the language of Christian mystics like Francis Assisi (consider his "Canticle of the Sun"). Similarly, Julian of Norwich's "Revelations of Divine Love" emphasize the love of God as an infinite source of joy and playfulness. The speaker ("Wisdom") of the Ecclesiast (see III.2) would agree that framing any motivated action as play is always preferable to calling it work.

Love and playfulness are central themes in Meister Eckhart's writings and teachings. He believed that love and joy were closely intertwined, with laughter being

¹⁸⁹ Pertile 2022, para. 4

a catalyst for liking, joy, and ultimately love.¹⁹⁰ Eckhart described a state of "wandering joy" that arises when one detaches from the ego and allows themselves to be in union with God.¹⁹¹ This joy is described as a state of freedom and causeless happiness.

It was partly an *en masse* desire for these states that instigated "the love revolution," the 1960s spiritual (and drug-fueled) movement that Ashbery takes for his meditative object in *Three Poems*. Put another way, Ashbery assumes the 1960s counterculture as the "set and setting" for his tripartite contemplative journey reported in and as *Three Poems*.¹⁹² He is reflecting on the recently passed historical moment: *The switches had been tripped, as it were*.¹⁹³ thousands of individualized conversion narratives ("switches") of a generation were all taking place thanks to drug journeys ("trips") and/or mystical experiences located within a sacralized personal and interpersonal psychology, far from the maddening narrow-mindedness of institutional Christianity. In this book, Ashbery lampoons what he considers the naivete of the "counterculture" while still taking its tenets quite seriously, turning over its forms and functions like an obsessive philosophical researcher—at times seemingly as if his life depended on it.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ Eckhart 96

¹⁹¹ McGinn 108

¹⁹² In accordance with treating experiences of reading and writing lyric poetry as mind-altering experience: *Set and setting*, when referring to a psychedelic drug experience or the use of other psychoactive substances, means one's mindset (shortened to "set") and the physical and social environment (the "setting") in which the user has the experience. Set and setting are factors that can condition the effects of psychoactive substances: "Set" refers to the mental state a person brings to the experience, like thoughts, mood and expectations; "setting" to the physical and social environment. This is especially relevant for psychedelic experiences in either a therapeutic or recreational context. Hartogsohn, Ido (2017). "Constructing drug effects: A history of set and setting". *Drug Science, Policy and Law*.

¹⁹³ LoA 282.

¹⁹⁴ more on his mental health at time of writing in 4.b.

I think critics are fooled, thanks to Ashbery's ingenious capacity for the detached tone of a critical mode of prose writing, into believing that he is one of them—a critic, that is, one who espouses the ideological position of a pretense to objectivity—as opposed to a poet, indebted to and embedded in the highly Romantic lineage of the American Sublime (Emerson, Whitman, Stevens). Biographer Karin Roffman notes how Ashbery himself felt compelled to “pick a side” and come down on the first half of the Critical/Creative polarity: “At some point (during his years making a living as a visual art critic) [Ashbery] decided he didn't want to do judgment and didn't want to critique, he just wanted to describe and to be enthusiastic about the things that he loved.”¹⁹⁵

Of course it is in the interest of this project to believe that the Romanticisms and Idealisms of the 1960s appealed to Ashbery as a poet, as did the radical politics (free thinking and queer equality especially) that flowered from that movement's spiritual heterodoxy. Presenting as a poet, and unlike the critics, Ashbery reserves the right to lie, to be unethical, self-focused, and even religious¹⁹⁶; that is, to play

¹⁹⁵ Roffman min52 of video “John Ashbery: A Life of Poetry with Karin Roffman,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cv8wyie3ss>

¹⁹⁶ Hints of this desire to play the spiritual field appear earlier in his biography. In 1945, in college, “John announced to surprised friends that “I have gotten religious all of a sudden.” He blamed his new passion on his recent reading, which included T. S. Eliot, the Bible, and “Hindu philosophy ... *A Passage to India*, *The Waves* (Virginia Woolf—it stinks) ... *The Bostonians* by James.” He admired Forster's *A Passage to India* as “one of the best books I've ever read—in fact parts of it made me ecstatic—especially the big religious shindig at the end.” He continued to send ribald poems (“Virtue / Won't hirtue / But vice / Is nice”) and notes (“P.S. Don't forget to send for our free booklet, ‘Sex Can Be fun’”) to Bob [Bob Hunter, a Harvard friend], and he also promised that his religious exploration “will pass.” Over a month later, however, he reported that “I still feel quite religious, and probably will when I get back to Cambridge, so watch out. I mean, there must be a reason for everything, even for evolution.” (Roffman 159)

devil's advocate and side, for aesthetics' or argument's or the Holy Fool's sake, with the "losing team" (i.e. hippies).¹⁹⁷

1. Entering *Three Poems*: Form & Function

Three Poems (and in particular the first poem, "The New Spirit") follows a looping, spiralic structure of writing, rewriting, revising, and revisiting an individual (and universalizing) journey of spiritual healing. As I offer contemplative close readings, I acknowledge their necessary incompleteness: in the quite fine print of the Library of America edition, the book runs 79 pages long; 118 in the original Viking paperback and subsequent Penguin reprintings. *Three Poems* could easily, on its

¹⁹⁷ I say 'losing team' to jab at any desire to transcend politics, which evasion no longer seems possible. Tarot and astrology, for example, are ancient and medieval forms of divination that are perhaps even more normalized now than they were in the 1960s. Although commonplace, even trendy, in the US, these practices are still suspect in Europe, especially by political leftists who consider themselves personally responsible for mass social change.

An indulgent anecdote may help illustrate. In 2024, living in an anarcho-communist squat house in a village outside of Leipzig, Germany, my "New Age" interests were exposed when I offered a Tarot reading to a fellow guest after dinner one night. Following the assumptions of the highly intelligent and thoughtful members of the radical political resistance that made up most of the house, I learned that the consensus dictated that any acknowledgment of interest in 'the occult' or 'Esoterik' affirms totalitarianism. Historical evidence, in concert with empirical logic and repressed trauma and ancestral legacies of self-blame, seemed impossible to overcome, and in my time there, core house members proved unwilling or unable even to imagine it possible to consider engaging with Tarot cards, an intuitive method of knowledge endemic to their indigenous culture.

These same people proudly fly to Central and South America to participate in expensive psychedelic tourism, vomiting up their emotions into exotic soil. In this way it seemed that hyperconscientious supercriticality had reached its ironic apotheosis in political-economic narrowness, calcifying into exclusionary uncritical dogma: "Das macht man nicht hier" (*That's not done here*). The left loses its own people when it punishes spiritual practice.

"[Western] civilization does not value its roots," Peruvian curandero Alonso del Río says. Attempts to erase the offending culture or the offending self tend to backfire, entrenching difference and retraumatizing both sides (colonizer and colonized, for example). In rushing to affirm the indigenous knowledges of non-whites and non-Europeans, white Europeans deepen their denial of their own spiritual inheritance. A psychedelic or New Age orientation would say that neither socially-sanctioned self-loathing and self-erasure (per the German far-left psychological model) nor guilt-based reparation and emotionally-burdened reconciliation (the mainline American liberal/academic model) heals the roots of historical trauma, because both sides of this coin operate from the belief in our ultimate separateness from each other.

own, supply content for multiple book-length studies of the mystical pedagogy of Ashbery. Despite the length and loopiness, I suggest that close-reading selections from this extended work—even at random, in the “old spirit” of a divinatory *sortes vergilianae*¹⁹⁸—makes for fruitful contemplation. I want to acknowledge that it is perhaps absurd to close-read a text that the author himself suggested be treated “like a TV left on in a room.” This may be an example of my own desire and willingness to seek interpretable objects in the seeming superfluous of daily life; or it may be a resistance to Ashbery’s wily sheening of his own work as if to protect it from the critical eye, something he does throughout his life.

It is my dream that a Contemplative Criticism is different enough—idiosyncratic, “postsecular,” open-minded enough—that Ashbery would not balk at its application to his poems. Like translation, I believe we offer a new thing when we read. Slowing down to observe his overwhelming overflow of language carefully, to give effort to imagining how and why he chooses to move from word to word, idea to idea, and sentence to sentence as he does, completely changes my experience of the poems and what glows behind their surfaces—“transforming the scarcely noticeable bleakness into something both intimate and noble”.¹⁹⁹ Contemplative Criticism is my suggested form of “acting out” and of “absorption”.²⁰⁰

Before we can read him, it may help to try to figure out just what we are reading; so first, a note on formal categorization. *Three Poems* are very long poems in prose. Lacking enjambment, one must conclude that they were composed at the

¹⁹⁸ The Sortes Vergilianae (Virgilian Lots) is a form of divination by bibliomancy in which seekers of advice or predictions of the future are sought by interpreting passages from the works of the Roman poet Virgil. See also Ashbery’s poem of the same name (“Sortes Vergilianae,” *Double Dream of Spring*)

¹⁹⁹ “The Recital,” 326.

²⁰⁰ see also “The Recital,” 326.

level of the sentence, rather than the level of the line. They could readily be understood as essays in Robert Musil's sense. In *Figures of Possibility*, Niklaus Largier says of Austrian Musil's unfinished 1930/33 novel *Man Without Qualities*: "His novel is not essayistic insofar as it includes what we could call reflective theorizing passages but insofar as it *deploys things, events, and concepts as figures that disrupt and constitute characters and relations, evoking time and again possibilities and experimental openings where we expect semantic closure.*"²⁰¹ The same can be said of the processes and relationships that form the open-ended "subject" of *Three Poems*—the more-than-human, pluralistic, mystical "I." "The System" and "The Recital" (Poems two and three) are responses to this New [Age] Spirit (Poem one), and glow best when read in light of its figurative mysticism.

The essayistic mysticism of *Three Poems* cannot be understood without at least cursory historical contextualization of New Age religion, the book's contemporaneous widespread spiritual movement. Access to the historical study of New Age religion has been blocked and rendered deeply taboo in academia,²⁰² for reasons Hanegraaff, Komjathy, and others have elaborated.²⁰³

*Perhaps no art, however gifted and well-intentioned, can supply what we were demanding of it: not only the figured representation of our days but the justification of them, the reckoning and its application...*²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ 224, emphasis added.

²⁰² This may be akin to scholar Gillian White's idea of "lyric shame," a notion I can't support for a variety of reasons, but which at least accurately confesses to the critical inability to accept the poetic desire for expression and attachment to a theoretical wholeness (see Part IV: The Quest for a Unified Worldview)

²⁰³ See Hanegraaff, *Rejected Knowledges*; Komjathy, *Introducing Contemplative Studies and Contemplative Literature: A Comparative Sourcebook on Meditation and Contemplative Prayer*.

²⁰⁴ "The Recital" 322.

Seen through a New Age lens, Ashbery's poesis of mystical experience rhymes perfectly with Musil's:

A good page of prose, Musil writes, is at first not a message that can be understood but nothing else than the production of "arousal," of a disruption, based on figural effects, that entails chains of assimilation. It is a sensual and affective stimulation of the mind through the artful production of a configuration of elements that shape perception. This is nothing else than what Auerbach has in mind when he speaks of "intensity." Thus, Musil's text, his essayism, explores "exactitude" in and through words and elaborates from within this engagement a world of possibilities and new relations between words, things, and concepts. It destabilizes fixed qualities and allows for new configurations. The utopian state is a state of rhetorical invention and play; of configurations of words, figures, and things; and of emerging relations. It is not and is never a state of redemption, stability, or identity.²⁰⁵

"Hope is the thing with feathers."²⁰⁶ The Ashbery imagination, far from the world of belief, enables the essayistic poem to produce "altered" states of consciousness, to achieve a state that is utopian without being redemptive or fixed in its identity.

Relationship describes the co-creative force or dynamic that makes this state possible. For Ashbery, who is also committed to a revolutionary revision of the self as expressed through a lyric "I" (beyond shame), these relational dynamics play out through experimental and often uncanny deployment of personal pronouns.

The essay is the medium that imitates a quasi-alchemistic practice "to dissolve and coagulate" (*solve et coagula*) in a space where thought explores its exactitude in and through words and elaborates from within this exactitude a world of possibilities and new relations between figures, figural effects, meanings, and concepts. (228)

The very notion of "possibility" appears in Eckhart's so-called speculative mysticism as the concept that motivates and determines its critical character. It is also a concept that he uses to reinterpret the tradition of negative theology. The "nothingness" of the divine, divine "darkness," Eckhart points out, can be "called . . . a possibility or receptivity"—a possibility and receptivity that can be traced in our intellect itself. Thus, he does not argue for a radical iconoclasm and a seemingly irrational flight into mystical unity but for an intellectual engagement, a thought of exactitude and an exactitude of thought that realize and recognize their own finitude. (228)

²⁰⁵ FP 224.

²⁰⁶ Emily Dickinson

In the spirit of exactitude, forgive my multiple use of the emphatic “precisely” in the following paragraph. The accepted critical appreciation that *Three Poems* is a work of philosophical, intellectual, and historical criticism is not far off; but they²⁰⁷ significantly overlook that Ashbery’s baseline is poetic, that is, mystical.²⁰⁸ It is precisely his *mystical* orientation to reality that provides him with the psychological detachment needed to keep his imagination fully open and flexible enough to bend and reshape the contours of the lyric as it extends from modernity into postmodernity. Indeed, Ashbery is capable of detaching intellectually from his book’s deep and extended analysis of New Age counterculture precisely because he does *not* inhabit the identity of (religiosity-resistant) critic: he is detached even from the critic’s desire for some perfected detachment.²⁰⁹ With this acceptance of the effects of his own private stakes, he is able to be truly experimental, i.e. possibility-oriented, in his exploration of what 1960s religiosity meant and might yet mean in the 1970s and beyond. He’s precisely *not* ‘objective’ about the history of the movement, but instead renders its effects very personally, that is, in terms of his own relationships.

Key terms such as “detachment” (*Gelassenheit* or *Abgeschiedenheit* or *Bildlosigkeit* in German) refer to this intellectual practice that, as Eckhart argues, liberates not only thought but also all the things that otherwise get caught up in the order imposed on them by reason. As he states in a passage that is important in view of Musil’s reading of his work, a person who could see “a fly or a piece of wood” without the order imposed on it—and thus as a figure in this realm of possibilities—would not need a sermon or even the Scriptures. This person would see it *âne eigenschaft* (without quality), *sunder warumbe* (without a why)—not as something, not as this or that, but in a moment where intellect and love, reason, sensation, and affect converge, where the human mind grasps the infinite and the unsayable in and through the irreducible particularity of the “piece of wood”—and of every other thing it sees and encounters.

²⁰⁷ I do generally mean poetics scholars Helen Vendler and Marjorie Perloff here; even Bloom falls for this, identifying as more ‘Gnostic’ in an elitist scholarly sense (the mental/imaginative aristocracy of Stevens) than mystical in a spiritually heterodox (sensuous/embodyed) sense

²⁰⁸ Refer to Part One of Introduction for my sense of this broad term.

²⁰⁹ Cf. Ann Arbor poet Raymond McDaniel: “I was free even of the desire to be free of desire.”

In his conclusion of the short essay he writes on Balázs, Musil calls this moment *Schau*, “vision,” and he connects it with the very experience of film: “In this vision film uncovers . . . the infinite and ineffable character of all beings—as if put under glass, so that we can watch it.”²¹⁰

Ashbery ends his third poem, “The Recital,” and the book thus:

A vast wetness of sea and air combined, a single smooth, anonymous matrix without surface or depth was the product of these new changes. It no longer mattered very much whether prayers were answered with concrete events or the oracle gave a convincing reply, for there was no longer anyone to care in the old sense of caring. There were new people watching and waiting, conjugating in this way the distance and the emptiness, transforming the scarcely noticeable bleakness into something both intimate and noble. The performance had ended, the audience streamed out; the applause still echoed in the empty hall. But the idea of the spectacle still hung in the air long after the last spectator had gone home to sleep.

²¹⁰ FP 229.

2. “You private person.”²¹¹ Ashbery himself

In the late 1960s, as he was becoming better known and his poetry was being read more widely, Ashbery stopped giving interviews or allowing ones he had given to be published. His anger at the process of being asked to explain himself and his poems had been growing for some time. When critics claimed that his poems were difficult or needed explication, he often seemed surprised, a reaction perceived as feigned or outright hostile. Repeatedly he responded to questions about his life and work by deflecting them back to his poems as containing the only thoughts about their potential meaning that mattered. When pressed, he argued that the creative process was always slightly mysterious, so that in attempting to explain it, he would also be obscuring it.

—Roffman, *Songs We Know Best*, from the Preface (emphasis added)

Personhood and poetry prove to be co-constitutive for the young Ashbery, and his work is permeated by a wise awareness of the nature of his chosen vocation as a sacralization of his own psyche.²¹² At time of writing this project (2025), Roffman has not yet completed her full biography of Ashbery, so I restrict my biographical evidence to her *Songs We Know Best*, which chronicles his early years: from birth in 1927 until his 1956 departure from New York for a Fulbright in Paris at the age of 29.

By high school, Ashbery was already writing poetry regularly; he had decided upon the genre as his vocation around age 13. For an essay for English class, teenaged Ashbery shared an opinion that is reflected in the tragic Bildungsroman of his college sestina “The Painter” (see III.1). The opinion also supports my reading of his digestion of New Age religion vis-à-vis *Three Poems*. He wrote of the “poetry of today” that

“[i]ts high caliber and its extreme complexity may both be accounted for by the fact that the

²¹¹ From “The New Spirit” (256).

²¹² See Part Four, Section V.

poet, neglected by a society of which he is a member whether he wishes it or not, turns from the outside world as inspiration for his poetry, and feeds on the process and intricacies of his own mind. Poetry becomes then highly personal and highly original, but due to the unavoidable membership in society it frequently has social themes, which are, however, treated from a purely personal standpoint. Thus the poems are complex because they spring from a mind which has been made complex by its double existence—its social responsibility and its inward enigma.” (SWKB 142)

Ashbery would repeatedly use ideas from his own writings in high school and college much later in his life.²¹³ Religion and mysticism interested Ashbery while he was an undergraduate at Harvard:

[In 1945, in college,] John announced to surprised friends that “I have gotten religious all of a sudden.” He blamed his new passion on his recent reading, which included T. S. Eliot, the Bible, and “Hindu philosophy” ... He admired Forster’s *A Passage to India* as “one of the best books I’ve ever read—in fact parts of it made me ecstatic—especially the big religious shindig at the end.”

...

Bob [Hunter, a Harvard friend] suspected that John’s flirtation with religion was primarily a desire to resolve “the vast contradictions that existed within his soul.” John argued that it was even more self-interested; at the very least, he said, it would “be a pity to be caught on the losing team on the Day of Atonement.”²¹⁴ Beneath his jokes, however, was a serious fear that “in the long run I may not achieve the goal of a creative artist I have set myself, or even succeed in becoming a genuine person.” He was eager to resolve a conflict he felt between his life and art. (SWKB 159-60, emphasis added)

The Day of Judgment is a concept that appears multiple times in *Three Poems*, usually simultaneously jokingly and with gravitas. Cyclical, the death of the old world makes space for the new. A birth of a new self happens coterminously with the birth of a new alternative spiritual movement (the “counterculture”) described in “The New Spirit,” which individualization rhymes with the above anecdote’s portrait of the artist as a young man—his dominant desire being to “succeed in becoming a genuine

²¹³ E.g. “In Ashbery’s 1971 essay on Willem de Kooning for *Art News Annual*, he explains the painter’s genius by directly building on ideas from a 1948 college paper.” <https://ashberyhouse.yale.edu/introduction-john-ashberys-poetics-things-how-poems-are-cho-sen-objects>

²¹⁴ Twenty-five years later, finishing *Three Poems*, he will repeat this concern almost exactly, under humor of the same tenor: *Appearances must be kept up at whatever cost until the Day of Judgment and afterward if possible.* “The Recital” (321)

person.” What appears to make this desire self-aware is the way its additional layer—his desire to “achieve the goal of a creative artist”—weaves inextricably with the authenticity of his personhood.

John Ashbery’s lifelong (auto)poetics will develop in response to this inextricability. *Contemplation* proves to be as close as he can get to something like religious resolution, a unity he approaches both psychologically and formally. The reader occupies any given poem “like a tenant in a rented house.”²¹⁵ The mundane or workaday is made poetic and sublime by our choosing to pay (“mystical”) attention to it. What is going on, everywhere, constantly, every moment of every day, is life. We may only tune in very occasionally. Like Philip Glass’ 1975 opera “Einstein on the Beach,”²¹⁶ *Three Poems* offers an extended setting in which to practice this awareness of life happening to us. A poem of pure environment! Compare this with the ways in which Tarot or astrology imaginatively apply the brain’s interpretive and analytical functions onto archetypes, images, stars, theoretical points in the universe (Midheaven; North Node; Juno; Vesta; Lilith) for the purposes of revealing knowledge, granting insight. If there’s an identity between poetry and the occult, between the banal and the transcendent, it invites and celebrates this collapse of sacred and profane, as Ashbery does in his “New Age” opus.

²¹⁵ From “Homeless Heart” (*Quick Question*), 2012.

²¹⁶ Glass’s first and longest opera score, taking approximately five hours in full performance without intermission; given the length, the audience is permitted to enter and leave as desired. Compare this with remarks Ashbery has made about how his readers should feel free dipping in and out of *Three Poems*, treating it like a TV left on in a room.

Indulgent anecdote: When I had a student job as an usher for Cal Performances at Zellerbach Hall in Berkeley, my first shift was an interminable performance of “Einstein on the Beach.” Standing guard at the doors to the orchestra level in the dark, I pointed out to a coworker an unconscious audience member in the back row, giggling: “That old lady fell asleep!” He replied, “Dude, that’s the composer.” It was Phil Glass.

Administratively, bearing out these lofty ends turn Kafkaesque. While still in college, Ashbery had a dream: “I was in Harvard changing my major from English to Comparative Religions ... great confusion in getting petition signed, etc”.²¹⁷ In a class on the epic, meanwhile, he *took notes on related [religious] materials, for example: “But Virgil and Aeneas are somehow mystical—closer to coming Christianity than Classical Greece. Inwardness, piety, individualism.”*²¹⁸ The authenticity required of the contemplative stalks the burgeoning poet.

In John’s favorite fall class, “The Epic,” classicist John Finley emphasized “what in [literature] transcends history and is valid for all time.” In an essay on the *Inferno* that Finley judged “intelligent and well- written,” Ashbery concluded that Dante’s depiction of the relationship between contemporary experience and eternal truth was crucial for modern writers to understand:

“Dante’s value for us lies, then, not in his conception of the universe, for it is one in which we can no longer share, but beneath it. It is rather the fact that Dante was able to create an idea of the universe applicable to his own time that is important. For just such an idea is what we desperately need.... Dante is a constant incitement to the creative minds of our century, for whether or not we believe in any religion, we cannot gainsay his assurances that eternal truth, harmony, and proportion continue to exist in spite of man.”

In college, Ashbery was arguing that “what we desperately need” is “an idea of the universal applicable” to our own time. He read Dante’s “assurances that eternal truth, harmony, and proportion continue to exist in spite of man” as an “incitement” for his own poems. He had always worried that if he used recognizable details from his current life in his poetry, he would cheapen the moral emotional universe his poems described.²¹⁹

New Age religion, eager to reinvest people with meaningfulness by way of radical self-responsibility, turns the individual himself into this desperately-needed “idea of the universal” that has persisted from before Dante and into the present.

Postmodernism is a psychedelic effect. Constructivism. Polysemy. Groundlessness: no “there there.” Psychedelic experiences generally dissolve

²¹⁷ SWKB 169.

²¹⁸ AM6 Box 31, JA Papers; PDF 193, FN 99.

²¹⁹ SWKB 165, emphasis added.

structures; dissolve the subject/object divide; show ecological and networked relations between things.

Psychedelicism is a natural theology: an attempt to explain the way the world works. We are living in apocalyptic times, and we cannot go back to sleep. The Americana element: the messianic impulse. "We are the answer." Esoteric evolutionism...

—notes from Dr. Christian Greer (Berkeley Alembic: "Psychedelic Culture in the 1980s")

I think I consider the poem as a sort of environment, and one is not obliged to take notice of every aspect of one's environment—one can't, in fact.

I guess I am pleased that my method has given every critic something to hate or like. For me, my poems have their own form, which is the one that I want, even though other people might not agree that it is there. I feel that there is always a resolution in my poems.

—John Ashbery, 1983 interview (emphasis added)

Whatever you create in this life that no longer needs you: that is success.

—Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche

3. The Critic's Critic (is the Poet)

Its flutterings are those of the fledged Imagination[;] its difficulty, that of the Truth.

—John Hollander, *Three Poems* book jacket blurb, first edition²²⁰

²²⁰ The original Hollander blurb reads, in its entirety: "Worked in a prose as demanding and thus as fecund as verse, John Ashbery's new book is a meditational masterpiece, calm in its encounters with minor fictions, desperate in pursuit of a supreme one. Its flutterings are those of the fledged Imagination, its difficulty, that of the Truth."

It appears that all subsequent editions of *Three Poems* deleted both the first phrase and the concluding sentence, only printing these phrases: "a meditational masterpiece, calm

The implicit critical commitment to a vacuum of genuine faith on the part of John Ashbery—illustrated in the scholarship’s concentration on irony, melancholy, meaninglessness, and other postmodern and poststructural philosophical defenses, and amplified by the hitherto unbroken silence on religion and/or spirituality in Ashbery studies—has always seemed to me more to do with the precarious status of the critic in society, and in his own esteem, than it has about the likelihood of a mystical Ashberyan spirituality or the viability of a contemplative Ashberyan poetics and pedagogy. The extent to which the critic is learned in faith and ritual via a history of religion and spirituality is likely the extent to which s/he will be capable of considering, i.e. taking seriously, the religious and spiritual valances, underpinnings, and implications of Lyric itself. A “mystical spirituality” (in McGinn’s capacious sense) is not some vestigial tailbone of the genre, but a constitutive expression of the lyric gene that manifests throughout all of Ashbery, and most unmistakably in his own favorite work. The recent intolerance to the category “Lyric” may partly be the result of longstanding intolerance of the academy to practitioners of religion, humanist backlash against “higher powers.”

Ashbery openly finds fault with this intolerance, addressing it in the summarizing conclusion of the small third poem, “The Recital.” Prefiguring his most sustained (and rightly famous) discussion on representability in “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” which follows in 1975, Ashbery in “The Recital” comments on art and criticism, representability of experience and its mediations:²²¹ *We are trying with*

in its encounters with minor fictions, desperate in pursuit of a supreme one.” It is interesting to consider what is lost in this abbreviation—the genre theory of the first phrase; the Stevensian grandiosity of the last sentence; the implications of the religious capitalizations of Imagination and Truth.

²²¹ 321.

mortal hands to paint a landscape which would be a faithful reproduction of the exquisite and terrible scene that stretches around us. Note that the hands are ‘mortal’, the wished-for reproduction ‘faithful.’ Revisiting the theme of holism, the “dream of the unified field,”²²² Ashbery continues by arguing that the natural movements of life that occupy the interest of the intellect are what brighten and texture our “permanent now:” it is *the quality of this ebbing and flowing motion rather than the relevance of any of its isolated components that infuses a life with its special character.* He states that we do not want to exaggerate the importance of the intellect; indeed, he argues that the critical practice of isolating components renders them no longer relevant. Doing theory requires being “in flow.”

A related example of Ashbery’s criticism of criticism comes ten years later in his poem “Introduction” (from his most “fluid” book, *A Wave*, 1984), which plays on the dual academic role of critic/teacher even more directly, and still ends up concluding that intuitive art practice is only possible by means of a kenotic mysticism of un-selfing.²²³ An intellectual compartmentalization is again deemed irrelevant. Soon after, in “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” he will literally denounce the critical

²²² Jorie Graham

²²³ For fuller exegesis of the poem “Introduction,” see Part 3 of the Introduction; also:

*I have a theory
About masterpieces, how to make them
At very little expense, and they’re every
Bit as good as the others. You can
Use the same materials of the dream, at last...*

*It’s a kind of game...And it ends up
Nobody’s, there is nothing for any of us
Except that fretful vacillating around the central
Question that brings us closer,
For better or worse, for all this time.*

faculty, at least in his present context as an appreciative ekphrastic poet, as being
“beside the point.”²²⁴

This [how I put life in poems] is the way that life appears to me, the way that experience happens. I can concentrate on the things in this room and our talking together, but what the context is is mysterious to me. And it's not that I want to make it more mysterious in my poems—really, I just want to make it more photographic.

—John Ashbery, 1983

Ashbery always insisted that when it comes to interpretation, his poems are designed to speak for themselves. McGinn's medieval Christian mystical model, itself a critical response to mainstream orthodoxy, is uploaded quite directly into much New Age “worlding,” which often tempers its Romantic holism with a shrewd edge of “postsecular” irony. New Age spirituality has adapted and reinterpreted medieval mystical concepts and practices by emphasizing individualism, eclecticism, holism, experiential spirituality, and the idiosyncratic reinterpretation of traditional symbols and myths. These adaptations reflect broader generational trends in contemporary culture, such as the focus on self-expression, cultural exchange, and the reintegration of science and spirituality. While none of these aspects escapes scrutiny in his work, Ashbery never identifies with literary critics. He did, however, practice art criticism, his day job for forty years, as well as teach the writing of poetry

²²⁴ [T]hose assholes
Who would confuse everything with their mirror games
Which seem to multiply stakes and possibilities, or
At least confuse issues by means of an investing
Aura that would corrode the architecture
Of the whole in a haze of suppressed mockery,
Are beside the point.
 (“Self-Portrait,” lines 427—433)

to undergraduates at Brooklyn and Bard Colleges. Shifting from critic to teacher, he stayed poet.

Literary critics have named the meditative quality of the style of *Three Poems* and pointed to Gertrude Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation*, which Ashbery reviewed for Poetry magazine in 1957.²²⁵ Ben Lerner, John Hollander, and others have used the existence of this early review to assign Ashbery affinity with Stein's poetics and conclusively label *Three Poems* "meditative" without ever defining or contextualizing that concept. "Meditation" names one group of contemplative practices that has adapted to atheistic secularism enough in the last century to merit interest in academic research, especially by cognitive science (of "mindfulness") and the allopathic medical world, which latter prescribes the practice as a form of prolonged exposure therapy to mitigate PTSD, for example.

In the Glossary for his textbook *Introducing Contemplative Studies*, scholar of religion Louis Komjathy provides some context:

Meditation. From the Latin *meditatio* (lit. "to think over," "to reflect on"). In technical Roman Catholic Christian usage, prayer involving reflection on particular subjects. Often contrasted with *lectio divina* (scripture study), *oratio* (silent or vocal prayer), and *contemplatio* (silent awareness of God's presence). A comparative category with vague definitional parameters. Usually seated practices that apparently alter consciousness in identifiable ways, although there are also forms of meditation that involve standing, walking, or lying down. Often conflated with Buddhist meditation. There are diverse forms of meditation with diverse purposes and goals. In a broader, comparative framework and pluralistic context, has some rough correspondence to contemplative practice and/or contemplation.²²⁶

²²⁵

<https://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/stein-per-ashbery.html#:~:text=Both%20Stanzas%20in%20Meditation%20and,not%20only%20because%20of%20the>

²²⁶ ICS 315.

Reading *Three Poems* may be framed as an act of prayer, an offering of holy attention, as David Marno writes of the sonnets of John Donne. Writing *Three Poems* was an act of reflection by Ashbery on the self as constituted by the inextricability of one's historical moment and one's personal relationships. In his later *Contemplative Literature: A Comparative Sourcebook*, Komjathy supplies this definition of

meditation:

"Meditation may be conceptualized as *a process of attentional restructuring wherein the mind can be trained both in concentration, the ability to rest undisturbed on a single object, and in mindfulness, the ability to observe its own moment-to-moment nature*, to pay attention undistractedly to a series of changing objects. This perceptual retraining allows a finely honed investigation of the rapidly changing self-concepts that perpetuate the sense of self. (Epstein and Lieff 1986, 58)"²²⁷

This gets us closer, and echoes of Largier's figural. In *Three Poems*, Ashbery meditates directly on the concept of meditation as something that activates the tension between the polarized spiritual paths of the active life and the contemplative life (*vita activa/vita contemplativa*, per Augustine's "Confessions"). While in the reflective mode of the poem, with the life of action frustratingly out of reach, he yet manages to restore faith in a mysterious spiritual process ("approaching the river at night") that he values as foundational to wading through those "commonplace events" that make "our being here:"²²⁸

There is probably more than one way of proceeding but of course you want only the one way that is denied you, the leaves over that barrier will never turn the sorrowful agate hue of the rest but only burnish perpetually in a colorless, livid explosion that is a chant of praise for your having remained behind to think rather than act.

Meditation rains down on you to be sucked up in turn by the sun like steam, making it all the more difficult to know where the branching out should occur.

²²⁷ CLCS 5.

²²⁸ This moment is a solid block in the original text; to spread out the density, I have taken the liberty of separating each sentence with a paragraph break.

It is like approaching a river at night, uncertain of the direction of the current.

But the pulsating of it leads to further certainties because, bouncing off the vortexes to be joined, the cyclical force succeeds in defining its negative outline.

For the moment uncertainty is banished at the same time that growing is introduced almost surreptitiously, under the guise of an invitation to learn all about these multiple phenomena which are our being here, since a knowledge of them is after all vital to our survival in this place of provocative but baffling commonplace events.

The meditative moment—“this moment, the only moment”²²⁹—is here wrought in highly poetic figures of nature and chthonic²³⁰ cycles of nourishment and energy, including articulate forays into the invisible energetic processes of vibration (quantum mechanics, a favorite realm of New Age science). Empirical knowing is obscured in favor of the certainty of the “pulsating” of inner (invisible, i.e.) experience. In the end, the passage supports the presence and needfulness of a healthy criticality after all; but that criticality must be in service of a higher spiritual pedagogy—one that praises, paradoxically vivid and drained, the decision to pause. Compare with John Milton in his Sonnet 19 (“When I consider how my light is spent”), a meditation on the poet’s blindness that recasts the wisdom of “the meek [egoless] shall inherit the earth”: “They also serve who only stand and wait.”

Nondoing is to do appropriately only what needs to be done and then be done with it. And to come to it with no preconceptions.

²²⁹ A favorite phrase of Jon Kabat-Zinn (PhD MIT), creator of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction technique in later 1970s at UMass, in his recorded meditations

²³⁰ I hope one day that someone writes the book on the chthonic in Ashbery. Cf. Harold Bloom’s contention that the American Sublime was built over and against an obsession with “what William Blake named the Female Will, the matrix of night, death, the mother, and the sea that Walt Whitman celebrated and longed to enter” (Bloom, *The Daemon Knows*, p18).

I do try to get it down the first time. I write very fast actually when I finally write. And then I go over and make corrections that seem called for and then I just put it away for a year or so.

—Ashbery, *Believer* interview (2009)

*Mind is shapely, art is shapely.
First thought, best thought.*

—Beat attitudes

*I like the idea of being as close to the original thought or voice as possible and not to falsify it by editing. Here is something I just read by Max Jacob, quoted by André Blanchet in the notes to Jacob's book *La défense de Tartufe*. He talks about composing novels or stories in a notebook while taking long walks through Paris. I'll translate, "The ideas I found in this way seemed sacred to me and I didn't change a comma. I believe that prose that comes directly from meditation is a prose that has the form of the brain and which it is forbidden to touch."*

—Ashbery, asked if he revises (*Paris Review* interview, Issue 90, 1983)

4. Historical Respiritualization: Three Poems, Six Ways

*Playing alone, I found the wall.
One side was gray, the other an indelible gray.
The two sides were separated by a third,
Or spirit wall, a coarser gray. The wall
Was chipped and tarnished in places,
Polished in places.*

*I wanted to put it behind me
By walking beside it until it ended.
This was never done. Meanwhile
I stayed near the wall, touching the two ends.*

*With all of my power of living
I am forced to lie on the floor.
To have reached the cleansing end of the journey,
Appearances put off forever, in my new life
There is still no freedom, but excitement
Turns in our throats like woodsmoke.*

*In what skyscraper or hut
I'll finish? Today there are tendrils
Coming through the slats and milky, yellowy grapes,
A mild game to divert the doorperson
And we are swiftly inside, the resurrection finished.*

—“And I’d Love You To Be In It,” *As We Know* (1979)

4.a. Channeling as “Articulated Revelation”

“Well, I hear voices . . . I don’t have any idea of what my own voice is, if indeed I have one, and I’m usually listening rather than talking and what I hear somehow gets written down.”²³¹

—Ashbery in an interview with John Koethe, emphasis added

²³¹ Koethe, J., and J. Ashbery. “An Interview with Ashbery, John.” *SubStance*, no. 37–3, 1983, pp. 178–86.

“The ‘I’ in my poems is not me, yet has to be, I suppose, by default, yet I feel like somebody else is doing the writing... I think a lot of poets must feel this way”²³²

—Ashbery in discussion with Al Filreis, emphasis added

New Age religion, according to Hanegraaff, is *revelation-based* religion; its knowledge is in large part derived from divine inspiration or divinely-authored scriptures.²³³ Just as with the Abrahamic religions, Hinduism, Sikhism, and others, channeled texts are foundational to the New Age. Channeling can be described as sourcing “inspiration” in the classical religious sense of inspiration (Lt. “to breathe in;” cf. “God breathed” 2 Timothy 3:16-17).²³⁴ Hanegraaff prefers to specify channeling as “an emic term used in the New Age context to refer to the general etic category of ‘articulated revelations,’”²³⁵ where “emic” refers to an “insider’s perspective,” i.e., a practitioner of the tradition being studied, and etic to an “outsider’s,” i.e., a scholar or researcher. The “emic” category generally relies on qualitative methods of trying to understand the internal logic or worldview of a religion or culture.

Harold Bloom described Ashbery’s writing as “visionary:” “*Three Poems*, in resonance and spirit’s strength, can stand near Rilke’s *Malte* as a visionary achievement.”²³⁶ At various points in his writing life, Ashbery “recalls being in a trance and/or entering a state that allows him to write and then not being able to remember what he wrote afterward.”²³⁷ Almost a century earlier, Rilke, too, credited hearing the opening lines of his famous *Elegies* being spoken to him by a voice that was carried on the wind as he stood on the cliffs overlooking Duino in northern

²³² March 26th, 2002, MP3 fragment #14 (via PennSound Archives)

²³³ NAR 28.

²³⁴ NAR 25.

²³⁵ NAR 27.

²³⁶ in his blurb of the Penguin edition (1986 printing)

²³⁷ Karin Roffman, @ 28:10 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cv8wyie3ss>

Italy.²³⁸ Accepted as the preeminent Modernist poet with mystical undertones, Rilke has since the 1990s been championed by adherents of the New Age, with much thanks to the translations of Stephen Mitchell, a Yale-trained American translator based in California whose second wife, Byron Katie, happens to be an extremely high-earning spiritual author and “New Age guru.”²³⁹

It is significant that Bloom chooses to compare these very long prose poems of Ashbery’s with the Austrian poet’s autobiographical early (and only) novel: both are what we might now categorize as “lyric essays,” recalling Largier’s invocation of the essayistic per Musil (see I.1.c). *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (*Die Aufzeichnungen Malte Laurids Brigge*, 1910) thematizes Rilke’s protracted depressive episode while living in poverty in Paris in his late 20s. *Malte* itself is best understood as an exercise in inner contemplation motivated by a will-to-spiritual-transformation via another ‘dark night of the soul’ (more couched in explicitly religious doubt than *Three Poems* can honestly be, 60 years later).

To return to the question of genre briefly: for me, *Malte* is the preeminent Modernist precursor to contemporary postcritical categories of writing like autotheory and autofiction, which are motivated by just what drove Rilke to prose: namely, seeking felt relief for a personalized suffering. *Malte* demonstrates a master poet breaking away from his dominant mode and doing psychology, philosophy, and cultural criticism “on himself”—i.e., psychologizing his religious doubts while sacralizing his psychological states—in experimental, fragmented prose, not unlike

²³⁸ “The Cambridge Companion to Rilke”, ed. Karen Leeder and Robert Vilain

²³⁹ Byron Katie credits her career as an author and public speaker to her self-described spontaneous enlightenment in 1986. Since their marriage, Stephen Mitchell has shifted from translating poetry to co-authoring and editing Katie’s self-help books (e.g., *A Mind At Home With Itself: How Asking Four Questions Can Free Your Mind, Open Your Heart, and Turn Your World Around*, 2017).

Metaphysical poet and Anglican theologian Thomas Traherne almost 240 years earlier in his *Centuries of Meditation*.²⁴⁰ Ashbery himself likewise predates and anticipates today's autotheory, especially evidenced in his trilogy of self-reflective 1970s collections *Three Poems*, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, and *As We Know*.

For comparison, other postsecular American poets working with ideas and practices of esoteric spirituality—particularly understood through the lens of the New-Age building block, transpersonal psychology—include James Merrill's famous use of the Ouija board and Jack Spicer's conviction that his poetry came to him from alien transmissions.²⁴¹ In a similar vein, painter and close friend Jane Freilicher described Ashbery as "just combing the Universe with his poems."²⁴² The replacement of God with a name or concept like 'the Universe' is a standard New Age evolution, the three most common being 'Universe,' 'Source,' and 'Spirit.'²⁴³

I want to dedicate some space now to *A Course in Miracles* (published 1975; 'channeled' 1965-1973), an "articulated revelation" incidentally written down at the same place and time as *Three Poems*, and to try doing comparative contemplative literary criticism across fields.

If we were to select one single text as "sacred scripture" in the New Age movement, the sheer awe and reverence with which The Course—as it is fondly called—is discussed by its devotees would make this huge volume the most obvious choice...

²⁴⁰ written ca. 1672; first published 1908.

²⁴¹ This section's theory of articulated revelation also productively aligns with the New Age principle of healing as a religious phenomenon covered in the next section. Consider this, from Spicer's poem "Sporting Life:"

*The trouble with comparing a poet with a radio is that radios
don't develop scar-tissue. The tubes burn out, or with a
transistor, which most souls are, the battery or diagram
burns out replaceable or not replaceable*

²⁴² Also from Roffman video

²⁴³ Also 'Spirit,' 'Mind,' 'Consciousness,' 'Life Force,' 'Energy,' 'Love' (NAR 186-7).

*The intention of the material is 'removing the blocks to the awareness of love's presence, which is your natural inheritance.'*²⁴⁴

In New York City in the second half of the 1960s, as Ashbery was taking down *Three Poems*, a 1,100-page text was being transcribed by clinical psychologist Dr Helen Shucman, who, having been hearing a persistent inner voice for the past few years, finally consented to its request that she “take notes.” Disturbed by repetitive inner statements, suffering extreme anxiety, and fearing psychosis and insanity, she confided in a colleague at Columbia University, who encouraged and assisted her in the dictation of the document.²⁴⁵ This process took eight years; the resulting “course” was circulated among friends informally, becoming increasingly widespread and popular inside and out of New York. *A Course in Miracles* was officially published in 1975.²⁴⁶

The Course is devised and formatted as a teaching device. It consists of three books: a 669-page Text; a 488-page Workbook for Students (broken into 365 lessons, one for each day of a year); and a 92-page Manual for Teachers. The content emphasizes application rather than theory, and experience rather than theology. It specifically states that “a universal theology is impossible, but a universal experience is not only possible but necessary.”²⁴⁷ (In the college Dante paper of his early 20s and in “The Recital” of his early-40s, Ashbery argues as much.)²⁴⁸ Although Christian in language, the Course claims to deal in universal spiritual themes.²⁴⁹ The

²⁴⁴ NAR 37-8.

²⁴⁵ For what it's worth, Shucman was lucid at all times during this laborious transcription process: “Helen at no time was in a trance or in anything remotely resembling a trance.” Minute 30:00

²⁴⁶ NAR 30.

²⁴⁷ C-in.2:5.

²⁴⁸ Cf. respectively Section 2, “You private person.” and “The Recital,” 322 et al.

²⁴⁹ <https://acim.org/acim/en/s/42#2:2-4> | Preface.2:2-4.

Course summarizes itself in this way: "Nothing real can be threatened. Nothing unreal exists. Herein lies the peace of God."

The voice which spoke to Shucman was motivated into divine revelation (transmitting the Course) by the need for a mass awakening from a thought system based in fear to one based in love, a classic oversimplification of late 1960s "countercultural" consciousness shift.²⁵⁰ As a perfect example of the psychologization of religion and sacralization of psychology, the Course insists it is not a religion, but rather a psychological training:²⁵¹ it outlines and teaches the discipline of a

Selected examples of the Course repurposing and transmuting Christian concepts and infusing them with psychological and philosophical theory: The mind of God is the mind of Love; We are ideas in the mind of God; God is the ultimate reality; The Holy Spirit is the connecting link between God and his separate sons

²⁵⁰ Cf. the cult classic 2001 movie "Donnie Darko", a pitch-perfect digestion of the degeneration and commodification of 60s/70s New Age themes into the 1990s 'spiritual marketplace.' "Donnie Darko" lifts Course in Miracles lessons almost verbatim—it had by then become widespread and famous thanks to activist and speaker Marianne Williamson's appearances on The Oprah Show in the early 90s. In the film, packaged "attitude lessons" are given to high schoolers, who react with sympathetic critical skepticism of the uncritical misapplication of spiritual principles for the sake of behavioral control:

MS. FARMER

As you can see, the Lifeline is controlled by two polar extremes: "Fear" and "Love". Fear is in the negative energy spectrum. Love is in the positive energy spectrum.

SEAN

(to Donnie)

No duh.

[...]

DONNIE (CONT'D)

There are other things that need to be taken into account here. Like the whole spectrum of human emotion. You're just lumping everything into these two categories... and, like, denying everything else.

MS. FARMER

(not knowing how to argue with him)

If you don't complete the assignment, you'll get a zero for the day.

²⁵¹ Channeled, or 'articulated,' by a clinical psychologist-cum-researcher, no less

relinquishment of a 'thought system based in fear' and acceptance instead of one 'based in love.' Separateness (illusion of 'ego-mind') produces fear. Importantly, it does not distinguish physical healing from emotional forgiveness.²⁵²

The Course asserts that enlightenment is a shift in self-perception from body identification (mortal circumstances) to spirit identification (ultimate reality of our identity, union, innocence). What is meant by 'the singular begotten son' is the (medieval, Catholic, mystical) union of all mankind. This esoteric sense of Christ in ACIM corresponds to the colloquial sense of 'the real you,' an experience of pure innocence (more than authenticity). 'Salvation' is understood as an escape from (or surrendering of) all concepts.²⁵³ The Course considers the historical Jesus to have been one actualization of that pure innocence which is the ultimate potential in all of us; this potential is also referred to in ACIM as one's 'internal teacher.' Once the 'internal teacher' is present more often than not, a person is able to fulfill their purpose in relation to others; that is, they live as a 'teacher of God.'

ACIM is designed to draw the reader, through daily contemplation of its lessons, into an experience of presence or stillness. Many lessons in the course are designed to improve human interactions. They treat relationships as spiritual exercise in order to awaken from the 'dream of fear' that is the result of believing the ego-mind's conviction of its own separateness. By the end of the 365-lesson course,

²⁵² These correspondences will be important in the following section for their resonance with Indigenous medicine traditions that are newly fashionable (i.e. beginning to be considered legitimate by people in power, and therefore available as) objects for study in the academy.

²⁵³ All thoughts, says the Course, are judgments; accessing a space of awareness beyond thoughts (innocent of them, you might say) produces forgiveness. This of course rhymes with the Buddhist goal of recognizing and transcending the unreality of mental fabrications through the practice of meditation (cf. Buddha's teachings in the Pali Canon, esp. Anapanasati Sutta, Satipatthana Sutta).

the essence of the teaching has students dwelling in pure awareness: “This course is a beginning, not an end.”²⁵⁴

Interestingly, large swaths of the Course are in blank verse (i.e., unrhymed iambic pentameter). Certain sections of the texts are highly poetic. Consider this excerpt from Chapter 31, “The Final Vision,” Part V., “Self-Concept Versus Self,” for its inherent critical-contemplative poetics-as-pedagogy:

17. The world can teach no images of you unless you want to learn them. ²There will come a time when images have all gone by, and you will see you know not what you are. ³It is to this unsealed and open mind that truth returns, unhindered and unbound. ⁴Where concepts of the self have been laid by is truth revealed exactly as it is. ⁵When every concept has been raised to doubt and question, and been recognized as made on no assumptions that would stand the light, then is the truth left free to enter in its sanctuary, clean and free of guilt. ⁶There is no statement that the world is more afraid to hear than this:

⁷I do not know the thing I am, and therefore do not know what I am doing, where I am, or how to look upon the world or on myself.

⁸Yet in this learning is salvation born. ⁹And What you are will tell you of Itself.²⁵⁵

One can imagine how such an approach might appeal to someone depressed. The course defines a *miracle* as anything that removes barriers to our awareness of love’s presence. To work a miracle is therefore to “heal” or adjust one’s own perception. ACIM refers to all humans as ministers of God, not unlike how bell hooks refers to all teachers as “healers.”²⁵⁶ To embody this role cannot happen, according to the Course, until a person surrenders all interpretations and judgments, and gets to a place beyond thinking. *Three Poems* was accused of bringing readers to just such a place when it was first published.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁴ ACIM, W-ep.1:1

²⁵⁵ <https://acim.org/acim/en/s/347#17:1-9> | T-31.V.17:1-9

²⁵⁶ *Teaching to Transgress* pp15 et al.

²⁵⁷ From a frustrated 1972 book review in the New York Times: “The very modesty of the book’s title is a provocation, for these are not poems at all, but meditations couched in a maddeningly elusive prose style. Never, I think, have the simple forms of prose been waylaid

What Zen tradition calls ‘beginner’s heart’ or ‘beginner’s attitude,’ updated for modern Westerners by Shunryu Suzuki (Suzuki Roshi) as ‘beginner’s mind’ in his 1970 book *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, is repackaged in Lesson One of the Course in Miracles: *Nothing that I see here means anything*. In his poem “The Ecclesiast,” as we will see,²⁵⁸ Ashbery appreciates this paradox of fulfilling meaninglessness in his redux of the Teacher of Wisdom in Ecclesiastes.²⁵⁹

4.b. “Healing” as Religious Phenomenon

We have a need [in the contemporary United States] to heal violence, whether from without or within. Our strongest writers—Emerson, Whitman, Melville, Dickinson, James, Stevens...—can meet that imaginative poverty and help protect the individual mind and society from themselves. I now have come to see that as the highest use of literature for our way of life.

—Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime* (2015, pp31)

“Therapy is learning. Change is the result of learning.”

—Edward Olvera, therapist/coach (Sacramento, March 8 2021)

Every situation, properly perceived, becomes an opportunity to heal.

—*A Course In Miracles*, T-19.I.2:1

Moving toward a fuller “meaninglessness” in the miraculous sense—i.e., participating in rituals of making meaning (out of suffering, for example) without dogmatizing our interpretations—usually makes humans feel better. As mentioned above, in the sacralization of psychology that underwrites texts like *A Course in*

so masterfully into statements that defy interpretation... If these notations seem at all clear, that is only because they misrepresent Ashbery's incredibly complex prose by attempting to analyze it.... The result is a poem that is fascinating, but impossible to evaluate. I fear, ultimately, that “Three Poems” may be a secret too well kept; a marvelous, but maddening grammar of hermetic moments from which the reader, however willing to be seduced, may be excluded.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/1972/04/09/archives/three-poems-by-john-ashbery-118-pp-new-york-the-viking-press-cloth.html>

²⁵⁸ See III.2.

²⁵⁹ See Chapter “Heliotropic Vanity in “The Ecclesiast,” or, the Wisdom of Love Without Work”

Miracles, to work a miracle is to “heal” one’s own perception. *Three Poems* reflects sustained perceptual shifts concerning communal, interpersonal, and personal happenings in Ashbery’s early-middle life: the cultural hangover of the 1960s (communal); his meeting (in 1970) and falling in love with David Kermani, the person who would become his lifelong partner (interpersonal); and Ashbery’s admitting to being depressed, and being treated clinically for that depression (inner-personal).²⁶⁰ I want us to consider these three features of historical biography in the context of the New Age, in particular its interest in healing as a religious phenomenon.

Three Poems emerges from biographical Ashbery’s “dark night of the soul:” a phase of suffering, a passive purification of the senses and spirit in mystical development, leading up to union with divinity. The phrase “dark night of the soul” originates in Saint John of the Cross’ poem of the same name and his commentary on said poem. The path to God is unknowable, he writes, and therefore in darkness. God itself, likewise essentially unknowable, is also this darkness.²⁶¹ In contemporary understanding, the phrase functions as a synonym for a crisis of faith—against which grain Ashbery recycles tropes of night, shade, and shadow, repeating his preference for darkness throughout his career.

It is of consummate importance to the New Age to balance and nourish the enmeshed triad of mental health, physical health, and spiritual health. Ashbery’s holistic well-being²⁶² takes center stage during his composition of *Three Poems* (between 1968 and 1971). The WASPish convention or obligation of “mind over

²⁶⁰ “I try to do something with the plangent qualities of ordinary day-to-day prose... the shrink that I used to see suggested writing off of my feelings about various people in my life who had been important to me, not *about* them, but about the things that came to me when I reflected on them...” —Ashbery, when asked about the inspiration for *Three Poems* by Ron Silliman in 2013 at Kelly Writer’s House

²⁶¹ See John of the Cross

²⁶² in/as/through the personal formation of the speaker and subject of his current work

matter” must be circumvented or pushed through toward greater understanding, or perhaps simple acceptance, in order for the poet to find peace and for the work to find fulfillment in adequate expression.

With externally-decreed, cognition-qualified hope initially prevailing, confusion leads to disorder, chill, and a waking up to death (see below for an annotation of Ashbery’s “dark night of the soul” journey to the psychic underworld). Opening the book, many sections of “The New Spirit” read as if annotating an upset or “disturbed” person’s trail of thoughts and feelings, as if we were reading an internal transcript during a meditation (parentheticals are my glosses of the action of the excerpt):

It is the law to think now. To think becomes the law, the dream of young and old alike moving together where the dark masses become confused. (We are confused when we are made to hope only for approved thoughts...) We must drink the confusion, sample that other, concerted, dark effort that pushes not to the light, but toward a draft of dank, clammy air. (The “other” effort suggests “we” generally strive for order, light, warmth...) We have broken through into the meaning of the tomb. (Experience of depression as a knowledge of deadness; or perhaps acceptance or awareness of one’s depressive state rolls back the stone of confusion²⁶³...) But the act is still proposed, before us, it needs pronouncing. To formulate oneself around this hollow, empty sphere . . . (Moving away from the law of thinking, consider construction of a self based only in proposition, potential, void...) To be your breath as it is taken in and shoved out. (Meditator moves away from law of thinking temporarily to drop into embodiment perhaps via image or sense of the emptying-out lungs) Then, quietly, it would be as objects placed along the top of a wall: (By identifying with one’s breathing, a ‘formulation’ that takes place without action or its pronouncement, organic human life takes the shape of things that do not have any meaning assigned to them, but that nevertheless are privy to a higher perspective) a battery jar, a rusted pulley, shapeless wooden boxes, an open can of axle grease, two lengths of pipe. . . . (Perhaps the meditator has opened his eyes momentarily:) We see this moment (Yes, he has) from the outside as within. (Or has he? Either way, a unity of external with internal consciousness occurs, a blip of successful

²⁶³ “If you’re completely okay with the fact that life is difficult, then it’s no longer difficult” —Eckhart Tolle (New Age author, born Ulrich Tölle, 1948, Lünen, Germany)

interconnectedness of self and thoroughly inanimate others). *There is no need to offer proof.* (Either this experience is unprovable to those still committed to thinking as a rule, or has transcended beyond proving...) *It's funny.* . . . (Striking oddness and amusement, the two main meanings of 'funny,' are commonly reported flavors when a meditator or journeyer's 'altered state' bridges "the outside" / "within") *The cold, external factors* (perhaps the externally-conditioned thinking mind? Perhaps the higher neutral perspective of the items atop the wall?) *are inside us at last, growing in us for our improvement,* (this movement of the outside within is apparently sought after for self-improvement (*at last*), the general goal of movements labeled "Spiritual But Not Religious") *asking nothing, not even a commemorative thought. And what about what was there before?*

Unsurprisingly for the religious historian, in the New Age movement, 'healing' and 'personal growth' are closely linked. Practices and techniques are often both religious and therapeutic in nature, and unable to be placed only in either category.²⁶⁴ Certainly the so-called 'Psychedelic Renaissance,' its many arms directed variously by cognitive scientists, psychotherapists, and chaplains and ministers, is currently struggling with whether such a distinction is possible or useful.

Useful metaphors abound that describe experiences of mental illness as a physically-imaginable obstacle. In the biology of trauma, we are considered 'frozen' in time, at the moment of the shock or wounding; depression is a stagnation or block to the lively processes of the organism. In general, the New Age position on health and healing refers to an easeful flow of energy (within the person, and within the ecosystem in which the person lives) that is taken for granted to be the natural state of the world and of living things.

Against the block of grief she anticipated in her son, Helen Ashbery gave 13-year-old John his first notebook upon the death of his little brother from leukemia. Ashbery kept regular and fastidious diaries for the next three years, during which

²⁶⁴ NAR 46.

time he decided to become a poet. Years later, Ashbery would replace keeping a diary with walking, conscious of replacing one contemplative mode for another, to retain access to a “flow state” for receiving language and ideas for poems.²⁶⁵ During the years between these journaling and walking practices, in various letters to friends and college papers, Ashbery negotiated an ‘inner conflict’ and spoke to the ‘desperate need’ and ‘societal neglect’ of poets in particular, which had already chosen him for a vocation. These mentions all rephrase emotional and psychological wounds that create illness, according to both New Age and Indigenous knowledges, if not addressed, processed, and grieved.

Silent sitting and writing (I extrapolate from Komjathy’s gloss on “meditation”) are two complementary contemplative practices for greater self-awareness and understanding of one’s place in greater ecosystems. Ben Lerner has pointed out that Ashbery includes, in his 1957 review of Gertrude Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation*, this hint to his own readers: “The poem is a hymn to possibility; a celebration of the fact that the world exists, that things can happen.”²⁶⁶ In the act of writing and/or the reading, a poem is praise; this affirmation of life is intended to function as an antidepressant on the writer and/or reader’s personal psychology.

To summarize key New Age views on health and healing, Hanegraaff cites Marilyn Ferguson, author of the influential 1980 book *The Aquarian Conspiracy*. Ferguson agrees with Tolstoy that “All happy families are alike,” stating “All wholeness is the same”:

If we have been keeping secrets from ourselves—unexamined conflicts, suppressed yearnings—illness may force them into awareness. ... Just as

²⁶⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cv8wyie3ss> 10/17/2023, Karin Roffman on Ashbery, American Library in Paris

²⁶⁶ <https://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/stein-per-ashbery.html>

*the search for self becomes a search for health, so the pursuit of health can lead to greater self-awareness. All wholeness is the same.*²⁶⁷

This reinforces Aztec ways of understanding sickness as primarily spiritual and not material, to the extent that such a binary even holds water in Indigenous epistemologies.²⁶⁸ In her article “Calling Our Spirits Back: Indigenous ways of diagnosing and treating soul sickness” (2012), healer/midwife and professor Patrisia Gonzales reiterates the modern ‘re-infusing’ of healing as religious phenomenon not from the whitewashed New Age context but from the Macehual (Aztec, ‘common folk’) medicinal tradition :

Many Indigenous peoples migrating to the United States are re-infusing these Indigenous theories into the burgeoning communities that are viewed as either Indigenous or Latino and who have maintained, to varying degrees, Indigenous forms of healing in what is termed *curanderismo*, or curing philosophy. (38)

Alonso del Río (b. 1962, Lima, Peru) is one living example of such a *curandero*, or healer, trained in the tradition of Shipibo people of the Amazon. Del Río is invested in bringing the ancestral teachings of his teaching lineage to the West (a term he uses freely²⁶⁹) as they/we burn the house/rainforest down looking for ‘authentic’ ‘healing’ experiences vis-à-vis Indigenous sacred plant ceremony. Del Río offers an online self-study course designed for Western therapists who offer psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy to offer traditional support and context and to flag hazards of the course. He hosts ayahuasca ceremonies where he reservedly welcomes the

²⁶⁷ NAR 245.

²⁶⁸ Gonzales, P. (2012). “Calling Our Spirits Back: Indigenous ways of diagnosing and treating soul sickness.” *Fourth World Journal*. Autumn. Vol 11 Num 2. pp. 25-39.

²⁶⁹ “The **cultural essentialism** that sneaks in with the term “Western” has also hampered a comprehensive understanding of the consequences of colonialism and colonial exchanges for esotericism.” (3) Strube argues unequivocally to drop the qualifier (Strube, chapter 2). Asprem, Egil, and Julian Strube. *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, Brill, 2021.

increasing interest of foreigners, taking this as a signal that at least part of ‘the West’ (call it the Anthropocene) wants to prepare itself for a ‘paradigm shift’ (call it the dissolution of an empire of rampant egoic greed). In his second book, *The Four Altars: The Book of Liberation* (2006; first English edition 2019), del Río shows how Shipibo perspective aligns with the familiar New Age criticism of the rational ‘ego-mind’. He puts it this way:

The crux of the problem is this: while we are being governed by these [mental] patterns – whether social, cultural, sexual, intellectual, instinctive, etc.– one can’t even begin to perceive alternative ways of thinking which could lead towards liberation. The most influential and foundational patterns are developed as responses to emotional trauma that occurred during our childhood, and from them we construct the rest. At the beginning of our process of awakening, the mind (which includes our emotional body) is nothing more than a giant wound. Every person is identified with and acts primarily from their wound until there is healing (relaxation). Only then may one begin to exist in, and manifest from, their heart.²⁷⁰

Or, as an early poet-teacher taught me with regards to poetic form, you must learn the rules before you can break them. One must construct a wield an ego, a separated sense of self, before you dismantle that construction and liberate yourself ‘personally,’ i.e., become able to see other possibilities for being and relating at interpersonal and communal levels.

Del Río agrees with Marilyn Ferguson (and Saint John of the Cross) that sickness cannot be healed without a sense of meaningful personal agency: awareness reveals understanding, which resolves internal conflicts, just as the Course in Miracles fosters awareness that resolves interpersonal conflicts.²⁷¹ In one

²⁷⁰ *The Four Altars* 24-5, emphasis added.

²⁷¹ Healing as a religious phenomenon grounded in personal responsibility is also a foundation of the Course in Miracles:

“1. All magic is an attempt at reconciling the irreconcilable. ²All religion is the recognition that the irreconcilable cannot be reconciled. ³Sickness and perfection are irreconcilable. ⁴If God created you perfect, you are perfect. ⁵If you believe you can be sick, you have placed other gods before Him. ⁶God is not at war with the god of sickness you made, but you are. ⁷He is

module of del Río's online course "Ancestral Teachings for the Psychedelic Renaissance" called "The Legacy of Ancient Cultures," he says that one's conscious personal recognition of one's condition is *required* in the Amazonian medical system: "It is accepted that if a person does not take responsibility for their condition or illness, they will not heal." This particularizes his earlier theory from *The Four Altars*:

Our thoughts create our emotions, and our emotions create new thoughts.²⁷²
This is one of the greatest truths in our life and the essence of true medicine.
Both health and disease begin in the subtle and move towards the dense.
(83)

Or, as Ashbery puts it in "The System":

The darkness that surrounds you now does not exist, because it never had any independent existence: you created it out of the spleen and torment you felt. It looks real enough to hide you from the light of the sun, but its reality is as specious as that of a mirage. The clouds are dispersing. And nothing comes to take their place, to interpose itself between you and the reality which you dreaded and which is therefore real... (303)

Recall bell hooks, for whom this "essence of true medicine" is a critical and pedagogical imperative in academia: "I saw in theory then a location for healing."²⁷³ Fundamentally spiritual though her thinking is, bell hooks is unlikely ever to be characterized as a New Age figure. She takes healing as a religious phenomenon for granted, however, in her influential call for 'engaged pedagogy.' Engaged pedagogy, she argues, attempts to interpret *curanderismo* for the classroom, generating a site for 'healing' that is activated *if and only if* the practitioner (the theorist and/or teacher) is themselves operating as a spiritual being. Interestingly, Ashbery takes up his first

the symbol of deciding against God, and you are afraid of him because he cannot be reconciled with God's Will. "If you attack him, you will make him real to you. "But if you refuse to worship him in whatever form he may appear to you, and wherever you think you see him, he will disappear into the nothingness out of which he was made."
(<https://acim.org/acim/en/s/142#1:1-9> | T-10.IV.1:1-9)

²⁷² Cf. Hanegraaff 229, "Creating Our Own Reality," "one of the most central concerns of the New Age movement"

²⁷³ TTT 39.

teaching position in 1972, the same year that *Three Poems* is published. He will teach creative writing at Brooklyn College for more than a decade, then at Bard from the mid-1980s until 2008.²⁷⁴

For an example of Ashbery's awareness of the effects of his mental health on his thinking, consider this exposition of depression from near the end of "The System" (94), and consider the ways in which it shores up a multitude of New Age beliefs, from the basic goodness of the universe²⁷⁵ to the more extreme "I create my reality" or "I am God." It also may belie a skepticism about the individualistic methods of conventional psychotherapy.

1 Who am I after all, you say despairingly once again, to have merited so much attention on the part of the universe; what does it think to get from me that it doesn't have already? 2 I know too that my solipsistic approach is totally wrong-headed and foolish, that the universe isn't listening to me any more than the sea can be heard inside conch shells. 3 But I'm just a mute observer—it isn't my fault that I can really notice how everything around me is waiting just for me to get up and say the word, whatever that is...

Here, Christian identifications are called up and put to one side. Eden's Adam's orders, trivialized ("just... get up and say the word"), aren't working for Ashbery in this fallen instant. Even in the cradle of poesis ("who am I after all"), we are far from Logos, the birth of the word in the soul. The painful existential ignorance of the ego causes despair.²⁷⁶ The narcissistic self-loathing and self-pity of a depressive state belies frozen grief, unacknowledged pain that eddies and paralyzes a downward spiral of simultaneous rejection of self and world (these must, according to New Age holism, be simultaneous, for self and world are mystically identical). This theme

²⁷⁴ LoA Chronology 1000.

²⁷⁵ A conviction repeated elsewhere in the poems, such as in the prior paragraph: "Surely all this living that has gone on that is ours is good in some way, though we cannot tell why:" 93-4

²⁷⁶ Cf. 254: *Seeking happiness as a distant shore, populated by others...*

appears elsewhere (see “The New Spirit,” 276: *Meanwhile he had taken the universal emotional crisis on his own shoulders, not from altruism but through a mistaken notion that things could be no other way...*). Yet there is something like outward-facing (i.e. life-affirming) hope in the speaker’s defiant ‘noticing,’ that he continues to ‘notice’ despite his own solipsism.

Paying attention serves the speaker’s making moves, calls for thaw.²⁷⁷ The sea in a conch shell is a trenchant choice, despite Ashbery’s signature rug-pulling framing of the image in a negation (“I know no one’s listening, *but...*”). The image of the sea within a shell is reminiscent of mystical analogies of a droplet of water within the ocean (Katha Upanishad, 2.1.15), symbolizing the identity of the individual soul (Atman) with the ultimate reality or divine consciousness (Brahman).²⁷⁸ One of the most popular New Age appropriations of the Upanishads, this droplet analogy is repeated constantly by figures like Eckhart Tolle and Marianne Williamson, reinforcing the insight of universal interconnectedness.²⁷⁹ The sound we hear inside a conch shell is the result of ambient noise being amplified and resonating within the

²⁷⁷ Compare Rilke’s “First Elegy” (1923): *Often a star was waiting for you to notice it*

²⁷⁸ 4. *Om is the bow, the Self is the arrow, Brahman is called its aim. It is to be hit by a man who is not thoughtless; and then, as the arrow (becomes one with the target), he will become one with Brahman.*

5. *In him the heaven, the earth, and the sky are woven, the mind also with all the senses. Know him alone as the Self, and leave off other words! He is the bridge of the Immortal.*

6. *He moves about becoming manifold within the heart where the arteries meet, like spokes fastened to the nave. Meditate on the Self as Om! Flail to you, that you may cross beyond (the sea of) darkness!*

<https://www.hinduwebsite.com/sacredscripts/hinduism/upanishads/mundaka.asp>

²⁷⁹ For fuller exposition of this theme, see next section, “The Quest for a Unified Worldview.” VI-x-1-2:

“These eastern rivers, dear boy, flow along to the east and the western ones to the west. They rise from the ocean and merge in the ocean, and become that ocean itself. And there as these rivers do not know themselves as “I am this river, I am that river”, even so, dear boy, all these creatures, having come from Being, do not know, “We have come from Being”. from Chhandogya Upanishad

shell, which creates a white noise effect that can resemble the sound of the ocean. White noise is a mix of different frequencies that blend together to create a single, continuous sound. White noise can sound similar to the ocean, as the ocean is also a combination of different sounds and frequencies. Any and all of this describes Ashbery's high-low collage-style poetics, where his chopping and screwing of language of the profane somehow approximates the sacred. It is as if his performative ekphrasis here is not of visual artwork, but of philosophy and religious scripture.

In an amusing twist of modern self-consciousness, the speaker then insists it is not his (all-too-human) 'fault' that he has the awareness of the awesome co-creative power of his perception, though at the present moment (due to his depression, perhaps) he is refusing to wield that worlding power, or is otherwise prevented from 'say[ing] the wor[ld].' To psychologize this moment of sacred image, the narcissistic self-blame that often accompanies or prefigures a depressive episode may have resulted from the speaker's pointed nonbelief in anything 'larger' 'hearing' him. His sensitivity to this co-creative dynamic between himself and the universe (the 'everything around me') is sketched as a sore point, a pressure, a source of anxiety. It could be argued that Ashbery's entire artistic career would be well-framed as a journey of healing as a religious phenomenon.

Every single problem comes down to a lack of openness.

The core of all prayer is: help to recognize myself.

I have no center. I don't see anything as my center.

If you talk about no self, everybody disappears. So here (in the West) I have to say, "infinite potentiality." Even though "no self" is the complete self!

The most flexible identity is no identity.

All blessings come from being no one.

—notes from Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, Berkeley, April 2023

"Today is a good day—an old war cry."

—Dr. Gene Hightower, clinical psychologist, Emeryville

In the course of his psychoanalysis, Ashbery's therapist recommended a book of practical theology, Thomas Traherne's *Centuries of Meditations* (1636?-1674).²⁸⁰ The short passages concentrate on themes of happiness, which Traherne calls *felicity*, and especially the experience of this state in childhood. They are mystical ecstatic radical personal theological texts, tracts in lyrical prose. The first entry reads:

An empty book is like an infant's soul, in which anything may be written. It is capable of all things, but containeth nothing. I have a mind to fill this with profitable wonders. And since Love made you put it into my hands I will fill it with those Truths you love without knowing them: with those things which, if it be possible, shall shew my Love; to you in communicating most enriching Truths: to Truth in exalting her beauties in such a Soul.

²⁸⁰ Traherne left this collection of prose poems (as one could describe them) untitled; they were arranged in batches of 100 ("Centuries") and retroactively titled "Meditations" by a publisher, similar to the way in which *Three Poems* were labeled 'meditational' by John Hollander and others in reviews.

Like Traherne's *Centuries*, Ashbery's *Three Poems* are love poems for the universe, for everything in the diverse pluriverse of experience, made possible by unitive consciousness, based in the universal interrelatedness of a holistic understanding of the nature of reality that is culturally embedded in New Age Religion. The toggle between one-to-one human intimacy and expansive cosmic unity is a common enough feature of this book to support an updated description of Ashberyian lyric as fundamentally 'mystical.'²⁸¹ It is dedicated to the present moment: "*Three Poems*," Ashbery said in the original edition's author's note, "tries to stay close to the way we talk and think without expecting what we say to be recorded or remembered."²⁸²

What do we say when we do not expect to be remembered? While all his later work will aim for this, *Three Poems* is the first to render the full flush of the present moment, with no egoic eye on either the past or future (correctness or posterity). Formally, and in its apparently baffling New Age contents, *Three Poems* breaks with modern-poetic orthodoxy and sets Ashbery on the wild track of the rest of his career. It lays the groundwork, theoretically, and I would of course argue spiritually, for his next book, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), which is already preparing to be born: he had seen the Parmigianino painting in Vienna in 1959; and he begins composing that poem in 1973, immediately after *Three Poems* is published.²⁸³ Perhaps the writing of that poem, which turns the spotlight permanently on him, is his last quiet moment of unobserved contemplation.²⁸⁴ It is impossible,

²⁸¹ Cf. "The System," 95: *But as you continue gazing embarrassedly into the eyes of the beloved, talking about extraneous matters, you become aware of an 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...*

²⁸² Ashbery, John. *Three Poems*. New York: Penguin Books, 1972. (From the author's note.)

²⁸³ See LoA Chronology, 1000-01.

²⁸⁴ "1976: *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* wins the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award—the first time all three major American prizes are

after the worldly success of *Self-Portrait*, that Ashbery will ever again write something that he cannot “expect to be remembered.” The poetry of the rest of his career will strive to register the thrill of possibility that only exists in what he calls “the permanent now.”

4.c. The Quest for a Unified Worldview

*The prose poem seems to me to be especially suited to this kind of writing, since it implies a beginning and an end, a setting out and a finishing, a wholeness that is both artificial and authentic.*²⁸⁵

By dint of its historical moment, New Age spirituality is likewise “both artificial and authentic” in its claims to wholeness. Salvation history, beginning with Paul—Christianity’s imposition of a restricted linear timeline onto history, arguably the invention of a modern understanding of time—is echoed here too, “since it implies a beginning and an end.”

Contemporaneous with the bloom of aboveboard interest in mind-widening psychedelic synthetics (LSD, MDMA, DMT) and vast underground mycelial networks (psilocybin mushroom), the complex interconnectedness of all beings has recently become an accepted understanding in the academy. James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis’ Gaia hypothesis in the 1970s set the stage for an openness to holism in academia while New Age ideas were still unthinkable there. More recent local examples of universal interconnectedness or ‘web thinking’ include the work of physicist Karen Barad (agential realism), ecofeminist Donna Haraway (making kin),

given to the same book. From this point forward, Ashbery is increasingly seen as one of the most important poets of his generation; numerous academic essays praising his work are published by influential critics such as Harold Bloom, Marjorie Perloff, and Helen Vendler. (Chronology 1001)

²⁸⁵ Ashbery, John. “The Impossible: An Introduction to the Prose Poem.” *Selected Prose*, 126-127.

and Anna Tsing (science studies). Indigenous examples include Betty Krawec (*Becoming Kin*) and Alonso del Río (quadripartition, *The Four Altars: The Book of Liberation*).

Holism, a view of the nature of reality that underwrites a spiritual quest for “wholeness,” summarizes the orientation of multiple alternatives to two categories considered by New Agers to be inaccurate and damaging, namely, dualistic and reductionist approaches to the nature of the universe. Holistic alternatives “systematically attempt—with varying degrees of success—to avoid and replace dualism and reductionism.”²⁸⁶ The New Age desire to achieve unitive consciousness (the “mystical” in McGinn’s capacious sense), the co-creative (or ‘worlding’) emphases on holistic health and our individual entwinement within greater ecological systems, and the acceptance of a global (indeed, cosmic) network of interconnectedness all express this holism. The development of a sacred transpersonal psychology is another manifestation of this desire. The universal interrelatedness of everything in the universe is an obvious underwriting of any reader of Ashbery, so obvious perhaps that it escapes notice, taken for granted, as soon as we enter “the open field of narrative possibilities”²⁸⁷ that characterizes the Ashberyan lyrical oeuvre.

I think it would be most useful for the purposes of engaged pedagogy to read the Ashberyan speaker ‘lyric I’ transpersonally,²⁸⁸ which requires understanding and appreciating the origins, context, and goals of transpersonal psychology as a

²⁸⁶ NAR 119.

²⁸⁷ “The New Spirit,” 273.

²⁸⁸ *He thought he had never seen anything quite so beautiful as that crystallization into a mountain of statistics: out of the rapid movement to and fro that abraded individual personalities into a channel of possibilities, remote from each other and even remoter from the eye that tried to contain them* (“The New Spirit,” 277, emphasis added: see how the “eye” can be read too as ‘the lyric “I”’)

founding thrust of 1960s New Age religion. A frame built for getting beyond the coping construct of the ego, “Transpersonal psychology can be regarded as the theoretical wing of the Human Potential Movement,”²⁸⁹ beginning with Abraham Maslow and flowering with Stanislav Grof. “Transpersonal psychology takes religious and mystical experiences seriously as constituting a domain *sui generis*, refusing to follow the reductionistic interpretations widely accepted in other psychological schools” (NAR 51). Predecessors therefore include William James and Carl Gustav Jung.

“The empirical branch [of transpersonal psychology],” continues Hanegraaff, “has largely concentrated on the field of so-called Altered States of Consciousness induced either by drugs or by various mind-expanding techniques.”²⁹⁰ Premises of transpersonal psychology can be applied theoretically to improve understanding of Ashbery’s lyric and practically to help us in the pedagogy of writing and reading as contemplative practices. For example:

Stan Grof believes that transpersonal experiences empirically support a radically new, holographic paradigm: ‘The universe is seen as an infinite web of adventures in consciousness, and the dichotomies between the experiencer and experienced, form and emptiness, time and timelessness, determinism and free will, or existence and nonexistence has been transcended.’²⁹¹

Grof’s “holotropic”²⁹² mode of consciousness “involves the experience of oneself as a potentially unlimited field of consciousness that has access to all aspects of reality without the mediation of senses.”²⁹³ Open to any page of *Three Poems* and you are

²⁸⁹ NAR 50.

²⁹⁰ NAR 51.

²⁹¹ NAR 226.

²⁹² Nonordinary states of consciousness, compared with ‘hylotropic’ or everyday, matter-oriented consciousness (‘consensus reality’); NAR 250. Ashbery acknowledged writing in holotropic trance states (see footnote 41).

²⁹³ NAR 332.

likely to find a phrase, sentence, or paragraph that extols just this worldview; indeed, when he turns from *Three Poems* to tackle *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, he will use that book's title poem to argue for the same premise, though there he frames it negatively.²⁹⁴ Whether our universal interrelatedness is a blessing or a curse is what occupies Ashbery's prose here. That that holism underlies everything is taken completely for granted as the premise of these extended contemplative exercises.

Hanegraaff continues,

"Th[e] use of transpersonal experiences (Altered States of Consciousness, trance states) as an empirical foundation for a spiritual worldview is a prominent example of the psychologizing of religion and sacralization of psychology. Defenders of the transpersonal perspective agree that religious entities are 'all in the mind,' but then go on to assert that whatever is in the mind is *real*..."²⁹⁵ For transpersonal psychologist Jean Houston, it all boils down (experience, perception, reality) to "resonance," and we can become conscious and creative participants in the dance of frequency. 'In so doing,' she concludes, 'we become world-makers'."²⁹⁶

Worlding involves taking radical responsibility for one's inner and outer environment, to empower oneself and others by affirming life. Its legitimate service as theory responds to deconstruction and poststructuralism's negation of meaning-making. For New Agers, the statement "I create my own reality" is literal. Put in a binary, poesis

²⁹⁴ Consider this passage ("Self-Portrait" 435-444), which both takes a jab at philosophy and struggles to conceptualize the indivisible (and therefore, according to philosophical logic, ineffable) present moment, the simultaneous 'bread and butter' and 'unicorn' of contemplative practice and spiritual development:

*It seems like a very hostile universe
But as the principle of each individual thing is
Hostile to, exists at the expense of all the others
As philosophers have often pointed out, at least
This thing, the mute, undivided present,
Has the justification of logic, which
In this instance isn't a bad thing
Or wouldn't be, if the way of telling
Didn't somehow intrude, twisting the end result
Into a caricature of itself...*

²⁹⁵ NAR 227. Cf. also the poem "Poetry," by Marianne Moore, one of Ashbery's favorite poets, and its famous analogy for lyric: "imaginary gardens with real toads in them."

²⁹⁶ NAR 229.

and worlding are examples of aesthetic / artistic expressions of spirit that bubble over into the 'realer' world of matter. Speaking (or writing) thoughts into language make or 'world'. "In Christology, the Logos (Koinē Greek: Λόγος, lit. 'word, discourse, or reason') is a name or title of Jesus Christ, seen as the preeminent expression in fullness of all the attributes, the complete thought, and the entire "knowable" reality of the infinite and spiritually transcendent Godhead. The concept derives from John 1:1, which in the Douay–Rheims, King James, New International, and other versions of the Bible, reads:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*²⁹⁷

Three Poems begins with "The New Spirit." "The New Spirit" begins:

I thought if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer, way.

The creator of this new sentence, stanza, poem, book, and form manifests by means of worded thoughts. Its initial impulse is the will to totality, 'all'-encompassing inclusivity, in the literary spirit of American cataloguers Ginsberg and Whitman. 'And' then, flipping the coin of creation, the other side shows the spirit of the empty rice bowl, the radical negation of kenosis. Relative ('truer') "truth" is again at issue, as in "The Ecclesiast". Seemingly disconnected fragments splay out as the third move of *Three Poems*' maker and a compromise between the first two 'ways:'

clean-washed sea

The flowers were.

²⁹⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Logos#Christianity>

Two images now refigure, or metaphorize, or spiritualize, the second half of “The New Spirit”’s opening chiasmus, where “clean-washed sea” (A) is kenotic and “The flowers were” (B) is all-inclusive. Water washing water leaves no trace, is a contemplative practice of nondoing, the planet’s feminine mutable element, untraceable, unfathomably deep. “The flowers were” makes a little fun by summing up Romanticism, exemplifying the florid emotional abundance of that tradition of lyric poetry, à la Wordsworth’s daffodils²⁹⁸. It also prefigures the second half of Ashbery’s “What is Poetry” (*Houseboat Days*, 1977), which thinks again the idea of thoughts:

*In school
All the thought got combed out:*

*What was left was like a field.
Shut your eyes, and you can feel it for miles around.*

*Now open them on a thin vertical path.
It might give us—what?—some flowers soon?*

The man who has God essentially present to him grasps God divinely, and to him God shines in all things; for everything tastes to him of God, and God forms himself for the man out of all things. God always shines out in him, in him there is a detachment and a turning away, and a forming of his God whom he loves and who is present to him. It is like a man consumed with a real and burning thirst, who may well not drink and may turn his mind to other things. But whatever he may do, in whatever company he may be, whatever he may be intending or thinking of or working at, still the idea of drinking does not leave him, so long as he is thirsty. The more his thirst grows, the more the idea of drinking grows and intrudes and possesses him and will not leave him. Or if a man loves something ardently and with all his heart, so that nothing else has savor for him or touches his heart but that, and that and nothing but that is his whole object: Truly, wherever he is, whomever he is with, whatever he may undertake, whatever he does, what he so loves never passes from his mind, and he finds the image of what he loves in everything, and it is the more present to him the more his love grows and grows. He does not seek rest, because no unrest hinders him.

²⁹⁸ “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” 1802, which ends: “They flash upon that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude; / And then my heart with pleasure fills, / And dances with the daffodils.”

—Meister Eckhart (c. 1260—1328); from Counsels on Discernment
(Counsel 6, emphasis added)

What follows is a four-sentence excerpt from “The System”²⁹⁹ that plots out how, in the thinking of Ashbery’s speaker/seeker, holism (in both material and immaterial manifestations) gives way to “parallelism”, which movement reveals the fundamental “I am God” and/or “I create my reality” beliefs of New Age (sentence one). In *New Age Religion*, Hanegraaff devotes 11 pages in his chapter on the nature of reality to the idea of parallelism as an emergence of the “universal interrelatedness” implication of New Age holism. Confirming this to be fully in New Age territory, Ashbery’s speaker/seeker cops to the sacralization of the individual psyche when he lands on the paradox that it is the will to self, or acceptance or realization of one’s uniqueness, that renders him the site of the universal (sentence three). Far from a paralyzing solipsism, this navel-gazing conclusion is sourced via recognition of universal sameness (sentence three). Furthermore, framed as an evolutionary adaptation,³⁰⁰ the conclusion that the forms and contents of ‘the new spirit’ and ‘the system’ as such are ultimately self-created, i.e. born of one’s own desire for change (sentences three and four), is precisely what necessitates a sacralization of the individual psychology “on[to] a higher plane.” In this excerpt, Ashbery, most likely unwittingly, offers an exegesis of the intellectual lineage of psychiatrist Stan Grof, enacting the transpersonal psychology that will come to provide the New Age holistic paradigm for overcoming the dualism between self and other, inner and outer world.

1 Today your wanderings have come full circle. 2 Having begun by rejecting the idea of oneness in favor of a plurality of experiences, earthly and spiritual, in fact a plurality of different lives that you had lived out to your liking while time proceeded at

²⁹⁹ 100-101 of Penguin. He discusses the holism/parallelism, unity/diversity theme all over the poems; this is a random selection. See also p.80 of Penguin 3P.

³⁰⁰ see NAR 158 for New Age corollaries on the evolutionary perspective.

another, imperturbable rate, you gradually became aware that the very diversity of these experiences was endangered by its own inner nature, for variety implies parallelism, and all these highly individualistic ways of thinking and doing were actually moving in the same direction and constantly threatening to merge with one another in a single one-way motion toward that invisible goal of concrete diversity. 3 For just as all kinds of people spring up on earth and imagine themselves very different from each other though they are basically the same, so all these ideas had arisen in the same head and were merely aspects of a single organism: yourself, or perhaps your desire to be different. (i.e. to change or heal yourself; to shift or transcend your situation) 4 So that now in order to avoid extinction it again became necessary to invoke the idea of oneness, only this time if possible on a higher plane, in order for the similarities in your various lives to cancel each other out and the differences to remain, but under the aegis of singleness, separateness, so that each difference might be taken as the type of all of the others and yet remain intrinsically itself, unlike anything in the world...

There are countless examples throughout *Three Poems* and the rest of Ashbery's career where he describes the intermingling, liminal slippage, or outright mystical union of two or more people,³⁰¹ living things,³⁰² environmental surrounds,³⁰³ etc., all of which suggest that a holistic 'universal interrelatedness' causes his thinking friction for his whole life. Although the issue is often couched in the language of art and artifice (styled usually after "all the world's a stage"), whether that union is performative or authentic, real, is a secondary concern, a wrinkle in aesthetic theory; the foundational hypothesis, existential and religious in origin, never changes: Creation, and the divine role of the human in creation.

Yet in the end, we think, this [for spectators to be absorbed into the play] may become possible; that is the time when audience and actor and writer and director all mingle joyously together as one, as the curtain descends a last time... yet... the apotheosis never attracted you, only those few moments in the next-to-last act where everything suddenly becomes momentarily clear, to sink again into semi-obscurity before the final blaze which merely confirms the truth of what had been succinctly stated long before. (309)

³⁰¹ See "The Grapevine," "All and Some"

³⁰² See "Some Trees"

³⁰³ See "As You Came from the Holy Land"

If the apotheosis were all, there would be no need for poetry.³⁰⁴ The attraction is to the moment of insight, the penultimate revelation of clarity. Truth, simple and profound, is appreciated once it is experienced through art (and this is a basically contemplative practice); only then can it produce “poetry: The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind / Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to communicate...”³⁰⁵

4.d. Popular Divination: Astrology & Tarot

*If you call upon Me often you will perceive everything in lion-form.
For then neither does the curved mass of Heaven appear, nor the stars shine.
The light of the moon is hidden, and the earth is not firmly secured.
But all things are seen by flashes of lighting.*

—Chaldean Oracles, 2nd CE (Ronan trans.)³⁰⁶

An old criticism of the New Age is that it promotes narcissistic individualism at the cost of the collective, feeding into unfettered consumerism; more recent reads argue that this accelerated individualism is to blame for our present ‘crisis of meaning’.³⁰⁷ In *New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden*, UCSC’s Kim Lau demonstrated how superficial commodification of the trappings of New Age religious ceremony has reproduced harmful orientalist appropriation and deepened religion’s intertwinement with the evils of late-stage capitalism. Charles Taylor formulates this concern, not directly in relation to New Age, but in relation to modern forms of religiosity à la William James:

Quote

³⁰⁴ Cf. Jack Kornfield’s book, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry* (2000).

³⁰⁵ “And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name”

³⁰⁶ from *Hekate: Her Sacred Fires* ed. D’Este

³⁰⁷ See Adam Robbert,

https://thebasecamp.substack.com/p/cross-pressured-spaces?utm_source=post-email-title&publication_id=310038&post_id=151472041&utm_campaign=email-post-title&isFreemail=true&r=cjtqm&triedRedirect=true&utm_medium=email

Ashbery addresses this criticism explicitly, linking it with the burgeoning “spiritual marketplace” of the commodified New Age, right at the end of “The New Spirit.” After acknowledging this impossibility of holism (of ‘putting it all down,’ as he writes in the book’s first sentence), he will turn to dissolving it, or at least shredding it to bits, in the next poem, “The System.”

*Meanwhile he had taken the universal emotional crisis on his own shoulders, not from altruism but through a mistaken notion that things could be no other way, that riches would automatically result from the world’s following its preordained course.*³⁰⁸

This also echoes contemporary repudiations of personal consumer responsibility for the effects of corporate greed and biocide on the planet. A cynical or even nihilistic chalking-up to fate yet contains a paradoxical element of personal responsibility, a paradox common to New Age thinking. And it relates too to the macrocosm of society, suggesting the capacity for an individual to be ‘in alignment’ with great and mysterious cosmic forces, even suggesting that one person’s misguided acceptance of responsibility for collective emotional turmoil—a turn of events that is destined to occur regardless—could signal large-scale social and political change. The stanza continues:

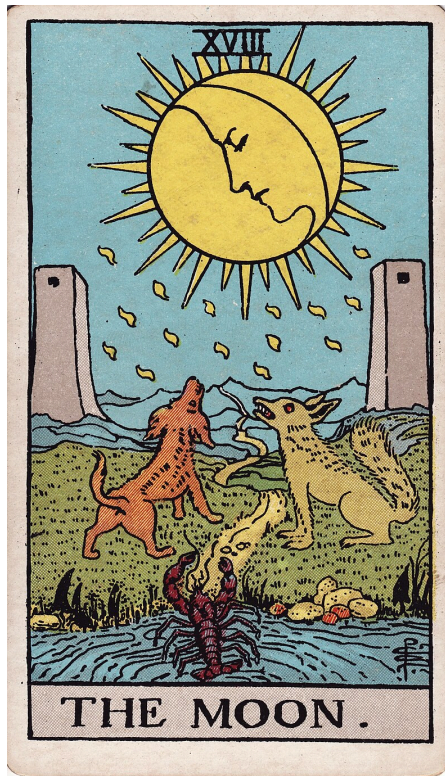
And alas, to be releasing the prey for the shadow at this late date was, no doubt, to fall in with the plans of the cosmos, but how faintly it echoed,

The connection of the personal to the social, mediated through symbolic and celestial bodies, though tenuous, is the subject of his contemplation here. Carefully indicating his skepticism, Ashbery, however, does not linger on the miseries and failures of the anthropocene; rather, he contemplates the imagery of a relevant card

³⁰⁸ 276.

in the Tarot, the eighteenth of the Major Arcana, most beloved celestial body of poets, the Moon. The reflective nature of the Moon corresponds to the searching quality of the speaker's attempts to cure his own negativity ("It was noticed that this transparency was the same as emptiness" 276). The stanza continues:

There was no getting around it, the Moon had triumphed easily once again, Hecate and her brood of snarling mutts were always around messing up the place, and in the meantime the crayfish had glided unnoticed out of the water and begun its upward course, drawn by some baffling magnetism toward its mother, the moon, who places everything in a false and puzzling light from which a fraction of the truth is not altogether absent, for the moon does illuminate, though erratically.



'Diana-Hekate-Selene,' Tarocchino di Mitelli, c.1665

This ekphrastic passage describes the card quite literally. Classical correspondences of the Moon in Tarot and the neopagan context include the feminine principle, or 'yin,'

passivity, negativity, receptivity, darkness, night, the ocean, and surrender.³⁰⁹

Ashbery returns to these motifs throughout his oeuvre, often preferring dark and night to bright day.³¹⁰ Compare the moon's borrowed light with the power poetry borrows from experience, what words reflect of life ('through a glass darkly').³¹¹ Much can be said about Ashbery's lifelong interest in light and darkness, the interplay of shadow, and the moon, but for the sake of this project, I'm going to focus on the moon as tripartite spiritual symbol.

Hecate is an ancient deity, a Titan, the only Titan Zeus respected or feared enough to leave undestroyed in his takeover. She is goddess of night and the moon, of crossroads and liminal spaces, and of witchcraft and magic. She is sometimes combined with other moon goddesses, including Diana/Artemis and Selene, and is often represented in archaic art with three bodies (waxing, full, and waning; in modern neopaganism, these are understood to represent phases of life: maiden, mother, and crone; the fourth invisible side being the new moon of pure potential). With another syncretic spiritual nod, Ashbery comments obliquely on the triplicate form of *Three Poems* by beginning and ending the first of the poems with the imagery of the Neopagan triple goddess Hecate.

³⁰⁹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20090223093949/http://tarothermit.com/moon.htm>

³¹⁰ See "The Path to the White Moon" (*A Wave*, 1984); or this example from "As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat" (1975):

*The night sheen takes over. A moon of cistercian pallor
Has climbed to the center of heaven, installed,
Finally involved with the business of darkness.
And a sigh heaves from all the small things on earth. . .*

In this poem, the moon replaces the sun as 'center of heaven', and all life is relieved, as if nature could be psychologically burdened and unburdened by a religious rearrangement of power.

³¹¹ *Three Poems* has already mentioned the image multiple times – right in the beginning of the poem, for example, when Ashbery asks directly: "Ever thought about the moon, how well it fits what it has to light?" (250)

A few notes on the triple goddess: "According to Robert Graves, Hekate was the "original" and most predominant ancient triple moon goddess. ... Although Graves's work is widely discounted by academics as pseudohistory, it continues to have a lasting influence on many areas of Neopaganism."³¹² "Graves wrote extensively on the subject of the Triple Goddess who he saw as the Muse of all true poetry in both ancient and modern literature."³¹³ "The syncretism of the predominant triple moon goddess (a united figure of Diana/Hecate/Selene), combined with the Orphic belief that the Seasons and the Fates were divisions of this same divinity, along with the latter representing the three stages of life, ultimately gave rise to the modern conception of a Triple Goddess whose symbol is the moon and whose triplicity can be conceived of both in terms of the moon's phases as the "Maiden, Mother, and Crone". However, it was not until the early 20th century that this fairly obscure ancient connection was developed and popularized."³¹⁴

Tarot and astrology are two systems of knowledge known best in anthropology of religion for their application as methods of divination. Divination (from Latin *divinare* 'to foresee, foretell, predict, prophesy, etc.') is an esoteric rite that attempts to gain insight into a question or situation by way of occult ritual or practice. The Tarot card deck is 600 years old or more (European); in the 18th century French occultists shifted from playing cards with the deck to using it for divination. Western astrology is historically based on Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* (2nd century CE), which in

³¹² Greer, John Michael (2003). *The New Encyclopedia of the Occult*. Llewellyn., p280

³¹³ Graves, Robert (1948). *The White Goddess: a Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*. London: Faber & Faber.

³¹⁴ Jones, P. (2005). "A Goddess Arrives: Nineteenth Century Sources of the New Age Triple Moon Goddess". *Culture and Cosmos*. 19 (1): 45–70 – via Academia.edu.

turn was a continuation of Hellenistic and ultimately Babylonian traditions. “The New Spirit” concludes with another reference to the existential purpose of astrology:

*Your being here... is again affirmed in the stars: just their presence, mild and unquestioning, is proof that you have got to begin in the way of choosing some one of the forms of answering that question, since if they were not there the question would not exist to be answered, but only as a rhetorical question in the impassive grammar of cosmic unravelings of all kinds, to be proposed but never formulated.*³¹⁵

To be proposed but never formulated: the lightless new moon, the fourth face of Hecate, the “fourth force” of psychology that describes the transpersonal³¹⁶, the quadripartition of the universe into four elements as outlined by Alonso del Río³¹⁷ are all available here, in Ashbery’s affirmation that the themes in these poems, specifically in their coexistence among the stars, must be read more than rhetorically.

As an example, I want to offer a reading, informed by divinatory practices of astrology and Tarot, that revises and expands on a moment in John Shoptaw’s authoritative Ashbery criticism, *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery’s Poetry* (1994). In his chapter on *Three Poems*, Shoptaw narrates an interpretation of “The New Spirit” that restricts the audience to a former lover of the poet and the speaker to a singular male character: “the writer in “The New Spirit” turns to a particular reader, ostensibly a former lover, meditating on the history of their affair; [...] Near the end of the poem these reflections coalesce into a character called “the Ram” or “he”. ”³¹⁸

In both western and Vedic astrology, the zodiacal year begins with Aries, symbolized by the Ram, on the eve of the spring equinox. The context surrounding this divinatory allusion supports a reading that prioritizes astrological

³¹⁵ LoA 280.

³¹⁶ NAR 51.

³¹⁷ Del Río, *The Four Altars* 96.

³¹⁸ Shoptaw 135.

correspondences over any particular fictionalized personhood. Ashbery is very literal and explicit on this score:

*All this happened in April as the sun was entering the house of Aries, the Ram, the agent of Mars and fire and the first of the twelve signs of the Zodiac, bringing a spirit of reconciliation and amnesty amid the wars and horror that choked the earth; a feeling of sacrifice too and blood-letting in the annual performance of the rites of spring.*³¹⁹

The masculine-coded subject returns one and a half paragraphs later, but it does not seem at all evident to me that he necessarily be identified with the symbol of the Ram from earlier. If anything, although the reference is oblique, it would be more astrologically accurate to identify Ashbery with the “fixed flame” of the paragraph that precedes this Ram reference: John Ashbery’s own sun sign is Leo, the sign in the element of Fire and the Fixed modality.³²⁰ Aries is also fire, but is cardinal: the new spirit being born is the spirit not of a single individual around whom the poem coalesces, but a new year, every one of which begins with the bursting forth of the energy of the spring ram.

Not long after he had finished the poems, Ashbery offered this explanation:

*I talked about the fact that somebody is being born; in other words at the end [of “The New Spirit”] a person is somehow given an embodiment out of those proliferating reflections that are occurring in a generalized mind which eventually run together into the image of a specific person, “he” or “me,” who was not there when the poem began. In “The System” I guess you might say that the person who has been born as “he” has taken over in the first person again and is continuing the debate.*³²¹

Archetypal assignation of esoteric figures and tropes is a New Age application of transpersonal divinatory techniques that Ashbery is using to texture and aestheticize his ongoing exploration of mystical birth of the self, itself inescapably 1960s in

³¹⁹ LoA 274.

³²⁰ Signs in astrology are categorized by elements and modality. Elements are four: fire, earth, air, water; Modalities are three: cardinal, fixed, and mutable.

³²¹ Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out*, 135

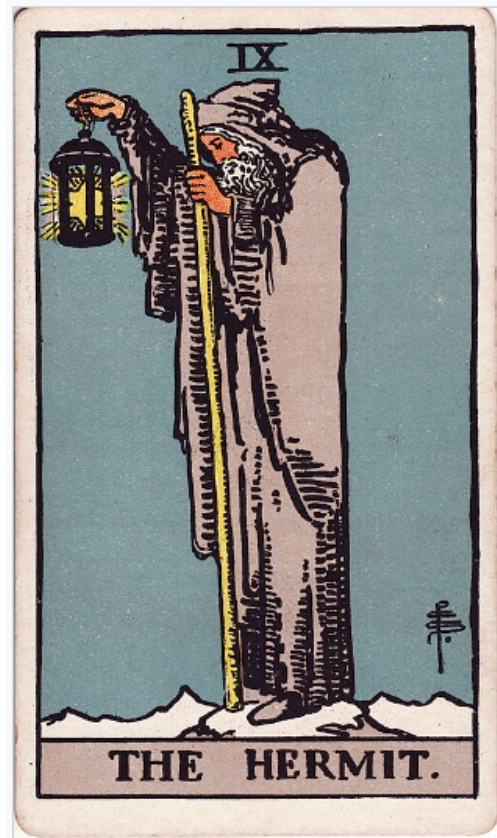
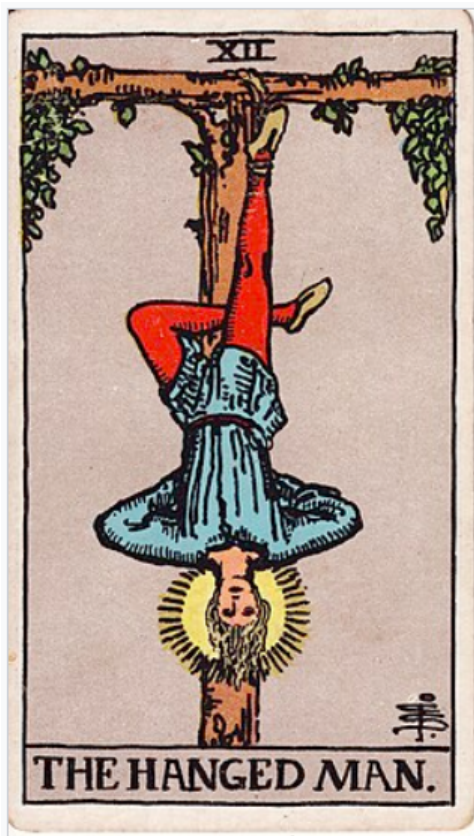
context. The Hermit, the Hanged Man, Sagittarius the Archer, the minor arcana card Five of Cups, Aries the Ram are all constellated in an attempt to make internal meaning from an external situation (perhaps a lost lover, as Shoptaw suggests) causing pain and confusion. Just as the Ram makes the most sense in astrological terms, the figures of the Tarot deck that next appear make the most sense in their appropriate Neopagan context. It would be equally limiting to consider that Ashbery meant for us to read “The Hermit”³²² and “the Hanged Man”³²³ of that same paragraph as the speaker or subject of the poem instead of assuming that we understand that these are names of Major Arcana cards of a standard Tarot deck. To read them in light of their order suggests recovery and healing. Pulling from the stream of popular culture as he loves to do, Ashbery combines these two systems, astrology and Tarot (possibly with an ironic new 1970s flavor), to texture and give some particularity to a harrowing openness that itself does not protect the speaker (or us) from suffering.

Reading this section as a transcribed anecdote of an experience of divination using the newly fashionable New Age tools of astrology and Tarot makes sense in a magical way: “the diagnosis or prognosis achieved through divination is both temporarily and logically related to the manipulative, protective or alleviative function of magic rituals. In divination one finds the cause of an ailment or a potential danger, in magic one subsequently acts upon this knowledge.”³²⁴

³²² correspondences of frozen ground, depression, and isolation, but with a guiding light from a star (see card image for glass-walled lantern containing a brilliant star)

³²³ correspondences of the Green Man, Christ, sacrifice, resurrection, surrender, and spring; perhaps more literally, revolution (see card image for upside-down cross)

³²⁴ Sørensen, Jesper Frøkjær; Petersen, Anders Klostergaard (3 May 2021). “Manipulating the Divine - an Introduction”. In Sørensen, Jesper; Petersen, Anders Klostergaard (eds.). *Theoretical and Empirical Investigations of Divination and Magic: Manipulating the Divine*. Volume 171 of Numen Book Series: Studies in the history of religions - ISSN 0169-8834. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV. p. 10.



Divination is a method of healing; it sacralizes psychology by psychologizing sacred modes of knowing; the ritualized pulling and reading of cards and of star charts function as symbolic articulations of revelations. In this case, in the wake of using such methods, Ashbery's text goes on to annotate and contemplate these divinings. Here is the first part of this section:

"When one is in one's late thirties, *ordinary things*—like a pebble or a glass or water—*take on an expressive sheen*. One wants to know more about them, and *one is in turn lived by them*. Young people might not envy this kind of situation, perhaps rightly so, yet there is now interleaving the pages of suffering and indifference to suffering *a prismatic space that cannot be seen, merely felt* as the result of an angularity that must have existed from easiest times and is only now succeeding in making its presence felt through the mists of helpless acceptance of everything else projected on our miserable, dank span of days. *One is aware of it as an open field of narrative possibilities*. Not in the edifying sense of the tales of the past that we are still

(however) chained to, but as stories that tell only of themselves, so that *one realizes one's self has dwindled and now at last vanished in the diamond light of pure speculation*. Collar up, you are lighter than air."³²⁵

Ashbery continues this important section immediately with an explication of a journey through this "open field of narrative possibilities", i.e., the soul's journey through ancient esoteric modes of knowledge.³²⁶ Here, he goes on to describe damaged nerves and the mental path one may take (meditation, visualization) to wade through physical pain. The surmounting of pain opens the "you" into a desire to share the story of their healing journey, but others are generally too concerned with their own to be a receptive audience. The others are then transmuted into archetypes familiar from Tarot cards.³²⁷ Critics have long loved to isolate and decontextualize that phrase, *open field of narrative possibilities*, as a way of bemoaning their secular tools' uselessness in the face of Ashbery's New Age divination. In fact, this passage is very simple to follow along when considered in light of these grouped New Age concepts 'healing as a religious phenomenon,' 'universal interrelatedness,' and 'divination (astrology and Tarot).'³²⁸

Lacking access to such themes and worldviews, it is my impression that literary critics have done the best they could by labeling Ashbery's mysticism "surreal;" but this is inadequate to the poet's own perceptual apparatus. According to Roffman's talks with him as she compiled his early-life biography, as a small child

³²⁵ 273, emphasis added.

³²⁶ Compare with "Journeys through Inner Space" (NAR 252ff): "The concern with inner journeys is yet another example of the New Age's high regard for the powers of the imagination" (254).

³²⁷ 273ff.

³²⁸ In this case, he quite literally tells us he is interpreting cards by quoting an interpreter's guide to the Five of Cups verbatim: "Five of Cups: "Trouble from a loved one. Trouble introduced into the midst of an already realized state. Amorous dangers..." 273-4.

Ashbery had the experience of the vibration of all matter.³²⁹ Rather than lumped with Surrealists and absurdists flirting with nihilism, I rather see Ashbery's work, beginning with *Three Poems*, comparable with Walter Benjamin's *Berliner Kindheit* and with Rainer Maria Rilke's *Malte*,³³⁰ two Romantic Modernist prose texts fixated on the vibrancy of material objects.³³¹

What's new about these ancient and medieval esoteric practices? What's new is the basis of the application of all these modes of knowing in the modern self, the postmodern subject—the disconnected (modern alienation) and fragmented (postmodern deracination) seeking connection and wholeness not through institutions or communal consensus but of and by itself. The New Age spirituality that Ashbery embodies and enacts in *Three Poems* could be described as a reader-response theory of religion and of 1960s US culture at large (As the second poem begins, "The system was breaking down...").

Just as reader-response theory in criticism comes after the proclaimed death of meaning, 'self-interested' New Age spirituality rushes in to fill the lacuna of broken faith in the US counterculture (queer culture, artist culture of Ashbery's New York City scene). In the case of *Three Poems*, it repairs to ancient and medieval esoteric methods (astrology and Tarot) in its attempt to do so.

³²⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cv8wyie3ss>

³³⁰ "Out of a million small irrepressible movements a mosaic of life is created, utterly convincing in its reality. Things vibrate into one another and out into the air, and their coolness makes the shadows vivid and gives the sun a light, spiritual clarity. In the garden nothing stands out above the rest; every flower is everywhere, and you would have to be inside each leaf and each petal not to miss anything." (Malte 203)

³³¹ "And one moves closer, drawn first by the aura of the spectacle, to come to examine the merit of its individual parts so as to enjoy even more connecting them up to the whole" (274). Ashbery's Romanticism is seen in his indulgence of correspondences. Refusing to draw conclusions does not automatically make one a Surrealist.

Three years after *Three Poems*, like a dutiful Modernist work of art, “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” sublimates these mystical-religious concerns of surrender, self-realization, and union with the beloved other into aesthetic and secular-philosophical terms. Finally secularized into legibility, Ashbery’s 1975 *worlding* (the titular poem and the book) are championed by the critical establishment. But *Three Poems* remained Ashbery’s favorite of his own works. I wonder if it’s because, in specifically saturating the text in religious and esoteric themes, he was rejecting literary-establishment mores; or perhaps it was because he didn’t feel personally responsible for articulating that particular revelation (“Well, I hear voices...”).

4.e. Psychologization of Religion / Sacralization of the Psyche

*In New Age religion, the fundamental distinction between objective reality and subjective experience is seriously called into doubt, to say the least. A logical result is that religion is psychologized by discovering the psyche as the locus of the sacred.*³³²

The fifth element of New Age religion that can be identified as fundamental to early Ashberyan poetics, most explicitly in *Three Poems* but tangible from “Some Trees” (1956) at least until “Homeless Heart” (2012), is what Hanegraaff labels the psychologization of religion and the sacralization of the psyche. With *Three Poems*, Ashbery comments most directly on the popular and current historical-cultural moment out of which he writes, processing the late 1960s. Yet even his broad sociopolitical claims are motivated by personal psychology, as opposed to the other way around.

³³² NAR 245-6.

Once Ashbery forges his prose-styled lyric “I” in the elaborate soul-birthing of “The New Spirit,” in “The System” he turns to generating a summary of the flowering and failing of the countercultural movement in the US, inflecting it through his new opinionated individual persona. The speaker couches his observations and arguments in neutral, critically-distanced, often passive language. He begins by invoking Hermes: “From the outset, it was apparent that someone had played a colossal trick on something.”³³³ Next he puns on psychedelic drugs that reorient the default mode network of the brain: “The switches had been tripped, as it were...”³³⁴ This blooms into an optimistic seemingly-infinite pluriverse of possibilities for society, including the coming together of new forms of love and loving, which infinity overwhelms the subjects experiencing its ‘cohesion’ on the material plane: *Thus it was that a kind of blight fell on these early forms of going forth and being together, an anarchy of the affections sprung from too much universal cohesion...*³³⁵

Ashbery feels moved to address, recover, or at least patch up this failure of the ‘countercultural,’ ‘spiritual but not religious’ proliferations of the 1960s, his speaker motivated by the desire to overcome his own despair. He attempts this

³³³ LoA 282.

³³⁴ In the frozen grief of his depression, meanwhile, drugs don’t work on him; i.e., he seems incapable of ‘altered states,’ which grimly reinforces his sense that the culture is wrongheaded. See 289:

But the few who want order in their lives and a sense of growing and progression toward a fixed end suffer terribly. Sometimes they try to dope their consciousness of the shifting but ineluctable grid of time that has been arbitrarily imposed on them with alcohol or drugs, but these lead merely to mornings after whose waking is ten times more painful than before...

This rhymes with trip guide protocols that would have been used in the psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy underground, e.g. R Coleman’s classic text *Psychedelic Psychotherapy*, which explains that recreational use of drugs without qualified guidance is likely not to produce any long-term healing results, and such unassisted ‘casual’ encounters may possibly retraumatize the user (as Ashbery describes the negative reinforcement of ‘the morning-after’).

³³⁵ LoA 284.

personal recovery by repairing to and working from the fundamental principles of the movement—healing, holism, divination, etc.—but by bringing some more rigorous intellectual and philosophical thinking to bear on these principles, testing their logical and metaphorical limits by transmuting them into sustained lyrical meditations to see how far they can be pushed in this poetic format, the tone and style of which stems from both religious and philosophical traditions: the sermon and the tract.

Ashbery's choice to concentrate on this subculture,³³⁶ taking its tenets seriously while enmeshing them with his personal life's subjective realities—depressive 'dark night of the soul' and subsequently seeking psychiatric treatment; falling in love with David—places him not in the standard anthropologist's seat of assuming objective reality. It instead reveals him to be more like a radical critic in the realm of Contemplative Studies, where the scholar is always already a practitioner. The poet therefore, mirroring the "fourth force" transpersonal psychology of Stan Grof, acknowledges and respects his subjective experience as valid data for analysis and reflection. He describes the resurgence of religious feeling that transferred out of institutions and into the *Stimmung* of the moment:

*one really felt that one had set one's foot on the upward path, the spiral leading from the motley darkened and lightened landscape here below to the transparent veils of heaven... And even in the darkest night this sense of advancement came to whisper at one's side like a fellow traveler pointing the way.*³³⁷

But this "advancement," he frets, is not credible for any except those with conviction, which of course this speaker cannot indulge. The loudest voices in any group are the extremists ("unrepentant hedonists or on the contrary those who chose to remain all day of the dung-heap, rending their hair and clothing"), and, like Yeats, he balks at

³³⁶ Which movement is 'rightly regarded' as the roots of modern New Age religion (NAR 10-12, 522, et al.)

³³⁷ LoA 284-5.

their certainty and drama.³³⁸ The final move of this most explicit discussion of the 1960s “vibe” leaves Ashbery here:

This was the logical cutting-off place, then: ahead might lie new forms of life, some of them beautiful perhaps, but the point was that the effort of establishing them or anything else that was to come had ended here: a permanent now had taken over and was free to recast the old forms, riddles that had been expected to last until the Day of Judgment, as it saw fit, in whatever shape seemed expedient for living the next few crucial moments into a future without controls. (286-7)

The purposelessness of the newly-installed “permanent now,” an experience of bodhisattva material enlightenment, a place where “Life became a pregnant silence” (287) that for Ashbery fails both to appreciate the past and to consider the future. The terror of the chaos of the present moment throws back to the final stanza of Stevens’ “Idea of Order at Key West”³³⁹ and the tragic denouement of Ashbery’s early sestina “The Painter.” Fear of the present, a weighting of the “nothing that is”³⁴⁰ as far heavier than the “dreams and infinite longing,”³⁴¹ stirred up by the counterculture’s sacralization of the psyche, must first produce existential dread in one whose psyche is undergoing significant suffering. For Ashbery, for these deluded young people, the present is “eternally misapplied;”³⁴² “Myself am Hell.”³⁴³ Though he separates himself from this mass, he admits his own entanglement openly:

This [eternally misapplied present] was the stage to which reason and intuition working so well together had brought us, but it was scarcely their

³³⁸ “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.” (WB Yeats, from “The Second Coming,” 1919)

³³⁹ *Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
The maker’s rage to order words of the sea,
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.*

³⁴⁰ Wallace Stevens, “The Snow Man” (1921)

³⁴¹ John Wieners, “Cocaine” (1964) (note that both this poem and Stevens’ “The Snow Man” comment directly on how to navigate solitary experiences of misery)

³⁴² LoA 288.

³⁴³ Milton’s Satan, *Paradise Lost* (IV. l.73-75)

*fault if now fear at the longest shadows of approaching darkness began to prompt thoughts of stopping somewhere for the night, as well as a serious doubt that any such place existed on the face of the earth.*³⁴⁴

Ashbery's psychiatrist encouraged 'felicity' in him by recommending Traherne's *Centuries of Meditation*; the patient had already absorbed Stevens' secularized worship of the imaginative faculty as instrument of worlding when he uploaded "The Idea of Order at Key West" into "The Painter" in *Some Trees*. "At first sight, New Age statements to the effect that we have created, are creating or may be able to create our own reality might easily be dismissed as suggestive rhetoric rather than serious convictions," writes Hanegraaf in a chapter section titled "The Metaphysics of Mind."³⁴⁵ Ashbery's birth and abstracted adolescence narrative in *Three Poems* (of which his criticism of the counterculture represents an adolescent agon) are at least partly the product of a mind-over-matter problem-solving initiative wherein, in an attempt to climb out of a hole, he psychologizes, well, everything. This is very appropriate to his historical context in the "me generation."

"The evidence strongly suggests," Hanegraaf goes on, "that people come to believe that they create their own reality, not primarily for philosophical reasons, or out of a desire to emotionally seal themselves off from others, but because they feel that it restores meaning to human existence."³⁴⁶ It is my suggestion that what Ken Wilber acknowledges as "borderline pathology"³⁴⁷—this extreme belief in self-responsibility, including even that physical illness is self-created—occupies Ashbery's consciousness as he tries to detangle the disrepair of his own mental health from the ideology of his cultural moment. Like everything else, he is unable or

³⁴⁴ 288.

³⁴⁵ NAR 229.

³⁴⁶ NAR 233.

³⁴⁷ NAR 244, footnote 132.

unwilling to resolve this piece of his puzzle, and the tone of the book stays irresolute. "The darkness that surrounds you now does not exist," the speaker asserts in a later passage, once he has gained some control over his own narrative,

*because it never had any independent existence: you created it out of the spleen and torment you felt. It looks real enough to hide you from the light of the sun, but its reality is as specious as a mirage. The clouds are dispersing. And nothing comes to take its place...*³⁴⁸

This is the "nothing that is," Stevens' Snow Man's nothing, the dancing at the still point; the new moon.

Overcoming or sidestepping the notion of guilt, then, in the adopting of responsibility of 'worlder', becomes crucial to an experience of resolution in both art and artist. "An alternative way," he tries a few pages later, "would be the 'life-as-ritual' concept. According to this theory no looking back is possible... the difficulty could be eased and self could merge with selflessness." Committed still to an idea of 'growth' in paradoxical simultaneity with his 'permanent now,' he contemplates 'happiness:' "Its sudden balm suffuses the soul without warning, as a kind of bloom or grace."³⁴⁹ He actively seeks not 'mindlessness' that he senses in the 'enterprising but deluded young people' who 'misapply' their present moment; rather

the value judgments of truth, exposed one after another like colored slides on a white wall that is the naked soul, or a kind of hard glaze that definitively transforms the ordinary clay of the soul into an object of beauty by obliterating the knowledge of what lies beneath.

The enlightenment or healing Ashbery seeks he finds, of course, by moving away from psychological argument and into ekphrastic metaphor. He will speak about 'felicity,' Traherne's preferred word for happiness, in the coming pages, and move through an orthodox transcendent idea of God into a sensually-grounded mystical

³⁴⁸ 303.

³⁴⁹ LoA 292-3.

relationship with one by means of involvement with the vibrancy of matter.³⁵⁰ Noticing things outside of his own mind again, taking an interest in detail again, seems to pull him up out of his unhappiness and back into a coasting neutrality, which itself can exist as a function of a will towards meaning and purpose: “to wonder how is the same as beginning to know why.”³⁵¹ Perhaps “The System” at stake in this poem is both religion and psychology, and the 1960s counterculture’s rival “system” more mere historical setting for Ashbery’s tackling these deeper issues. By the last passage of the poem, he has been converted from a psyche paralyzed by emptiness and nothingness into an actor pleased by the variety of roles offered him:

It could be anything, you say...And it is here that I am quite ready to admit that I am alone, that the film I have been watching all this time may only be a mirror, with all the characters including that of the old aunt played by me...
(317)

4.f. New Age [Writing] as Culture Criticism

The rejected chapters have taken over. For a long time it was as though only the most patient scholar or the recording angel himself would ever interest himself in them. Now it seems as though that angel had begun to dominate the whole story... One can almost hear the beginning of the lyric crash in which everything will be lost and pulverized, changed back into atoms ready to resume new combinations and shapes again...—unimaginable, in a word. And would you believe that this word could possibly be our salvation?
—“The Recital,” 316

In the third and briefest poem of *Three Poems*, “The Recital,” Ashbery ends the *Three Poems* project by beginning with a restatement of the existential, cosmic, psychological concerns of the last two poems. Ashbery (and/or his speaker) will shift finally out of the holding pattern of ever-renewing apathy (320) and into an affirmative

³⁵⁰ “the atmosphere of the day the event took place, the way the trees and buildings looked,...” (296)

³⁵¹ LoA 300.

stance on life (324, 'yes'), calling for a 'synthesis' (325) to help him conclude his performance (of this birth and maturation of a new self that this book represents).

Attachment to outcome causes tension. Expectations cause disappointment, yet desire remains unavoidable. Ignorance is somehow simultaneously anxiety and bliss; as the author of *Three Poems* is a self-conscious inheritor of lyric trope, both birdsong and the moon are taken to account. A middle way must be found, and as the book is ending, pressure mounts. "The Recital" begins:

*All right. The problem is that there is no new problem... It is like the beginning of a beautiful day, with all the birds singing in the trees...and yet the progress of any day...gets dimmer and dimmer until finally it sinks into sour, flat darkness. Why is this? Because not one-tenth or even one one-hundredth of the ravishing possibilities the birds sing about at dawn could ever be realized in the course of a single day... And this brings on inevitable reproaches, unmerited of course, for we are all like children sulking because we cannot have the moon...we know only that we are unhappy but we cannot tell why. We forget that it is our own childishness that is to blame.*³⁵²

Adult life, he goes on to report, downgrades our experiences from 'delight' to possession and labeling, that is, 'the naming of all new things we now possessed became our chief occupation'; in this new duller register, 'the song of a bird' becomes 'a wistful parody of itself' (319). Struggling to label life's movements via Adamic naming causes that same depression that artistic or poetic interpretation may cure—"As though there were something criminal in trying to understand a little this uneasiness that is undermining our health" (321).

As I have stated earlier, Hanegraaff's study concludes that New Age religion reflects the ongoing negotiation between secular thought and the human search for meaning and spiritual fulfillment. I further argue that 20th-century lyric reflects just this same negotiation, albeit in different form. Just as New Age religion should be

³⁵² 318.

understood as a form of cultural criticism, so too can Ashbery's lyric be understood as cultural criticism (of lyric theory in a strict sense and of academic interpretation of art in a wide sense). Nowhere in his oeuvre is this more self-evident than in *Three Poems*. 1970s Ashbery may be more accurately cast in the religious terminology of the outsider—heterodox, mystical—than in the atheistic cultural terms for outsiders—avant-garde, experimental—that have so far been applied to mark him off as an edge case for interpretability.

New Age as Culture Criticism:

All New Age religion is characterized by a criticism of dualistic and reductionistic tendencies in (modern) western culture, as exemplified by (what is emically perceived as) dogmatic Christianity, on the one hand, and rationalistic/scientistic ideologies, on the other. It believes that there is a "third option" which rejects neither religion and spirituality nor science and rationality, but combines them into a higher synthesis. It claims that the two trends which have hitherto dominated western culture (dogmatic Christianity and an equally dogmatic rationalistic/scientistic ideology) have been responsible for the current world crisis, and that the latter will only be resolved if and when this third option becomes dominant in society.³⁵³

The following conclusion about New Age religion could easily read as a case for Ashbery's unique liminal position in the modern/postmodern, lyric/post-lyric landscape of 20th/21st-century poetics:

All New Age religion is characterized by the fact that it expresses its criticism of modern western culture by presenting alternatives derived from a secularized esotericism. It adopts from traditional esotericism an emphasis on the primacy of personal religious experience and on this-worldly types of holism (as alternatives to dualism and reductionism), but generally reinterprets esoteric tenets from secularized perspectives. Since the new elements of "causality," the study of religions, evolutionism, and psychology are fundamental components, New Age religion cannot be characterized as a return to pre-Enlightenment worldviews but is to be seen as a qualitatively new syncretism of esoteric and secular elements. Paradoxically, New age

³⁵³ NAR 517.

*criticism of modern western culture is expressed to a considerable extent on the premises of that same culture.*³⁵⁴

I consider Ashbery the preeminent 20th-century cultural critic of the lyric, and therefore see his relationship to poetry's modern western forms as analogous with the relationship of New Age religion, itself the preeminent 20th-century cultural critic of dogmatic Christianity, to its predecessors. Therefore, I want to consider the validity of the following analogy: just as "the New Age movement is characterized by a popular western culture criticism expressed in terms of secularized esotericism," so too is "the Postmodern poetry movement, exemplified by Ashbery, characterized by a popular western lyric criticism expressed in terms of secularized esotericism."

Much of Ashbery's material, and most literally his *Three Poems*, functions simultaneously as an expression of 'Contemplative Criticism' *and* as an application of Contemplative Pedagogy. Perhaps more than criticism, *Three Poems* makes sense as a work of pedagogy, and in this applicability Ashberyan lyric both absorbs and transcends the tenets of the New Age. As he reports in "The System," it is only once we shed the perspective of the 'arcane historian' and instead pick up the 'point of view like the painter's' that any affirmation of life is possible:

*Judged from this angle [the painter's] the whole affair will, I think, partake of and benefit from the enthusiasm not of the religious fanatic but of the average, open-minded, intelligent person who has never interested himself before in these matters either from not having had the leisure to do so or from ignorance of their existence.*³⁵⁵

Day-to-day living, it turns out, does not benefit from philosophy: for Ashbery, when it comes to managing and processing acute human situations (like depressive episodes or falling in love) pedagogy wins out over criticism. He deals with himself

³⁵⁴ NAR 520-1.

³⁵⁵ 282.

explicitly and ends up throwing away his Enlightenment inheritance: “It is the law to think now,” that damning announcement that opened page one of “The New Spirit,” the problem that this book was be born to solve...

And it was just here that philosophy broke down completely and was of no use. How to deal with the new situations that arise each day... Forget about the details of name and place [he advises himself]³⁵⁶, forget also the concepts and archetypes that haunt you and which are as much a part of the typical earthbound situation you find yourself in as those others... What is required is the ability to enter into the complexities of the situation as though it weren't really new at all, which it isn't, as one takes the first few steps into a labyrinth...

The mystical seeker's journey reveals itself completely now, framed as life's lessons, mediated by the stuff of interpersonal relationships, banking on surrender:

Here one abruptly finds one's intuition tailored to the needs of the new demanding syndrome; each test is passed flawlessly, as though in a dream, and the complex climate that is formed by the vacillating wills and energies of the many who surround you becomes easy as pie for you.

Midway through the journey, shuffling off the mortal ego, student becomes teacher:

You take on all comers but you do not advertise your presence...

The theme of worlding, of simultaneous theo- and autopoiesis, radical

self-responsibility in reality creation, recurs exactly once the student becomes the teacher:

Right now it is important to slip into the Gordian contours of [that labyrinth] without uttering so much as a syllable; to live in that labyrinth that seems to be directing your steps but in reality it is you who are creating its pattern, embarked on a new, fantastically difficult tactic whose success is nevertheless guaranteed. You know this.

Thought is finally relieved of its alleged usefulness, and the lesson becomes one of unlearning:³⁵⁷

³⁵⁶ And this piece of advice he will take, writerly, with regards to all of his future poems, where he characteristically removes specifics of name and place to generate a suspended, ambivalent quality in the bulk of his verse

³⁵⁷ Since the passage of time renders “the promise of learning...a delusion” (“Soonest Mended”)

*You may as well forget them and abandon yourself to the secret growing that has taken over. Nothing can stop it, so there is no point in worrying or even thinking about it.*³⁵⁸

In the face of these gnarls of living, Ashbery will repeatedly illustrate, and often directly advocate for, the contemplative practice of entering a state of thoughtless awareness in his poems³⁵⁹. He breaks the spell of superficial hope that arises from the human practitioner's belief "that we are immune to time because we are 'out of it.'"³⁶⁰ Yet still he returns, neutrally, to the meditative posture of the original measuring unit of lyric, and central object of 'mindfulness,' the breath:

*Yet there is air to breathe. One may at least stay here a while hoping for more and better things to come.*³⁶¹

*

Hanegraaff dedicates most of the final page of *New Age Religion and Western Culture* to a quotation from German-Jewish philosopher Gershom Scholem. In a 1975 interview, Scholem identifies one of the predecessors of the relationship between modern Lyric and New Age religion: (Ashbery's ancestor) Walt Whitman and (New Age ancestor) the Kabbalah. The transpersonal nature of the symbols of the Kabbalah, Scholem suggests, points to a shareable or collective dimension of experience (the sacred) that modernity has forsaken in its individualistic technologization. He too found both Contemplative Criticism and Pedagogy in

³⁵⁸ 304-5.

³⁵⁹ Indeed, this is the energy underlying the famous ending of "Paradoxes and Oxymorons," the mystical unity that transcends the conceptual and linguistic knots of its title: *The poem is you*. See also "the almost empty mind" ("And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name"); "What was left was like a field" ("What Is Poetry"); "you are left with an idea of yourself / And the feeling of ascending emptiness" ("These Lacustrine Cities"), "Oh, Nothing" (*Shadow Train*); et al.; see also "You will stay on, restive, serene in / Your gesture which is neither embrace nor warning / But which holds something of both in pure / Affirmation that doesn't affirm anything" ("Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror").

³⁶⁰ 305.

³⁶¹ 306.

Whitman, mystical in essence: “I was strongly criticized,” Scholem said, “when I dared to say that Walt Whitman’s writings contain something like this [religious symbolic dimension]. Walt Whitman revealed in an utterly naturalistic world what kabbalists and other mystics revealed in their world.”

Interestingly, the related desires to contribute to collective social justice and to reject modern individualistic cult-of-self notions can simultaneously be gratified by taking up self-directed contemplative practices (reading and writing), among other things—alongside a balanced diet of socialization and organizing, say, or in as healthy an environment as possible, that is, in safe, sane, and consensual³⁶² relationship with one’s set and setting (existential kinmaking, perhaps). Postmodern readers may benefit from accepting that they have been isolated in this way, “changed back into atoms,”³⁶³ so that they stand a chance of becoming “ready to resume new combinations” and are thereby able to go about achieving simultaneously particular and cosmic, personal and public goals.

Intimate and interior negotiations via the navel-gazing lyric plus New Age theories and praxes founded in the “me generation” can be synthesized, through their basis in *contemplation*, broadly conceived, to produce an effective, refreshing, and usable blend of criticism and pedagogy. This goes beyond the simple sublimation of theology into the aesthetic or the secularized ‘imaginative faculty’ as supported, for example, by Bloom’s lineage of Whitman—Stevens—Ashbery, a sublimation taken for granted in theories of the lyric because it acknowledges the

³⁶² “Safe, sane, and consensual” (SSC) is a motto often used in BDSM (bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, sadomasochism, et al.) and other communities to describe ethical and responsible practices. It emphasizes the importance of ensuring activities are safe, participants are in a sound state of mind, and all parties involved willingly consent.

³⁶³ 316.

roots of the genre in religion while giving as little ground as possible to its contemporary religiosity. The mystical pedagogy of lyric cannot be captured by critical observation because it is alive in the classroom, “the insistent now that baffles and surrounds you,”³⁶⁴ made and held by readers who imbue their own text interactions with utterly idiosyncratic textures of significance.

*Perhaps no art, however gifted and well-intentioned, can supply what we were demanding of it: not only the figured representation of our days but the justification of them, the reckoning and its application, so close to the reality being lived that it vanishes suddenly in a thunderclap, with a loud cry.*³⁶⁵

Transference is the core psychological mechanism in religion.

Identity politics is puritanical and hypermoral—it gives up any connection to the unconscious, which is where trauma is not the personal property of its victim.

—Dr. Nick Powers, author, *Black Psychedelic Revolution* (Religion and Psychedelics Forum, April 2022; panel, “The Psychedelic Religion of the Counterculture”)

The ability to access ancestral blessing and support is the other side of (intergenerational) trauma.

—Dr. Melila Helner-Eschel (Religion and Psychedelics Forum, April 2022; panel: “Narratives of Healing in a Jewish Context”)

Attachment and avoidance: the obstacles to detachment.

—Joan Suval, senior disciple of Shri Brahmananda Sarasvati (New York)

³⁶⁴ “The Recital” 323.

³⁶⁵ “The Recital,” 322.

“You are grateful for an imaginary pause”³⁶⁶

³⁶⁶ From “The Thousand Islands” (*Rivers and Mountains*)

III. Contemplative Criticism: Three Readings

1. “The Painter”: Portrait of the Artist as Ritual Sacrifice

A sage has no self, yet there is nothing that is not himself.

— Shitou, 8th-century Buddhist teacher; originator of Zen Buddhism

In the acceptance comes the closure and the deliverance, the joy of release and liberation. Freedom in acceptance—that's a powerful thought, that freedom lies in acceptance.

...

But never forget that only the acceptance at the close will yield the mystery of wholeness to you, the thing you desire most of all. You have to lose your life in order to save it. You have to expend yourself in order to find yourself. You gain your life only by giving it up.

—William Everson, *Birth of a Poet* (192-3)

Ashbery's sestina “The Painter,” manifestly a portrait of the young artist, is also early-career cultural criticism: part cautionary tale, part self-reflective admonishment. Written during his senior year as an undergraduate at Harvard (1948), it is the earliest poem included in his first book, *Some Trees* (1956). In her biography of his early life, Karin Roffman provides a characteristically bittersweet gloss of the poem as an Orphean lament for the ineffable:

*A young artist chases after an idea and fails to capture it... “The Painter” was his first poem to elevate the artist’s inability to capture ‘subject’ and ‘feeling’ as his most important experience.*³⁶⁷

This summation echoes an accepted interpretation of Ashbery's verse as depressively Postmodern, struck dumb by the incommunicability of experience. Yet

³⁶⁷ Roffman 162.

“capture” is not the most interesting mode of poetic communication. Despite Ashbery’s own insistence, throughout his life, that all his poems are love poems, typical readings tend to wallow in the poet’s “inability” to access connection once they have forbidden his chance at the obvious, exploitative option (“capture”). Perhaps between ‘orthodox’ (dogmatic-oppressive) and ‘secular’ (unimaginative-materialist) interpretation, there is a radical, ensouled, ‘mystical’ option, exemplified by contemplative forms and tones. Nothing is literally captured that can be interrogated for empirical data; but that does not mean that there’s nothing “to touch, love, explain”.³⁶⁸

Transformative connection between writer and reader via text is still possible, Ashbery will prove, even after Modernism, but its locus has shifted: the responsibility of the experience of transformation is more equally given now to the reader, not left in the hands of an authoritative writer. Ashbery’s famous ‘difficulty’ is the result of his place at the bleeding edge of this evolution in creative-critical interpretation—his interest in connection outside of captivity. Ashberyan poetics defy hegemonic criticism’s reductive religious/secular polarity. Furthermore, they offer—if the reader will risk prioritizing his own presence as grist for the interpretive mill³⁶⁹—divinely imaginative possibilities for communication even after the shattering of common (as in, universal) sense. “The Painter” is one excellent early example of a cyclical work of mystical contemplation, for which contemplative theory and pedagogy provide the best-handling methods for interpretation and appreciation.

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³⁶⁸ See “Some Trees” exposition in III.3.

³⁶⁹ “What the poem *is* is going to be determined by the reader... The poem is not really in my hands: it’s in someone else’s.” DeJong (7) quoting Ashbery.

Sitting between the sea and the buildings 1

He enjoyed painting the sea's portrait.

The title figure of "The Painter" sits at a crossroads, spanning two environments. Poised literally between the natural and the manmade, he finds inspiration in the former. The sea, an immeasurably gigantic natural feature, has only ever reasonably been the subject of landscape painters. In the first subtle strangeness of the poem, set out in the second line, Ashbery's painter desires to render a *portrait* instead. This choice underscores the rest of the narrative and thematizes the deeper spiritual exploration of the poem, which seeks to reconcile the human and natural through art.

In one possible sense of the term, where the setting of a document or image has two standard orientations, a "portrait" names a vertical rectangle, taller than it is long; "landscapes" run horizontal, wider than they are high. Another sense of the word, more obvious to us from the realm of photography, aims to capture a human face or bust; it emphasizes the sensual expressive features of a person and typically assumes a human subject.

This painter's approach is queer, told slant. As so often with Ashbery, artistic conventions are subverted by subtle means: before the poem even began, the painter's choice enacted this quiet, yet radical, reorientation. This is an apparently natural divergence in the individual artist's methodology—i.e., the literal, physical sense of his setting the seascape to "portrait mode," not to mention what it may imply to see the sea as human or personal. This divergence triggers the reaction of his society and produces the social drama that narrativizes the surface of the poem. Further, it explicates its secondary emotional tension: that of the artist's relationship to his society, and vice versa.

The deeper and more obscure—and I believe dominant—emotional core of the poem is the painter’s relationship to the sea. This mysterious dynamic is made partially manifest by his attempts to paint it. Does he see the sea as a person? He sees it as a *subject*, which is a conventional and accepted view to take, despite the eyebrow-raising decision to reorient the image sideways, to paint it on its edge or head. The painterly sense of subject feels more like object—as in, the ‘thing’ ‘captured’ by the hand-mechanical act of image-reproduction. The literary-critical sense of *subject*, however, as in ‘subjective experience,’ has agency as its defining quality. It acts, first and foremost, whether or not it is acted upon, or perceived, or rendered in a work of art. Ashbery’s painter espouses this second sense of *subject* (and perhaps reveals his naivete) by expecting the sea to do the work of painting for him:

But just as children imagine a prayer 3
Is merely silence, he expected his subject
To rush up the sand, and, seizing a brush,
Plaster its own portrait on the canvas.

The artist places all power in the hands of nature with the same innocence as children ignorant of the inner speech that comprises prayer. The verbs reveal his temper’s apparent difference from his subject: while he sits, and enjoys, and expects, the sea (in his mind) rushes, seizes, and plasters, providing the robust action counterpart to his erstwhile contemplation.

Nothing visible results from this formless state of ‘just sitting’ (echoes of shikantaza- footnote); the painter’s process will not be activated until unlocked by social pressure or suggestion.

So there was never any paint on his canvas

Until the people who lived in the buildings

Put him to work: "Try using the brush

As a means to an end. [...] 10

The artist is innocent, even naive, at the outset of the poem, characterized by states of enjoyment, imagination, and expectation. He is happily, and obscurely, stationed between art and culture (l.1). The collective energy of the culture excoriates his affinity for nature and transforms the act of painting into labor; that is, his artmaking is not activated in a way that is legible to other humans "until the people... / put him to work." Historical materialism is writ literal: the brush, they tell him, is best used as a *means to an end*. This could be read as a reaction to 'art for art's sake.' In light of their advice, he finds himself placed at odds with the people.

Select, for a portrait, 10

Something less angry and large, and more subject

To a painter's moods, or, perhaps, to a prayer."

The group of building-dwellers exhort him to practicality, choosing something smaller and more manipulable. They implicitly endorse the authority or supremacy of artist over (feminine) subject. The artist struggles ongoingly in his triangulation between self, nature, and culture. He attempts to alleviate this tension by following the group's advice to take on an easier side project. In the third stanza, he expends energy fretting over how to explain himself, his methodology, and his Romantic hopes for the predominance of nature over culture in the realm of painting.³⁷⁰

How could he explain to them his prayer 13

That nature, not art, might usurp the canvas?

³⁷⁰ More narrowly along these lines, Stephen J Ross argues that Ashbery "subscribes to the long-standing avant-garde fantasy of turning art into nature"—see Ross, Stephen J., 'The Invisible Avant-Garde: Nature, New Realism, and Ashbery's France', *Invisible Terrain: John Ashbery and the Aesthetics of Nature*, Oxford English Monographs (Oxford, 2017; online edn, Oxford Academic, 20 July 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198798385.003.0001>, accessed 2 May 2024.

*He chose his wife for a new subject,
Making her vast, like ruined buildings[...]*

The painter takes comfort in ‘subject’-ing a personal intimate relationship and practicing his craft on a human, the perfect mix of art and nature. It is easier to expand a small subject than to condense a vast one,

*As if, forgetting itself, the portrait 17
Had expressed itself without a brush.*

The wife’s portrait succeeds, by his standards, thanks to its apparent artlessness—its naturalism, you could say. Transferring the hugeness of cultural edifices onto a human subject—the vastness of the buildings perhaps corresponding to some inner grief or sense of emotional ruination—worked, to the extent that the portrait seemed to “forget itself,” to lose self-consciousness. His portrait of his wife felt like it “painted itself,” just as he had hoped the sea’s would do in the opening stanza. And, presumably, she was more willing to sit still for him while he worked.

Having achieved this goal, and temporarily placated his onlookers, the painter immediately returns to his true subject, the sea. Explicitly this time, he expresses his desire for mystical dissolution of self and other, subject and object, external and internal; sea and soul.

*Slightly encouraged, he dipped his brush 19
In the sea, murmuring a heartfelt prayer:
“My soul, when I paint this next portrait
Let it be you who wrecks the canvas.”*

By dipping his brush into seawater while reciting a prayer—that his soul might be expressed on canvas, presumably by means of that seawater drenching the brush—the painter casts a spell, makes neo-Pagan animist magick. With this intentional, ritual act, in addition to empowering himself with the agency he had

previously only accorded to the sea, the painter alchemizes the symbolic power of water and the sea itself, invoking all its traditional correspondences: primordial origin, femininity, chaos, the void, fecundity, formlessness, emotionality, depth, visionary/psychic qualities... He imbues his instrument with all this associated power in the same moment that he announces his desire to destroy artifice, to “wreck” the facade of the canvas, with the act.

The news spread like wildfire through the buildings:

He had gone back to the sea for a subject. 24

Such an intense expression of power does not go unnoticed. With an image of uncontrolled fire, his risky choice—its surface or literal sense—is communicated throughout the buildings, edifices of artifice and metonymic for the artist’s culture (his peanut gallery). Interestingly, they understand his decision (or it reaches them) in terms of the opposite element that he has chosen to summon. The ‘wildfire’ of his choice opposes the dominant element of water, with the effect of intensifying the others’ resistance to his desires and purpose. External evaluation, however, is the least of his problems.

Imagine a painter crucified by his subject! 25

Too exhausted even to lift his brush,

Either the ritual does not work, or it works too well. The keynote of the crucifixion is surrender. The most feminine icon of masculine transcendence and realization-in-form is Christ. The material or bodily form gives way to pure spirit through extreme suffering. The painter is crucified by his subject (nature, vis-a-vis the sea) in the same way perhaps that Christ is crucified by Empire, vis-a-vis Pontius Pilate. The sea exhausts him beyond capacity for expression. If the brush *is* a means to an end, as the people tell him, he goes through a process of losing the ability to

use it, and finally he puts it down altogether. Once again, as if to provide some superfluous or relative levity between moments of excruciation, the artist's onlookers reveal their own limitations through their inferences about his process.

He provoked some artists leaning from the buildings 27

To malicious mirth: "We haven't a prayer

Now, of putting ourselves on canvas,

Or getting the sea to sit for a portrait!" 30

Others declared it a self-portrait.[...]

The group deems the artist a canary in their coal mine, but interpret him defensively. After his initial run-in with them (l.8-9), it is never addressed whether the painter is conscious of the criticism of the world—the people in the buildings, which group includes a subset of fellow artists—or whether it is merely correlated for metacritical texture with his personal journey and struggle for transcendence, expression, and salvation through union with nature. Those others in the art world lean out of the buildings, increasing the amount that can be seen from them, but remain firmly within the buildings. They interpret the painter's struggle as an excuse or threat not to reorient or change their own position, ensconced in the edifices of culture. Their base notes are prescriptive materialism (the "means to an end" logic of ideology) and negativity, expressed as cynicism around the project of self-expression (shored up in their negative grammar: cf. l.11, l.28; cf. also the "critics" in "The Idea of Order at Key West" below). Their malice is self-directed: "We haven't a prayer." Perversely mirthful at the recognition of their own hopelessness, this group may be made of "some artists," but they function here as critics: their contribution is restrictive and destructive, not expansive or creative. This exaggerated polarity may be satirical, meant to convey the way an early-career artist receives feedback as his

impressionable ego is developing.³⁷¹ Whether their jeers reach him or not, the painter's artistic journey continues:

Finally all indications of a subject 32

Began to fade, leaving the canvas

Perfectly white. He put down the brush.

He goes back to the beginning—where before he had waited for the sea to pick up the brush (and act human), now he sets down the brush and ceases to act at all, perhaps having exchanged or surrendered the act of artmaking for the pure *being* of nature. In the unfolding of this poem, he has developed the capacity for agency, summoned that power, and then returned to surrender it. Here the artist identifies with the crucifixion, the most intense representation of suffering in modern Western spirituality. This denouement transforms the passive enjoyment that originally qualified him as a painter. Casual pleasure (“he enjoyed painting” [2]) gives way to intense pain. In the psychospiritual arc of this poem, this portrait of a young man as an artist, affirmative enjoyment is transformed (by surrendering to overwhelming pain) into transcendent dissolution.

At once a howl, that was also a prayer, 35

Arose from the overcrowded buildings.

They tossed him, the portrait, from the tallest of the buildings;

And the sea devoured the canvas and the brush

As though his subject had decided to remain a prayer. 39

After yet another collapse between the painter and his portrait in the antepenultimate line (“him, the portrait” can be read two ways), contemplation engenders action: his

³⁷¹ It may be that without proper reception, the artist is nonexistent. Ashbery's own take on reader-response theory is well-documented in interviews throughout his career. “The poem is you” (Ashbery, “Paradoxes and Oxymorons”). Uncomfortable as it may be, the self is other-made, dependent (cf. DeJong 7).

soul wrecks the medium of canvas; the sea devours the canvas *and* the brush, both the universal field of awareness and his particular instrument of expression.

The last stanza is a trinity and a riddle. Do they murder him, branded as a failure? Is he dead or alive when they toss him? The final line leaves us wondering: has the sea been a prayer this whole time? [Be Always Converting p61 - is this an example of a counter-conversion that is thwarted by external factors? "Transition from orthodoxy to infidelity" (James)? What does this mean? Internally-derived salvational knowledge (gnosis) overwhelms the main character of this melodrama. Or is his subject Nature itself, life itself, and is poetry the prayer that it has decided to remain, i.e., this poem functions as evidence of the ritual working. The poem concludes with a gently funny affirmation of the children invoked in its opening—silence follows (the word) prayer. The void/sea, unlike our young artist, is blissfully immune to criticism; it swallows it whole.

*

In "The Painter," the artist's faith—that is, his willingness to believe in the efficacy of prayer—distinguishes him from the other people in the poem. He also enacts ritual acts of magic in his artmaking process, suggesting an older animist/materialist religiosity than the transcendental/Christian belief-based one. He stereotypes the Romantic archetype by means of his personal relationship with Nature, his concern for the state of his soul, and his tragic fate, particularly relative to the uncomprehending and compassionless society in which he worked. It may be this society, or his impression of it, which the young artist seeks to escape by seeking mystical union with the forces of nature through the religious vocation of his art.

The best Modern/Postmodern sources of poetic criticism are poems themselves, sometimes explicitly. A visible precursor to Ashbery's sestina is Wallace Stevens' poem "The Idea of Order at Key West," which is famously about poetry, thinly veiled in one of its original forms as song. "The Painter" is about poetry, in its ur-manifestation as prayer to nature, here symbolically conveyed by the genre of painting.

To what extent can these poems be usefully compared? Both poems identify artists as religious beings who exist in tense relationship to social mores and cultural institutions: i.e., the artist serves a quasi-mystical function, they are after something following the Romantic tradition akin to what Bloom would call 'personal gnosis'.³⁷² Both poems are about individual artists who create near the sea while observed and critiqued by a plural body of onlookers. Both poems seek to increase knowledge and understanding "of ourselves and of our origins"—for "ourselves," I read the self or soul being expressed in artmaking; "our origins," the sea, our primordial source. Fewer than twenty years later, Ashbery (in 1956) disassembles and then re-worlds the stakes of self-aware art, and the fate of the artist, as previously announced by Stevens (in 1938) just before Modernism's floodgates burst with the outpouring of Postmodernism.

In Ashbery's sestina, the painterly subject of the sea is seen so directly by the painter that the two unify, in a mystical sense,³⁷³ in the mind of the painter as it merges with the soul of the sea. Western Christian mysticism can be described as

³⁷² Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (1992)

³⁷³ "[I]t is important to remember that mysticism is always a process or a way of life. Although the essential note - or, better, goal - of mysticism may be conceived of as a particular kind of encounter between God and the human between Infinite Spirit and the finite human spirit, everything that leads up to and prepares for this encounter, as well as all that flows from or is suppose to flow from it for the life of the individual in the belief community, is also mystical, even if in a secondary sense" (McGinn xvi).

“an attempt to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God.”³⁷⁴ This direct expression, ultimately more sea than self, comes to embody the agential, literary sense of a subject, not walking and talking with a human face, but enjoying an active, primary role as the essence of the poem, its center; its *raison-d’être*. The painter himself does not survive this transformative passing of the torch of significance; yet his role is given as the work’s title as all tragic heroes are, as in *Hamlet*, whose plot outmaneuvers, despite (or in light of) his extreme sensitivity and capacity for contemplation.

In this way, “The Painter” serves as a tidy and respectful, if characteristically cheeky, Postmodernist update of Wallace Stevens’ “The Idea of Order at Key West,” reflecting an ecocritical-approved return to the preeminence of the natural world in its Transcendental ineffability, while simultaneously affirming the foundational role of the artist in understanding the relationship between man and nature. The sestina annotates a cosmic conversation: he (the young artist, Ashbery and/or/as his painter) stands out in the lighting storm, holding up a kite with a key. The risk and vulnerability of the artist are not so literalized in Stevens as in Ashbery; and Ashbery’s selection of the sestina form eddies the movement of the poem, not unlike song lyrics with their repeating chorus. The recurring words also produce an eerie feedback-loop emptiness to the poem’s diction that feels prescient of the algorithm’s keyword and pattern-based meaning-making, absent a human self: “ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds”.³⁷⁵

Here we experience the opposite of one mastering the night by portioning out the sea—a portrait successfully wrangled, critically acclaimed—and instead reveal

³⁷⁴ McGinn xvi.

³⁷⁵ Stevens, “The Idea of Order at Key West,” line 56.

Ashbery's complicity with a reenchantment project that holds space for the chthonic, primal, feminine sea. Stevens' poem champions the singularity of humanness, seeing more self than sea in an assertive male misreading of a female artist's mystical surrender unto source. At best, Stevens' speaker understands the female as a mysterious force who walks, for some unprovable reason, beside another mysterious force, the sea.

The power in the woman observed by the speaker in Stevens' poem is "more than" (line 28) the sea because she uses words to "form to mind or voice" (line 2)—restating the biblical act of creation, speaking into being, Logos. This poem exemplifies a mainstream Christian (as opposed to Christian mystical) manner of worlding, where art in words makes worlds: "She was the single artificer of the world / in which she sang" (37-8); "the sea / ...became the self / That was her song" (38-40). This making dissolves all three categories—nature, person, and art form—into one world, which the speaker insists is contingent on the artist's will, *for she was the maker* (40). Ashbery's painter is not so literally lofty. The sea is never subdued into portraiture. Neither poem can claim mastery or even comprehension of nature; "the maker's rage to order words of the sea" (Stevens 53) must "remain a prayer" (Ashbery 39). Indeed, for Stevens there can be no idea of order imposed on nature beyond a prayer for its potential representability. This sea is not one to be portioned out. Rather, in the slippage between Modern and Postmodern, the Romantic and awful sublime absorbs and annihilates the artist and his work.

"The Idea of Order at Key West" is presented from the point of view of the artist's onlookers, of plural amateur art critics, you could say, who disregard or fail to grok the primacy of the sea already in the first stanza. After all, they categorize it as

inhuman, as nothing but landscape—"merely a place by which she walked to sing" (17). Compartmentalized and dismissed as unknowable, the sea fades into the background, and (in an ungenerous reading) the critics spend the rest of the poem reproducing that old koan, "A wise man points to the moon and an idiot looks at the finger." The sea functions as location, setting, backdrop. If it *could* make art, the "we" supposes, it would have made "deep air," "sound alone" (25, 28)—that is, meaninglessness in the human eye and ear. The human subject must suffice for this group of meaning-makers, and so the woman remains the focus throughout. Secular by design, any discussion of mystical union is outside the scope of their project.

Like poets, and like the light in the fishing boats in those iconic, Gatsby-esque final stanzas, Stevens' artist (as far as the critics can construe) espouses a healthy Formalism: she makes by measuring, and by time. "She measured to the hour its solitude" (36). In the penultimate and ultimate stanzas, his last bid for interpretation, the speaker deluges an imagined interlocutor with terms of empirical precision and rational dominance: master, portion, fix, arrange, and finally *order* (repeated twice). The masculine eye of the critical group turns even the natural properties of the interplay between darkness and light, water and light, into instruments of ordering. It is my suggestion that the primary subject of this poem is the plural speakers who observe the woman, not the woman-artist, and certainly not the sea: it is their interpretation of these two things that focuses the poem. The fundamental separation of nature and the human seems due to their "critical distance," their insistence on the primacy of the human creator-role: "but it was she *and not the sea* we heard" (14, italics added). To the grouped critic, the singular artist comes first; the sea is again explicitly negated; and last but not least: *we heard*. Social reception is tantamount in

this iteration of Modernist worlding; and this bubbles over into Ashberyian worlding too, appearing as a preoccupation of the self-aware young painter (though never fully colonizing the poem's airspace).

The fundamental separation of nature and the human here, the "socially dependent nature of the self" (DeJong 3), prevents any possibility of 'mystical union' such as the one made possible by prayer in the case of "The Painter"—a union consummated in outwardly tragic denouement, but not necessarily tragic if one takes a mystical-spiritual interest in the soul (or its historical context) and imagines that physical death is not the end. In the transition from Stevensian Postromantic-Modernism to Ashberyian Postromantic-Postmodernism, group criticism has replaced the sea as central subject, and the inherited lack of any acknowledgement of the human soul's affinity with nature results in despair. Meanwhile, the fate of the artist polarizes: one either becomes pure ego (Modernist clinging to self as site of meaning, as in the insistence of personal origins ["for she was the maker"] or sacrifices one's personality in the midst of this coup (loss of life, unspoken union with godhead in natural world?). If presence to the experience itself is not valued in our interpretive schema, we can't win for losing.

Negation is one of the most important tools in a critical toolbox: "that was not ours, although we understood" (6) speaks volumes of the presumptive appropriation of spiritual-religious power in the critical appreciation of the aesthetic. When one does not understand, one may apply the transferred dissatisfaction of confusion onto the object that resists interpretation—and so the sea becomes "tragic-gestured" before being demoted to an almost arbitrary backdrop for the triumphant individual ego. Where Stevens was instead concerned with the idea of the human 'self,'

Ashbery turns to appraisal of the 'subject;' in this distinction we can see a microcosm of the transition from Modernism to Postmodernism, and feel the emotional timbre of that shift.

Stevens' poem concerns itself with external mediation as a result of its speakers' inability to process the raw power and formlessness (cf. l.2) of their observed artist's natural subject, the sea. The central claim of the poem is this: "When she sang the sea / became the self that was her song, for she was the maker" (38-40). To the critical gaze, the woman manages to subsume something of the spirit of the ocean and transmute its essence into audible music: this act transcribes the religious function of the lyric as uploaded into post-Freud, post-Marx, 'secular' modernity. Through layers of mediation, the "maker... order[s] words" (53).

It is possible, then, that the fate of the artist in "The Painter" can be chalked up to lack of sufficient mediation; a lack of social support, certainly; and undergoes a mystical (Dionysian) dissolution or annihilation of his ego into his subject, which transformation cannot be represented except perhaps in prayer. For "The Painter" uses prayer instead of measurement. Stevens' critics, orderers of ideas, are in art's mystical ballpark when they ask, "Whose spirit is this?" (18), and when they say they "knew / it was the spirit that we sought" (19). In abstractly devotional final lines, they bless the struggle of the artist, and they acknowledge the existence of such numinous phenomena as portals, stars, and mysterious origins, while acceding to the immaterial ("ghostly") quality of these processes of making.

But they are basically separated, being observers; Stevens' voice is closer to that of a philosopher, whereas Ashbery's (cyclical, less linear) is a composer or dancer. The speakers of "The Idea of Order" are not artists, but the critical group

gaze: primarily anthropologically interested, they are perhaps moved emotionally, though shown to lack the capacity for reflecting on their emotions. They are moved aesthetically, but not to faith, as artists necessarily are. The acknowledgement of a critic's inner life, their 'positionality,' is now fashionable, if not required; this is another important shift between Modern to Postmodern forms of reading. One can imagine that Stevens wrote with some ambient awareness of the methods of New Criticism, whereas Ashbery wrote with a prescient awareness of the oncoming tide of Deconstruction and cultural materialism.

They, too, however, surrender the measure and philosophy of the previous stanzas to end their poem with exhortation and a kind of prayer, albeit to a named human person ("Ramon Fernandez," 44), and albeit with the desperate desire to force order onto the chaos of the natural, the chthonic, and the feminine. The speakers turn from critical 'mastery,' in the metacritique of criticism in the penultimate stanza, to pure ejaculative prayer by the close of the poem ("Oh! Blessed. . ." 52).

*

Sometimes characterized as flat or prosaic, I consider the trademark of Ashberyan verse to be remarkable, and at times uncanny, clarity.³⁷⁶ In the transparent availability of the syntax and grammar, there is almost always a sturdy sense of sense being made, regardless of a reader's ability or inability to operationalize its meaning. Poetic language, even when it seems like the language of everyday, is not to be understood on everyday terms, nor applied as such (cf. "The

³⁷⁶ "However clear, it would have been deep air" (25) - where Stevens saw no appreciable value, Ashbery makes half his career out of 'meaningless' clarity. He carves an androgynous or at least ambiguous Postmodernism, which expands to include even failures of meaning-making, out of Modernism's rejection of chthonic void of sea/cosmos.

Instruction Manual"). Limpid pools are for unfocused gazing more widely than they are for pH testing for water quality: clarity appears not to want for clarification.

Appreciation, in the form of genuine presence, outstrips understanding as the highest form of criticism. The poetic language of John Ashbery lends itself to contemplative theory and pedagogy. This interpretation of his poems' critical metacontent can be gratefully applied as analgesic, perhaps even antidote, to the scientized schema of university-English-department literary interpretation which has been falling away since the 1960s. With his forms, tones, and voice, Ashbery (prophetically early, with *Some Trees*) is critiquing our contemporary culture of artistic criticism, particularly the simplified dogmatic forms of historical materialism which have proven handier to assess in classrooms than the idiosyncratic, nonlinear inner workings of deep contemplation and love, of which appreciation is foundational.

"The Painter" (*Some Trees*, 1948)

Sitting between the sea and the buildings
He enjoyed painting the sea's portrait.
But just as children imagine a prayer
Is merely silence, he expected his subject
To rush up the sand, and, seizing a brush,
Plaster its own portrait on the canvas. 6

So there was never any paint on his canvas
Until the people who lived in the buildings
Put him to work: "Try using the brush
As a means to an end. Select, for a portrait,
Something less angry and large, and more subject
To a painter's moods, or, perhaps, to a prayer." 12

How could he explain to them his prayer
That nature, not art, might usurp the canvas?
He chose his wife for a new subject,
Making her vast, like ruined buildings,
As if, forgetting itself, the portrait
Had expressed itself without a brush. 18

Slightly encouraged, he dipped his brush

In the sea, murmuring a heartfelt prayer:
"My soul, when I paint this next portrait
Let it be you who wrecks the canvas."
The news spread like wildfire through the buildings:
He had gone back to the sea for his subject. 24

Imagine a painter crucified by his subject!
Too exhausted even to lift his brush,
He provoked some artists leaning from the buildings
To malicious mirth: "We haven't a prayer
Now, of putting ourselves on canvas,
Or getting the sea to sit for a portrait!" 30

Others declared it a self-portrait.
Finally all indications of a subject
Began to fade, leaving the canvas
Perfectly white. He put down the brush.
At once a howl, that was also a prayer,
Arose from the overcrowded buildings. 36

They tossed him, the portrait, from the tallest of the buildings;
And the sea devoured the canvas and the brush
As though his subject had decided to remain a prayer.

2. Heliotropic Vanity in "The Ecclesiast," or, the Wisdom of Love Without Work

"The Ecclesiast" (*Rivers and Mountains*, 1966)

"Worse than the sunflower," she had said.
But the new dimension of truth had only recently
Burst in on us. Now it was to be condemned.
And in vagrant shadow her mothball truth is eaten.
In cool, like-it-or-not shadow the humdrum is consumed. 5
Tired housewives begat it some decades ago,
A small piece of truth that if it was honey to the lips
Was also millions of miles from filling the place reserved for it.
You see how honey crumbles your universe
Which seems like an institution – how many walls? 10

Then everything, in her belief, was to be submerged
And soon. There was no life you could live out to its end

And no attitude which, in the end, would save you.
 The monkish and the frivolous alike were to be trapped in death's capacious claw
 But listen while I tell you about the wallpaper – 15
 There was a key to everything in that oak forest
 But a sad one. Ever since childhood there
 Has been this special meaning to everything.
 You smile at your friend's joke, but only later, through tears.

For the shoe pinches, even though it fits perfectly. 20
 Apples were made to be gathered, also the whole host of the world's ailments and troubles.
 There is no time like the present for giving in to this temptation.
 Once the harvest is in and the animals put away for the winter
 To stand at the uncomprehending window cultivating the desert
 With salt tears which will never do anyone any good. 25
 My dearest I am as a galleon on salt billows.
 Perfume my head with forgetting all around me.

For some day these projects will return.
 The funereal voyage over ice-strewn seas is ended.
 You wake up forgetting. Already 30
 Daylight shakes you in the yard.
 The hands remain empty. They are constructing an osier basket
 Just now, and across the sunlight darkness is taking root anew
 In intense activity. You shall never have seen it just this way
 And that is to be your one reward. 35

Fine vapors escape from whatever is doing the living.
 The night is cold and delicate and full of angels
 Pounding down the living. The factories are all lit up,
 The chime goes unheard.
 We are together at last, though far apart. 40

*

"The Ecclesiast"

The title of this poem renames the title given to the author of Ecclesiastes, one of the writings of the Hebrew Bible. Modern culture has kept many of its verses in circulation. The opening lines of Ecclesiastes (1:1-2) read:

*The words of the Teacher:
Meaningless! Meaningless!*³⁷⁷

In addition to being a popular section of the Bible in modernity, this opening doubtless appealed to Ashbery's sensibility, shuttling between levity and gravity. The Ecclesiast is traditionally identified as King Solomon, considering his life and old age with extreme skepticism. "*What profit hath man for all his toil, / in which he toils under the sun?*" The Ecclesiast is also translated as Teacher or Preacher. The speaker of these passages shifts multiple times, at some points into the personification of Wisdom itself (the feminine concept; cf. Sophia³⁷⁸). Put simply, the existential passages insist on the meaninglessness of (day and) labor while reflecting more gently on night and rest (and the love and enjoyment possible therein).³⁷⁹ Throughout his own poem, Ashbery tropes the book's recurring images of shadow and sun,

³⁷⁷ Biblical citation: New International Version (is this recommended? Which is?)
[Ecclesiastes 1 NIV - Everything Is Meaningless - The words - Bible Gateway](#)

³⁷⁸ FAST SOPHIA FACTS: [Sophia \(wisdom\) - Wikipedia](#) [Sophia \(Gnosticism\) - Wikipedia](#)

*In the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church, the feminine personification of divine wisdom as Holy Wisdom (Ἁγία Σοφία; Hagía Sophía) can refer either to Jesus Christ the Word of God (as in the dedication of the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople) or to the Holy Spirit.

*The connection of Divine Wisdom to the concept of the Logos resulted in the interpretation of "Holy Wisdom" (Hagia Sophia) as an aspect of Christ the Logos.

*In Russian Orthodox mysticism, Sophia became increasingly indistinguishable from the person of the Theotokos (rather than Christ), to the point of the implication of the Theotokos as a "fourth person of the Trinity".

*Cf. theosophical writings of sixteenth century German Christian mystic Jakob Böhme, who also speaks of the Sophia in works such as *The Way to Christ*.

*Sophia assumes aspects of a goddess or angelic power in Gnosticism.

*In Gnosticism, Sophia is a feminine figure, analogous to the human soul but also simultaneously one of the feminine aspects of God. Gnostics held that she was the syzygy, or female twin, of Jesus, i.e. the Bride of Christ, and the Holy Spirit of the Trinity.

> Not a goddess: In Christian iconography, Holy Wisdom, or Hagia Sophia was depicted as a female allegory from the medieval period.

³⁷⁹ Ashbery's verse often prefers the darkness to the light of day. As Ben Lerner puts it, "The daylight mode to which sense would pin the poet is opposed to the discretion of the night." ("The Future Continuous: Ashbery's Lyric Mediacy," *boundary 2*, 2010)

darkness and light, quoting almost verbatim in multiple places, and sketches a contemporary iteration of a contemplative's vexed relationship with a *deus absconditus*.

"Worse than the sunflower," she had said.

The poem opens with a typical Ashberyian head-cock, a straight-passing strangeness seemingly from out of nowhere. "Under the sun" is a phrase used 29 times in Ecclesiastes, each time serving to contextualize the ultimate uselessness of daytime labor. The sun symbolizes a sovereign God, the ultimate power which turns all heads; yet the Ecclesiast demurs from subservience. What could be "worse," a woman asks, than to be a follower of the sun(son)? Perhaps it *is* yet worse to doubt and conflict and confuse internally, as the author of Ecclesiastes does in those polyvocal writings.

Who is "she"? Following the title directly, she could be the Teacher or speaker of Ecclesiastes; the Hebrew noun *Ecclesiast* oddly takes a feminine grammatical form, the only instance of such a form in the Bible.³⁸⁰ A "feminine" reader of life's struggle, the Ecclesiast does not follow the masculine Sun as is expected; she instead challenges, then rejects purposiveness entirely.

³⁸⁰ from [Ecclesiastes - Wikipedia](#): "Ecclesiastes is a phonetic transliteration of the Greek word Ἐκκλησιαστής (Ekklesiastēs), which in the Septuagint translates the Hebrew name of its stated author, Kohelet (קֹהֵלֵת). The Greek word derives from ekklesia "assembly,"[5] as the Hebrew word derives from kahal "assembly,"[6] but while the Greek word means 'member of an assembly',[7] the meaning of the original Hebrew word it translates is less certain.[8] As Strong's Concordance mentions,[9] *it is a female active participle* of the verb kahal in its simple (qal) paradigm, *a form not used elsewhere in the Bible* and which is sometimes understood as active or passive depending on the verb,[a] so that Kohelet would mean '(female) assembler' in the active case (recorded as such by Strong's Concordance),[9] and '(female) assembled, member of an assembly' in the passive case (as per the Septuagint translators). According to the majority understanding today,[8] the word is a more general (mishkal, מִשְׁכָּל) form rather than a literal participle, and the intended meaning of Kohelet in the text is 'someone speaking before an assembly'; hence 'Teacher' or 'Preacher'. This was the position of the Midrash[10] and of Jerome.[11]" (emphasis added)

Centuries earlier,³⁸¹ Ovid tells the myth of Clytie and Helios, a somewhat different recounting of the difficulty of love between mortals and the divine.³⁸² Clytie, a nymph, enjoys her love relationship with Helios, god of the sun, until he is seduced to another woman by a trick of Aphrodite (herself eager for revenge, as it was Helios who revealed Aphrodite's affair with Ares to Hephaestus—Helios, being the sun, seeing everything first). After a second-degree murder that yet fails to win her god back, Clytie transforms into a flower, eternally following his celestial radiance with her heliotropic head. Ovid reports that Clytie was turned into a heliotrope, but popular representations as early as the 17th century had replaced the little violet species with the brighter, more human-sized sunflower.³⁸³ Modern interpretations also replaced the older solar deity with Apollo, god of light and of poetry.

Heliotropism is to turn towards what gives life: the sun; the awaited-for child; a lover; poetry. To trope is to turn (Greek, Latin). The only words Pete Seeger wrote in 1959 were "Turn, turn, turn!"; the rest quote the Ecclesiast.

IV.

*As flowers turn toward the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history. A historical materialist must be aware of this most inconspicuous of all transformations.*³⁸⁴

*But the new dimension of truth had only recently
Burst in on us. Now it was to be condemned.*

Even if we do not presume that either the speaker of Ashbery's poem or the female referent of the first line has an Ecclesiastic voice, when the poem next turns to consider "a new dimension of truth," condemnation is not far behind. Somehow,

³⁸¹ Ovid wrote 8CE. Ecclesiastes was written sometime between 450 and 180 BCE. (315 = average Eccl guess date)

³⁸² Metamorphoses 4.167-270. [P. Ovidius Naso. Metamorphoses Brookes More. Ed.](#)

³⁸³ Cf. e.g. *Clytie Transformed into a Sunflower*, Charles de la Fosse, oil on canvas, 1688

³⁸⁴ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"

despite the skeptical allusive title and anti-Romantic first line, inspiration has struck—that is, the personal recognition of an insight or aspect of wisdom (Sophia) had “recently / burst in” with explosive force. It bursts in on *us*, presumably the pairing of the poem’s speaker and the woman of the first line. But apparently its value cannot last. An impersonal passive voice renders this judgment in the present (“now”), and moves to dispatch the inadequacy.

And in vagrant shadow her mothball truth is eaten.

In cool, like-it-or-not shadow the humdrum is consumed.

Vagrant and mothball are two nouns turned into unsavory, dilapidated adjectives. Darkness (in the form of shadow) takes on and metabolizes this woman’s piecemeal insight, breaking down into now commonplace (“humdrum”) what was earlier significant. Darkness, it seems, is indifferent to any personal attachment to insights gained from “new dimension[s] of truth,” not unlike how Helios forbore ever again looking at Clytie, despite her fixed-swivel adoration: the first heliotrope was condemned to live life in the shadows³⁸⁵. Darkness is “cool, like-it-or-not.” The condemned and consumed truth, however, continues to be the subject of the Ecclesiast’s discussion.

Tired housewives begat it some decades ago,

A small piece of truth that if it was honey to the lips

Was also millions of miles from filling the place reserved for it.

According to this Ecclesiast, it was modern women, exhausted by the domestic and affective labor required by their subservient social conditions, who birthed this “new dimension of truth.” Perhaps this is a dig at the target consumer of the New Age’s commodification of truth, the ‘spiritual marketplace’ that bloomed in

³⁸⁵

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0028%3Abook%3D4%3Acard%3D167>

the 1960s and peaked in its original form in the 1990s.³⁸⁶ If referring literally to their children (as “begat” implies), this truth would be a cipher for a generation of seekers, like those coming of age around 1966 when the poem is published. This newborn capacity of truth was naturally sweet (“honey”), convenient and transportable (“a small piece”), and, most interestingly, did not know its place (or conscientiously objected to its place) in the given tradition of knowledge. It existed outside of those predetermined categories—way, exaggeratedly outside, *millions of miles from* it. This turn of phrase, like “like-it-or-not,” gives the embedded history of this little revelation a chatty conversational tone, inviting us to share in its gossip. The poem then blooms into direct address, enveloping the reader and asking a startling question.

*You see how honey crumbles your universe
Which seems like an institution—how many walls?*

The organically sweet nature of this “new dimension of truth” causes dissolution of the prior absolute or totality to which the woman, and we listeners/interlocutors, belonged.³⁸⁷ This dissolution recasts our understanding of the universe—as suddenly we are flooded in the spotlight of second-person address—while existence, reduced to fragments, yet “seems like an institution.” Without Helios or the son, this small new truth is sounding explicitly anti-institutional; it further demonstrates, or asks us to “see”, the extent to which the previous totality was multiply walled, exclusive, and therefore literally divisive.

*Then everything, in her belief, was to be submerged
And soon.*

³⁸⁶ Cite someone. Erik? Kim Lau? Hannegraaff?

³⁸⁷ I say “we” here, and throughout the essay, because Ashbery says “you,” requiring participation; my “we” henceforth refers to readers, myself and yours.

Life, the Ecclesiast tells us, is for dying. The overwhelming fact of mortality underscored by the impermanence of status, wealth, relationships, and so on after death is thematized here as in Ecclesiastes. World-submersion could have echoes of the New Age story of the lost paradise Atlantis, a fictional island in Plato whose demise warned against the hubris of nations.

*There was no life you could live out to its end
And no attitude which, in the end, would save you.*

Here we get an update on the standard projected salvific timeline of Christianity. End-times are brought to mind by the doubling of the word “end.” Life, as referred to here, is apparently eternal, endless; or, at least, its end is not achievable by humans. Reading the speaker psychologically, the totality-dissolution engendered by the sweet “new dimension of truth” (sardonically sweet, now, perhaps) triggers fear, which disperses into a frantic (and therefore blindly totalizing) certainty that “all is lost”.

VI

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.³⁸⁸

The monkish and frivolous alike were to be trapped in death’s capacious claw
Here Ashbery imports, revises, and embellishes Eccl. 2:16. The original verse reads:

*For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered;
the days have already come when both have been forgotten.*

³⁸⁸ Benjamin, “Theses”

Like the fool, the wise too must die!

The wise is reimagined into “monkish,” i.e., living a life of contemplation, at a deliberate remove from the world. The fool is reimagined as “frivolous,” i.e. of little value; paltry; not worthy of serious attention. The behavior of both ends of this spectrum has marginalized them, removed them from the public square of the communal mind. The polarity, however, remains intact, while neither pole escapes destruction.

But listen while I tell you about the wallpaper—

The speaker of this ten-line metanarrative of allusive desolation gets distracted, either reaching a climax and breaking off abruptly, or deliberating focusing on material, present reality to try to ‘ground’ themselves and return their nervous system to a parasympathetic state. Attention is toggled over to a housewifely concern: wallpaper, slang paradigm of uninteresting or meaningless decoration. This line in conjunction with the next two marks for me the strangest sentence in the poem.

There was a key to everything in that oak forest

We can guess at cognitive-associative connections, but characteristic Ashberyian catch-all/randomness may win out here. Was the wallpaper produced from trees in an oak forest? Does the design of the wallpaper imitate or resemble oak leaves? Either way, we experience a turn from universalizing future-oriented revelation to narrowed present-moment visual-aesthetic focus, which leads to a statement about the strong, even crucial (“key”), meaningfulness inherent in natural environments. Wallpaper, symbol of meaninglessness, is laden explicitly with meaning, being identified via the em-dash as a “key to everything;” nothing and

everything bend around to touch. Furthermore, this (Romantic!) conviction of nature's having the "key to everything" involves an unanticipated emotional response:

But a sad one.

Sadness breaks through the feeble attempt at distracting from the panic of meaninglessness, if indeed that was the idea behind the abrupt cut to considering the wallpaper. Perhaps the Ecclesiastical pounding-down-from-on-high insistence of life's meaninglessness—as Ashbery will trope heavily in the poem's final stanza—has finally 'broken' the speaker emotionally, and broken the chain of logic previously linking the poem's sentences, such that we are thereby given to a natural stage of grieving for that loss of meaning now. In Ecclesiastes, the "key" of working in concert with the natural world opens a door behind which there is only a wall; satisfaction is less than thin on the ground. The acknowledgement of an emotional valence to this recognition of meaninglessness causes next, as it did in Ecclesiastes, a reflection on youth and being young.

Ever since childhood there

Has been this special meaning to everything.

Awareness of mortality gives gravity to life. In Ashbery's biographical case, the death of his younger brother to leukemia marked a permanent change in Ashbery, then 13. His mother gave him his first diary upon his brother's death, and he began it right away, opening the door to his writing life and thereby unlocking his vocation as a poet a couple years later.³⁸⁹ Sadness transfers or reflects a certain knowledge: the original Ecclesiast agrees, and takes the notion even further. Eccl. 7:1-3 reads:

A good name is better than fine perfume,

³⁸⁹ Roffman, Library of America in Paris interview (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cv8wyie3ss>)

*and the day of death better than the day of birth.
It is better to go to a house of mourning
than to go to a house of feasting,
for death is the destiny of everyone;
the living should take this to heart.
Frustration is better than laughter,
because a sad face is good for the heart.*

With the image of the oak forest still highlighted as “key,” the speaker’s focus on the natural world now links present emotionality with a lifelong history (or memory-long, at least) of “special meaning to everything.” The dream or wish of a significant totality may be the fantasy of a child. Ashbery’s reliance throughout his oeuvre on the specifics of childhood reminds me of Walter Benjamin, who takes his own early object fixation as source of contemplation in his autobiographical *Berliner Kindheit* (1900).

*III.
To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past—which
is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its
moments.*³⁹⁰

You smile at your friend’s joke, but only later, through tears.

With what has come in the lines before—apocalyptic intensity followed by the intimate personalization of meaning—we may not be entirely surprised to find ourselves crying. The sadness engendered by the forest, itself called up by the wallpaper, itself selected to avoid the desolation of meaninglessness, casts a Matryoshka shadow over human interactions, even over the healthy and hopeful use of humor to connect in times of struggle.

In the space between stanzas, the unspecified referent of the friend’s joke invites speculation. Was the entire spiritual revelation of lines two through 14 a joke? Or, even more literally, is it possible that the joke was “Worse than the sunflower”? In

³⁹⁰ Benjamin, “Theses”

any case, the grief of the recognition of meaninglessness is something that we are moved to process privately, and only after connecting with someone safe and close to us (our “friend”). The connection with nature, with friendship through humor, and with one’s inner life through emotional release together make a case for this “special meaning to everything” that has persisted through the speaker’s experience.

For the shoe pinches, even though it fits perfectly.

The next stanza clarifies, albeit in a scent-throwing move: we tear up not for emotional reasons only, but also because of physical tension in the body, in this case due to, hmm, restrictive footwear. How is it that even the perfect shoe pinches? If it must be so, then the conclusion is in keeping with the motivations of a contemplative orientation towards reality. Pain is unavoidable; it is a feature, not a bug, of human existence. Having ‘coolly’ established this sensual fact of life—‘like-it-or-not’—the third stanza transitions into its spiritual content.

Apples were made to be gathered, also the whole host of the world’s ailments and troubles.

This line is the exact midpoint of the poem, so perhaps states the poem’s ‘central’ thesis. Here we see a creation-based commitment to the Ecclesiastical insistence on the rightness of God’s will despite the world’s apparent unfairness (cf. Eccl. 3:10-15; 8:17). We infer that Eve was not wrong to eat the apple; apples were “made to be” so: in other words, Original Sin is more of a naturally-foregone conclusion than an eternally-regrettable fumble. The action confirms the First Noble Truth of Buddhism, *dukkha*: life is suffering.³⁹¹ Extreme suffering destroys meaning, or the ability to make meaning; so suffering produces a sense of meaninglessness.

³⁹¹ <https://www.lionsroar.com/buddhism/four-noble-truths/>

The Buddhist aspiration that results from the First Noble Truth, to achieve full recognition of the impermanence of all things, seems to align with the refrain of the Ecclesiast: “All is meaningless / vanity and chasing after wind” (1:16; 2:26; 4:4, 16; 6:9; 12:8, et. al).

Is the second phrase of the line a restatement of the first, or a logical continuation of the thought? The syntax of the line could be read as a subtle mockery of the popular 1960s habit (modeled above, and returned with a vengeance in ‘mindfulness’ discourse today) of eliding Christian and Buddhist ethics, pushing for syncretism via a humble “also,” an unconvincing (because agrammatical) yoking. Whether metacritical or not, “ailments and troubles” are presented as a universalizing communion (“the whole host”).³⁹²

*There is no time like the present for giving in to this temptation.
Tomorrow you'll weep—what of it?*

Here Ashbery provides an exegesis of the preceding line, the ‘central’ thesis of the poem. We receive a call to action—or inaction, depending on how closely Ashbery’s Ecclesiast aligns with the biblical one’s resistance to daily work³⁹³. The temptation is presumably the gathering of apples, i.e. our attachment to the reliable experience of suffering (with that childlike human habit of applying “a special

³⁹² Lerner: “In Ashbery’s poems, meaning might not be fully present, but we have a graceful kind of non-absence: each moment feels authorized by a truth that has yet to arrive” (206).

³⁹³ Self-contradicting in multiple places, Ecclesiastes also suggests an enlightened resignation, as in 3:22: *So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work, since that is their lot*. It could be that the ‘temptation’ to do one’s work without complaining serves to bring a person into the present moment via an experience of absorptive ‘flow’.

We see this theme repeated elsewhere in Ashbery’s oeuvre, and refracted through a couple, e.g. this excerpt (l. 9-11) from “Haunted Landscape” (*As We Know*, 1979):

*She had preferred to sidle through the cane and he
To hoe the land in the hope that some day they would grow happy
Contemplating the result: so much fruitfulness. A legend.*

meaning to everything” [l.18]). These two sentences prepare us for the coming pronouncement.

There is time enough

Once the harvest is in and the animals put away for the winter

Here we hear the opening of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8: “There is a time for everything”. This line opens arguably the most positive passage of an otherwise agonizing book. I say positive because the introductory statement and follow-up catalog structure is affirming—*there is a time*, i.e. we are not yet out of time, and with this available time we may do things, irrespective of things’ meaninglessness. We are not yet (or were not in 1966) always already annihilated by the climate-catastrophe-cum-capitalocene. Despite the content seeming to ‘cancel out’ or neutralize via pairs of polarities, the form of the passage remains affirmative, the message more positive than negative. It is undoubtedly the most famous part of Ecclesiastes thanks to Pete Seeger’s song “Turn! Turn! Turn!”, which came out in 1959. The Byrds’ cover, which brought the song to international prominence, came out in 1965, one year before the publication of “The Ecclesiast” in *Rivers and Mountains*.

There is a time for everything,

and a season for every activity under the heavens:

a time to be born and a time to die,

a time to plant and a time to uproot,

a time to kill and a time to heal,

a time to tear down and a time to build,

a time to weep and a time to laugh,

a time to mourn and a time to dance,

a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,

a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,

a time to search and a time to give up,

a time to keep and a time to throw away,

a time to tear and a time to mend,

*a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.*

Despite immediate precedents of tears (19), pinching shoes (20), ailments and troubles (21), and the threat of yet more weeping (23), Ashbery's *Ecclesiast* affirms our being held in time, as symbolized here by stewarding fertile land in accordance with the seasons. Right action in alignment with nature is encouraged despite suffering and meaninglessness.

To stand at the uncomprehending window cultivating the desert

Instead of any of those fourteen cataloged actions and their opposites, although he aligns exactly with Eccl. 3:1-8, our speaker would use his 'time enough' to stand at a window—to do nothing at all. Perhaps this falls under *a time to be silent*. There is mention in the final chapter of Ecclesiastes of "those looking through windows" who "grow dim" (12:3). "Cultivating the desert" could reflect an attempt to sow and reap earth that does not produce, another image of fruitlessness of human efforts. Contrary to the harvest that was just brought in (l. 24), the speaker now would have us work interior, stonier (sandier) ground. Perhaps we are to consider our own mortality, as in the Buddhist meditation Maranasati (mindfulness of death, death awareness), said to be conducive to right effort.³⁹⁴

The 'action of inaction' described in this line encourages discipline in one's solitary contemplative practice. The Judaeian desert is the scene of the temptation of Christ, who does spiritual battle with Satan while fasting for forty days. Here we

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<https://www.buddhistinquiry.org/article/shining-the-light-of-death-on-life-maranasati-meditation-part-i/>

imagine taking the time to invest ourselves in the (materially useless) labor of spiritual warfare in the image of that New Testament narrative.

The image is also reminiscent of the conceit and opening lines of “The Instruction Manual” (from *Some Trees*), another poem which enshrines the spiritual potential of ‘useless’ imaginative play in rebellious contrast with coerced ‘productive’ institutional labor.³⁹⁵ That the Ecclesiast’s window is ‘uncomprehending’ perhaps signifies a reflection of modern social norms which no longer have a place for spiritual contemplation. This could corroborate the unorthodox or even heterodox sense in the opening stanza of our sweet, small new truth being “millions of miles from filling the place reserved for it” (l. 8).

With salt tears which will never do anyone any good.

The personal practice of cultivating the desert magically produces water from a rock, and we find ourselves crying again (for the third and final time). Such contemplation (of death/failure) effects an emotional release, the fruits of which “will never” be exploited or used by others. Despite this alleged uselessness, the tears engendered by thinking on the desert provoke an outburst into emotionality that leads to direct address aimed at intimate connection (like those drawn from “but a sad one,” l. 17). This time, the addressee seems more like a beloved than the earlier friend.

*My dearest I am as a galleon on salt billows.
Perfume my head with forgetting all about me.*

³⁹⁵ *As I sit looking out of a window of the building
I wish I did not have to write the instruction manual on the uses of a new metal.
I look down into the street and see people, each walking with an inner peace,
And envy them—they are so far away from me!* (“The Instruction Manual,” l. 1-4)

In the first pure simile of the poem, we witness a surprising switch into high poetic language that figures the weeper as a ship, tossed on a veritable ocean (as Stevens would say) of stormy tears. The elevation in tone hearkens back to troubadour origins of the love lyric, as does the plea which implies the other's action is required to put an end to this painful emotional turmoil.

These lines are only the second and final time the poem uses the first person singular, coming out from behind a descriptive third person (l. 1), a suggestive second person (from l. 9 on), and an evasive and absorptive first person plural (l. 3 on). Due to both its subject matter and tone, the previous instance of first person singular ("But listen while I tell you about the wallpaper" [l. 15]), lacks the intimacy and immediacy of the present pronouncement. Whereas before the housewifely "she" of the first stanza was boring us in flat diction about her interior decorating, now we are taken aback by the elevated tone, dramatic self-transforming imagery, and tongue-tip consonance of l's, n's, and s' in "galleon on salt billows." This "I" feels markedly different from the "I" of the earlier line.

It also issues an imperative, the first and only direct order of the poem. We are directed to perform ablutions with the express purpose of dissolving our attachment to the speaking "I." Depending on how we want to guess at the identities of the I and you—which game is almost always rigged in Ashbery—this could mean that the person doing the perfuming should forget the speaker, or forget themselves, or forget them both (i.e. move on from the relationship, whatever it was). Self-negation and even ego dissolution are at issue now: that is, for me to be able to forget myself would be a sacred, even deifying, honor.³⁹⁶

³⁹⁶ Ashbery may be working again from his biblical source here. The image of perfume appears twice in Ecclesiastes, both times to open a new chapter, and both in comparative

Apparently the tumult of dramas attendant on love and attachment causes even the voice of wisdom (the Ecclesiast) to falter, and to wish for Lethe. In Ecclesiastes, Wisdom makes frequent use of the imperative; it is when Wisdom speaks that we receive marching orders (Eccl. 7:9; 7:16; 7:21; 8:2-3; 9:7-10; 10:4; 10:2; 11:1; 11:6; 11:9-10; et al.). The use of the imperative in this couplet may signify a switch over to a higher power speaking. Of course, the mortal beloved may be felt to be a higher power, in troubadour logic. But imagine this elevated and sonorous first person were the voice of God speaking, and his suggestion becomes provocative. The greatest honor you could do Him is not to think on Him... or is that God Himself wishes to forget that He exists?

At any rate, whomever is speaking bids us forget about them.³⁹⁷ And forget we shall, obediently, in the penultimate stanza that follows. This voice lowers slightly into what you might call workaday prophecy: perhaps it is still the same speaker (who is perhaps Wisdom, or God), but there is a return to a more settled and composed tone.

For some day these projects will return.

Which projects? Literally, those most recently named are bringing in the harvest, putting away the animals, and cultivating the desert within (l. 24-5). The

contexts (the latter is pure simile, like Ashbery's galleon). 7:1: *A good name is better than fine perfume, / and the day of death better than the day of birth.* Chapter 10 opens: *As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, / so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.*

³⁹⁷ from Wikipedia: "Ecclesiastes regularly switches between third-person quotations of Kohelet and first-person reflections on Kohelet's words, which would indicate the book was written as a commentary on Kohelet's parables rather than a personally-authored repository of his sayings."

"The book belongs to the category of wisdom literature, the body of biblical writings which give advice on life, together with reflections on its problems and meanings—other examples include the Book of Job, Proverbs, and some of the Psalms. Ecclesiastes differs from the other biblical Wisdom books in being deeply skeptical of the usefulness of wisdom itself."

obligations of life and work ground us again in Ecclesiastes: "I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards..." (2:4). Figuratively, and closer at hand, there is the assigned project of honoring-by-forgetting an emotionally intense encounter with the divine (l. 28).

The return of these projects emphasizes again the distinction between worldly action and interior contemplation. "Turn! Turn! Turn!" becomes a *return*. In a contemplative view, the project of the self reestablishes prominence in the wake of the weeping encounter in the desert. The project of remembering one's self (the reemergence of a stable ego structure) returns to the fore. Either way, *return* confirms a sense of time as cyclical, a truth corroborated by the following line.

The funereal voyage over ice-strewn seas is ended.

After the wake, life goes on. In a Gnostic reading aligned with Bloom's notion of 'the American religion', here the idea of death as final is overturned. Less literally, and less metaphysically, this line could be observing that self-pity, or grief of the loss of one's personal ego, does end at some point; the drama of that loss plays out and finishes eventually. Either way, this image sets the stage for reincarnation and its ambivalence in the next line.

*You wake up forgetting. Already
Daylight shakes you in the yard.*

It appears that the forgetting of self which was prayed for in the last stanza *is* possible under the condition that we return to life after death. Light comes again, somewhat uncouth, as in Donne,³⁹⁸ and with it the expectation of work, and with that, our ongoing Bartlebyan refusal.

³⁹⁸ Cf. "The Sun Rising:" "Busy old fool, unruly Sun, Why dost thou thus?"

The hands remain empty. They are constructing an osier basket
Just now,
Ecclesiastes 4:5-6 reads:

Fools fold their hands
and ruin themselves.
Better one handful with tranquility
than two handfuls with toil
and chasing after the wind.

This seems to promote a middle path of contemplation in lieu of either extreme. To do nothing is foolish; to toil overmuch is also foolish. “Better one handful with tranquility.”

We are reminded the devil finds work for idle hands. At the same time, this poem has undergone its own reckoning with the meaninglessness of existence *à la* Ecclesiastes and arrived at a recognition similar to the Third Noble Truth: by ending or renouncing attachment, one may thereby bring an end to suffering. The hands have been empty, and so they remain, even on into further lifetimes, when one has woken up after a death and great forgetting (l. 30-31).

These empty hands are yet *constructing* something; this logic wavers under closer examination. Are hands that are at work constructing a basket technically empty? Is this because the basket being assembled is itself as yet empty? This functions as an analogy for life and signification: one constructs a life (capaciously) and then puts meaning into it... Is the work of basket-weaving empty, devoid of meaning? There is the old-fashioned joke of the futility of studying the arts where we say we went to college and studied “underwater basket-weaving.” The flexible twigs of the osier—also called the basket willow—do in fact require soaking under water before they can be weaved... At any rate, having been goaded by a koan down a

rabbit hole, we are officially back in familiar Ashberyian jousting territory: the “just now” (33) of the uncanny, and unassimilable, detail.

*and across the sunlight darkness is taking root anew
In intense activity.*

In the presence of another paradox—simultaneous darkness and sunlight—polarity is reasserted through action (karma), “intense activity.” This sentence casts its surreptitious vote for contemplation over action. The blinding thoughtlessness of sunpowered activity breeds darkness; perhaps the emptiness of the basket-weaver’s hands proved adequate idleness, and the devil did find work there. Fresh hells from newly-rooted darknesses are the fruit of labor even in this bright new life. And yet:

*You shall never have seen it just this way
And that is to be your one reward.*

And yet. This judgmental view of the darkness is gently corrected by the awareness of multiple possible interpretations. The highlight of one’s life (or lives) is multiplicity, an openness of vision, willingness to see another way.³⁹⁹ We are assured of this reward by a prophetic or promising future tense: *you shall; this is to be*. This sentence hearkens back to the opening of the poem, wherein we are “burst in on” by the new dimension of truth which began this journey. The “new dimension of truth,” singular focus on which had caused the fear-spiral in the housewife (inner domestic/kept woman/anima) in the first two stanzas, has been fully digested now. Instead of ‘only’ seeing it ‘that way’, we are rewarded for integrating the “new

³⁹⁹ On some level, it seems Ashbery is always also talking to his readers, and therefore (abstractly) to critics. His oeuvre is pedagogical and ‘useful’ for my purposes for this reason. The relationship between teacher and student requires communication, shared language, and generosity of interpretation. Openness to multiplicity of perspective is a fundamental requirement before any genuine pedagogy can take place...

dimension” into a diverse perspective. Once this reward is bestowed, the poem is free to close, panning out to remark from its fresh place on mortality and its intertwinement with the divine.

Fine vapors escape from whatever is doing the living.

Whoever has announced our reward—a toss-up between an Ecclesiast (Teacher/Preacher), Wisdom itself, and a divine voice distributing favors—sees from beyond the human, which would explain this line’s detached way of describing the ceaseless activity of human breathing.

The final verses of Ecclesiastes, 12:5-8, meditate on the finality of death and remind the reader to keep God close in those last moments:

*Then people go to their eternal home
and mourners go about the streets.*

*Remember him—before the silver cord is severed,
and the golden bowl is broken;
before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,
and the wheel broken at the well,
and the dust returns to the ground it came from,
and the spirit returns to God who gave it.*

*“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher.
“Everything is meaningless!”*

The Hebrew word “hevel,” translated as “meaningless” here and throughout Ecclesiastes, means “vapor” or “breath,” indicating something mere or fleeting.⁴⁰⁰

The first line of Ashbery’s final stanza could be a description of death, breath’s final escape; it could be of sleep, characterized by unconsciousness (“whatever”) and deep regular breathing. Or it could simply be intended to separate us from the experience of being human enough to be willing to imagine the nonhuman beings

⁴⁰⁰ <https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/hevel-the-journey-of-an-intangible-word/>

which are about to disrupt our assumption of intact humanity. It is in any case a night vision: where we were just a few lines ago shaken awake by daylight (l. 32), the next sentence puts us back in dark cold night—and not alone, but overwhelmed by powerful celestial beings (and favorites of the New Age).

*The night is cold and delicate and full of angels
Pounding down the living.*

The unexpected appearance of angels is not an immediate comfort. The night is full of them, like bats; they bear down irrepressibly. “Jeder Engel ist schrecklich” (Rilke). What does it mean for angels to be ‘pounding down the living’? Perhaps they are angels of death, come to oversee the final escape of life’s vapor from the mouths of mortals. Perhaps our own religiosity or spirituality, including our belief in them and their divine expectations, or our comparisons of ourselves with their presumed perfection, are what pound down on us. *There was no life you could live out to its end / and no attitude which, in the end, would save you* (l. 12-13). Or perhaps they are Benjamin’s ‘Angel of History’:

*The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them.*⁴⁰¹

*The factories are all lit up,
The chime goes unheard.*

True to Ashbery and Ecclesiastical form, the poem ends on an image of an abandoned place of work and a disregarded call to action. The factory’s state of bright aliveness strikes unnaturally in the context of dark night.

XI.

According to Fourier, as a result of efficient cooperative labor, four moons would illuminate the earthly night, the ice would recede from the poles, sea

⁴⁰¹ Benjamin, Thesis IX

water would no longer taste salty, and beasts of prey would do man's bidding. All this illustrates a kind of labor which, far from exploiting nature, is capable of delivering her of the creations which lie dormant in her womb as potentials. Nature, which, as Dietzgen puts it, 'exists gratis,' is a complement to the corrupted conception of labor.

We are together at last, though far apart.

The dream of union with God is simultaneously possible and impossible; divinity is always 'near and distant' (cf. the title of Ian Cooper's book "The Near and Distant God: Poetry, Idealism, and Religious Thought from Hölderlin to Eliot"). Togetherness is perhaps the only thing actively encouraged in Ecclesiastes (more positive than detachment from outcome or making peace with death, the book's other commands). Personal togetherness is valued and encouraged (4:9, 11). Simple enjoyment of life is urged in light of meaninglessness of labor (Eccl 9:9-10). As for the ending phrase, *though far apart*, his ultimate union (union in the ultimate line of the poem) was perhaps expected to bring meaning; when it did not, per the Ecclesiast's emptied-out view, we wonder whether the experience is still valuable at all. To be together without meaning could entail a persistent sense of feeling apart.

XVI

A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the 'eternal' image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past.

3. "Some Trees": Romantic Understatement

*These are amazing: each
Joining a neighbor, as though speech
Were a still performance.
Arranging by chance*

*To meet as far this morning
From the world as agreeing
With it, you and I
Are suddenly what the trees try*

*To tell us we are:
That their merely being there
Means something; that soon
We may touch, love, explain.*

*And glad not to have invented
Such comeliness, we are surrounded:
A silence already filled with noises,
A canvas on which emerges*

*A chorus of smiles, a winter morning.
Placed in a puzzling light, and moving,
Our days put on such reticence
These accents seem their own defense.*

The title poem of Ashbery's debut collection "Some Trees" organizes four long sentences across twenty lines, and hosts these lines in quatrains. Each stanza rhymes, AABB CCDD etc, its yoked pairs of couplets; some rhyme exactly, as in "each/speech" and "reticence/defense," while others echo a shared consonant sound or provide a visual or feminine ending, as in "are/there" or "soon/explain" (l.9-10, 11-12) and "surrounded/invented" and "noises/emerges" (13-14, 15-16).

The subtle effect of such simple and neat formal constraints is owed to the signature prosody of the Ashberyan sentence: the ideas in each sentence propel themselves forward by means of 'flat,' 'prosaic,' or even 'didactic' chains of syntax.

His syntax is a straight-faced shrug: the glimmer of a smirk lies in the oddities he stows away in phrases that resist cognitive clarity.

"These are amazing: each / joining a neighbor, as though speech / were a still performance." This first colon separates experience from illustration, being from meaning, what from why. With such a declamatory opening phrase, the title of this poem could be the title of a painting, with the poem itself functioning as expository caption on the museum wall, admiring, contextualizing, and theorizing the landscape. What makes this batch or set or not-quite-grove of trees, carelessly assembled ("some"), an amazement? It is their interrelatedness, their capacity for communication. Apparently they, like the lines that describe them, pair off: each joins a neighbor in the performative sharing of speech. As in Oz, trees talk!—and unlike us, they do not require perceptible gestures to do so.

Apart from or in addition to a painterly reading of this poem, we can understand the opening exclamation as an oversimplified, perhaps gently parodic manifestation of an inherited lyric Romanticism: Wordsworth, Blake, Coleridge. Religious awe of the natural world also speaks to American Transcendentalist roots in Emerson and in Whitman, an acknowledged Ashbery ancestor. Contemplation is the form of spiritualizing attention that Ashbery gives to his object. In this case, one loosely-assembled set of Nature's particulars (some trees) amazes because of its inherent ability to 'join' in 'speech', to dialogue amongst its-selves.

A second layer of amazement arises by means of analogy: not only do these trees join one another, but they do so with a level of awareness which is comparable to the self-conscious performance of an actor or dancer. They make contact—speak

to each other—and they know, somehow, that they are speaking; they are at once actor and audience. "As though speech / were a still performance."

It is my impression that Ashbery composes at the level of the sentence more deliberately than at the level of the line. The lineated paragraph "Some Trees" formally enacts the described joining of speech by weaving each sentence across stanzaic gaps, effectively dovetailing the stanzas: only two stanzas are end-stopped with a period, the final one and the middle one; and the middle seamlessly connects to the penultimate by beginning with the word "And".

The second sentence of the poem begins with the fourth line, ending the first stanza. "Arranging by chance" opens up the longest and most complex sentence in the poem, the subject of which ("you and I," "we") forms the poem's literal center and names its central concern. The grammatical and semantic cores of the poem are identical, and this phrase is buried in the back of the eight-line sentence, located in lines ten and 11.

"Arranging" reminds us of musical composition, while "chance" could refer either to randomness or to the deliberate manipulations of Fate (itself either the Fates, triple goddess of life and death or Fortuna, goddess of destiny). Taken together, we see a classic Ashberyan paradox. How could anything happening by chance be arranged? Is this simply an imaginative reprieve from reality, an escape into droll impossibility? Perhaps, through a contemplative lens, randomness yet holds significance.

In any case, somewhere between randomness and destiny, the extra-long central sentence of "Some Trees" sets up shop. Its two grammatical halves are split by a colon; the first half is split in half again by a comma, the second by a semicolon.

“Arranging by chance / To meet as far this morning / From the world as agreeing / With it” describes the subject of the first half of this sentence, “you and I.” Finally, the introduction of personal particulars lends this poem some lyric ground. You and I—the speaker and audience, and/or lover and beloved, and/or poet and reader—have made a date; we have chosen to set ourselves apart “from the world” to be together.

Ashbery describes and texturizes the extent of this separateness in an unfamiliar way. To agree or disagree with something, one must understand or imagine oneself as separate from it: duality inheres in dialogue. The soliloquy of the world, or nature, includes us, in spite of our delusion of separateness. We are meeting “as far... from the world” as one feels from nature (or one’s neighbors) when she describes it as separate from herself.

After the comma that splits the first half of this sentence, we are shown that angling to skirt “the world” in order to preserve a bond with another proves misguided. The joined wish of the self and other to separate from all else ironically results in their merging with nature: “you and I / Are suddenly what the trees try // To tell us we are[.]” Suddenly: kronos become kairos; time’s flow contracts to a point as the paired humans recognize their coexistence, and indeed their cocreation, with the knowledge shared (somehow) through some trees. We have come to the end of the first half of the longest and central sentence of the poem, and a colon holds the space for the following “that” (l.10) which will answer to the “what” (l.8) posited before it.

“What” are we? The trees will tell us now; but arboreal grammar continues to confuse subject and object, referent and pointer, man and nature. The title and

opening line of the poem identify a group of some trees as the subject for contemplation. Now, a third of the way through the poem, “you and I” are identified as the second grouped subject. What has seemed neatly discrete—the behavior of trees, the behavior of us—begins to intermingle after the poem’s second colon (and there will be one more before we are finished, as another trio of specifications accretes). Rather than define us on human terms, the trees tell us what *their* presence has to do with us: that they portend; and what they portend.

Finally we are delivered to the core of the poem: lines 10 and 11, the literal center of things. The trees are trying to tell us what we are, and they go about this first by acknowledging their positionality. “That their merely being there / Means something;” this is the formal and semantic pith of the poem. *Their merely being there means something*. Stripped down to the essential subject and verb: *Being means*.

From the mouths of trees, man’s meaning-making locates him in the natural world. To me, this simple affirmation should be used to ground and orient not only Ashbery’s oeuvre, but all history, philosophy, and criticism of art. The being means necessitates a contemplative approach to reading poetry, one with an eye toward self-recognition and self-understanding (what are we?, the trees sense we are asking) through rapt attention to nature (“Trees are amazing,” more or less, should open every session of surrendered will-to-interpretation).

That being *means* feels abstract. The trees tell us that their presence signifies; what does it signify? The nine-line sentence is almost over, and we receive our marching orders, or at least a message of reassurance, in the form of a trio of verbs. Being means, which is to say “that soon / We may touch, love, explain.” Soon

come: the meaning of being is a process that unfolds over time. "Touch" may be read transitively and intransitively here: our future selves hold the possibility of emotional influence (to affect someone) as well as physical contact (to touch skin to skin). The three ascending orders of intimacy for a poet-contemplative may be contact, adoration, exposition. We see the being of some trees: we say, these are amazing: and we set up the first of three colons after which we let loose our stream of meanings. Intimacy, communion, and communication are all possible through the insight of contemplation.

Touch, love, explain: experience, affirmation, exegesis! Even the lack of clarity as to whom the "we" includes contributes to a blended experience of communion: are we who touch, love, and explain the human pair, or are we the humans and the trees, doing all this together? Either the lover-interlocutor or the natural world or both protect the speaker from the isolation of singularity.

But all this "merely," and tree-said, lest we risk sentiment or overexposure. Understatement, one of Ashbery's key emotional tones, gives this and many others of his poems their Zen-minimalist timbre. An underlying detachment from, or avoidance of, egoic self and self-aggrandizement characterizes his writing, as we see in the next lines of the penultimate stanza:

And glad not to have invented

Such comeliness, we are surrounded:

The trees have taken responsibility for meaning-making in the abstract and have shouldered the burden of reporting the three steps of mystical union that await the unsuspecting pair, the "you and I." With relief, the pair accepts with amusing humility that they did not single-handedly create these gorgeous truths (amusing, perhaps, that they ever could have assumed themselves so powerful). Or, in a more

traditionally Romantic reading, is it the comeliness of the grove of trees itself that humbles us? This humility functions to avert their gaze from the seduction of such beauty, protecting against its possible fatuousness in a postmodern world no longer willing to admit unironic Romance.

But not so fast: it is precisely due to this grateful surrender of responsibility that the coupled human subject is rendered passive, engulfed, but something unnamed—that creator which *did* invent such comeliness, presumably. And with the third and final deployment of the colon, we are submitted to another trio of possibilities, this time what we might have been “surrounded” by:

*A silence already filled with noises,
A canvas on which emerges*

A chorus of smiles, a winter morning.

First, “[a] silence already filled with noises:” the void teems with potential manifestations, what the Taoists call “the ten thousand things.” Second, “[a] canvas on which emerges // A chorus of smiles:” here we are given a blend of the two arts, visual and musical, that Ashbery will trope doggedly for the rest of his career. The “chorus of smiles” remains enigmatic, but echoes subtly with the “still performance” of the trees in the opening stanza, emphasizing the studied deliberation of something staged, and with an audience. And third, “[a] winter morning:” here Ashbery reuses and embellishes an indicative time-of-day word from twelve lines earlier to remind us where (or when) we are, that is, somewhat clandestinely meeting someone somewhat separately from the world. . . The embellishing adjective “winter” hearkens back to two famous poems by his predecessor Stevens, “The Snow Man” and “Thirteen Ways of Looking At a Blackbird.”

The mystical contemplation of Meister Eckhart can be heard in the “already filled” quality of the silence and the ‘emergence’ of the chorus on the canvas. Eckhart uses the analogy of filling to describe the overflowing of spirit []. Likewise, emergence is a common description of the final step in the mystical path, the birth of the word in the soul.

The third and final subject of the poem, after “some trees” and “you and I” or “we”, are “our days.” The final sentence of the poem, spaced across three lines, comments obliquely on the apparent goals of the project of the poem as well as on the content of the previous sentences: i.e., how the piece thought of itself, and how it played that thinking out. Change has occurred, and something like an *ars poetica* moment can be identified:

Placed in a puzzling light, and moving,

In the face of some trees, someone or something has switched a light on and cocked our heads, placing experience “in a puzzling light.” Now that we’re paying attention, we see that what was “still” in the first stanza has got “moving” in the last. It has even actualized, no longer buried in a hypothetical (“as though...still”, 2-3), and proliferated: moving, of course, can mean both ‘in motion’ or ‘mobile’ and ‘emotionally touching’ (heartening back to the doubled sense of “touch” in line 13).

Movement is touching may be a more explicit or direct reiteration of the poem’s central point, that *being means*. In its unfolding, not least because of the tumbling dovetailing of stanzas and sentences, the poem has transmuted stillness into flow of movement.

Our days put on such reticence

These accents seem their own defense.

Resistance to the flow of love and meaning remains, almost to the last. Backing off from personal pronouns as the subject, we're still invested: "Our days", not we ourselves, display enough reticence to put the project of the poem, of radical interspecies co-creative meaning-making, on the defensive. It is our days, the content of interpersonal lives as they play out across space-time, that put up the fight against amazement and its fruits: reticence, that self-protective, critically-distant Postmodern emotional theme that has misled so many Ashbery scholars away from his fundamentally mystical theo- and eco-poetics. The guarded agnosticism of the sensitive intellectual is betrayed by the devout playing-out, in form, style, and content, of spiritual exercises across Ashbery's body of work.

It is only by a return to an American-Zen minimalism of style that the poem saves itself from scorn and uselessness. The reticence of our days is such that these accents seem their own defense. Whatever these accents are, it is the strength of the reticence itself which rationalizes the attention we pay to, well, whatever we choose. An *accent* is (OED):

1. A mark or sign
2. An aspect of vocal or musical sound.
3. Distinction; distinguishing mark, character, or tone

What signs we have chosen to emphasize speak for themselves. What aspects of a given sonic landscape we choose to focus on are innocent, or, can fend for themselves. "These accents"—the distinguishing marks of trees on a landscape, for instance, and simultaneously our experience of them, and our interpretation of that experience—"seem their own defense." "Some Trees" recreates, distills, and annotates Ashbery's contemplative journey through the lyric's inherited Romanticism; at the same time, it models his own idiosyncratic eco-spiritual grounding. "These

accents” could also, of course, refer to the poems of *Some Trees* themselves, and poetic use of language generally, as notations and annotations of our days.

IV. Coda: “And the work gets completed in a dream.”⁴⁰²

Trust me. The world is run on a shoestring...

—Ashbery, “Hard Times”⁴⁰³

But this vision of bare life is a terrifying thing for many intellectuals, because it requires getting close to zero, which means releasing their primary means of fetishistic disavowal: discourse itself. The world ahead of us is a world of myriad altered states, mutations in consciousness, virtual dematerializations, and psychoactive slipstreams. Best to explore the possibility of experiencing ourselves, and recognizing aspects of the mind, that are not entirely locked into the carceral influencing networks of knowledge, information, and discourse. In other words, states of “non-knowledge,” light as a feather.

—Erik Davis⁴⁰⁴

The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of our selves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.

—bell hooks⁴⁰⁵

0. Ending the Beginning

At least as much as mind-manifesting Stevens, it is wild-bodied Whitman and theopoetic Emerson who speak through Ashberyan lyrics, and this is why I have foregrounded what is essentially an emotional dimension of American natural spirituality in this first foray into Contemplative-Critical Ashbery Studies.⁴⁰⁶ A

⁴⁰² From “All and Some” (*Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*)

⁴⁰³ From *Shadow Train* (1981).

⁴⁰⁴ From “Out of the Oven” (article, Burning Shore online newsletter, 1.1.25)

⁴⁰⁵ *Teaching to Transgress* 207.

⁴⁰⁶ Everson 102.

psychedelic poetics, with its potential to disrupt conventional thinking and expand our understanding of consciousness and creativity, can provide a rich ground for the kind of critical engagement that liberatory pedagogy seeks to cultivate. By exploring poetry through this lens, students might be encouraged to question deeper assumptions about themselves, society, and the nature of reality, thus fostering the "consciousness of freedom" that Giroux associates with critical pedagogy and contributing to the "liberatory practice" that hooks calls engaged pedagogy.

Directly incorporating psychedelic substances into pedagogy raises ethical and practical considerations not addressed in this project: at this time, we're not saying to slip drugs into the drinking water. Likewise, engagement with the intense and ego-crushing alchemy of Ashbery lyric is best undertaken with an experienced guide, one who can help keep the encounter relatively safe, sane, and consensual. As a reminder, consent must be enthusiastic, ongoing, act-specific, specific in time, and revocable at any time. Consent is possible only when the person is "of sound mind."⁴⁰⁷ In fall 2019, my only quarter on campus, the 1968-born UCSC banners leading up the hill commanded, "QUESTION AUTHORITY." When an administration puts an act of curiosity and desire into the imperative and plants it like a flag, this illustrates what I see as the paradox of reading lyric in the academy. For Postmoderns, freedom of religion extends to freedom of art practice.

Capitulation to fate in the postmodern anthropocene can be great fun. Ashbery is radical because he brings attention, enjoyment, and enthusiastic consent to the 20th-century as someone who, by all rights, "ought to know better." To come out in the academy as a practitioner of spirituality of any kind incurs only slightly

⁴⁰⁷ See Appendix E, Manufactured Consent, for an important corollary of this.

worse social repercussions than to come out there as an artist. As a graduate student (i.e. raw materials) with no hope of a meaningful career in academe, particularly coming from the “rural,” “third-tier” UC Santa Cruz (as opposed to Berkeley, or Stanford, or Brown), having watched my cohort drop like flies to poverty and addiction, unwitting conversions to and through abjection have freed me to come out, if not fearlessly, then ruthlessly, by means of the production of this dissertation. I hope it has not been too clumsy, and I hope that it has some use. Had the PhD afforded me more than one quarter living in Santa Cruz with campus access, I can imagine I would have discovered how far we have already come in advancing theory and pedagogy to good ends that help and change our world. Despite efforts to stay nearby, to stay affiliated, and to stay involved, what proved untenable about the conditions of UCSC, the California economy, and COVID-19 displaced me in every sense. By leaving town, I managed to keep the faith—i.e., keep on writing.

The ostensible relationship between psychedelic poetics and liberatory pedagogy has several significant implications for and from the theory of the lyric. These implications largely revolve around challenging conventional definitions and uses of the lyric, expanding its perceived scope, and emphasizing its potential for critical engagement and transformation. I’ve argued that New Lyric Studies is already secretly pushing its object category as psychedelic, even mystical, observing that the negotiation of subjectivity is constant, and inherently relational and social. To bring the spiritual content of these negotiations out of the shadows is to offer our students and ourselves a real shot at belonging and contribution. To theorize the lyric as a

space for exploring non-ordinary states of consciousness necessarily challenges normative understanding of self and world. It decenters in that way we like.⁴⁰⁸

A meditator is always settled in, or unsettled by, his context; his intention and attention shape his experience. The lyric-as-meditation flirts with fluid, multiple, transpersonal subjectivities; when it's really good, it knows no bounds, and it knows this. (Review the title poem, "Blessing in Disguise," at the end of this chapter.) The baffling and antagonistic contradictions of modernity can be held by the disciplined applications of contemplative reading and writing to the extent that practitioners of these acknowledge and assimilate the explicitly personal and explicitly spiritual dimensions of experience. The New Age is one cultic milieu which defines modern alternative spirituality in California and throughout the globalized West; humanistic research and theorizing, if they have any will to pedagogy, will want to learn about it. By compassionately tending to the aggrieved relationship between lyric and student, stitching up the rift between spirituality and humanistic theory, the classroom can turn to face those forces which are actually threatening its people, from within and without. Now that we have named the ideologies and professed to repudiate them, as Edward Olvera would say, "you gotta cut a peace deal within."

My own response to the problem of violence has been a passive one. I understand passiveness as a principle, and how to live it. There is nothing pacific about my poetry, however. I'm not quite sure how those two aspects of my life fit together.

I sometimes claim that I am not a pacifist any longer, which is a way of saying that I don't know how to solve the problem of violence on this continent. At one time, the simple solution was to stop fighting, but I don't believe that anymore. I don't have recourse to that belief anymore because I don't think it is possible, it's just not in the cards.

⁴⁰⁸ "I have no center" (Weshe Rinpoche).

Some other solution to the problem of violence has to be found, and I think we have to look to the role of the artist for that. He is the only one who can liberate it.

—William Everson (*Birth of a Poet*, “Meditation Ten: Dura Virum Nutrix,” 121)

My motivation with this study has been to broaden the bounds and improve the quality of lyric theory and poetic criticism for contemporary application in the university classroom and in the personal lives of nonacademic readers of poetry. I honor Self-making, spirit-poesis, that forms subjects both in resistance and wildly, dangerously indifferent to the state that would produce pulverizing conventional subjectivity.⁴⁰⁹ Poets and offline New Age heads, as rhyming species on the cultural fringe, both carry the potential for enjoying and benefiting from the freedom that comes with not being recognized by the dominant social structures; they court social kenosis, perhaps, by virtue of the way they create and uncreate their realities?⁴¹⁰

The goal is freedom. The method is discipline.

—Gary Snyder, on Zen

This project grew out of my observations of the dire straits of the 200-odd undergraduate students who were in the classrooms I ran while employed as a Teaching Assistant and Graduate Student Instructor at UCSC (2019—2023; set and setting: peak COVID fear and isolation). The negative emotional energy I felt upon

⁴⁰⁹ following Moten 2016.

⁴¹⁰ Cf. Moten 2016, 22-23, where he speaks to the fantasy of not emptiness, but *nothingness*, as something that can inform our existence and lead to new forms of sociality

entering a classroom (or Zoom conference call) reflected my students' unmet needs, which were, of course, material, sometimes astonishingly so—I would bring food—but they were also emotional, psychological, and what I would call (to try to sum up holistically their plethora of complaints) spiritual. The *majority* of my students, across over a dozen courses and all four years of undergraduate work, reported chronic or acute mental and physical illnesses, the most common being ADD/ADHD, anxiety, depression, OCD, and c-PTSD; of these, about half produced medical documents for corroboration, while the other half evinced their struggles in other ways. It would be an understatement to say that conventional humanist pedagogy failed to connect with this demographic. It should not be surprising, reviewing the list of illnesses above, that both Attention Studies and Trauma Studies are surging in popularity right now.

To respond to the needs of my students—to try to help them return to energetic “working order” so we could give attention to poetry with depth and presence—I spent class meetings and office hours teaching and leading exercises geared towards health and healing, “bodymind” practices I had studied or developed on my own from decades of being an artist, a “highly-sensitive person,” the child of a holistic healthcare provider, and a person with chronic pain. I knew from personal research into the biologies of trauma and attachment that until the nervous system was downregulated, there would be no connecting with a person, and without connection (of them to themselves, mainly), there could be no learning. Well before I understood it, my classes became refuges for contemplative practices.

On any given day, I would lead students through any of the following: MBSR-style breathwork and pranayama;⁴¹¹ targeted acupressure for stress and chronic fatigue; mindfulness meditation; recitation and slow reading; Qi Gong; asana yoga; CBT-inspired journaling;⁴¹² generative writing prompts; listening practices; guided visualizations; and embodiment work (stretching and EFT,⁴¹³ mostly). I was learning in my classrooms that before I could introduce students to poetry (much less a poet as slippery as Ashbery) and have that meeting be interesting or useful to them—intellectually, artistically, emotionally, spiritually—for it to *mean*—there was a mountain of “regulating” groundwork to be done on the *bodymind*, at intertwining levels of their psychology and physiology.⁴¹⁴ I curated my hodgepodge arsenal of practices, different each time we got together, to meet and heal their bodies—addressing nervous system trauma—and to meet and heal their minds—addressing mental “disorders” proceeding from long-term unresolved trauma, in particular the stress of financial insecurity and constant threat of houselessness. Without addressing their bodyminds holistically, I knew from my own experiences, there was no hope of expecting them to cultivate the spiritual discipline of *paying attention*—that is, to begin to practice Contemplative Criticism—with the intensity and fineness that activates the transformative powers of poetry.

Unprompted, many of my students listed their favorite of our group contemplative practices (I was not calling them that, then) in their end-of-term

⁴¹¹ Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (Jon Kabat-Zinn, University of Massachusetts)

⁴¹² Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (cf. David Burns, *Feeling Good*)

⁴¹³ Emotional Freedom Technique (aka “tapping”)

⁴¹⁴ “Bodymind” is a term coined by Dr. Candace Pert, neuroscientist and pharmacologist, in her 1997 book *Molecules of Emotion*, to emphasize that our thoughts, feelings, and physical states are inextricably bound up with each other, and to advocate for the need to consider the whole person when approaching topics of health, illness, and human experience. She famously stated, “Your body is your subconscious mind.”

teaching evaluations. They expressed gratitude for “actually teaching us something we can use.” They also expressed gratitude for my modeling honest communication about subjective experiences of taboo topics like poverty, houselessness, drug use, and direct action for abolition of the university. I worried, and continue to worry, about the “unprofessionalism” of shared self-reflection; still, harm reduction⁴¹⁵ has pride of place in my pedagogy.

In my first quarters teaching at UCSC, I selfishly resented what seemed to me the “remedial” nature of what I had to do to make rent. (I realize now that I needed acknowledgment and support for grieving my disappointment, petty and personal as it may have been.) Once I figured out how better to serve my students, I dropped the resentment and soaked up the “glimmers”—like the immediate lift in group energy after one minute of a 4-7-8 breathing pattern. I rewrote our “learning goals” entirely each term. I came to appreciate the rewards of meeting these people where they were at, less in relation to any assigned course material—although we would always find a way to weave it into our flow—but in relation to their individual psyches, and especially to the bodyminds in which they were experiencing those psyches. For the work of the art of poetry, as with any transformative discipline, the physical regulation of the vehicle needs to come first; indeed, it is tempting to stay in the material bodymind, considering how much usually needs to be done there. For ten-week undergraduate courses, this more or less sufficed.

⁴¹⁵ “Harm reduction” refers to policies, programmes and practices that aim to minimize the negative health, social, and legal impacts associated with drug use: examples include a nonprofit (like Checkit! in Vienna) that tests street drugs and publishes their ingredient purity, or a facility that provides clean needles. I am using the phrase in a broader sense here, as an analogy for promoting emotional and interpersonal health and hygiene.

The sensible bodymind, of course, is not our only field of play. Emotional and spiritual work is subtle, mysterious, intense, risky, and taboo. Approached “contemplatively,” such work directly faces this dualistic problem of self/world, individual/collective that haunts philosophy and culture. It is also devilishly tricky to teach. Nevertheless, it’s possible to see the university system—spurred on both by the morale disaster of dropout rates and the pathfinding adventurousness of its undercommons—beginning to accept that we can no longer afford to avoid, neglect, and undermine these aspects of our methods and materials, our students, and ourselves as artists and teacher-scholars.

1. Psychedelic Poetics: Premises & Protocols

Research into psychedelic consciousness has the potential to significantly enrich and expand scholarly understanding of poetry and poetics by offering new perspectives on creativity, consciousness, and the nature of experience, all of which are central to poetic expression and interpretation. Furthermore, by challenging conventional understandings, it could contribute to a more useful field of Lyric Studies in terms of spiritual and potentially material liberation.

Psychedelics have been suggested as a powerful tool for improving imaginative abilities. In particular, Johns Hopkins and MAPS⁴¹⁶ have proven to establishment powers that psychedelics are effective in healing trauma, especially PTSD and depression, because they dissolve frozen grief and redistribute psychic resources, allowing for an experience of rebirth - often quite literally, as countless trip reports indicate - marked by a return to curiosity, openness, and availability to life beyond the rigidity of dissociation and attachment to dogmatic conditioned ideology. It is of course from this reborn place that our imaginations fuel our best creative and critical work, our best reading and writing, our best problem-solving.⁴¹⁷

The experience of "the separateness of the Self" in psychedelic states could provide a unique and timely lens through which to reexamine the concept of the "Lyric I" and the construction of subjectivity in poetry, fundamental concerns of Lyric Studies. It might challenge traditional notions of a unified poetic voice and offer insights into more fluid or "decentered" forms of self-expression. As living metaphors,

⁴¹⁶ Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing legal pathways for psychedelics; based in Santa Cruz

⁴¹⁷ Dr. Rick Strassman mentions studies from the 1960s indicating psychedelics' positive effects on problem-solving across artistic, scientific, psychological, spiritual, and emotional domains; cf. *DMT: The Spirit Molecule* (2000)

both synthetic and plant-based psychedelics reveal their potentials. Acid dissolves (ego). Mushrooms communicate and distribute resources via a vast underground root system. MDMA—street name “ecstasy,” originally called “empathy” by therapists using it for couples and war veterans—facilitates memory reconsolidation. Ayahuasca (Quechua, “vine of the dead” / “vine of the spirits”) reconnects us with our ancestors and reprograms (reminds us of) their wishes for us.

Further, research into psychedelics' effects on spirituality could enrich the understanding of poetry's historical and ongoing relationship to spiritual and mystical experiences vis-a-vis the altered states of contemplative traditions. Once we are feeling more “resourced,” as therapists say, by the rigorous vulnerability of Contemplative Studies, maybe lyric theorists and religious historians will be more willing and able to respect the “trip reports” of such ritual journeyers as John Ashbery and his readership.

Presence is a feature of embodiment.

The nervous system, the body, is “the rig you’re riding.”

Basic energetic navigation techniques include singing; toning; breathing; dancing. These are the most important things to teach right now (with the resurgence of interest in psychedelic drugs).

Projection is an interface so we can communicate with nonhuman intelligence.

Meditation makes space around pain.

Who teaches the teachers? It was shocking for me to arrive at UCSC and discover just how disembodied, just how traumatized, was the average undergraduate and graduate student there. In that one quarter I spent living in Santa Cruz, I soon discovered that the vast majority of my colleagues were either medicated (for depression and anxiety) and/or regularly self-medicating, addicted to a combination of sugar, caffeine, cannabis, cigarettes, alcohol, amphetamines (sometimes prescribed for ADHD, otherwise just street speed), cocaine, heroin, and fentanyl. As a “highly sensitive person”⁴¹⁸ with a history of eating disorders and chronic illness, I am only ever permitted (by my hairtrigger physiology) to dabble in sugar, caffeine, and cannabis; all those other things either make me ill or have never attracted me. When I exposed my interest in the “healing” powers of psychedelics to my cohort, I was called “cute” (read: “soft”).

Compulsive activism, of course, can function as another addictive coping mechanism on campus, promising to relieve pain by putting built-up rage and sorrow “to good use” while getting your depressed butt out of the house. It’s my sense that “secular” and atheistic forms of activism, however, often become hopelessly psychologically mired in political-economic materialism to the point where dogmatic religious frameworks unknowingly (and tragically) prevail in the bodymind of the activist, who believes fervently that external change *must* precede internal transformation, and therefore neglects themselves sick, so to speak. Idealistic-symbolic 1960s forms of protest are the opium of the liberally-educated (university-indebted) US masses.

⁴¹⁸ Sensory processing sensitivity (SPS) is a temperamental or personality trait involving “an increased sensitivity of the central nervous system and a deeper cognitive processing of physical, social, and emotional stimuli”. A human with a particularly high measure of SPS is considered to have “hypersensitivity”, or be a highly sensitive person (HSP).

Luckily—although it was humiliating at the time—my chronic illness prevented me from dedicating myself completely to the wildcat strike actions in fall of 2019, though I did spend most of my brief time in Santa Cruz on wildcat strike and at the picket (I also picketed at Berkeley for the union-backed strike two years later, when I was living in Oakland). Luckily, my psychic dependency on either strike's outcome did not end up costing me my degree, as it did multiple of my colleagues, quitting their representative roles in disgust and deserting California for more affordable pastures, like Mexico, Arizona, the Midwest, rural Vermont.

I felt obliged to detach emotionally from the protest scene after attending a Humanities Q&A at the picket, a few weeks before the pandemic broke our wildcat. Despite participation in Occupy Wall Street as an undergraduate at Cal, I had never gotten in trouble at school before. In 2020, administrator emails threatened that any participation in strike actions could result in termination of degree. I voiced my fear of these threats to the Literature department graduate adviser, who was facilitating this Q&A during a break from our marching, chanting. Hundreds of cops were assembled around us; I was new to this scene, stressed, and scared. I wanted to understand how it was supposed to help the cause for me to lose the job I needed to pay for my degree. The administrator reacted to my confusion with disdain and exasperation, by cursing me: "If you aren't willing to lose your job for this cause, you shouldn't f*cking be here!"⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁹ After the meeting broke up, a few other students came to me and whispered that they shared my fear, but were afraid of exposing their vulnerability to "the community" by verbalizing any emotion. I was apparently courageous, or foolish, to have done so. The normality of this sort of violence and conditioned self-policing allows me to put "the community" in scare quotes without feeling guilt. This administrator was literally advocating for the self-abolishment of students in her charge, presumably to reinforce her identity as a good lefty, pressured by the contradictions between her attachment to her job and her attachment to her ideology. Her best suggestion for her advisee, from such a tense position,

On a parallel wavelength of reality, perhaps I have had only life-affirming, resilience-fostering experiences with the political binary of the corrupt power of the union machines and the corrupt power of the university machines. We had gone on “illegal” strike in October 2019; by March 2020, the pandemic broke the strike; for the next few months, the administration targeted graduate students who had been on the line one by one, with video-call interrogations and more vague threats. I attended my hearing on Zoom, from my mom’s kitchen table in San Diego, where I repeated dully what the strike organizers bade me say. I was meaninglessly “let off with a warning,” and they would not tell me if I had received a black mark on my record for my participation. I handed over my withheld grades and got my job back.

To sum up, in that first fall I was exposed to drugs and politics, addiction and dependency, burnout, dissociation, precarity, hostility. These were the formative learning experiences of my UCSC PhD, the “teachable moments” most memorable to my nervous system. In the five years to follow, I would experience both acute and longer-term effects of the overlapping mental and physical illnesses that result from poverty, which are well-documented,⁴²⁰ but were new to my person. I did not want to (or could not, for physical and emotional reasons) use drugs or political ideology to cope with the trauma of seeing the sacrifices of my and my friends’ health and safety. I was unable to stay in this place and get writing done; my bodymind just couldn’t reorient and restabilize quickly or consistently enough to the shock(s) of its disillusionment with the (education) system.

was to get (“f*cking”) fired. She has since been promoted within the university (as The Notorious B.I.G. sings: “mo’ money, mo’ problems?”).

⁴²⁰

<https://odphp.health.gov/healthypeople/priority-areas/social-determinants-health/literature-summaries/poverty>

So I changed my environment—early and often. The housemates of my Westside Circles rental scattered when the pandemic broke out, and nobody was renting out rooms for fear of contagion, so I moved home—North County San Diego—for the first time since high school. My parents happened to be in the process of a prickly divorce, which made living in either of their places unbearably uncomfortable. I resisted heaping my hardships upon theirs, ashamed to ask for support of any kind, implicitly understanding that any family fortune was being dissolved. My partner bought an old work van, stripped and rebuilt with a coarse wooden desk and frame for a mattress, and so we lived in that. Often we parked overlooking the beaches of some of my earliest memories (learning to swim): La Jolla Shores, Encinitas. “Homelessness in one’s hometown,” incidentally, is a fine analogy for the place of New Age spirituality in the academic study of Lyric.

While my partner befriended other van people and learned to surf, I taught undergraduates out of our 1995 Ford Econoline (“Reggie”), laptop perched on the dash, using my mobile phone as a hotspot. Over the next two years, I attended seminars, presented at international conferences, hosted faculty check-ins, cohort meetups, student office hours, and waded through coursework, all from Reggie’s front bucket seat. With the exception of one memorable thunderstorm, Reggie kept the rain out of our bed. I collected rocks, seashells, and feathers for the dashboard altar. We shared food and drugs with fellow streetbound beatifics (soft foods, like avocados and bean burritos, for the ones without good teeth). We had a few psychotic breaks apiece, but we never got rats in our engine.

“The rootlessness of American life,” as William Everson puts it, “provides the relevant situation of the poet.”⁴²¹ Homelessness and housing insecurity marked this project for me, and I feel shame, disappointment, and not a little rage in admitting that these circumstances were so damaging to my body, mind, and spirit that I have probably produced a dissertation that falls well below the standards I once set for myself, much less those imagined expectations of my advisors, department, field... “It is what it is,” as surfers say of less-than-ideal conditions. Or the Viennese with their characteristic shrug: “*Es geht sich aus.*”

From what I’ve seen and heard, my circumstances are in no way rare, special, or different from the majority of graduate students in the United States who do not have trust funds. Only by detaching fully from any hope of becoming a professor at an American university, thereby giving up on the ordeal of submitting to the present American academic job market, and by getting away from the toxic cultures of both the establishment and the resistance, was I able to give my full energy to this dissertation and stay in integrity.

This new-to-me level of detachment from career dreams, and this also new-to-me compassion for my erstwhile community, is what moves me to include this kind of autobiographical information as I conclude this project. Our friend who stored my notebook-bearing (Everson-referencing) suitcase in Leipzig is a theoretical mathematician trained at UCSD; he lived in a bush during his BA there, not even able to afford a car for shelter. “The best minds of my generation” are not exactly “starving hysterical naked,” as Allen Ginsberg described seventy years ago in “Howl,” but more accurately “houseless addicted dissociated.” Because of these physical

⁴²¹ “Meditation Twelve: American Shaman,” 130.

and physiological obstacles—C*VID notwithstanding—I found it impossible to sustain nourishing communion with fellow doctoral students during the writing of this book. I agree with Ashbery in thinking Gertrude Stein is right: poets write for themselves and strangers. Dissertations, I now feel, finishing, you write for your friends.

“Do whatever it takes to get encouraged; once that occurs, only then your perspective opens to possibilities. A shut-down attitude is a reaction to the shocking situation you find yourself in—the disillusionment, the disappointment. What people, what activities, can help?

In one sense, it’s like grieving. And the number one thing in grieving is comfort. And doing this is the work. Taking care of yourself in a way that nourishes you is the work. This is the point that is the point.”

—Edward Olvera, private session

There is an implicit social trauma at stake when we consider the erstwhile fate of the poem in the classroom—a fear and pain shared by students of all ages, graduate students, teachers, professors. The fear threatens to reveal and reify what “not understanding” the text might mean for us, about us. It is a similar fear that struck in the pelvis of fellow workers when the administrator told me I should want to lose my job for the cause. It’s as if the assignment of our dream, the utopic horizon fueled by intergenerational trauma and institutional greed, had been abstracted to the point that in a moment, ideology stiffened us against human vulnerability, that precise precarity (as psychological as it is financial) against which we do battle. Emotional reactivity almost always points to fatigue and an unmet need for rest. One can always return to and “stay with” the trouble; it is likely here to stay a while.

According to psychologist John Gottman, criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling are the “four horsemen of the apocalypse,” the behavioral patterns that doom intimate relationships. Aware of these hazards of the road, practitioners of Contemplative Criticism must find ways through and around these behaviors when they rear up as we read and write. The desire that accompanies the poem in the classroom is to connect with others (co-readers, the writer, etc.) through entering into a relationship with a work of art. Language connects humans, though we know that animals and plants (and possibly water molecules) respond to it, too. Lyric language seeks connection with the spiritual dimensions of (mostly human) being. If “spiritual practice is the basis of all social action,” as Thich Nhat Hahn wrote and embodied, then it’s only natural that theory and pedagogy engage with the ways in which the psychologization of the sacred and the sacralization of the psyche (which has leaked from the secularizing New Age and spread into the culture) puts the soul of the student, teacher, and poem back into play.

*“There’s a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious,
makes you so sick at heart, that you can’t take part! You can’t even passively
take part! And you’ve got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the
wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus -- and you’ve got to make it
stop! And you’ve got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who
own it -- that unless you’re free the machine will be prevented from working at
all!!*

*That doesn’t mean -- I know it will be interpreted to mean, unfortunately, by
the bigots who run The Examiner, for example -- That doesn’t mean that you
have to break anything. One thousand people sitting down someplace, not
letting anybody by, not [letting] anything happen, can stop any machine,
including this machine! And it will stop!!”*

I really like how Mario Savio⁴²² qualifies himself here, in his most famous speech, with respect to civil disobedience: to me this moment of discernment beats with the radically compassionate heart of Contemplative Criticism. We don't have to *break* anything, he qualifies, as if slipping into TA mode for a moment.⁴²³ I hear a call for mystical surrender in this admonishment (as by now you'd suspect I might). One has the ability, though it may be difficult, simply to *stop letting anything happen*. Of such Bartlebyan stoppage, I would ask a classroom: how might we compare this with the "just sitting" of Zazen? Or the "laydown" anarchy of the TangPingists? Or "slacktivism", the amoral holy grail of the 1990s ("slacking off")? Or the holistic therapy philosophy that trusts that the body, allowed to relax and move as it pleases, heals itself?⁴²⁴ "1000 people sitting down someplace," Mario imagines: "the next Buddha will be the Sangha."⁴²⁵ Nonviolence is not for the faint of heart. As a friend once said to me in Michigan, mired in the thick of spiritual battle during their gender transition: "loving compassion will kick you in the f*cking teeth."

Poet-professor Fred Moten came out to support UCSC graduate students at our wildcat strike. Following a talk he gave to a group of us, gathered beneath a huge California live oak, someone asked him what he considers the most effective possible strike action: she practically pleaded: "What should I do?" Fred blinked. "Feed people," he replied. I hope it does not sound glib when I say that the lyrics of John Ashbery feed us—that they remind us to feed ourselves, and not on bread

⁴²² UC Berkeley Philosophy student, one of the leaders of the Free Speech Movement; this is 1964.

⁴²³ The "What do I mean by that?" moment, the catnip of clarification

⁴²⁴ For good books on this, see Peter Levine, *Waking the Tiger*, and Will Johnson, *Posture of Meditation*; for this principle as understood in the context of psychedelia, esp. ayahuasca ceremonial healing, see the works of Alonso del Río.

⁴²⁵ Thich Nhat Hahn again. "Sangha" means "community" (of practitioners of Buddhist meditation, for example). Strikes and protests get that right.

alone. When he plays psychedelic chaplain to American Postmodernism, his poems are transfigured and transform us. His poems not only foster and induce psychedelic experiences—they simultaneously serve as ideal templates for facilitating psychedelic integration conceived as a practice of Contemplative Pedagogy.

Following ongoing conversations with my unofficial fourth committee member, Dr. Erik Davis, and our joint holistic work developing the “psychedelic humanities” outside of the academy vis-à-vis the Alembic in Berkeley, and inspired by my year of teaching, volunteering, and building community in that space, I submit John Ashbery as a preeminent “psychedelic human”—not a substance, not an ideology, not a one-man community (except perhaps formally...), but a communicator of singular freshness amidst a blizzard of neutered overkill. Ashbery’s spiritualizing contribution to postmodern aesthetics not only belies the ancient desire for transcendence that defines the erstwhile “Lyric,” but his poems themselves, when read “psychedelically” in the key of Contemplative Criticism, provide highly efficient and powerful models of spiritual care for radical social liberation.

2. Liberatory Pedagogy: Premises & Protocols⁴²⁶

*Birth of a Poet. Meditations on charismatic vocation. Vocari. To be called. We always speak of the most noble of the professions of mankind as callings. And there is a strange linkage between the words profession and calling. You are called, you respond, you surrender; and when surrender is complete, you profess. All of these meditations are an exploration of that equation—the meaning of call and surrender, the meaning of profession.*⁴²⁷

I would like it [the poem] to be what Stevens calls a completely new set of objects. My intention is to present the reader with a pleasant surprise, not an unpleasant one, not a nonsurprise. I think this is the way pleasure happens when you are reading poetry. Years ago Kenneth Koch and I did an interview with each other, and something I said then, in 1965, is pertinent to what we are talking about: It's rather hard to be a good artist and also be able to explain intelligently what your art is about. In fact, the worse your art is, the easier it is to talk about, at least I would like to think so. Ambiguity seems to be the same thing as happiness or pleasant surprise. I am assuming that, from the moment life cannot be one continual orgasm, real happiness is impossible, and pleasant surprise is promoted to the front rank of the emotions. The idea of relief from pain has something to do with ambiguity. Ambiguity supposes eventual resolution of itself, whereas certitude implies further ambiguity. I guess that is why so much "depressing" modern art makes me feel cheerful.

—John Ashbery⁴²⁸

*O we are all ushered in—
Into the presence that explains.*⁴²⁹

⁴²⁶ N.B. See Appendix E for additional context vis-a-vis Noam Chomsky's "manufactured consent" and its relationship to academia, in particular student loans.

⁴²⁷ Eversion, *Birth of a Poet*, 18.

⁴²⁸ Paris Review interview 1984.

⁴²⁹ From Ashbery's "Preludes," *As We Know* (1979).

To the point of revolutionizing Lyric Studies for spiritual and material liberation, here's a fuller excerpt of the end of Mario Savio's speech, from the steps of Sproul Hall sixty years ago:

"Well I ask you to consider -- if this is a firm, and if the Board of Regents are the Board of Directors, and if President Kerr in fact is the manager, then I tell you something -- the faculty are a bunch of employees and we're the raw material! But we're a bunch of raw materials that don't mean to be -- have any process upon us. Don't mean to be made into any product! Don't mean -- Don't mean to end up being bought by some clients of the University, be they the government, be they industry, be they organized labor, be they anyone! We're human beings!

And that -- that brings me to the second mode of civil disobedience. There's a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious. makes you so sick at heart that you can't take part! You can't even passively take part! And you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus -- and you've got to make it stop! And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it -- that unless you're free the machine will be prevented from working at all!!

That doesn't mean -- I know it will be interpreted to mean, unfortunately, by the bigots who run The Examiner, for example -- That doesn't mean that you have to break anything. One thousand people sitting down some place. not letting anybody by, not [letting] anything happen, can stop any machine, including this machine! And it will stop!!

We're gonna do the following -- and the greater the number of people, the safer they'll be and the more effective it will be. We're going, once again, to march up to the 2nd floor of Sproul Hall. And we're gonna conduct our lives for awhile in the 2nd floor of Sproul Hall. We'll show movies, for example.

Likewise, we'll do something -- we'll do something which hasn't occurred at this University in a good long time! We're going to have real classes up there! They're gonna be freedom schools conducted up there! We're going to have classes on [the] 1st and 14th amendments!! We're gonna spend our time learning about the things this University is afraid that we know! We're going to learn about freedom up there, and we're going to learn by doing!!

Now, we've had some good, long rallies.

[Rally organizers inform Savio that Joan Baez has arrived.]

Just one moment. We've had some good, long rallies. And I think I'm sicker of rallies than anyone else here. She's not going to be long. I'd like to introduce one last person -- one last person before we enter Sproul Hall. Yeah. And the person is Joan Baez."

With the goal of "real classes," "freedom schools," in the spirit of Myles Horton, Savio—a Philosophy student who, as a child of devout Italian-American Catholic parents, had planned to become a priest—makes a logistical aside about the planned actions: "The greater the number of people, the safer they'll be." An instinctive understanding of this concept of safety (root chakra), more than any intellectual pleasure, perhaps not more than a desperation to fulfill the dream of my nine-year-old self, is what motivates me to have spent almost seven years in this project-desert in the first place.

By fostering a deeper understanding of consciousness and challenging limiting materialist worldviews, research into psychedelic states (even metaphorically) could contribute to a sense of spiritual liberation by opening up possibilities for exploring transcendent experiences and alternative ways of being. We already know that the relatively young Contemplative Studies, which also explores altered states, can engage with existential, soteriological, and theological questions; what I hope will follow is the openness of New Lyric Studies (and Literary Criticism more broadly) to the direct role that poems play in dissolving and redistributing the energies of cognitive imperialism through emotional transformations of consciousness. A psychedelically-informed Lyric Studies might also encourage a more embodied and lived engagement with poetry.

Without the enthusiastic and knowing consent of ourselves and our students to participation in these larger structures and systems, any useful study is impossible. The high psychological, emotional, and spiritual risks associated with the potent relational substance Lyric dictate that a lot more attention be paid to consent in the classroom on all sides—undergrads, grad students, professors, and even staff. What are we agreeing to when we show up to talk about poetry, and why? What is going to be asked of us? With many workshops and seminars lacking explicit consent conversations, it is no wonder students are suspicious, resistant, and shut down on the interpersonal level and in their relationships with themselves, as evidenced in their diminished capacity for interoception. Perhaps only subtle, spiritual-care-rooted pedagogy can show them that not only is it safe and valuable to feel good (and vulnerable in particularly strengthening ways), but also that bucking the system only feels good long-term, and offers results you can enjoy, if you already “feel good” about “yourself.” Oddly enough, one of the ways this personally-pleasurable strength is made possible is via the synthetic Postmodern Lyric filtered through a mystical New Age lens.

In their now-classic 2013 book, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney describe “the Undercommons” as a space within and against the institution, a description religious historians have also applied to mysticism. The concept of the Undercommons can be applied to fostering both spiritual and material “liberation” in a classroom setting in a few ways. The New Age, if we accept Wouter Hanegraaff’s research, is essentially an updated outpost of Western esotericism, part and parcel of the “rejected knowledge” against which academia has defined itself, assigned itself significance, and invested itself with cultural power. Yet much of the philosophical and ideological

forms and contents of the New Age, I hope I have shown, are in fact quite at home in the Humanities, often (in places like Berkeley and Santa Cruz, in particular) hiding in plain sight.

By now I hope I have also clarified how this “within and against” description (of the Undercommons of our educational institutions) applies to the poetics of an undercover Postmodern prophet like Ashbery, whose psychedelically transpersonal, mycelially-networked lyric “I” enacts its own “enraptured commons,” as Moten and Harney might put it. In a classroom, this translates to creating a space that acknowledges and critiques the limitations and power structures of traditional education while simultaneously exploring possibilities for being and knowing beyond those limitations. At its core, this project serves as a lengthy reminder that there are infinitely new ways of reading the same poems; that it is our deep selves, and the deep selves of our students, who provide this freshness of interpretation. bell hooks, of course, similarly envisions the classroom as “the most radical space of possibility in the academy.” The Undercommons, for Moten and Harney, is fundamentally about collective freedom, moving towards the “with and for”. The study of “mysticisms” and the study of “the lyric” must also be like this for either of them to be “effective” in experiences of personal healing: psychedelic consciousness shows that the nature of personal healing is already always a collective effort—not all for one, but all as one. Moten and myself at the picket both witnessed how the oppressive austerity of the academic climate keeping graduate students psychologically dissociated⁴³⁰ (“no

⁴³⁰ Many of us still want in anyway, despite being abused and humiliated by the system; dissociation usefully, though not entirely successfully, staves off the pain of acknowledging one’s complicitness in their own destruction. Addiction (maladaptive coping) fills in the blanks.

jobs, no future”) does at least as much damage as the material insecurity in which most of us live. Material poverty almost always tanks mental and spiritual well-being.

Given the state of the education system, the nation, and the world, touching this dangerous, tender wound directly requires the utmost of consensual and (noninvasive) surgical precision. The mysticity of lyric, for lack of better terms, is uniquely situated to achieve this precision. It solves both sides of the equation – research and teaching – by bringing the subjective into focus by means of a spiritual detachment: not critical distance, but intensely intimate critical proximity, to ourselves, to our materials and methods, and finally, to our students; not to mention building in time to breathe, the breath being the unit and measure of the poem. (This contrasts with the individualistic and competitive attachment fixations that tend to metastasize in academic settings.)

The communal focus of hooks’ engaged pedagogy resonates with the Undercommons’ emphasis on shared space and purpose beyond individual achievement. This “being with” can foster spiritual liberation by creating a supportive environment where students can explore existential and spiritual dimensions of being without the pressures of judgment or the need to conform to pre-defined notions of religiosity. The “no questions asked” ethos of the Undercommons could translate to a classroom where vulnerability and diverse spiritual experiences are encouraged and supported.

Moving beyond a “banking system of education” towards a more participatory and reciprocal learning process might be achieved by prioritizing meditation, i.e., contemplative practice. As Everson puts it: “the chief difference between the lecture and meditation is that in the former, objective knowledge is communicated from the

learned to the ignorant. In the latter those who share identical views come together to reflect on the implications of what they mutually seek.”⁴³¹

The "critical subjectivity" inherent in Contemplative Studies accepts and encourages the sharing of direct, personal, and lived experience. This resonates with the Undercommons' groundedness in the lived realities of the dispossessed. Komjathy also highlights the need for "critical adherent discourse," valuing the perspectives of religiously committed individuals. In the context of something like "spiritual liberation" in an Undercommons-informed classroom, this means respecting diverse spiritual commitments and allowing for "theorizing from the inside out". This emphasis on lived experience and diverse perspectives can challenge the "taboo of subjectivity" and the demand for disembodied objectivity that Komjathy critiques, and that I suggest is harmfully delusional. It allows for a more holistic understanding of both spiritual and material realities. This is already happening organically in places like the UCSC Literature classroom out of necessity. My suggestion is that we help our students and ourselves shift away from toxic codependencies on substances and ideologies and into consensual, transformative relationship with themselves and others, using Lyric's peculiarly psychedelic powers to assist in this transition and apply it to "liberation."

Compassion, forgiveness, and surrender are hard; people generally avoid them if possible. They take time, energy, courage, and support. The practices of religion, poetry, and psychedelics are "no bowl of cherries," as my prep school Latin teacher, Jim Updegraff, used to say of the house of Atreus. Moten and Harney state that the Undercommons is "always an unsafe neighborhood". They know that

⁴³¹ Everson, Foreword v.

genuine transformation involves risk, discomfort, and a challenge to established norms. Similarly, bell hooks acknowledges the potential for "confrontation, forceful expression of ideas, or even conflict" in the engaged-pedagogic classroom when addressing subjects students are passionate about. For both spiritual and material liberation, the Undercommons in the classroom will likely necessitate embracing this discomfiting "unsafety," riding the rocky waves of conversations about power, privilege, and deeply held beliefs, while holding fast to the truth that such engagement can become a catalyst for growth. Basic training in de-escalation techniques, centering and grounding for psychological distress, and an array of "mindfulness" or contemplative practices must be part of any pedagogy that wants to be for "the oppressed"⁴³² on a college campus.

"One of the marks of a saint is that his errors behind him have no power over his freshness of response in this moment. Every spiritual teacher will tell you that. The thing you have to do is forget your sins, put them out of your mind, render them inoperative. Confess them and forget them. . . It's a good trick if you can do it!"

—William Everson, *Birth of a Poet* (106)

The final third of Everson's *Birth of a Poet* course explores the significance of place for the poet (region, i.e., not nation). Like Brandon Cesmat, C.S. Giscombe, Bob Hass, Joanne Kyger, Diane Wakoski, Rob Wilson, and other California poets, Everson affirms that the poet must be grounded in his region, must acknowledge and make a sacred space of it. Without "centering" himself with a deep sense of his

⁴³² With regards to debt, the vast majority of American university students can be forgiven for falling for the temporary relief of assuming the identity of the outraged and helpless victim, without realizing this assumption has disabled openness to learning and to change.

surroundings, imbuing that place with cosmic centrality, his writing will lack power. “For the lack of center in the field of space denotes a certain disconnection with the cosmic forces, the pulsating heart of the cosmos itself. Many writers resist this connection. Addressing themselves to the secular milieu as audience they are reluctant to speak in terms they fear are essentially mystical and religious.”⁴³³ He gives as examples the cosmic grounding of Robinson Jeffers in California and of W.B. Yeats in Ireland. “You don’t have to be a regionalist to possess your region,” he writes; nor do you have to be there literally, I hope he means, for those of us who can no longer afford to live with dignity in our birthplace. “It is better for a writer to ground himself on symbolic wholes, such as the regional sense of sacred space. Then his ideology can attribute as it pleases.”⁴³⁴

His next move, one of the final insights of his meditations, speaks directly to the conditions which formed this project—and especially how the New Age came to loom so large—and so I will quote it fully. “As for myself,” Everson goes on,

“I found my sacred space and my true vocation in the same recognition, and for years this focus centered my energy and enabled me to survive the chaos of the world, when that world, once again at war, obtruded on my life. But the slipping away of region in the loss of love exposed me to search for a deeper synthesis, and I had to fight through to the sacrality of personality. That, for me, subsumed the instance of sacred space in the more sharply focused mandala, the person of Christ. Out of this flowed the Church, the collectivity of man in God. But it all began with sacred space.

There is no time left to dwell upon the sacrality of personality as existentially co-equal with the sacrality of space, but it has been implicit in all these meditations, and it springs from the same principle of hierophany as sustains the cosmos.

⁴³³ Everson 184.

⁴³⁴ Everson 185.

His understanding of his own journey as the sacralization of psychology reflects his cultural moment's commitment to the psychologization of the sacred—that fundamentally New Age characteristic. Even more pagan and wild—being Californian, being professed among ancient redwoods—Everson's Catholicism is radically pantheistic, panpsychic, and green, echoing Hildegard of Bingen's *viriditas*: one's environment as one's self. Alonso sings, "Porque mi cuerpo es la tierra," "because my body is the earth."⁴³⁵ What could promote more empowerment, more will to joy?

Max Weber's Protestant work ethic and the spirit of capitalism are still constitutive of the bureaucracy of higher education such that pleasure, like religiosity, is generally suspect (with the exception of political-economic revenge fantasies). Poets do what they do, generally, to please themselves, and to be with their gods; that is, to praise. Ashbery affirms; he "holds space;" he sacralizes by attending to his senses, thoughts, emotions, the ineffable. If bell hooks and Louis Komjathy and Wouter Hanegraaff and Fred Moten—and John Ashbery himself, who taught poetry at (and as a) Bard for decades—can all have had faith in the university (and/or its offshoot underbelly) as a sacred location for autopoiesis, a place to foster selfing and unselfing, then I can surely choose to, too. Imagining that faith can be a choice to which one enthusiastically consents is one happy result of using this dissertation project to surrender, and surrender to, my own inherited regions of the New Age, of Lyric Studies, and of the Universities of California.

⁴³⁵ From "Con Mi Tabaco," *Canciones de Medicina* ("Medicine Music," 2003), composed for ayahuasca ceremony ritual use

HOMELESS HEART⁴³⁶

When I think of finishing the work, when I think of the finished work, a great sadness overtakes me, a sadness paradoxically like joy. The circumstances of doing put away, the being of it takes possession, like a tenant in a rented house. Where are you now, homeless heart? Caught in a hinge, or secreted behind drywall, like your nameless predecessors now that they have been given names? Best not to dwell on our situation, but to dwell in it is deeply refreshing. Like a sideboard covered with decanters and fruit. As a box kite is to a kite. The inside of stumbling. The way to breath. The caricature on the blackboard.

⁴³⁶ John Ashbery, from *Quick Question* (2012).

A Blessing in Disguise

*Yes, they are alive and can have those colors,
But I, in my soul, am alive too.
I feel I must sing and dance, to tell
Of this in a way, that knowing you may be drawn to me.*

*And I sing amid despair and isolation
Of the chance to know you, to sing of me
Which are you. You see,
You hold me up to the light in a way*

*I should never have expected, or suspected, perhaps
Because you always tell me I am you,
And right. The great spruces loom.
I am yours to die with, to desire.*

*I cannot ever think of me, I desire you
For a room in which the chairs ever
Have their backs turned to the light
Inflicted on the stone and paths, the real trees*

*That seem to shine at me through a lattice toward you.
If the wild light of this January day is true
I pledge me to be truthful unto you
Whom I cannot ever stop remembering.*

*Remembering to forgive. Remember to pass beyond you into the day
On the wings of the secret you will never know.
Taking me from myself, in the path
Which the pastel girth of the day has assigned to me.*

*I prefer "you" in the plural, I want "you,"
You must come to me, all golden and pale
Like the dew and the air.
And then I start getting this feeling of exaltation.*

Appendices

A: Modern Theories of Mysticism Cheat Sheet

I reproduce here a document compiled for my Qualifying Examination.

cf. Annette Wilke's Introduction to *Constructions of Mysticism as a Universal* (2021):

By the late 19th-century, mysticism emerged as a universal term describing sublime personal experience. Three defining elements supposedly form the mystical kernel or common core: direct experience; sense of unification; consciousness-purity (unmediated, non-dualist, devoid of doctrinal contents).

Sociologists Luhmann & Fuchs characterize mysticism as "perceiving infinity in the finite and converting transcendence into an immanent reality."

"Universal" mysticism (of this 19th-century type) fell to the constructivist-contextual approach of Cultural Studies, although it continued to flourish in popular culture and inform much postmodern spirituality. The notion of unmediated pre-reflexive experience cannot survive this critical turn (cf. Katz below); essentialism and perennialism become anathema for the majority of scholars of religion. McGinn still does take his texts as reports of the immediate consciousness of presence. For him, mystical experience and its understanding, i.e. philosophical and theological interpretation or mystical theology, cannot be separated.

cf. Bernard McGinn's "Appendix: Theoretical Foundations" in *Foundations of Mysticism* (1991):

Theological Approaches

Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965): famous phrase "reverence for life" refers to an affirmative and ethical mystical orientation (vs. negative world-denying forms)

Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923): mystical religion is based upon the primacy of direct or immediate religious experience, and thus can be described as an independent religious philosophy present in many concrete religions (still, sociologically embedded)

W.R. Inge (1860-1954): defines mysticism as "the attempt to realize, in thought and feeling, the immanence of the temporal in the eternal, and of the eternal in the temporal"

Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941): defines mysticism as "the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with transcendental order,

whatever be the theological formula under which that order is understood" (classic "common core" argument no longer accepted)

Anselm Stolz (1900-1942): "mysticism in the professed sense is a transpsychological experience of being included within the flow of divine life that is given in the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist" (i.e., like Schweitzer, only Christian mysticism is true mysticism)

Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984): mystical consciousness is a "mediated return to immediacy" in which a vital intersubjective relationship of union is experienced between God and human person

Karl Rahner (1904-1984): discerns 2 types, "everyday" experiences of God in all things and "special" experiences of grace in faith... *Versenkungserfahrungen*, "depth experiences" (?) are essentially natural phenomena empowered by grace

Philosophical Approaches

* *William James* (1842-1910): "personal religious experience has its root and center in mystical states of consciousness" (what we might call "altered states"). Outlines four marks of such experience: ineffability; noetic quality (contains insight); transiency; & passivity. Concentrates on personal and private side of religion.

Baron Friedrich von Hügel (1852-1925): outlines dialectical relationship between three modes of religion: Institutionalism, Intellectualism, and Mysticism. Identifies exclusive vs. inclusive mysticisms, i.e. *via negativa* vs. the loving and even morality-producing positive form. Promotes panentheism, idea that God and world intersect through all space & time.

* *Henri Bergson* (1859-1941): saw mysticism as the direct expression of the evolutionary force at the heart of all reality – the *élan vital* – goal of which is creative effort of life itself. "We represent religion, then, as the crystallization, brought about by a scientific process of cooling, of what mysticism has poured, while hot, into the soul of man"

Jacques Maritain (1882-1973): Develops hierarchy of forms of knowledge (based on Aristotle and Aquinas) that uses schema of three degrees of abstraction, the goal of all knowledge being mystical knowing. Identifies four modes of "connaturality:" affective, intellectual, creative (of the poet), and nescience/ignorance (so, natural mystical experience is possible?)

* *Michel de Certeau* (1925-1986): mystical experience “has as its essential elements the *ego*, the ‘center of the utterance,’ and the *present*, the ‘source of time.’” He distinguishes mysticisms before and after the emergence of the noun form (*la mystique*, 17th-century France).

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) & *Ludwig Wittgenstein* (1889-1951): neither takes up directly with mysticism, but both can be understood as mystical in certain aspects of their thought. (z.B. Wittgenstein’s interest in paradox and ineffability led to the overquoted end of the *Tractatus*, *Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen* as a catchphrase to shut down rigorous considerations of the significance of mystical experience and the efficacy of language to express either the experience or an interpretation of it.)

Louis Dupré (1925-2022): the mystic is one whose soul comes to have direct knowledge of its self-transcendence (following Maritain); suggests mysticism has significant role in the secular world, partly in that the mystical sense of divine absence (as in Eckhart) provides a point of contact between classical Christian mysticism and modern atheism

Comparativist & Psychological Approaches

* *Rudolf Otto* (1869-1937): Mysticism is the “identification of the personal self with the transcendent Reality;” it is found when the unapproachability element recedes and the overpowering force of the numinous induces the human subject to see it as the sole reality and thus to seek self-annihilation. Comparative book “*Mysticism East and West*” popularized cross-cultural typological study of mysticism. “Meister Eckhart, Otto’s test case, made the dialectic of transcendence and immanence the cornerstone of his thought” (McGinn 329).

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939): negative cast of mystical desire for contact with divine as regressive to infantile stage (narcissistic union of mother and child); describes this as “oceanic feeling.” However, he also suggests that there may be positive, cathartic value in transient forms of mystical experience.

* *Carl Jung* (1875-1961) & his disciple *Erich Neumann* (1905-1960): While Jung wrote very little explicitly on mysticism, Neumann attempted to relate Jung’s thinking to it. Neumann: “For us the mystical is rather a fundamental category of human experience which, psychologically speaking, manifests itself wherever consciousness is not yet, or is no longer, centered around the ego.” *Homo mysticus*, in Neumann’s terminology, is the definition and goal of all human life. This may be comparable to Jung’s notion of self-integration; this idea grounds New Age subjectivity.

Joachim Wach (1898-1955): German Protestant training; “radical individualism” fundamentally characterizes mysticism

* *Gershom Scholem* (1897-1982): “there is no mysticism as such, there is only the mysticism of a particular religious system;” “mysticism is a definite stage in the historical development of religion and makes its appearance under certain well-defined conditions.” Scholem’s theory of the evolution of religions places the social role of mysticism in a dialectic between conservative (s/he must speak the language of the tradition in order to be understood) and revolutionary (revelation tends to find itself in conflict with authority...).

* *Hans Jonas* (1903-1993): studied Gnosticism, influenced by Heidegger; argues that both myth and mysticism are related expressions of the inner existential ground of the subject. Insists on the irreducible mutuality of spirit and world: “The entire world is spiritualized through a spirit made worldly.”

* *Stanislav Grof* (1931-): Czech psychiatrist working in the US on role of psychedelic drugs in exploring dimensions of human consciousness. After LSD was made a Schedule I substance in 1968 and all research was halted, Grof developed a breathing technique to mimic the effects (Holotropic Breathwork) for psychotherapeutic use. The founder of transpersonal psychology or “spiritual psychology”

B: Mystical Experience Questionnaire

What follows is the original Mystical Experience Questionnaire (MEQ), which survey tallied up results from the famous 1962 psychedelic drug experiment on Harvard Theology students (Marsh Chapel, AKA the “Good Friday Experiment”) and became a popular benchmark for people interested in the relationship between altered states of consciousness and curing illness.

The Mystical Experience Questionnaire impacted the way that the 1960s-70s counterculture understood and talked about “the mystical”, and continues to be an underlying framework for that rapidly expanding demographic of people involved in the mainstreaming of psychedelic science and medicine that has been emerging from the underground into ‘legitimacy’ since the 2010s.

States of Consciousness Questionnaire and Pahnke-Richards Mystical Experience Questionnaire

“Instructions: Looking back on the extended session you have just experienced, please rate the degree to which at any time during that session, you experienced the following phenomena. In making each of your ratings, use the following scale:

0 – none; not at all. 1 – so slight cannot decide 2 – slight 3 – moderate 4 –strong (equivalent in degree to any previous strong experience or expectation of this description) 5 – extreme (more than ever before in my life and stronger than 4)

Items and Scoring: There are 100 items in the States of Consciousness Questionnaire. Forty-three items on this questionnaire comprise the Pahnke-Richards Mystical Experience Questionnaire which provides scale scores for each of seven domains of mystical experiences: Internal Unity (6 items); External Unity (6 items); Transcendence of Time and Space (8 items); Ineffability and Paradoxicality (5 items); Sense of Sacredness (7 items); Noetic Quality (4 items); and Deeply-Felt Positive Mood (7 items). Data on each scale are expressed as a proportion of the maximum possible score. The remaining 57 items in the questionnaire served as distracter items and were not scored. Numerals associated with each item indicate the numerical sequence of the items.

I. Internal Unity

26. Loss of your usual identity.

35. Freedom from the limitations of your personal self and feeling a unity or bond with what was felt to be greater than your personal self.

- 41. Experience of pure Being and pure awareness (beyond the world of sense impressions).
- 54. Experience of oneness in relation to an “inner world” within.
- 77. Experience of the fusion of your personal self into a larger whole.
- 83. Experience of unity with ultimate reality.

II. External Unity

- 14. Experience of oneness or unity with objects and/or persons perceived in your surroundings
- 27. With eyes open, seeing something in your surroundings more and more intensely and then feeling as though you and it become one.
- 47. Experience of the insight that “all is One”.
- 51. Loss of feelings of difference between yourself and objects or persons in your surroundings.
- 62. Intuitive insight into the inner nature of objects and/or persons in your surroundings.
- 74. Awareness of the life or living presence in all things.

III. Transcendence of Time and Space

- 2. Loss of your usual sense of time.
- 12. Feeling that you experienced eternity or infinity.
- 15. Loss of your usual sense of space.
- 29. Loss of usual awareness of where you were.
- 34. Sense of being “outside of” time, beyond past and future.
- 42. Feeling that you have been “outside of” history in a realm where time does not exist.
- 48. Being in a realm with no space boundaries.
- 65. Experience of timelessness.

IV. Ineffability and Paradoxicality

- 6. Sense that the experience cannot be described adequately in words.
- 19. Experience of a paradoxical awareness that two apparently opposite principles or situations are both true.
- 23. Feeling that you could not do justice to your experience by describing it in words.
- 59. Sense that in order to describe parts of your experience you would have to use statements that appear to be illogical, involving contradictions and paradoxes.
- 86. Feeling that it would be difficult to communicate your own experience to others who have not had similar experiences.

V. Sense of Sacredness

- 5. Experience of amazement.
- 8. Sense of the limitations and smallness of your everyday personality in contrast to the Infinite.
- 31. Sense of profound humility before the majesty of what was felt to be sacred or holy.
- 36. Sense of being at a spiritual height.
- 55. Sense of reverence.
- 73. Feeling that you experienced something profoundly sacred and holy.
- 80. Sense of awe or awesomeness.

VI. Noetic Quality

- 3. Feeling that the consciousness experienced during part of the session was more real than your normal awareness of everyday reality.
- 9. Gain of insightful knowledge experienced at an intuitive level.
- 22. Certainty of encounter with ultimate reality (in the sense of being able to “know” and “see” what is really real) at some time during your session.
- 69. You are convinced now, as you look back on your experience, that in it you encountered ultimate reality (i.e. that you “knew” and “saw” what was really real).

VII. Deeply-Felt Positive Mood

- 10. Experience of overflowing energy.
- 18. Feelings of tenderness and gentleness.
- 30. Feelings of peace and tranquility.
- 43. Experience of ecstasy.
- 50. Feelings of exaltation.
- 60. Feelings of universal or infinite love.
- 87. Feelings of joy.”

Source: RR Griffiths, WA Richards, U McCann, R Jesse. 2006. “Psilocybin can occasion mystical-type experiences having substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance.” *Psychopharmacology (Berl)*. 187(3), 268-83, commentaries 284-292. Available on the Council of Spiritual Practices’ Psilocybin Research page.

I tried each thing, only some were immortal and free.

—Ashbery, “As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat

C: Psychedelic Sources

A snapshot of recent and ongoing Psychedelic Humanities research that complements this project and may serve to inform broader applications of Contemplative Criticism and Pedagogy.

N.b. This page is restricted to California people and people I have met personally who helped inform this project (with the exception of Pendell and the Shulgins, who were with me in spirit).

PSYCHEDELIC PEOPLE

[Erik Davis](#) (San Francisco)

[Rev. Lenny Duncan](#) (Graduate Theological Union, UC Berkeley)

[J. Christian Greer](#)

Gene Hightower (Emeryville)

[Ayize Jama-Everett](#)

Mariavittoria Mangini, founder, [Women's Visionary Council](#) (Hog Farm)

Larry Norris, founder, [Decriminalize Nature](#) (Oakland)

[Dale Pendell](#), author, *Pharmako/ Plant Teachers and the Poison Path* series (*Pharmako/Poeia*; *Pharmako/Dynamis*; *Pharmako/Gnosis*) and *Walking with Nobby: Conversations with Norman O. Brown* (Santa Cruz)

Marlena Robbins (Public Health, UC Berkeley)

Ann and Sasha Shulgin (Lafayette)

[Sunflower Sutras Media Collective](#) (Francisco Rivarola and Soleil Sarmiento)

PSYCHEDELIC RESOURCES

[Erowid](#), online resource: member-supported organization providing access to reliable, non-judgmental information about psychoactive plants, chemicals, and related issues.

Entheogenic Research, Integration, and Education (ERIE), organization dedicated to the sharing of entheogenic and transpersonal knowledge in a non-hierarchical, community based format (based in Oakland): <https://erievision.org/>

Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS), nonprofit organization dedicated to providing legal pathways for psychedelics (based in Santa Cruz): <https://maps.org/>

D: "The Idea of Order at Key West"

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.
The water never formed to mind or voice,
Like a body wholly body, fluttering
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry, 5
That was not ours although we understood,
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

The sea was not a mask. No more was she.
The song and water were not medleyed sound
Even if what she sang was what she heard, 10
Since what she sang was uttered word by word.
It may be that in all her phrases stirred
The grinding water and the gasping wind;
But it was she and not the sea we heard.

For she was the maker of the song she sang. 15
The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea
Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.
Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew
It was the spirit that we sought and knew
That we should ask this often as she sang. 20

If it was only the dark voice of the sea
That rose, or even colored by many waves;
If it was only the outer voice of sky
And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,
However clear, it would have been deep air, 25
The heaving speech of air, a summer sound
Repeated in a summer without end
And sound alone. But it was more than that,
More even than her voice, and ours, among
The meaningless plungings of water and the wind, 30
Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped
On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres
Of sky and sea.

It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing. 35
She measured to the hour its solitude.
She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self

That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we, 40
As we beheld her striding there alone,
Knew that there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know, 45
Why, when the singing ended and we turned
Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
As the night descended, tilting in the air,
Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles, 50
Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
And of ourselves and of our origins, 55
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

—Wallace Stevens (*Ideas of Order*, 1938)

E: Manufactured Consent & Relation to American Academia + Student Loans

Made by Qwen 3-235B-22A, an OpenSource LLM from China.

1. Understanding Manufactured Consent:

Coined by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman in *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, this concept describes how dominant institutions (like media, corporations, and governments) shape public opinion through systemic filters. These filters—ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak, and ideology—create a narrative that aligns with the interests of power structures, leading the public to "consent" to policies that may not serve their best interests, often without coercion.

2. Application to American Academia:

American academia operates within a system influenced by neoliberal principles, where education is increasingly treated as a commodity. Universities, reliant on tuition revenue, government grants, and corporate partnerships, often prioritize marketable fields (e.g., STEM) over others, reflecting funding sources and economic demands. This aligns with Chomsky's filters:

Ownership and Funding: Private donors, corporate sponsors, and government grants influence research priorities and curriculum, steering students toward degrees that benefit capital interests.

Sourcing: Experts and studies cited in media often reinforce the narrative that student loans are a "necessary investment," marginalizing critiques of systemic issues like tuition inflation.

Ideology: Education is framed as a personal investment in individual success, not a public good. This neoliberal ideology shifts responsibility from the state to the individual, normalizing debt as a personal obligation.

3. Student Loans and Manufactured Consent: The student debt crisis (over \$1.7 trillion in the U.S.) reflects a system where consent is manufactured through institutional and media narratives:

Normalization of Debt: Universities and policymakers promote loans as essential for accessing education, downplaying risks. Financial aid offices and media portray debt as a "good" investment in future earnings, despite stagnant wages and rising costs.

Lack of Alternatives: Public discourse rarely emphasizes free or subsidized education models, fostering acceptance of debt as the only option. Academia's silence on systemic solutions (e.g., debt forgiveness, public funding) reinforces this.

Administrative Priorities: Universities invest in facilities and rankings to attract students, inflating costs. Students, encouraged by societal pressure to pursue degrees, often take on debt without fully understanding long-term consequences.

Workforce Compliance: Graduates burdened by debt may accept precarious employment or avoid activism, creating a compliant workforce. This aligns with corporate interests seeking docile labor.

4. Critiques and Implications:

Neoliberal Academia: Universities function as market actors, prioritizing revenue over affordability. This perpetuates a cycle where students are "consenting participants" in a system that exploits their labor and debt.

Media and Messaging: Media narratives often individualize the crisis (e.g., "irresponsible borrowers") rather than critique structural issues (e.g., privatization, state disinvestment).

Resistance and Reform: Challenging manufactured consent requires reframing education as a public good, advocating for debt cancellation, and promoting financial literacy within academia.

Conclusion:

Manufactured consent in academia and student loans manifests through institutional pressures, media narratives, and ideological framing that normalize and justify debt as a necessary path to success. This system sustains power structures by deflecting attention from systemic inequities, ensuring public acquiescence to a model that prioritizes profit over people. Addressing this requires collective action to redefine education's purpose and democratize access.

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John Ashbery, 1931 / Kayla Krut, 1993

