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Chinese Whispers Chinese Rooms: The Poetry of John Ashbery and Cognitive Studies

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Submitted for Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Abstract

This thesis examines the relationship of John Ashbery's poetry to developments in cognitive studies over the course of the last sixty years, particularly the science of linguistics as viewed from a Chomskyan perspective. The thesis is divided into four chapters which position particular topics in cognitive studies as organising principles for examining Ashbery's poetry. The first chapter concentrates on developments in syntactic theory in relation to Ashbery's experiments with poetic syntax. The second chapter examines the notion of "intention" and "intentionality" in Ashbery's writing from the perspective of cognitive "theory of context" writing, particularly the work of Deirdre Wilson and Daniel Sperber. The final two chapters consider cognitive questions using Ashbery's poetry as a means of entry into controversial areas in formal cognitive studies. The third chapter examines his poetry in relation to temporality, suggesting that Ashbery's experiments with time form "theories of consciousness" as they consciously manipulate readerly consciousness and attention. The final chapter explores perception in relation to Ashbery's writing. The thesis argues that poetry can be conceived of as a less formalised method of cognitive study, and that poetic experiment can lead to significant reconceptualisations of cognitive notions which may play a role in framing critical questions for more formal experiments in cognitive science-philosophy going forward. The thesis concludes with reflections on the wider implications for literary cognitive studies in general.

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Introduction

The Mooring of Starting Out: Basic Thesis Aims

It comes down to
so little:
the gauzy syntax
of one thing and another;
a pleasant dinner
and a frozen train ride into the exhaustible
resources. (Ashbery, *Chinese Whispers* 85)

This thesis explores two central questions. The first is a general one: can the study of literature provide meaningful insights into the study of mind? It is the position of this thesis that literary study not only can offer such insights, but instances can be pointed to where literature has actually arrived at critical questions about mental faculties before more formal scientific or philosophical disciplines have. In his book, *Reading Minds: The Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science* (1991), Mark Turner proposes “a reframing of the study of English so that it comes to be seen as inseparable from the discovery of mind” (Turner vii). In reframing the study of literature this way, he suggests, literary criticism will be seen to be “participating, even leading the way” in the discovery of mind, “gaining new analytic instruments for its traditional work and developing new concepts of its role” (Turner vii). The “reframing” of which Turner writes is central to understanding the purpose of this thesis. While there is a long history of critical examinations of the interaction of literature and mind, not least during the period of psychoanalysis’ greatest literary influence, the understandings and approaches developed in the modern cognitive sciences offer fresh conceptions of both “minds” as entities in themselves, and the sub-processes which create unified “minds”. Though many of the insights of modern cognitive science may be

new, they address questions which are as old as philosophy itself, and which have, thus, played a role in the creation and comprehension of literature since its beginning.

The second question the thesis examines relates specifically to the writing of John Ashbery. How does a writer like Ashbery, who is both self-consciously experimental and self-consciously concerned with the depiction and function of the mind, explore the mind, and what can his writing tell us about its composition and function? Critics, even critics who are not particularly concerned with cognitive issues, have frequently noted how central the exploration of the conscious mind is to Ashbery's writing. Though numerous examples will be produced throughout the thesis, a few exemplary passages here will serve to indicate how Ashbery's writing has been received by critics in relation to questions of cognition. In an essay entitled, "Coming Full Circle", collected in Susan Schultz's book, *The Tribe of John* (1995), Fred Moramarco writes:

Ashbery has worked toward finding the language to express an awareness that exists on the axis between our 'inner' and 'outer' lives, between our personal lives as individuals and our collective life as a contemporary civilization. In this sense Ashbery's work is really not about language at all but about consciousness, which, for a poet, can be reached and conveyed only *through* language. (Schultz et al. 38)¹

Moramarco's point is a crucial one, though, as will be seen, whether language is merely the medium through which Ashbery explores consciousness, or part of a larger investigation of consciousness which considers "language" in more formal terms, is (for this thesis at least) a live question. In the same volume, Donald Revell writes, in "Some Meditations on Influence" that Ashbery's writing is as much an enaction and conception of the imagination, and a dramatisation of human perceptual faculties, as it is a literary artefact:

everywhere in *The Tennis Court Oath*, Ashbery reminds me that the imagination is not an inward quality in search of expression but, rather, an event that occurs when perception

contacts the world with the force of desire in the form of words or paint or sounds.

Imagination defines itself in what it does. (Schultz et al. 93)

Critics are not alone in suggesting Ashbery's writing concerns itself with the functioning of mind. Ashbery himself has frequently discussed his conception of mind in relation to his writing. Some of Ashbery's most direct and in-depth remarks on the subject are published in an interview included in *The Craft of Poetry* (1974), edited by William Packard. In the interview, Ashbery is asked about his use of verb tenses and how they relate to his poetic subject matter. He replies that he sometimes likes to use "all" verb tenses "simultaneously" in works because "things ... are happening in our minds all the time which I'm attempting to reproduce in poetry" (Packard 118). These "things" constitute, for Ashbery, "the actions of a mind at work or at rest" (Packard 118).

Here, three critical features of Ashbery's understanding of his relationship to cognition are explicitly addressed and a fourth aspect is implied. The first, and most important, aspect is Ashbery's statement that the "things happening in our minds" are what he is "attempting to reproduce in poetry". Thus, his poetry exemplifies, in his understanding, a non-formal investigation of mental processes. Secondly, Ashbery's understanding of the character of his investigations of mind includes the "mind at work or at rest" and so it is not merely the experience of cognition and consciousness that Ashbery is investigating in his writing, but the mechanics of that process. The third important feature of the quotation is Ashbery's statement that he likes using "all" verb tenses "simultaneously" and, thus, that his poetry not only attempts to mimic the process of consciousness, but understands and explicitly *theorises* a relationship between cognition and time and/or temporality. Finally, the discussion of verb tenses implies the discussion of grammar and syntax as a critical aspect of Ashbery's poetic work. The instability created by the shifting of verb tenses and, as will be seen, unstable reference chains in Ashbery's use of pronouns, indicate a conscious effort on Ashbery's part to use not only the relationship of

time to cognition, but, also of language to cognition, to investigate and express both the conscious and unconscious elements of these relationships and how they constitute, actuate, and are theorised by the mind.

With these aspects of Ashbery's poetic project now more clearly articulated, questions may be asked about the modalities of his experiments in his poems and other writing. The notion of a mind "at work or at rest" includes both conscious and unconscious elements. Ashbery sees the depiction of this distinction as a critical aspect of his writing which differentiates it from other forms of experimental writing in the twentieth century. Later in the *The Craft of Poetry* interview he states, "I think in fact that the conscious element of my poetry is more important than the unconscious element, if only because our conscious thoughts are what occupy us most of the day" (Packard 118). As will be shown, Ashbery essentially uses this dividing line, the self-conscious investigation of these processes, experiences, and presuppositions of the conscious mind—the "mind at work" in a sense—to distinguish his writing from surrealist writing, a mode of experimental writing that Ashbery feels over-privileged the unconscious mind. Thus, the attempt to integrate both conscious and unconscious elements provides Ashbery's writing with a greater fidelity to aspects of the experience of consciousness than the surrealist approach, and has stylistic and structural consequences for his writing and its critical reception.

One way to approach Ashbery's writing in relation to the question of how the mind is investigated in literature, and what the implications of such investigations may be for more formal approaches to cognitive study, can be found in another passage from the *The Craft of Poetry* interview. Ashbery notes that the critic Richard Howard has, in his study of Ashbery's writing, found that Ashbery's poetic "methodology coincides with the subject" (Packard 121). Building on Howard's insight—that Ashbery's subject matter is often a constituent of his method of writing—it becomes possible to see how concepts like syntax, intention, perception,

and the temporal substrate of human action become, not only sites of experiment, but also the *material* of experiment. In consciously exploring such concepts, Ashbery uses features of the human experience of them to “comment” on properties of the concepts themselves, and, thereby to comment on the relationship of those properties to cognition itself. To understand how this dynamic functions, it is helpful to take an example from an Ashbery poem. Consider the following passage from “Idaho” from *The Tennis Court Oath*:

Cornelia unfolded the piece of crude blue paper that is a French telegra.

#####

The mouth of weeds [...]. (Ashbery, *The Tennis Court Oath* 92)

Despite the shortness of the passage, many of the key features that define the “cognitive” character of Ashbery’s poetry can be seen. Most obviously, perhaps, are the fourteen “hash marks” which form the middle line. The hash mark may have a “symbolic” value—an evolving one, it should be noted, as the spread of the popularity of the micro-blogging site, Twitter, recontextualises it—but it cannot meaningfully be argued that the marks have a “lexical” value. They are not words, nor are they symbolic representations denoting words in this context. They also have no syntactic character. The line would not be more or less comprehensible if there were ten or seventeen hash marks on it. Thus, Ashbery uses a “non-lexical”, indeed, non-linguistic, feature to create a poetic effect. The flip side of the lack of lexical content of the marks is their irreducibility. Despite not being “language” in a normal sense, they are a fundamental part of the poem for which a reader must account. Each reader may offer a different interpretation of their significance, but the response on the part of the reader is as much a “cognitive” effect of the poem as any of its lexical content. Ashbery is placing his reader in a situation where conventional reading strategies are not adequate to the text. Because the poem was created by Ashbery, as opposed to a computer programme, or an automaton, the reader must assume a kind of “intentional content” in the poem (i.e. Ashbery intends that the symbols

be seen and “read”). Here, too, the cognitive implications of the lines become more clear: Ashbery is not only using non-linguistic elements to strain readerly comprehension, he is *knowingly* doing so, and, therefore, explicitly taking into consideration the cognitive faculties of his readers and using that relationship as a topic of discussion in the poem itself. The poem may not specifically state that it is doing so, but, like the hash marks themselves, the fact of its doing so is irreducible.

The line that follows the hash marks is also of interest. Reading “The mouth of weeds”, it is clear that the line does not represent a syntactically complete sentence in English. To extend beyond the line, the next word offers a kind of closure, but not resolution: “The mouth of weeds/marriage” (*The Tennis Court Oath* 92). Here, again, extra-linguistic elements play a role in constituting the “meaning” or “interpretability” of the line—the hash marks and the full stop, in this case—but what is important here is that the sentence is “asyntactic”. It cannot be processed meaningfully according to English syntax. As will be argued in chapter one, it is not merely the “asyntacticity” of the “sentence”, but the character of the syntactic disruption that will prove most illuminating from a cognitive perspective. Certain kinds of syntax errors will be shown to reflect properties of syntax itself which only very recent linguistic science—that is, at the time of the writing of *The Tennis Court Oath*—was beginning to address. In a sense, Ashbery’s poetic experiments make readers “aware” of these properties of the apparatus of English syntax in ways it would take much of the scientific community another decade to come to terms with.

Finally, the three quoted lines above are replete with narrative ruptures. In the first line, the narrative is interrupted by the truncation of the word “telegram” (or, possibly, the word “telegraph”, or “telegraphic”, or “telegraphy”, or, indeed, a non-word like “telegrammar”; there can be no lexical resolution of any kind in this case). The second line may be read as a glyphic manifestation of “interruption”, a materialisation of narrative rupture, and the final line is a

syntactically, and formally, incomplete narrative. It is both an incomplete sentence, and an incomplete sentence which spills over two poetic lines.

Thus, the reader's attention is constantly being managed by the poem, being strained, ruptured, or colluded with according to particular—possibly emergent—imperatives of the poem itself. The implications of these explorations of perception and attention are critical to understanding both how Ashbery experiments with these mental faculties in his own work, and how literature can theorise these properties of mind more generally. Thus, literary experiments feed into other forms of cognitive study. The major features of the lines discussed above—syntax, the intentional manipulation of readerly perception, and relationship of the poem to temporality and perception—will represent crucial theoretical touchstones for the investigations of the rest of this thesis.

Gertrude Stein, Ashbery and “Cognitive Literature”

As can be seen from a later quotation from the same wide-ranging *New York Quarterly* interview, Ashbery has also explicitly used poetic form—or the lack of it—to consider the mind and the process of consciousness. Speaking about extended prose passages in his poetry, Ashbery says:

The idea of it occurred to me as something new in which the arbitrary divisions of poetry into lines would get abolished. One wouldn't have to have these interfering and scanning the processes of one's thought as one was writing; the poetic form would be dissolved, in solution, and therefore create a much more—I hate to say environmental because it's a bad word—but more of a surrounding thing like the way one's consciousness is surrounded by one's thoughts. (Packard 126)

Though certain poetic line arrangements might be seen to be more or less “arbitrary” than others—a question considered in detail in the third chapter of this thesis which will be concerned with the relationship between temporality and cognition—what is important to note

about the passage above is that Ashbery is explicitly framing his poetic formal choices with cognitive ends in mind. In stating that he wants to dissolve the “interfering” and “scanning processes” of “poetic form” because the emergent “anti-formal” form is more representative of “the way one’s consciousness is surrounded by one’s thoughts”, Ashbery offers another means of purchase on cognitive questions in his writing. Not only is methodology Ashbery’s subject, as in Howard’s formulation, but form becomes a subject as well in his large prose poems. Certain parallels with stream-of-consciousness writing will here likely occur to many readers.² The similarities and differences between Ashbery’s approach and that of stream-of-consciousness writers will be a subject this thesis returns to in a number of contexts, considered both in its role as a literary device, and as a means of representing the functioning of the mind. To use the phrase “stream-of-consciousness” is, of course, to evoke the legacy of modernism, and, with it, the long-acknowledged link with Ashbery’s modernist predecessors. In regard to the specific concept of the “stream of consciousness”, the phrase is particularly appropriate in relating Ashbery to his modernist experimental predecessors, not least because of the umbilical links between one of the key figures in the dissemination of the term “stream of consciousness”, William James, and his role as a mentor and tutor to Gertrude Stein, one of Ashbery’s most important literary influences. In highlighting this lineal connection, it becomes possible to see both how Ashbery’s writing has built on the literary experiments of Stein (how he has conceived of Stein’s writing, how he has borrowed structural or conceptual aspects of it in his own work, and what he has valued in it as experimental literature), as well as how Stein’s own experiments were formed in the wake of her scientific training and work under William James during her undergraduate career.

In her essay-lecture, “Poetry and Grammar”, from her *Lectures in America* (1935), Stein writes that diagramming sentences was, for her, a kind of intellectual awakening:

I really do not know that anything has ever been more exciting than diagramming sentences. I suppose other things may be more exciting to others when they are at school but to me undoubtedly when I was at school the really completely exciting thing was diagramming sentences and that has been to me ever since the one thing that has been completely exciting and completely completing. I like the feeling the everlasting feeling of sentences as they diagram themselves. (Stein, *Look at Me Now and Here I Am* 124)³

In her lecture “The Gradual Making of *The Making of Americans*” from the same series, Stein explicitly considers the role her psychological research with James had on the making of the novel. Stein’s passion for diagramming sentences can be linked here to what she saw as the critical aspect of the novel, the descriptive and classificatory capacities provided by language in addressing personality:

When I was working with William James I completely learned one thing, that science is continuously busy with the complete description of something, with ultimately the complete description of anything with ultimately the complete description of everything. If this can really be done the complete description of everything then what else is there to do. We may well say nothing, but and this is the thing that makes everything continue to be anything, that after all what does happen is that as relatively few people spend all their time describing anything and they stop and so in the meantime as everything goes on somebody else can always commence and go on. And so description is really unending. When I began *The Making of Americans* I knew I really did know that a complete description was a possible thing, and certainly a complete description is a possible thing. (*Look at me Now and Here I Am* 94)

The Making of Americans (1925), is, for Stein, then, an attempt at the “complete description of everything”, in particular, its characters. In consciously linking the literary enterprise to the psychological project of James, Stein is making an argument that literature can be a cognitive

endeavour if undertaken with a particular set of intentions. For Stein literature is, building on her understanding of the diagramming of sentences, the “complete description” of personalities. Literature is not merely a means of telling a story, or of creating interesting formal or semantic experiments, but a legitimate companion to scientific investigation in an attempt to describe the mind as fully as possible. As will be seen, for Ashbery, the project is, at once, larger, yet also more specific.

Writing at a time when the question of what constituted the fundamental units of language was just beginning to be formulated in its modern sense—through the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, and Otto Jespersen—Stein proposed that it was not, as many thinkers suggested at the time—and as many theorists do today—that the lexical component of language was the ultimate unit. For Stein, it was in fact the paragraph that allowed language to achieve genuine artistic expression:

I once said in *How to Write* a book I wrote about Sentences and Paragraphs, that paragraphs were emotional and sentences were not. Paragraphs are emotional not because they express an emotion but because they register or limit an emotion. Compare paragraphs with sentences any paragraph or any sentence and you will see what I mean. (*Look at Me Now and Here I Am* 53)⁴

Stein’s assertions are, of course, controversial, not least with regard to what is or is not the fundamental “emotional” unit of literature. However, a central insight, one which would be taken up in a more formal sense by the linguist and philosopher, Noam Chomsky, is important to note: if lexical items are not the fundamental units which provide understanding of what the system of language is, then it is the *relationships* (many of them actually unvoiced) that the lexical items enter into which are most significant. Stein herself hints at this deeper significance in the following passage from an interview with Robert Haas:

I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word, and at this same time I found out very soon that there is no such thing as putting them together without sense ... I made innumerable efforts to make words write without sense and found it impossible. Any human being putting down words had to make sense out of them. (Haas et al. 18)

Here, too, Stein writes of the critical “extra lexical” character of grammatical relations: “Think how a sentence is made by its parts of speech and you will see that it is not dependent upon a beginning middle and an ending, but by each part needing its own place to make its own balancing” (Stein, *Narration* 22-3). In a passage from the essay “Poetry and Grammar” concerning pronouns, Stein discusses the relationship between nouns, which she feels to be the basic grammatical unit of poetry, and pronouns:

Of course then there are pronouns. Pronouns are not as bad as nouns because in the first place practically they cannot have adjectives go with them. That already makes them better than nouns.

Then beside not being able to have adjectives go with them, they of course are not really the name of anything. They represent some one but they are not its or his name. In not being his or its or her name they already have a greater possibility of being something than if they were as a noun is the name of anything.

(*Look at Me Now and Here I Am* 125-6)

Though Stein’s “nouns” and “pronouns” must be understood in the historical sense of “prescriptive grammar” (i.e. the grammar taught in schools when children diagram sentences), her according of equal importance to the syntactic role played by words in these categories, alongside their “dictionary” meanings, provides a theoretical starting point for a new conception of the role of language in experimental writing. Though not strictly “scientific”, Stein’s theoretical characterisation of her experiments suggests that the approach she took to

experimenting with literature retained some of the metaphysical abstraction and observational character of experimental science. Such an approach clearly resonates with experimental work by Ashbery, as will be seen, particularly in his more radical early works.

Like Chomsky later, Stein seems to intuit that a critical element of language is its syntax. This understanding has considerable implications for the understanding of Stein's approach to experimental writing. First, her interest in paragraphs rather than sentences as the fundamental unit of linguistic sense results in her structuring literary passages which, at once, deflect attention from individual sentences and words, yet which also rely on the most minor changes of lexical content possible, thus, requiring extreme attention for genuine comprehension. This can be seen in both Stein's prose and her poetry. The following passage from *The Making of Americans* offers one example:

Slowly, every one in continuous repeating, to their minutest variation, comes to be clearer to some one. Every one who ever was or is or will be living sometimes will be clearly realised by some one. Sometime there will be an ordered history of every one. Slowly every kind of one comes into ordered recognition. More and more then it is wonderful in living the subtle variations coming clear into ordered recognition, coming to make every one a part of some kind of them, some kind of men and women. Repeating then is in every one, every one then comes sometime to be clearer to some one, sometime there will be then an orderly history of every one who ever was or is or will be living. (Stein, *The Making of Americans* 284)

The "subtle variations" which "come clear into ordered recognition" are as much about the exploration of the interaction of language and mind as the interaction of words between each other. The words are a pathway into the mind. The following example from "Before the Flowers of Friendship Faded Friendship Faded" provides further context:

Did he hear it when it was as said

And did he sing it when he sang a song

And did he like it when it was not said

And did he make it when he went along. (*Look at Me Now and Here I Am* 263)

Stein's repetition, then, can be understood as a form of cognitive experiment as well as a literary experiment, the creation of a kind of "field of experience" in which the reader's cognitive faculties are engaged and which, after sufficient immersion, may produce an emotional state. The reader sees or hears a word like "it" and sees the "it" repeated shortly thereafter, possibly in reference to a different noun, as, for example, the "it" in the first line which refers to something that is, apparently, said, and the "it" in the following line which may (or indeed may not) refer to a song that was sung. The ambiguity of the "it" and its repetition suspends the reader's ability to finalise a "meaning". Repetition, either of words, passages or sounds (e.g. rhyme or alliteration) frequently works to "stabilise" writing in that the reader-hearer may use the repetition to generate expectations or as a mnemonic device of sorts. In Stein, however, this capacity is essentially reversed. Aware that repetition can make things easier to understand, Stein uses repetition to multiply rather than narrow possible interpretations. This notion of a "cognitive field", wherein data are presented to the faculties of cognition for consideration, is consonant with a passage about the nature of literary greatness from Stein's *Lectures in America*. She writes that, for her, "the best writers" are "the writers who feel writing the most" (Stein, *Lectures in America* 89). Stephen Meyer, in his book about Stein's early scientific work, *Irresistible Dictation* (2001), cites another passage from Stein, this time from the work, *Narration* (1935), which emphasises "the physical something a writer is while he is writing" (*Narration* 56). These passages are of particular interest to the wider question of how a theory of "cognitive literature" is understood and formalised. The distinctive state of what "a writer is while he is writing", appears to be most fully manifested, for Stein, by "writers who feel writing the most". This state of

being—the “feeling most” while writing—appears to be transferrable, given Stein’s greater appreciation of these writers than of those who “feel” less—in her estimation at least. Here, the first hints at a deeper concept which will be developed in this thesis are expressed: the notion of the writerly generation and manipulation of the cognitive environment of the reader as a means of producing, in some cases, a similar cognitive state to that of the writer at the time of the creation of the writing, and, in others, a meaningfully distinct mental state which the writer attempts to “force” on his or her reader.

To see Stein’s writing in these terms is to begin to sketch out the path by which Stein’s writing can be understood as early “cognitive literature”. Among the writers to have come closest to articulating a vision of an explicitly “cognitive” Stein is Norman Weinstein in his book, *Gertrude Stein and the Literature of Modern Consciousness* (1970). With chapter titles like “Gertrude Stein and the Linguistic Revolution”, the text might, at first glance, appear to be almost a mirror of the present study, albeit one focused on the writing of Stein rather than Ashbery. Unfortunately, for those seeking a clear line from Weinstein to the present, the similarities to explicitly cognitive critical perspectives are more superficial than they first appear. Despite this fact, there are a number of valuable points in Weinstein’s analysis which have implications for critics taking a cognitive position, and some very powerful insights which can be understood to describe an early, less formalised, understanding of the mission of cognitive literary critique.

In Weinstein’s introduction, entitled, “Gertrude Stein and the Linguistic Revolution”, the differences between the present thesis’ perspective and Weinstein’s are most apparent. Writing thirteen years after the publication of Chomsky’s first monograph, *Syntactic Structures* (1957), and in the immediate wake of the first wave of “Chomskyan” literary critics, many of whom will be discussed shortly, it is surprising that Weinstein retains a decidedly “pre-Chomskyan” conception of the nature of syntax, writing that “our syntax, our ways of combining words is grounded in Aristotelian logic” (Weinstein 5). Though this remains an influential position within literary-

critical writing to the present, as will be demonstrated in detail in chapter one, the linguistic position articulated by Chomsky in *Syntactic Structures*, and then refined in his later book, *Aspects of a Theory of Syntax* (1965) and explored less technically in *Language and Mind* (1968), all written several years before Weinstein's text, is not reconcilable with such an "Aristotelian" understanding of the generation of syntax, as Weinstein characterises it. This is the case not least because such an understanding, as Weinstein goes on to write, relies on "laws of direct causality" and "linearity" (Weinstein 5), essentially suggesting there is a deliberate, anthropogenic character to syntactic organisation. This divergence from a Chomskyan understanding of language, while being at odds with the present study, would not necessarily have been unusual at the time of Weinstein's writing, but it is perplexing in relation to the rest of his text, not least because of an example Weinstein chooses to illustrate the modalities of Stein's syntactic experimentation. Weinstein compares the sentence "I am typing on a typewriter" to a sentence he composes using the same lexical components: "typewriter a on am typing I" (Weinstein 5). The example could scarcely be more Chomskyan; indeed, its resemblance to Chomsky's example of a syntactically acceptable nonsense sentence from *Syntactic Structures*: "colorless green ideas sleep furiously", and its corollary: "furiously sleep ideas green colorless" (Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* 15), is uncanny. There are no citations of Chomsky in the index of the book; however, there is a reference to *Syntactic Structures* in the bibliography (Weinstein 138), and so the reader must assume Weinstein had a passing familiarity at least with the text in which the example appears. That he draws a drastically different conclusion from the example is, to say the least, from a cognitive perspective, surprising. Perhaps what is most surprising about Weinstein's interpretation is that he directly links the implications of the "typewriter a on am typing I" syntactic displacements to the work of Edward Sapir, the progenitor of a famous line of linguistic reasoning that Chomskyan linguistics played a key role in undermining. It is necessary to briefly summarise the work of Sapir and outline his conclusions to understand the basis of this particular understanding of language and how it relates to the wider discussion of the linguistic context that

preceded Chomsky's approach, and the critical differences of view and ontology that prevailed at the time.

The following extended quotation from Sapir's writings on the nature of language offers a detailed and articulated summation of the ontology of language as conceived by Sapir, and as adopted by Weinstein as the "default" understanding of language in his book:

If the characteristic physical environment of a people is to a large extent reflected in its language, this is true to an even greater extent of its social environment. A large number, if not most, of the elements that make up a physical environment are found universally distributed in time and place, so that there are natural limits set to the variability of lexical materials in so far as they give expressions to concepts derived from the physical world. A culture, however, develops in numberless ways and may reach any degree of complexity ... [W]e need not be surprised to find that the vocabularies of peoples that differ widely in character or degree of culture share this wide difference. There is a difference between the rich, conceptually ramified vocabulary of a language like English or French and that of any typical primitive group, corresponding in large measure to that which obtains between the complex culture of English-speaking or French-speaking peoples of Europe and America. (Sapir 94)

Thus, the "physical environment" can account for certain "universal" linguistic terms, say, for example, words for "rivers" or "mountains", but not the other types of words, which may or may not appear in a language as the result of "cultural" variations. What follows from this understanding of language is that languages and cognitive fields of understanding are limited by cultural and environmental factors. The famous, and culturally insensitive in appositely Sapirian ways (i.e. focussing on environment as the "source" of language), formulation that "Eskimo peoples have fifty words for snow", is a crude restatement of the basic principle. Chomsky's position is that far from being limited by "environment", or "culture", there are many things

about language which native speakers understand which are never “learned” through cultural experience, and which could never be related to the physical environment. An example Chomsky picks to demonstrate this point is the concept of a “spherical cube” (Chomsky, *James R. Killian Memorial Lecture* 1991). Such a concept is, of course, impossible to experience in the “physical environment”, but can be mentally conceived, and, at least on a conceptual level, understood. Chomsky extends the point to note that native speakers of English understand that if someone were to say, “I painted my spherical cube brown”, the hearer of the sentence would assume that the outside of the spherical cube was painted brown rather than the inside. For the opposite to be true, it would have to be specified (*James R. Killian Memorial Lecture* 1991). Indeed words like “river”, too, are important in relation to this “unspoken” aspect of lexical content. As Chomsky suggests, in a thought experiment, if a river were filled with tea it would still be a “river”, but, if certain particular structures were built along a section of the river without changing the pure fluvial content of H₂O, that section would become a “canal” (Chomsky, *New Horizons in the Study of Language and Mind* 128). These unspoken “understandings” relating to lexical content and relations are not the by-product of instruction, and cannot simply be a product of habit, not least because the habits are not formed in reference to data. They suggest that Sapir’s characterisation of language is at best inadequate to the real experience and use of language.

It is important to note, in relation to Weinstein’s argument, that Sapir’s characterisation of language also extends to its grammatical relations. He writes that the “cultural complexes” that compose the lexical content of language can extend to grammar as well: “some elements that go to make up a cultural complex are embedded in grammatical form”; Sapir also suggested as much:

This is true particularly of ... languages operating with a large number of prefixes or suffixes of a relatively concrete significance. The use in Kwakiutl or Nootka, for instance [indigenous languages of the Americas], of local suffixes defining activities as

taking place on the beach, rocks, or sea, in cases where in most languages it would be far more idiomatic to omit all such reference, evidently points to the nature of the physical environment. (Sapir 99)

In this formulation, suffixes are understood to constitute conscious *choices* on the part of the speakers of Kwakiutl and Nootka because they relate to events in the *physical* world. However, the character of suffixation is not so readily explained by Sapir's "culture + environment" formula for language creation. Though Chomsky's system offers a more in-depth characterisation of how grammatical features like suffixes (which do not have "nominal" roles meaning that they do not pick out or name objects or states of affairs in the world), fit into a broader, internal system of language which he characterises as the "i-language", a language that is internal, individual and can be used intentionally to express an individual's thoughts. For the moment, however, it is simply important to understand that this is the ontological basis with regard to language for Weinstein's understanding of Stein's linguistic experiments.⁵

Extrapolating from the "typewriter a on am typing I" "sentence", Weinstein follows Sapir from the realm of conceptual reasoning into positing an alternative syntactic theory. For him, Stein is "creating" a new syntax, or "expanding" the mind's notion of what syntax could be and, thus, she is creating a new cognitive state. The present thesis' position is that it is perhaps true that a new cognitive state is being achieved, but it is not because a "new" syntax has been created simply because the writer has estranged lexical items from their usual syntactic positions in English; the new state is achieved by drawing on readerly expectations regarding syntax, displacing them and, in doing so, revealing aspects of cognitive function theretofore so ubiquitous and reflexive as to have been invisible. In this way, the writing becomes cognitive investigation rather than simply textual experiment.

Though Weinstein's conclusions are also rooted in pre-Chomskyan conceptions of language, and the then-current thinkers he cites as "evidence" of his understanding of language

(thinkers including Sapir, Benjamin Whorf, Jean Piaget, R. D. Laing, and Claude Lévi-Strauss) (Weinstein 52-6) read something like a “rogue’s gallery” for cognitively-minded critics working in a Chomskyan vein, he clearly understands and articulates some of the possibilities presented by a cognitive literary theory.⁶ Despite these differences, an early passage in Weinstein is very important in terms of understanding the conception of intentionality which will be examined later in this thesis. He writes, “we cannot speak of linguistic experimentation in literature apart from the larger purposes of the author using it” (Weinstein 2). This position would appear rather less daring than some of Weinstein’s statements about Sapir, but its implications are, perhaps, more powerful, and more durable. The realisation that “linguistic experimentation” is a vector for authorial concerns is, on its face, somewhat obvious, but, looking more deeply, the nature of such experimentation tells the reader both more about the actual, isolable “intentions” of a given author—as will be shown, far more than the historical investigations of writerly, or literary, intention often do—and, also, about the limits of certain cognitive functions as perceived by the writer. The “experiments” will, almost by definition, take place at some cognitive boundary or other, straining it, or warping it in accord with the aspect of language or literary creation the writer chooses to address. This form of “liminality” may genuinely offer insights into the functioning of cognition and features of mind which, until such experiments are carried out, remained untheorised.

A reading by Weinstein of Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation* (1956) is insightful in its early articulation of cognitive concerns. Weinstein writes:

I began this analysis of *Stanzas in Meditation* by emphasizing the poem’s syntactic structure because it is through this structure that the philosophy of the poem is enacted. It is my contention that the poem is not *about* philosophy, but it *is* philosophy set into motion by verbal action. (Weinstein 88)

Here, Weinstein articulates a critical though underexplored reality about literature, particularly experimental literature: that literary experiments are not merely a reflection of intellectual currents regarding the nature of mind at a given moment (as, for example, surrealist writing with Freudianism, or certain forms of modernist writing with phenomenological affinities, could be said to be), but that the works *themselves* are examples of intellectual investigations of the concerns that philosophy of mind undertakes, and, thus, as will continue to be elaborated going forward, “theories of consciousness” in their own right, manifestations of a writer’s ideas about the mind of the readers receiving or interacting with the literary work.

It should also be noted that here many of the experimental choices which Ashbery uses to great cognitive impact in his work have been written about in relation to Stein. Charles Caramello has addressed the implications of her use of pronouns (Caramello 193); Norman Weinstein, and Randa Dubnick have considered the implications of paired columns of text placed side by side on a page (Weinstein 83), and Dubnick herself has discussed the use of lists to draw attention to the act of listing (Dubnick 54). All of these literary experiments would appear in Ashbery’s writings in slightly attenuated forms. Indeed, the bulk of the thesis will be given to examining the ways in which Ashbery builds on the approach to experimentalism established by Stein. Having examined various critical approaches to Stein, it is revealing to examine Ashbery’s best known writing on Stein, a review of *Stanzas in Meditation*, and to consider what Ashbery found important in Stein’s poetic approach and how these ideas or concepts may have played a role in his own literary experiments.⁷

John Ashbery’s reading of Gertrude Stein: A Proto-Cognitive Perspective on Stein’s Experiments

Ashbery, perhaps alluding to another Gertrude Stein book, *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937), in his review of *Stanzas in Meditation*, writes that “the story of *Stanzas in Meditation* is a general all-purpose model which each reader can adapt to fit his own set of particulars” (*Gertrude Stein Advanced* 109). This line curiously echoes Ashbery’s own statement about how the conscious centre of his poems is something like a “sock that stretches to fit all sizes” (Shoptaw, 1).⁸ Also familiar from the body of Ashbery criticism is an observation in the review commenting on Stein’s use of pronouns, particularly “they”, and the effect the word creates. Ashbery refers to the effect as “a pleasant change from the eternal ‘we’ with which so many modern poets automatically begin each sentence” (Kostelanetz et al. *Gertrude Stein Advanced* 108).

Ashbery also seems particularly interested in the way the poems of Stein resemble the way life is experienced. He compares Stein’s writing and the writing of Henry James—the brother of Stein’s tutor at Harvard—in this regard: “The almost physical pain with which we strive to accompany the evolving thought of one of James’ or Gertrude Stein’s characters is perhaps a counterpart of the painful continual projection of the individual into life” (*Gertrude Stein Advanced* 110). This kind of shared sense of cognitive endeavour is an important part of the notion of theory of mind discussed in the writing of the cognitive literary theorist, Lisa Zunshine, whose work focusses particularly on the ways readers “theorise” other minds. In the light of this, it could certainly be argued that Ashbery himself may be said to be, informally, performing a “cognitive” reading of Stein, tracing the cognitive evolution of characters and seeing how the cognitive process as represented thus reflects the experience of actual cognition.⁹

It is perhaps something of a paradox, then, that the instances where Ashbery’s own writing appears to resemble Stein’s writing most from a surface perspective are those where it could be said to resemble Stein’s work least from a cognitive or philosophical perspective. Consider the following passage from *Stanzas in Meditation*:

I think very well of Susan but I do not know her name
I think very well of Ellen but which is not the same
I think very well of Paul I tell him not to do so
I think very well of Francis Charles but do I do so
I think very well of Thomas but I do not not do so
I think very well of not very well of William. (Stein, *Stanzas in Meditation* 43)

These repetitions appear, in an overt sense, not dissimilar from repetitions to be found in a number of Ashbery poems, particularly works like, “He”, from *Some Trees* (1956):

He cuts down the lakes so they appear straight
He smiles at his feet in their tired mules.
He turns up the music much louder.
He takes down the vaseline from the pantry shelf.
He is the capacious smile behind the colored bottles.
He eats not lest the poor want some.
He breathes of attitudes the piney altitudes.
He indeed is the White Cliffs of Dover. (Ashbery, *Some Trees* 60)

Or, here, from his recent collection, *Planisphere* (2009), in “They Knew What They Wanted”:

They all kissed the bride.
They all laughed.
They came from beyond space.
They came by night.
They came to a city.
They came to blow up America.
They came to rob Las Vegas.
They dare not love.

They died with their boots on.
They shoot horses don't they?
They go boom.
They got me covered.
They flew alone.
They gave him a gun.
They had just got married.
They live. They loved life.
They live by night.
They drive by night.
They knew Mr. Knight.
They were expendable. (Ashbery, *Planisphere* 113)

Though Ashbery clearly uses a kind of Stein-esque repetition in these poems, in many ways it would be difficult to describe this kind of repetition as “cognitively” Steinian. Whereas repetitions in Stein frequently draw attention to minor changes in word use or order, essentially providing a lexical matrix structure within which certain elements are permuted; in Ashbery, the repetition serves almost to move the reader along. The reader is fully aware upon seeing the poems that every line will begin with the word “they” or “he”. Unlike many instances of Stein’s writing wherein a repeated word’s role in a line or passage changes, in Ashbery, the “theys” and “hes” function somewhat like the call in a “call-response” dynamic. The reader anticipates that a “they” or “he” is coming at the beginning of the passage and, thus, it is not the word which matters most, but what will follow the word. While there are, no doubt, a number of complex associations and references in “They Knew What They Wanted”—the various film titles, to mention just one—the linguistic experimentation is not fundamentally syntactic in character in the way Stein’s frequently is.¹⁰ The words play essentially the same role in every line. For

Ashbery, the “hes” and “theys” of the poems above exist more as “subjects” in classical grammar than as “pronouns” playing a part in a syntactic structure. Of course it must be said that the “theys” and “hes” are pronouns and retain all the normal properties of pronouns as well, but this feature is simply not emphasised in the particular poetic experiment. Its implications will be discussed in detail in chapter three of this thesis.

To see the deeper influence of Stein, rather more at a philosophical than a lexical level, following David Herd’s argument from *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (2000), one may benefit from turning attention to *The Vermont Notebook* (1975) (Herd 160). The poetry in the collection is largely composed of lists of names and objects. In putting these lists before the reader, Ashbery is again in literary territory familiar from Gertrude Stein. In many of Stein’s plays, extended passages of names or other objects are “listed”, and the reader (or viewer in the case of the plays) is prompted to either associate the contents of the list, or to notice differences or inconsistencies. In doing this, the plays rely as much on the reader-viewer to supply “meaning” or interpretation as they do the contents of the lists themselves. This is, in a narrow sense, a cognitive experiment in and of itself, but the question is not merely “how are the plays of Stein and Ashbery’s *Vermont Notebook* poems to be understood as cognitive experiment”. Equally important is the nature of the experiment in terms of defining the cognitive faculties being examined. In order to see the philosophical sympathies, both in approach and technique, it is useful to make a specific comparison. The following is a passage from Stein’s opera-libretto, “Four Saints in Three Acts” (1928): “Saint Therese Saint Settlement Saint Ignatius Saint Lawrence Saint Pilar Saint Plan Saint Cecilia” (Stein, *Selected Operas and Plays of Gertrude Stein* 62). The passage can usefully be compared with a passage from *The Vermont Notebook*:

Anne Waldman, Tom Veitch, Hilton Obenzinger, Jack Marshall, Kathleen Fraser, Sandra MacPherson, Anne Sexton, Maxine Kumin, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, A.R.

Ammons, Ed Sanders, Kenward Elmslie, Nancy Ellison, Sandra Hochman, Arthur
Gregor [...]. (Ashbery, *The Vermont Notebook* 23)

The lists of saints and poets in both writers' works place the "cognitive burden" on the reader. In Ashbery's case, the reader is asked to "create" the poem, and, in Stein's case, among other things, to consider the nature of categorisation itself. In a later passage from the opera-libretto, Stein provides a similar list, but with her characteristic "minor variation" approach:

Saint Therese. When.

Saint Settlement. Then.

Saint Genevieve. When.

Saint Cecile. Then.

Saint Ignatius. Then.

Saint Ignatius. Men. (*Selected Operas and Plays of Gertrude Stein* 66)

Here, the "cognitive" implications of the passage can be read in a way which is quite similar to Ashbery's "poet list" in *The Vermont Notebook*. Again, Stein calls attention to the categorisation of the saints as saints, but the inclusion of the prepositional and postpositional "sentences" both suggests and despoils narrative possibility, as well as creating a false sense of "narrative security" in the passage. By the time St. Ignatius' name is seen, the expectation is likely that a different saint's name will be produced after a preposition. The repetition of St. Ignatius' name disrupts this expectation, and the inclusion of "men" instead of "then", or "when" almost reads as a satirical comment on the process of listing. The similarity many readers will have noted in the earlier lines is both undermined and realised. Stein maintains the end rhyme, but does so with a different type of word. With Ashbery's poems, the explicit act of categorisation never takes place. The role of the "category" is, thus, considered in differing ways. In Stein, the category the reader may likely anticipate is displaced. In Ashbery's poem, the reader is asked to supply the implied or suggested category. In both cases, however, Stein and Ashbery take into account

aspects of the reader's cognitive faculties, their capacities to organise data into categories and they manipulate that capacity for aesthetic purposes.

In considering the similarities in structure and effect of the preceding passages, it becomes easier to understand the nature of the explicit link between the writing of Ashbery and Stein made by Weinstein in his book. He writes that both Ashbery and Stein “are meditating upon the word and word structures that would dare to contain and encompass pluralistic reality” (Weinstein 98). Weinstein's point is that both Stein and Ashbery not only examine the world as a perceptual field, but also the properties of the language that is used to describe it or to think about it. It is the case that the two writers consider both “words” and “word structures” in their examination of the relationship of language to “pluralistic reality” and to the mind. By examining how the “word structures” which characterise the fundamental properties of language, in their presence, and in their absence, demonstrate methodologies of organising, and of dispersing, thought, the potential of cognitive readings of both writers' work becomes clearer: thought, and the production and character of thought, is not only subject matter (following Richard Howard's comment about a unity of “subject and methodology” in Ashbery's writing); thought and its structures and limitations are written into the forms which compose literary texts. With such an understanding in mind, the importance of the link, both aesthetic and methodological, with one of Ashbery's key modernist predecessors is revealed, and the value of viewing Ashbery's writing (and, indeed, Stein's) from a cognitive perspective can be seen. While it may be easy to historically link Ashbery's writing to that of Stein, by looking more deeply at the ways in which both writers theorise mind and use language to manifest their experiments, it is not only their writing which the reader can learn about, but also the nature of the faculties of mind they posited.

The Romantic Era: The Historical Foundations of Modern Cognitive Science

The investigation of cognitive processes, such as, the nature of thought, consciousness, ideation, learning, intention, and memory, dates to the Pre-Socratic philosophers, and likely long before. Indeed, the nature of the intellectual faculties is discussed in detail in Plato, Aristotle, St. Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Leibniz, Malebranche, Spinoza and Kant just to mention major figures. It would clearly be impossible to offer a complete overview of the history of cognitive science in a study such as this. However, as both a number of the key figures from contemporary cognitive studies, and Ashbery himself, trace their roots to the Romantic era (essentially the late 1700s to the mid-1800s), it is possibly most useful to begin the timeline in the Romantic period and to broadly trace the theoretical evolution of the science of mind up through the immediate post-war period and into the present. Chomsky, too, traces his programme to the work of the Romantic era, specifically to the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt. Given Chomsky's scientific concerns, this is not at all surprising, not least because, as Edwin Clarke and L.S. Jacyna note, "by 1850 the foundations of modern neuroscience had been laid" in the work of Romantic-era scientists (Clarke-Jacyna 1). However, in the case of John Ashbery, the association with the Romantic era must be understood as an aesthetic decision rather than a methodological one. Responding to a question in the *The Craft of Poetry* interview about his relationship to "lyricism", Ashbery replies: "That's a word like poetic which I really don't understand" (Packard 129). He then replies that he would classify himself not as a lyrical poet, but, "I guess Romantic in the sense of Romantic poetry I would understand and agree to; all my stuff is Romantic poetry, rather than metaphysical or surrealist" (Packard 129). Ashbery does not elaborate further, but it is instructive that he cites "metaphysical" and "surrealist" poetic approaches as being, in his understanding, distinct from Romantic poetry. As future sections of this thesis will explore (and, as many Ashbery quotations relating to surrealist poetry will also be seen to indicate), it is possible to infer that it is his attitude toward cognition and consciousness that makes Ashbery seek to align himself with Romantic poetry as opposed to "surrealist" or "metaphysical" traditions. Ashbery's work will be argued to represent a particular,

individualised understanding of the conscious mind which uniquely expresses universal mental faculties and which considers individual perception, individual history and conscious (rather than strictly unconscious) processes. All of these features of mind are important aspects of the poetic project that are brought to critical consciousness in the Romantic period.

Critical to note in terms of the dialogue between literature and science is the fact that a number of major and minor writers from the Romantic period—particularly the British Romantic period—had scientific training. Of particular interest to this study is the writer Thomas Lovell Beddoes. Beddoes was the son of a scientist named Thomas Beddoes who was directly involved in experiments involving cognition. As Alan Richardson describes, the elder Beddoes worked alongside Humphry Davy and conducted experiments involving nitrous oxide:

In the fall of 1799, Coleridge took part in what has been called the “first controlled scientific exploration of a consciousness altering drug,” Humphry Davy’s experiments with nitrous oxide in Thomas Beddoes’ notorious Pneumatic Institution in Bristol ... Their reports were taken down and published by Davy in his *Researches, Chemical and Philosophical: Chiefly Concerning Nitrous Oxide* (1800). The experiments, like the drug, were quite a success ... Mrs. Beddoes confessed that she ‘frequently seemed to be ascending like a balloon’. Davy found himself proclaiming in a fit of elation, “*Nothing exists but thoughts!*” Coleridge made brief reports on four separate trials of the drug. (Richardson 51-2)

The younger Beddoes, himself trained in medicine, would write a number of literary works and would go on to inspire one of Ashbery’s *Norton Lectures* (collected in *Other Traditions* (2000)). In the lecture, Ashbery notes the Davy experiments (Ashbery, *Other Traditions* 24), but focusses on the literary lineage of the Beddoes family in more detail than does Richardson. He also notes that, in addition to the formal experiments with Davy, the elder Beddoes was himself a writer, perhaps offering one of the most robust examples of a practising “cognitive” scientist—

in anything resembling the contemporary usage of the term—also attempting to explore the mind through literature (*Other Traditions* 25). Ashbery sees the younger Beddoes' medical work as having a cognitive dimension as well, writing (citing James Thompson's monograph on the younger Beddoes) of his attempt to find "the exact location of the soul" (Thompson 54) through anatomical research (*Other Traditions* 28). At one point in the *Norton Lecture*, Ashbery borrows the term "a poet of fragments" (*Other Traditions* 26) to describe Beddoes the younger's writing.¹¹ The idea of being a "poet of fragments" is clearly something that influenced Ashbery's approach in *The Tennis Court Oath*, *The Vermont Notebook* and other works (perhaps, at some level, in the poem "Fragment" itself). Ashbery's poems frequently exploit the value of the unresolved or unassimilated fragment. How these fragments come together to represent features of mind will be one of the main animating questions in terms of considering Ashbery's experimental works and their implications.

The nexus of literary and scientific examination of consciousness was not only of concern to the Beddoeses, but also was of great interest to Samuel Taylor Coleridge.¹² The well-known prefatory note to "Kubla Khan" (1797) explicitly considers the relationship of creation and the conscious mind.¹³ It is possibly Coleridge's best known writing on the subject, but there are other important connections to be seen as well. In the *Biographia Literaria* (1817), for example, Coleridge explicitly speaks of viewing writing as a means of understanding the functioning of mind:

The poet described in *ideal* perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone, and a spirit of unity, that blends and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Vol. II 15-16)

In this period of Coleridge's writing, the poet is seen as having, through imagination, the capacity to bring all cognitive faculties under a kind of unified control and, critically, to be conscious of the process of managing and directing cognitive faculties. To be a poet is not only to be an explorer of the mind, not even to be a chronicler of the mind, but actually to be a self-conscious master of the mind.

Coleridge also wrote, in his famous "Words and Things" letter of September 1800 addressed to William Godwin, on the subject of the emerging discipline of cognitive science, saying that he wanted Godwin to produce:

a book on the power of words, and the processes by which human feelings form affinities with them—in short, I wish you to *philosophize* Horne Tooke's system, and to solve the great Questions—whether there be reason to hold, that an action bearing all the *semblance* of pre-designing Consciousness may yet be simply organic, & whether a *series* of such actions are possible—and close on the heels of this question would follow the old 'Is Logic the *Essence* of Thinking?' in other words—Is *thinking* impossible without arbitrary signs? &—how far is the word 'arbitrary' a misnomer? Are not words &c parts & germinations of the Plant? And what is the Law of their Growth?—In something of this order I would *endeavor* to destroy the old antithesis of *Words & Things*, elevating, as it were, words into Things, & living Things too. (Coleridge, *Selected Letters* 78-9)

In a sense, what Coleridge is seeking here would seem to be a way of connecting words to a "Law of Growth", a means of understanding how language "grows" in the mind of the user. Though there is, admittedly, some significant interpretation in such a reading of Coleridge, there can be little doubt that Coleridge saw the ability to use language as a fundamental property of mind and a property that was rooted in native aspects of the cognitive apparatus, and that he hoped Godwin could produce a formalised system attesting to this fact. The emphasis on "words" rather than syntax is a major divergence from the present Chomskyan system, but,

critically, Coleridge's desire seems to be to find a form of "universal grammar" that links the "word" to the structure of mind. This is fitting because not only does it demonstrate the robust interaction between Romantic-era writers and more formal expressions of the exploration of mind from their own time, but, also, it links, by way of the concept of "universal grammar", to a major influence on Chomsky's work, Wilhelm von Humboldt. It is, in particular, Humboldt's interest in cognitive universals—mental properties which all developmentally healthy human beings share—which most engaged Chomsky. Humboldt writes:

In pondering on language in general, and analysing the individual tongues that are clearly distinct from one another, two principles come to light: the *sound-form* and the *use* made of it to designate objects and connect thoughts. The latter is based on the requirements that *thinking* imposes on language, from which the *general laws* of language arise; and this part, in its original tendency, is therefore the same in all human beings. (Humboldt 54)

Linguistic universals were also of interest to literary writers in the Romantic era, but, interestingly, they understood "universals" as referring to phonological elements of language, what they called "natural cries". Alan Richardson lists a variety of thinkers, notably Rousseau, Condillac, and Lord Monboddo, who articulated what they conceived as distinctions between—in the terminology of the time—"artificial" language (language characterised by arbitrary signs standing for concepts, what is today called, perhaps unhelpfully, "natural language"), and "natural cries"—the product of "impulses from the body"—which, it appears, were generally believed at the time to have some kind of isomorphic Fregean relationship between physical states and corresponding expressions (Richardson 75-6).¹⁴

While the so-called "Chomskyan Revolution" of twentieth-century linguistics dispensed with the search for a common root to all of the earth's spoken languages, such as Humboldt sought, and insisted on a distinction between the significance of animal vocalisations and human vocalisations (Chomsky, *Lectio Magistralis* 2012), the search for shared cognitive properties

remained at the heart of his project and is the foundation for many approaches in contemporary cognitive literary studies. To see Ashbery's writing in the light of the developments of the Chomskyan linguistic system is to see Ashbery, working independently of the scientific explorations of language Chomsky performed, arriving at similar—sometimes the same—sites of linguistic experiment.

Major Trends in Twentieth-Century Cognitive Studies: A Brief Overview

Over the course of the twentieth century, the field of cognitive studies has undergone a number of major shifts of perspective. William Lyons writes in his introduction to the anthology *Modern Philosophy of Mind* (1995) that since the early part of the twentieth century, in the field of theory of mind and theory of consciousness, “there have been more theoretical changes, confrontations, coups and revolutions than in the previous two thousand years” (Lyons et al. xlv). At the heart of the upheavals of which Lyons speaks is one of the oldest problems in philosophy, the so-called “mind-body problem”. As this thesis will spend a great deal of time considering the relationship of features of mind to the external world and to embodiment, it is important to at least offer a brief articulation of the contemporary debate to see both where this thesis itself stands in relation to established ideological positions, and how such an understanding may contribute to the study of Ashbery's writing.

The essential division in twentieth century cognitive studies—a division which extends to the present—is between thinkers who articulate a materialist view of mind, those who think, following Paul and Patricia Churchland, that “the mind is the brain” and that all cognitive states are ultimately reducible to neurophysiological states (Churchland ix), and those who take variations of less materialistic viewpoints. In the former view, mental processes must be understood as material physical processes and anything which posits non-material structures as being involved in mind is a kind of mistake, either in terms of categorisation, or in terms of ontology. Broadly within the more materialistic view are thinkers including Stein's mentor,

William James, who advocated a position he called “radical empiricism” which he categorised thus:

I say ‘empiricism’ because it is contented to regard its most assured conclusions concerning matters of fact as hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience; and I say ‘radical’, because it treats the doctrine of monism itself as an hypothesis, and, unlike so much of the half-way empiricism that is currently under the name of positivism or agnosticism or scientific naturalism, it does not dogmatically affirm monism as something with which all experience has got to square. (James vii-viii)

This “monistic” approach would inform thinkers from the “logical positivists” to the later radical behaviourists. The common thread, again, was to reduce mental phenomena, including language, to material processes. Essentially this is a “deflationary” or “eliminativist” tendency in cognitive science.¹⁵

Arguing that materialistic explanations are inadequate are a range of thinkers led by Chomsky who suggest a “neo-rationalist” approach to mind rooted in Cartesian and Romantic notions of universal cognitive endowments offers more in explaining mental phenomena. Some neo-rationalists have been associated with a school of thought known as “functionalism” which views the mind as something like a computer running particular programmes. The “programmes” the mind runs, according to this approach, are not reducible to their material sites of actuation (i.e. they are not merely matters of neurophysiology; a part of the brain involved in carrying out some action could be destroyed, but the cognitive structure it realised may continue to exist in some form). For a brief but representative example of key aspects of functionalist thought, consider the following passage from Jerry Fodor’s book, *A Theory of Content* (1990): “Computers show us how to connect semantical with causal properties *for symbols*. So, if the tokening of an attitude involves tokening a ‘symbol’, then we can get some leverage on connecting semantical with causal properties *for thoughts*” (Fodor, *Theory of Content* 22). Fodor, in

many ways a leading contemporary “functionalist” if a somewhat unorthodox one in his own thought, attempts to illustrate his point using a number of literary examples in which characters are understood to have particular mental understandings—“attitudes” in Fodor’s terminology—and he considers the relationship of these attitudes to one another, and to the propositions which human beings are able to assign to attitudes. The key to Fodor’s model is that mental structures have relations to each other which are not defined by external input. Beliefs and attitudes can interact on a level which does not necessarily have a behavioural output, but which may have behavioural consequences (the work of John Searle will be considered at length later in the thesis and understanding the “functionalist” position is critical to understanding the significance of his work).

Beyond the “computational” model of functionalism is the linguistics of Noam Chomsky. Chomsky’s work attempts to establish the contours of the syntactic apparatus of the mind in relation to language learning and relies on Fodorian notions of the interaction between “attitudes” and cognitive structures. The critical point in relation to Chomsky, which will essentially underpin the entirety of the thesis, is that language is a system without material basis but which results in material consequences. Language may produce situations which result in material states of affairs (e.g. business negotiations, political pronouncements), and it may be instantiated through material forms (e.g. vocalisations, signing), but the fundamental structure itself is not an intrinsically material structure, the syntactic structures which make language possible and comprehensible are not products of its physical realisation or consequences. The modalities of this state of affairs will be examined in detail in chapter one. The ontology of Chomsky’s thought is highly controversial, but his linguistic approach, as will be seen, has provided a robust corpus of empirical data which is extrapolable from narrow linguistic contexts to more general understandings of mind.

The ultimate position of the thesis is that a kind of quasi-Fodorian system likely represents the fundamental structure of mental processes. The thesis regards such a system as the most probable basic model because, as will be seen, the interaction of particular cognitive faculties—almost surely having some “structure” making them realisable (i.e. capable of being identified and acted upon) by the neurophysiology of the brain—is critical to the empirically supported (but, crucially, not empirically *based*) Chomskyan linguistic model. As noted, that model has changed in terms of its prescriptive character over the years, but its basic presuppositions continue to guide even linguistic research which is hostile to aspects of the Chomskyan model.

Stating this is important because if such mental faculties exist, they may be investigable in both formal and informal ways. Formal investigations, such as Chomsky’s, have hinted at the actual contours of certain mental faculties, notably syntax. As will be seen, Ashbery’s experimental works, particularly those in *The Tennis Court Oath*, have touched on some of the syntactic features suggested by Chomsky’s work. These instances of consonance suggest that more thorough investigation may yield more detailed data or principles. The difficulty of framing experiments in formal cognitive studies is a problem which literature dispenses with, not least because it is not interested in composing “repeatable” experiments in accordance with the Popperian model of scientific investigation.¹⁶ It may be the case that the presuppositions regarding mind which underlie certain literary experiments may play a role in helping more formal investigations of mind recognise what the true subject of their experiments could be, and, perhaps where to look for new models of consciousness. Having established the intellectual background of the cognitive philosophical concepts to be addressed in the thesis, it is now possible to return the discussion to literary issues.

Cognitive Literary Studies: Bringing Formal Study of Mind into the Discussion of

Literature

Roman Ingarden's writing provides a useful starting point for the consideration of the history of modern cognitive literary theory. Ingarden's aim, in his book, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* (1973), is to understand how a work of literature is at once composed and processed by the mind. A "literary work", for Ingarden:

can be brought to appearance only in a multiplicity of successive aspects which flow into one another and cannot be apprehended all at once, in a single act—just as a statue cannot be seen from all sides at once—is perhaps the clearest proof that the literary work of art is transcendent to both the diverse acts of apprehension performed during reading and the multiplicity of aspects under which it comes to givenness. (Ingarden 145)

The critical distinction Ingarden makes, between discrete processes of perception and an overarching process of reconciliation that brings the work into "givenness" is at the heart of understanding how literary works relate to both perceptual and conceptual faculties. The work—the "book" for example—is both processed temporally in distinct instances of perceptual engagement, and, once completed, as a fully integrated entity. Such an insight is important to understanding the criticality of perception both to the comprehension of literature as a mental faculty of readers, and as a property of the work of literature itself. The book's very readability is also a property of mind.

Though Ingarden's work is ultimately concerned less with the mental faculties involved in the processing of the work than the implications of the works being processed, it is an important starting point for modern cognitive literary studies for several reasons. First, because it focuses on theorising how a work of literature becomes readable, rather than what a work of literature is about or "means". Secondly, Ingarden's attention to the importance of the

perception of time as a distinct quantity will be seen to represent a powerful insight into a critical aspect of cognition, especially as viewed in relation to literature.

Wolfgang Iser's frequent references to Ingarden in his writing demonstrate not only his perceived debt to Ingarden as a theorist, but also serve to underline his own project as a kind of extension of Ingarden's cognitive concerns. Iser's pioneering work in formulating the "reader response" school of literary criticism is well known, and it must be understood to be a key precursor to contemporary notions of cognitive literature. Iser's position is essentially that a literary work only gains meaning by its interaction with a reader and the attitudes, capacities, and associations a reader brings to a text, or, as he writes, "a literary text can only produce a response when it is read" (Iser, *The Act of Reading* ix). Over the course of his career, however, Iser's project became more ambitious, as the subtitle of his later work, *Prospecting* (1989), suggests: "From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology". Where Iser's earlier work focused on the reader bringing and engendering "meaning" in a text, and, thus, as will be seen in a later chapter of this thesis, problematising the notion of literary "intention" on the part of the author, the Iser of *Prospecting* begins to suggest that it is not only properties of texts that can be illuminated *via* literary critical investigation, but, also, properties of the *reader*. Iser's "literary anthropology" is generally more concerned, however, with the aspects of culture that literary texts reveal (Iser, *Prospecting* 262-3); what Iser describes, following Nelson Goodman, is how literature functions as a "way of world making" (*Prospecting* 270). This instinct on the part of the literary critic, to go beyond investigating the text to the investigation of the *readers* of texts and their abilities and limitations, is the starting point of the strain of cognitive literary theory followed by this thesis.

Contemporaneous with Iser's work are the first forays into genuinely "Chomskyan" approaches to literary investigation. Paul Kiparsky, in his essay, "On Theory and Interpretation" (1987), posed the question of why the idea animating Roman Jakobson's 1960 book, *Linguistics and Poetics*, a theory of poetics building on a notion of language rooted in the work of Ferdinand

de Saussure and based on assessments of similarities and differences in lexical and linguistic entities, had yet to “live up” to its “promise” (Otero et al. 808). Kiparsky’s answer is that the Saussurean paradigm does not accurately characterise language as it is actually processed by mind. He suggests that it may be possible for a new kind of linguistic approach, rooted in Chomskyan syntax and notions of language use articulated by the philosopher H.P. Grice, to offer a much more cohesive and reliable method for looking at the way language and mind, and, ultimately literature, interact. This thesis is in full accord with Kiparsky’s suggestion, and will explore in detail the ways in which these ideas can illuminate poetry and poetic experiment, particularly Ashbery’s own unique approach; for the moment, however, valuable context can be provided by considering some of the earlier attempts to integrate Chomskyan linguistics into theories of literature and poetry.

Some of the most influential aspects of Chomskyan linguistic theory on literary critical texts during the “first wave” period (roughly 1965-1990) relate to the theory propounded by Chomsky and the phonologist, Morris Halle, in their co-authored book, *The Sound Pattern of English* (1968). In the work, Chomsky and Halle consider how cognitive faculties may affect phonological output including stress patterns. The project of *The Sound Pattern of English* was to begin the process of finding “the class of possible phonetic representations”. This concept, the “class of possible phonetic representations”, is important because of its wider implications: “the phonetic form of each sentence in each language is drawn from this class of possible phonetic representations” (Chomsky and Halle 5). In this framework, when the possible class of phonetic representations is revealed, it will then be possible to determine how they may relate to the innate syntactic structures Chomsky posited as directing language learning. The example Chomsky and Halle use to illustrate the workings of the system is to take various modifications of the word “telegraph” and consider how stress patterns are altered. To briefly recapitulate their schema, consider the three words, “telegraph”, “telegraphic” and “telegraphy”. As speakers of

English will immediately recognise, the stress patterns of the three words are quite different, with the stress migrating from its position in the root word for reasons which are not lexically obvious. Chomsky and Halle write: “Phonetic variation of *telegraph* in certain contexts is not an idiosyncratic property of this particular lexical item but is rather a matter of general rule, applying to many other lexical items as well” (Chomsky and Halle 11-12).

By theorising the interaction of the rule which applies cross-lexically, Chomsky and Halle hoped to discover important features of the phonological rules of English. Central to their theory was the idea that “[t]he lexical entry for *telegraph* must contain just enough information for the rules of English phonology to determine its phonetic form in each context” (Chomsky and Halle 12). The cognitive apparatus, reacting to a very small level of sensory input, then constructs the “correct” phonological structure. Thus, phonological data also become a window into the workings of cognition.

It is not difficult to see how such a system could have both implications for and applications within the field of metrical analysis in literary studies. The first wave of writers who examined the relationship include Bruce Hayes, who influentially applied the Chomsky-Halle approach to metrical analysis in English poetry, and Derek Attridge who also attempted to examine literary stress patterns by appealing to notions formulated in *The Sound Pattern of English*. Hayes’ approach is outlined in his book, *Metrical Stress Theory* (1995), which outlines a theory of metrical stress which claims “that stress is the linguistic manifestation of rhythmic structure, and that the special phonological properties of stress can be explicated on this basis” (Hayes 1). This tradition of analysis of poetic metre and “cognitively”-based notions of syllabic stressing continues into the present.¹⁷

Attridge and Reuven Tsur have gone on to write applied Hayesian metrical considerations to the study of the relationship between the emotional effect of poetry and the use of particular phonemes. Attridge, notably in his essay “Rhythm in English Poetry” (1990),

considers how rhythm “plays a ... dominant role in the complex interplay of linguistic features that constitutes all verse, and ... in doing so it reveals more clearly the sources and characteristics of the rhythmic pleasure so central to our experience of poetry” (Attridge 1016). For Attridge, the concern is less the construction of a Hayesian system of “abstractions of metrical feet or grids of weak and strong positions, but with the psychological and physiological reality of the sequences of rhythmic energy pulses perceived, and enjoyed, by reader and listener alike” (Attridge 1016). It is notable that Attridge also uses Ashbery’s poem “Crazy Weather” as a means of examining how Ashbery “resists” the pull of standard poetic rhythms even in his metred verse, and, thus, his paper could be thought of as a phonologically concerned partner to the present thesis (Attridge 1023-24). However, as Attridge’s aim extends beyond Chomsky-Halle and Hayes toward wider cognitive concerns, ultimately, his approach suffers from difficulty in defining notions like “enjoyed” and “rhythmic pleasure”. His insights are valuable, but problematic from a cognitive perspective because they are primarily descriptive of previously identified features of poetry in general, and Ashbery’s poetry specifically, and they offer less in terms of examinations of the implications of the identification of these features.

Tsur’s book, *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive?* (1987), examines how particular phonemic properties make particular sounds “expressive” in literature (i.e. how the use of particular phonetic patterns can produce emotionally valenced effects). Tsur writes that his project attempts to account for the “mysterious intuitions” which mean that certain phonemes have particular non-sonic content; for example, “that front vowels”, like the vowels “i” and “e”, are perceived as being “brighter” than “back vowels” like “o” and “u” (Tsur vii). Though Tsur is more interested in the literary effects created by the sound patterns, the implications of his approach are highly relevant from the perspective of cognitive studies. Among the most interesting is the experiment Tsur cites in which he asked a number of participants which letter, “b”, or “g”, they thought was most “metallic” (Tsur 14). The property of relative “metallicness”

of letters clearly never is learned—or, indeed, even discussed—when children are learning the alphabet, but, Tsur reports, his respondents consistently found “g” to be the more “metallic” letter. Such a property is significant for a number of reasons. First, for Tsur’s own reasons in considering how language can be used to expressive ends which are not entirely reducible to lexical or semantic content. Secondly, and most relevant to this thesis’ concerns, the fact that the universality of the kind of “mysterious” phonemic intuitions of which he speaks extend the kind of investigation of the properties of syntax that Chomsky and Halle pioneered.

Also notable among the first generation of Chomskyan literary theorists is work by the linguist, S.Y. Kuroda. Kuroda is credited with being among the first people to apply Chomskyan linguistics to the study of Japanese, but he is more notable in relation to the concerns of this study for an essay he wrote entitled, “Reflections on the Foundation of Narrative Theory from a Linguistic Point of View” (1976). Crucial to Kuroda’s examination of narrative is the distinction between the communicative function of language and its syntactic character. He writes, “[i]f linguistic performance is not communication, linguistic competence of grammar cannot be bound up with the communicative function of language” (Otero et al. 799). If this distinction is made, then it is possible to see the use of language in different ways in literary contexts. Critical to Kuroda’s approach is the examination of the way “meaning” is generated in narratives. In some instances, a direct narrative intent can be assigned to characters in works of literature. In these instances, “each sentence is the product of an act of judging in the narrator’s consciousness” (Otero et al. 781). Thus, such sentences become a means of investigating the “theory of mind” of an author, what principles and features of mind the narrators of works of literature are imbued with on the part of the creators of the works, a variation on a concern central to the present thesis: how literature represents and manifests as a “theory of consciousness”.

Critical also to understanding the Chomskyan approach to linguistics in the history of literary theory is the discussion of the school of “cognitive linguistics”. It is necessary to specify what is meant by the term here. The term “cognitive linguistics” refers to a school of linguistics rooted in semantic theory and pioneered and espoused by a group of linguists and literary theorists led by George Lakoff. Lakoff’s basic project is to understand how concepts, particularly those without obvious empirical content rather than contextual content (e.g. terms like “goal keeper” which may be realised empirically—a person may be a “goal keeper” in a football team despite the fact that concepts like “goal keeper” have only evolved after the concept of “football” and do not exist in nature in the same way objects like “rivers” do) come to have meanings that can be interpreted and broadly understood. It is Lakoff’s contention—following the work of Eleanor Rosch on “prototypes” and “basic level categories”—that there are essentially primitive cognitive capacities which allow concepts to be “filed” under native cognitive categories which are then “bootstrapped” by the brain’s ability to generate and use metaphoric and metonymic structures to “comprehend domains of experience which do not have a preconceptual structure” in the mind’s inventory of “basic level categories” (Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* 303).¹⁸ Despite focussing on the mental structures which make up the cognitive endowment of human beings—a distinctly “neo-rationalist”-Chomskyan approach—the “cognitive linguistic” approach differs from Chomsky’s in two main ways. First, there is an emphasis on the part of “cognitive linguists” on the role of semantics—the study of meaning—as opposed to syntax as the main engine of linguistic processing. Secondly, the role of metaphor and other comparison structures are much more prevalent in their studies, and so “cognitive linguistic theory” is ultimately more concerned with mental description than with *prescription*, in the sense that a Chomskyan approach looks for “generative processes” rather than necessarily sites of interaction between mental capacities. Lakoff characterises Chomsky’s position thus:

Where Noam Chomsky has described generative linguistics as committed to no more than being ‘precise and complete’ he was assuming that the use of certain systems of combinatorial mathematics was the only way to be precise. What was to be complete was thereby relativised to what was to count as ‘precise’ ... Given this commitment as to what counts as precise ... and scientific, only generative linguistics is seen as ‘scientific’. (Lakoff et al. 45)

For Lakoff, Chomsky’s project is considered too narrow and too rooted in quasi-algebraic systems. Though an influential group of linguists embrace this position, it does present problems of its own. The question of narrowness of focus, in particular, raises issues with regard to isolability: if a theory takes in a number of factors as being equally important it can be difficult to tell whether such a theory might not be hobbled by possible red herrings, and the search for explanatory principles may be diluted. It can be difficult to be sufficiently certain of conclusions in such a situation, and the linguist may end up focussing on description rather than explanation with regard to the phenomena under consideration.

The “cognitive linguistic” approach is only one of the many contemporary approaches to considering literature from a cognitive perspective. Perhaps the most widely-addressed topic in the broader body of contemporary literary criticism which regards itself as consciously “cognitive literary theory” is the concept of “theory of mind” as it is manifested in literature. The concept of theory of mind is perhaps most succinctly formulated by Robin Dunbar in the work, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*, (1996), as the ability to “understand our own feelings”, the ability to understand “those of other people”, and the ability to “imagine how someone who does not actually exist might respond to particular situations” (Dunbar 101-2). The concept of theory of mind is also the central topic of the important and influential text, *Theory of Mind in Literature* (2011), a series of essays edited by Paula Leverage. For the purpose of the present study, it is most relevant to concentrate on the essays from the book concerning the generation

and perception of empathy in literature and the ability of the brain to generate new concepts by reconciling earlier concepts. The essays, by Fritz Bretkopf and Mark Turner respectively, use literature as a means of entry into questions treated by cognitive science and propose “models”, in Bretkopf’s terminology (Leverage et al. 273), rooted in literary studies to complement those developed in more formal contexts. Turner’s and Bretkopf’s approaches treat literature as a document which is fundamentally cognitively aware, or, as Bretkopf puts matters, works of fiction not only provide “access to fictitious situations...but also themselves ‘theorize’ how such actions can happen” (Leverage et al. 274). In such a formulation, the protocols which license the comprehensibility of a given fiction text imply the cognitive faculties of a reader to respond to them, something of an extension of Iser’s project. How these “theories” are created and how they are enacted is one of the central concerns of this thesis. It examines Ashbery’s “theory of mind” as it is represented in his poems which are understood as “theories of consciousness”, rather like Bretkopf’s idea discussed above, the “theorising” of how particular actions happen, or how Ashbery uses his poetry to represent his understanding of mind and mental faculties.

In his essay, “The Way We Imagine”, Turner considers how conceptual “blending” occurs, meaning how two distinct concepts interact with cognitive faculties to produce a third concept. Turner describes such “blending” as “Double Scope Blending” involving “two inputs” that:

have different (and often clashing) organising frames, and the blend has an organizing frame that receives projections from each of those [previous]organizing frames. The blend also has emergent structure of its own that cannot be found in any of the inputs. (Leverage et al. 42)

The process of how the mind “constructs” a new cognitive entity from pre-existing entities or conceptions, is critical to understanding both how the mind perceives literature, indeed, how, following Ingarden, a work of literature is “constructed” and perceived by the mind, and also

how literary experiments *affect* the mind. As will be seen, many of Ashbery's experiments rely on such "framing" capacities described in Turner's essay.

Though the conclusions of Turner and Breitkopf may present complications of their own, and their positions are essentially speculative, their methodology is what is of particular interest. In assuming a literary text to contain "cognitive theories" they demonstrate how literature can function as a "theory of consciousness" in ways which establish meaningful dialogues with cognitive science and cognitive philosophy.

Perhaps the most explicitly Chomskyan of the major cognitive literary critics of the present, at least those not working the field of metrical studies, is Patrick Colm Hogan. Hogan's work is particularly concerned with aspects of literature which occur in literary traditions across cultures. His work, *Affective Narratology: The Emotional Structure of Stories* (2011), considers how "story structures are fundamentally shaped by our emotional systems" independently of cultural artefacts like lexicons (Hogan, *Affective Narratology* 1). His position is essentially that particular narratological features can be identified as crossing the literature of almost all known cultures and these features are products of the mind's capacity to combine properties of semiotics and narratology *via* neurophysiological and cognitive structures. Hogan's cognitive presumptions, largely shared by this thesis, are that emotional systems are, for the most part, "experience enabled" (*Affective Narratology* 5) rather than "experience produced" (meaning they are generated by experience rather than *actuated* by external stimuli). Hogan explains the notion of "experience enablement" of cognitive functions thus: a "system develops to a point where it can be affected by relevant sorts of experience" (*Affective Narratology* 5). In this framework, as in Chomskyan linguistics, experience provides a trigger for innate cognitive faculties to develop, and, as time goes by, the ability to process data and experience is shaped by the cognitive faculties themselves. If this is true, and experiments outlined in the chapter concerning linguistics suggest that there is evidence to support such a conclusion, then a cognitively-minded literary critic like

Hogan is not merely identifying the products of mind when examining literature; by virtue of the fact that the expressions of mind are comprehensible to other minds, literature is also seen to *reveal* aspects of the cognitive faculties which process it.

Hogan has also examined poetry in his search for “universal” features. In his essay, “Literary Universals” (1997), Hogan writes that literary universals are:

Properties and relations that are found across a range of genetically and geographically distinct literatures, which is to say literatures that have arisen and developed separately at least with respect to those properties and relations. More exactly, a property or relation may be considered to be universal only if it is found in distinct bodies of literature that do not share a common ancestor having that property or relation. (Hogan, “Literary Universals” 228)

Hogan offers a list of examples of the kinds of “properties and relations” which he considers to be classifiable as “universals”:

Many if not most basic techniques used in English literature appear to be universal. A partial list would include symbolism and imagery ... assonance ... alliteration ... verbal parallelism ... Certain broader organizational devices appear to be universal as well—for example, foreshadowing and plot circularity. (“Literary Universals” 229)

The value of Hogan’s idea is perhaps also something of its weakness, however. Though it would be hard to dispute that the properties he identifies are universal, and that searching for universal features of literature is a concern for cognitively-minded critics, the risk such a critic faces is that the features identified are red herrings of sorts (i.e. that their presence actually *conceals* something more important about their existence as universal features than their mere universality). It could certainly be the case that these features are identifiable in every literary tradition on earth, but the question here is less *whether* they can be discerned in such literatures, than *why* they might be so,

and *how* they might become comprehensible to the mind, and what cognitive properties and faculties they suggest exist as constituents of mind.

Hogan has also written on the topic of intentionality, particularly in his work, *Empire and Poetic Voice* (2004). In the book, Hogan offers a critique of the work of Homi Bhabha and Judith Butler which centres on the relationship of the individual to performative expectations of their “role” in social communities. Hogan’s position is that in any collusion with, or rejection of, one’s role in a social context, volition is a critical and ineradicable element of either choice. Indeed, the notion of the “choice” ultimately presupposes some form of volition—possibly mediated, but extant nonetheless, meaning that all choices occur in contexts which may limit the “purity” of their intent (e.g. a slave may choose to work in accord with a master’s wishes, but only to a minimal level of acceptability rather than enthusiastically). This limitation of the “purity” of intent does not actually negate volition or choice, but it perhaps may dilute it. This leads Hogan to argue that a concept called “practical identity” rather than “identity” itself is what Butler and Bhabha are problematising. He describes the concept thus: it is composed of “procedural schemas” which he defines as, “skills—cognitive structures that allow us to do certain things. For example, one complex of procedural schemas allows us to drive a car” (Hogan, *Empire and Poetic Voice* 9). Meaning that in the “procedural schema” that produces “car driving”, a driver (or prospective driver) learns the structure of relations required to drive a car (for example, sitting in the driver’s seat, turning the key in the ignition, moving the car into gear, etc.). As the learner successfully manages the schema, the role of “car driver” is realised. In the same way, Hogan suggests that Butler and Bhabha are proposing social roles as being similar “schemas”, instances where individuals acquire a set of “skills” which allow them to “perform” social roles. Hogan’s perspective *vis-à-vis* Bhabha and Butler is not the subject of this thesis. What is important in the above is merely his insight that to play a role in activating “procedural schemas” of the type he describes, a form of volition—or intention, by another name—is necessary. If this is the case,

then, perhaps, intentionality itself is something literature helps to locate and to theorise in ways meaningful to other modalities of cognitive investigation.

It is the contention of this thesis that an approach like Hogan's in relation to the various topics above is particularly valuable. However, it would seem the current state of understanding of mental faculties may indeed be too primitive for literary approaches like Hogan's to reveal as much as they might in the future when mental faculties are better understood. The present study uses a much narrower approach, attempting to identify specific aspects of mental faculties, the existence of which are attested by a reasonable level of empirical data from the sciences, or which exist as well-articulated, discrete concepts in philosophy, and it considers these features of mind in relation to examples of Ashbery's writing which, in turn, offer important ways of thinking about them. Like Hogan, it is the belief of this thesis that certain universal human cognitive faculties exist, and that literature may offer an inroad to understanding (or, at least, identifying) them, which may complement more formal studies. However, by using a much narrower scope of examination, it may be possible both to articulate such relationships more clearly, and to avoid taking in data which may prove not directly relevant to the properties of the specific faculties under consideration.

As with Chomsky, it is frequently figures from outside the traditional field of literary studies whose ideas will guide much of the thesis' investigation; however, in particular with regard to the chapter concerning writerly intention ahead, it is also important to consider another cognitive writer whose work is explicitly literary in its concerns. In his book, *Forgetful Muses* (2010), Ian Lancashire examines the "presence" of writers in the texts they generate by submitting texts to computer analysis to detect patterns and linguistic usages which he deems to be obviously "consciously" created, as opposed to sections of the text which he considers to be the product of essentially "unconscious" creation in which the writer allows the flow of his/her thoughts to pass uninterrupted by conscious "correction". Lancashire describes this process as

“cybertextuality” in which unconscious processes, what is described as “flow” in other writers’ formulations,¹⁹ are periodically assessed and manipulated by conscious writerly intervention (Lancashire 13). By using computers to examine texts for instances of “cybertextual” creation, Lancashire suggests that it is possible to see the hand of the writer more clearly. This is, of course, a controversial suggestion, as it is difficult in practise to disambiguate moments of conscious, lapidary creation from moments of spontaneous undirected creation of the kind of which Coleridge speaks in relation to “Kubla Khan”. However, Lancashire’s idea remains an important one: in searching for clear moments of disruption of expectation rather than cooperation with readerly expectation, it may be possible to see how a writer manipulates the conscious “environment” during the writing process for literary ends. This notion helps to ground a new conception of literary intention which diverges from historical meanings of the term.

The implications of this divergence are examined at length in the chapter of the thesis concerning intention *via* the writings of the philosophers, Daniel Sperber and Deirdre Wilson. Sperber and Wilson attempt to formulate a “theory of context” in their co-authored book, *Relevance* (1986), meaning that they attempt to account for the capacity for humans to communicate with each other despite not having a perfect understanding of any given statement at any given moment. The mechanism they formulate relies on the creation of a “shared cognitive environment” (Sperber and Wilson 41), in which two communicants interact with particular expectations in mind. Actions within this framework aimed at realising communicative ends are deemed “ostensive”, acts which draw attention to the intention to communicate something. This kind of instantaneous “notation” wherein one communicant uses both lexical (or gestural) information, and the manipulation of the shared cognitive environment of expectations and conventions, can be seen as an important insight into the concept of intention in literary and extra-literary contexts. It also has particular value in examining the writings of

experimental writers as their work frequently tests the boundaries of conventional linguistic or conceptual comprehension.

Positioning the Thesis in Relation to the Wider Field of Ashbery Studies

This thesis represents an example of a sub-division of Ashbery criticism that foregrounds cognitive issues and which examines the depiction or enactment of mind in Ashbery's writing. Possibly the most sustained work, other than the present thesis, which examines the relation of Ashbery's writing to cognitive issues is Andrew Dubois' book, *Ashbery's Forms of Attention* (2006). In his book, Dubois considers the implications of Ashbery's experiments with the attentional capacities of both his readers and himself. It is Dubois' contention that Ashbery's writing often constitutes a kind of "dramatisation" of the attentional process (Dubois xiv). Dubois' insight is an important one, and it is one of the key building blocks to understanding Ashbery's experiments with both time and perception. Though the present thesis does not characterise Ashbery's treatment of attention as fundamentally "dramatic", Dubois' book will be shown to have important implications for understanding the relationship of Ashbery's writing to cognition.

John Koethe's writing is also of major importance in the cognitive sub-section of Ashbery criticism. Koethe's "The Metaphysical Subject of John Ashbery's Poetry" (1980) appears in David Lehman's *Beyond Amazement* (1980), and it explicitly considers the idea of a "theory of the self" in relation to Ashbery's poetry, simply put, how Ashbery's "theory" of personal identity functions. Koethe formulates two opposing theoretical models for a "theory of self" in literature. First, a "Humean" self which he argues is exemplified by the writing of Frank O'Hara—a model rooted in David Hume's notion of the self as merely a collected accretion of perceptions without an "end point" (Lehman et al. 98). This is contrasted with a "Cartesian self" which, Koethe writes:

grounds any poetry introspective to a significant extent and characterized by a distinctive sense of personality or voice. While there is usually a degree of alienation of the self from

the world, that self is still seen as *part* of the world, a part to which the poet has a privileged means of introspective access. (Lehman et al. 96)

Koethe associates this model with writers like John Berryman (Lehman et al. 96). In the case of Ashbery, Koethe posits a “Kantian” approach to the self, a “transcendental or metaphysical subject” (Lehman et al. 96), which is not reducible to “a time-bound, self-identical Cartesian ego”, but, nevertheless, retains a definite and distinct point of view. One need not agree entirely with Koethe’s taxonomy; indeed, such classificatory models have certain limitations; however, Koethe’s attempt to both theorise and conceptualise a “theory of self” in Ashbery touches on the most fully developed trend in cognitive literary theory as spoken of earlier, the interest in “theory of mind” in literature. In formulating a “theory of self”, a writer is implicitly formulating a “theory of mind” as well. The text is expected to be read by readers with particular cognitive faculties and predispositions. Though the question of depictions of the “self” in Ashbery is an important one for cognitively-minded literary approaches to his work, the present thesis is less concerned with the notion of an integrated (or, indeed, fragmentary) self in Ashbery’s writing than the processes and faculties of mind which are subject to intentional action. The “what” of the self is less in the foreground. The “how” of the self, what processes and capacities the intentional mind has at its disposal, is the greater concern.

In the section of his book, *A History of Modern Poetry Modernism and After* (1987), dedicated to Ashbery’s writing, David Perkins makes a number of observations that fit the cognitive paradigm explored by this thesis. He writes that Ashbery’s poetry “enacts the mind’s always baffled pursuit of reality” (Perkins 614). Thus the “performative” and dramatic aspect of Ashbery’s writing in relation to the “enactment” of mind, again, is highlighted. Perkins clearly identifies an explicitly cognitive character to Ashbery’s approach to managing, depicting and considering perception, stating that Ashbery writes “of the mind forming hypotheses about reality in general” (Perkins 619). This observation, as will be seen, is critical to understanding

how a poem becomes a “theory of consciousness”. The “hypotheses” of which Perkins speaks are, in Ashbery’s writing, not merely about reality, but about *mind* itself. Also, directly germane to points which will be made later in specific chapters, Perkins identifies an important feature of the poem “Litany” (1979). He writes, “each time you go through ‘Litany’ you do it in a different order” (Perkins 618). As will be seen, the demands placed on readerly perception and cognitive faculties by “Litany” are rich in implications for understanding how the poet approaches mind, and the need to “go through” the poem differently each time it is read is one of the main methodologies employed to create such demands.

Other relevant cognitively-concerned critical examinations of Ashbery’s writing, include the essay, “Fragments of a Buried Life: Ashbery’s Dreamsongs” (1980), by Marjorie Perloff which is also included in Lehman’s anthology. In Perloff’s essay, depictions of dreams and their relationship to the conscious mind are considered. She writes:

Ashbery’s poetry does not, as is so often supposed, render the psychic life of its maker in all of its random and contradictory character. Such psychic life as is admitted to Ashbery’s verbal universe is, on the contrary, highly structured and condensed. (Lehman et al. 82)

Perloff’s insight is an important one: that however fully Ashbery may attempt to depict his “psychic life” in his “verbal universe”, the poetic frames he chooses have important impacts on how that “psychic life” is understood. The present thesis attempts to delineate some of the ways in which Ashbery’s “verbal universe” “structures and condenses” his “psychic life” both consciously, and unconsciously.

Another hint at a “cognitive Ashbery” can be found in *Invisible Listeners* (2005) by Helen Vendler which examines the “addressees” of Ashbery’s poems. Vendler speaks of various specific addressees, including Parmagianino (Vendler 57), but she also theorises his general approach, which she suggests is connected to the American Romantic tradition, specifically to

Whitman, who, like Ashbery, “envisages a second invisible listener—his reader, of whom many of his poems are acutely conscious” (Vendler 57). This thesis will explore, particularly in the two final chapters, exactly how Ashbery depicts his consciousness of his readers in his works, and what abilities these “invisible listeners” are presumed to possess and lack.

Again, though the thesis does not directly build on any of the works of the more cognitively-minded critics listed above, its primary aim is to bring the properties of mind discussed in their writings into sharper relief. In examining features of mind in detail, it then becomes possible to see how Ashbery’s writing theorises such features of mind. In examining Ashbery’s works as “theories of mind” in this sense, it then may be possible to see which specific cognitive faculties or properties are considered the “subject matter” of particular poetic experiments. In viewing how Ashbery conducts these experiments, it then becomes possible to see the “boundaries” of certain cognitive properties, (i.e. where and how certain features of mind either successfully process or have difficulty processing literary-linguistic data), and, in revealing these boundaries, literary exploration of mind may reveal heretofore unconsidered aspects of the presumed mental properties and, thus, may offer material for more formal scientific experiments to examine. In this way, experimental literature can bring to light previously unconsidered aspects of mind.

Chapter Synopses: Thesis Structure and Organisation

In the first chapter of this thesis, Ashbery’s writing is considered alongside the emergent linguistic discipline that evolved over the time period between his first and second published collections. A short history of some of Ashbery’s modernist predecessors with regard to literary-syntactic experiments is provided, both to trace the specific lineage of Ashbery as a writer, and to show how long such questions as the relationship between syntactic meaning and semantic meaning had been addressed by experimental writers. Though Ashbery clearly builds on a modernist literary tradition, a tradition which in many ways anticipates the kinds of overt

examinations of syntactic structures performed by Chomsky, it is with *The Tennis Court Oath*, that a much more aggressive examination of the structures of syntax emerges. Not only are syntactic structures the sites of experiment, but in making them such, Ashbery also makes syntax poetic subject matter. Where earlier experiments, for example, the poems of E. E. Cummings, may have highlighted syntactic structures and their role in creating meaning—a relationship which Chomsky would later theorise scientifically—Ashbery’s poems rely less on the “interpretive” character of language than Cummings’ work, meaning that the syntactic apparatus itself is as much the topic of poetic discussion as the semantic and logical implications of disrupting syntax.

In seeing how Ashberyan approaches to syntax present new ways of understanding the fundamental role of syntax as an aspect of poetic experiment, a deeper, almost pre-linguistic, consequence of Ashbery’s experimental approach will also be revealed: the nature of his understanding of poetic intention. This will be the subject matter of the second chapter of the thesis. The fundamental relationship between creative language use and intentional behaviour is both licensed by and constrained by syntactic structures; intentionality in literature, however—and, indeed, in any field of behaviour—is not merely limited to syntactic, let alone lexical, choices. A poem is an artefact of more or less “pure intentionality” in that it is not a natural object (i.e. occurring in non-anthropogenic nature), or an entirely aleatory object (despite the inclusion of aspects of chance in some forms of composition). The relationship of Ashbery’s poetry to historic notions of “literary intention” is examined in detail in chapter two. As will be established, traditional understandings of literary intention are inadequate to deal with the sophistication of the literary experiments Ashbery performs to investigate the concept. The modern lineage of “theory of intention” from philosophy is enlisted to help articulate a new way both of understanding the basis of a notion of literary intention and in perceiving how Ashbery’s experiments with intention function. Critical to the discussion of intention in the second chapter of the thesis will be both the literary history of the concept, as famously discussed by W. K.

Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley and other theorists, as well as the philosophical history of the concept. Beginning with the work of G. E. M. Anscombe and Gilbert Ryle, the thesis will trace the evolution of the notion of intention as it moved away from a quasi-behaviouristic model to a more complex one as exemplified in the work of J.L. Austin, John Searle, and Daniel Sperber and Deirdre Wilson.

The third chapter of the thesis considers the relationship of Ashbery's writing to the experience of temporality. The chapter examines the roots of Ashbery's interest in approaching literary depictions of time, tracing a major line of influence from his interest in contemporary classical music, particularly in the work of John Cage and Elliott Carter, and the body of Ashbery criticism which examines his relationship to their music. The relationship of Ashbery's poetry to other contemporary poets' experiments with time and poetic layout as a means of expressing or "containing" time will also be considered, specifically, "projective verse" and the general approach of the Black Mountain poets, particularly that of Charles Olson and John Cage. The work of the Black Mountain writers can be seen to be similar in premise but quite different in realisation from the expansive experiments with time seen in Ashbery's writing. Where the Black Mountain writers and Ashbery both frequently used layout as a means of "building time in" to particular poems, in the case of the Black Mountain poets, particularly Olson, such layout matters are related to a different conception of poetry to Ashbery's—a conception rooted in the performative tradition which Ashbery will be seen to broadly eschew in his writerly experiments. The other major experimental literary movement of the early part of Ashbery's writing life, the Beat writers, particularly Allen Ginsberg, approached many of the same questions as Ashbery but from very different perspectives. Regarding the similarities to, and differences from, the Beat writers, critical distinctions will include the "performative" element mentioned in relation to the Black Mountain writers, and it will extend to the linking of the physical body to poetic content. Where the Beats, Ginsberg in particular, attempted to create a kind of "physical" communion

with readers *via*, in Ginsberg's case, his approach to line breaks, it will be seen that Ashbery instead frequently favours a form of "cognitive" communion with his readers, creating, or referring to, the same mental states as those experienced by the poet at given moments. This has implications for the understanding of time as a material compositional feature of a poem, not merely as a substrate upon which a poem acts. Ashbery's strategies will be seen to feed into the preceding chapter's notion of intentionality, an, at once, expansive and reductive notion, taking in extra-linguistic factors as well as presentational features. In the *The Craft of Poetry* interview, Ashbery speaks about the way his poetry conceives of and makes use of time. Ashbery explicitly links his understanding of time to music, which is, for him, "something that takes time and which actually creates time as it goes along, or at any rate organizes it in a way that we can see or hear" (Packard 120). Ashbery's writing, too, "organises" time in ways in which it can be "seen" and "heard". The most obvious examples of such "organisations" of time are poems like "To the Same Degree" and "Litany", in which two columns of text are printed side by side and are understood to be intended to be experienced simultaneously. In these works, "time" essentially is "organized" by the layout of the text, as the reader is forced to formulate a means of managing time to take in the work.

In the fourth chapter of the thesis, the implications of this kind of experiment are examined in greater detail, and the relationship of such experiments to more formal philosophical and scientific considerations of the interaction between time, mind, and attention are described. The fourth chapter of the thesis will also consider how Ashbery depicts sensory perception in his writing. Critical to examining that relationship is Ashbery's interest in Romantic writers like John Clare, and the intellectual heritage of the discipline of phenomenology. As Ashbery is frequently described as being some sort of phenomenologist, not least by Marjorie Perloff, the question explored in this chapter is whether this is an accurate depiction of Ashbery's writing, and, if so, what kind of phenomenologist he may be. As will be shown,

Ashbery side-steps the formal, philosophical definition of the term, and, consequently, eschews self-consciously “phenomenological” poetic approaches. In Ashbery’s writing, perception is theorised as a modality of attention, and, building on insights from Andrew Dubois’ book on the subject of Ashbery and attention, the modalities of experiments with perceptual apparatuses can be seen in sharp relief. Such a process of poetic creation can be understood as not merely structured or realised *through* perception but also composed *of* perception.

In the concluding section of the thesis, the experimental approach of Ashbery is considered in relation to poets who have been influenced by him, in particular, the writing of the so-called School of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers. As will be seen, though Ashbery considers his own approach to be quite different, particularly with regard to his conception of the role of poetry in relation to syntax, many L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers trace their own interest in the role of syntax to *The Tennis Court Oath*. Further, the conclusion of the thesis considers the wider implications of developing a “cognitive theory of literature” with an appropriate grounding in established empirical science, not delimited entirely by what is already known about the mind/brain, but capable of using the existing data about mental structures to formulate both literary critical perspectives and to help interpret literary experiments *vis-à-vis* faculties of mind. A brief speculative section is also included on the prospect of a formulation of a “grammar of aesthetics” similar to a grammar of language as developed by Chomsky or as discussed in relation to theories of ethics in the work of John Rawls.

Notes

1. In order to preserve the orthographic character of quoted texts, all italics and citations will be retained as in original except where otherwise indicated. American spellings of words will be preserved *only* in direct quotations (e.g. “color” or “realize”).
2. When the term “stream of consciousness” functions as a noun, as in “the stream of consciousness” no hyphens will be used between the words. However, when the term is used as an adjective, as in “the stream-of-consciousness practice in modernist literature”, hyphens will be used in the term.
3. The term “diagramming sentences” refers to a practice in American primary schools in which children identify the parts of speech in a given sentence and create a diagrammatic structure of how the parts fit together, for example drawing a line between a noun and a verb and then connecting that verb via another line to an adverb.
4. The role of Roman Jakobson’s aphasia studies is frequently written about in relation to Stein’s work. In particular, by Johanna Isaak, in her article on Stein, “The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter”. She explicitly links Stein to Jakobson’s work, suggesting her grammatical experiments take Jakobson’s ideas into account, that Stein frequently creates sentences which exist only of a “kernel subject word” which, like the aphasia Jakobson discussed, “tends to give rise to ... one word sentences”. For the full text, see Johanna Isaak, “The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter”, in Kostelanetz, Richard ed.. *Gertrude Stein Advanced: An Anthology of Criticism*. Jefferson, NC: MacFarland and Company, 1990. Print.
5. For a thorough consideration of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis regarding the nature of language and its flaws, a comprehensive and accessible resource is Steven Pinker’s *The Language Instinct* (1994), which, though ontologically unsympathetic to the ultimate ends of the Chomskyan philosophical programme, critiques Sapir-Whorf from the perspective of Chomskyan linguistics.

For further information, see Pinker, Steven. *The Language Instinct*. London: Penguin Books London, 1997. Print (specifically, pages 51-61).

6. Throughout the 1960s, many attempts were made to link Chomskyan linguistics to Piaget's psychological theories and Claude Lévi-Strauss' wider cultural analysis (or to critique Chomsky on Straussian grounds). Chomsky consistently rejected any parallels, and, in *Language and Mind*, speaks quite dismissively of Lévi-Strauss' concepts, writing that the cognitive implications of Lévi-Strauss' work reduces to the fact, "that humans classify" (Chomsky, *Language and Mind* 74-75). For the full critique, see Chomsky, Noam. *Language and Mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968. Print.

7. A number of other important but not strictly germane works exist on the role of cognition or cognitive features in Gertrude Stein's writing. Among them, is *Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens: The Performance of Modern Consciousness* (2002), by Sara Ford. In the book, the emphasis is on the capacity for literature to enact or "perform" consciousness. This emphasis is an outgrowth of Ford's relating Stein's understanding of consciousness to the philosophical positions of William James. In *Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing* (1983), Marianne Dekoven uses the notion of grammatical "admissibility", as conceived by Chomsky, to examine aspects of Stein's grammatical experiments, considering "deviation from rather than total negation of conventional grammar" (Dekoven 11). Though Dekoven is not a Chomskyan, indeed, her use of the term "conventional grammar" suggests she does not think of language as a system of abstract, mostly unconscious syntactic constraints, her appeal to Chomskyan notions are of particular interest both in terms of showing the flexibility such concepts offer literary investigation, and in terms of considering the modalities of Stein's syntactic experiments. For the full argument, see Marianne Dekoven. *Different Language*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983. Print.

8. The original quotation about the “stretch sock” comes from an interview with A. Poulin, published in *The Michigan Quarterly Review*, 20.3 (1981). Web.

9. Lisa Zunshine’s *Why We Read Fiction* (2006) offers a highly engaging and detailed examination of how readers “read minds” when interacting with narrative and, thus, implement a kind of “theory of mind” when reading literature. She writes that “[a]ttributing states of mind is the default way by which we construct and navigate our social environment” (Zunshine 6). In creating art this is also taken into account: “when we compose an essay, a lecture, a movie, a song, a novel ... and try to imagine how this or that segment of our target audience will respond to it”, she argues we also engage in a kind of cognitive investigation (Zunshine 6). For further reading, see Zunshine, Lisa. *Why We Read Fiction*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2006. Print.

10. The films include: *They Live*-1988, Director: John Carpenter; *They Shoot Horses Don’t* *They*-1969, Director: Sydney Pollack; *They Died with Their Boots On*-1941, Director: Raoul Walsh; *They Gave Him a Gun*-1937, Director: W.S. Van Dyke; *They Came from Beyond Space*-1967, Director: Freddie Francis; *They Came by Night*-1940, Director: Henry Lachman; *They Came to Rob Las Vegas*-1967, Director: Antonio Isasi-Isasmendi; *They Flew Alone*-1942, Director: Herbert Wilcox; *They Came to Blow Up America*-1943, Director: Edward Ludwig; *They Dare Not Love*-1941, Director: James Whale; *They Go Boom*-1929, Director: James Parrot; *They All Kissed the Bride*-1942, Director: Alexander Hall; *They All Laughed*-1982, Director: Peter Bogdanovich; *They Came to a City*-1942, Director: Basil Dearden; *They Got Me Covered*-1943, Director: David Butler; *They Loved Life*-1957, Director Andrej Wajda; *They Live by Night*-1949, Director: Nicholas Ray; *They Drive by Night*-1940, Director: Raoul Walsh; *They Were Expendable*-1945, Director: John Ford.

11. The expression “poet of Fragments” is originally that of H.W. Donner in his introduction to *The Plays and Poems of Thomas Lovell Beddoes*. Harvard University Press, 1954, page xxiii.

12. Though the Romantic period is generally thought to be the beginning of the modern tradition in linguistics, an important work by James Harris from 1751 proposes the notion of a “universal grammar” in a systematic way. For further reading, see Harris, James. *Hermes: or a Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Language and Universal Grammar*. London: Valiant, 1751. Print. Also, it should be noted that several important books about the Romantic period have appeared over the years which could rightly be called “cognitive” in one way or another. Among the notable texts, Alan Grob’s *The Philosophical Mind* (1973), which examines Wordsworth’s evolving “theory of mind” as seen through his writing during the years 1797-1805. The book places Wordsworth’s early work in a Humean “associationist” framework (Grob 3), and sees his later work as a form of “transcendentalism” (Grob 10). Jerome Christensen’s *Coleridge’s Blessed Machine of Language* (1981) also considers Coleridge’s “associationist” background and the problems he had with the philosophy later in life (Christensen 10). The book is rather more post-structuralist, specifically Derridean, in character than the present work, but in its consideration of the intellectual lineage of Coleridge, particularly with regard to the writing of David Hartley (Christensen 10), it can, like *The Philosophic Mind*, be seen as a variation of the taxonomic approach to cognitive literary theory, tracing a writer’s conception of mind over his or her writing life.

13. The note in question reads as follows:

In the summer of the year 1797, the Author, then in ill health, had retired to a lonely farm-house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance in “Purchas’s Pilgrimage”: “Here Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed with a wall.” The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has

the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions without any sensation or consciousness of effort. (Coleridge, *Selected Poetry and Prose* 93)

14. Relating to Frege's notion of axiomatic logic wherein a symbol stands in full, isomorphic, denotative relationship to a concept. Language is understood to be non-Fregean in a Chomskyan model because of the capacity of word meanings to migrate and contain the kinds of odd properties he discusses in the *James R. Killian Memorial Lecture* (1991). For a more full understanding of Frege's ideas, see Frege, Gottlob. *Conceptual Notation and Related Articles*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972. Print.

15. One of the key exemplars of this tradition, who also had a key influence on the work of Chomsky was Rudolf Carnap. Carnap's 1931 paper, "Psychology in the Language of Physics", "sets out", in Carnap's words, "to explain and establish the thesis that every sentence of psychology can be formulated in the language of physics" (Lyons et al. 43). Carnap's belief was that:

all the sentences of psychology are about physical processes, namely about the physical behavior of humans and other animals. This is a sub-thesis of the general thesis of physicalism, according to which the language of physics is a universal language, i.e. a language into which every sentence can be translated. (Lyons et al. 43)

Carnap's project was not dissimilar to the work in symbolic logic by Bertrand Russell and mathematical logic by Frege and Ludwig Wittgenstein's own engagement with the project, but Carnap hoped to extend the "physicalist" approach to language itself so that it could be essentially reduced to a kind of system of notation as used in physics. Carnap writes in *The Logical Syntax of Language* (1934) that he defines the concept of "logical syntax" in relation to a language as:

The formal theory of the linguistic forms of that language—the systematic statement of the formal rules which govern it together with the development of the consequences which follow from these rules.

A theory, a rule, a definition, or the like is to be called formal when no reference is made in it either to the meaning of the symbols (for example, the words) or to the sense of the expressions (e.g. the sentences), but simply and solely to the kinds and order of the symbols from which the expressions are constructed. (Carnap 1)

Though certain aspects of Carnap's theory resonate with ideas explored in the Chomskyan approach, particularly the earlier iterations of his theory which sought the "rules" which governed particular linguistic forms; the Chomskyan approach, however, dispensed with the notion of a finite process which could be fully characterised by a system of outputs and logic.

16. For Karl Popper's definition of the methodology of science, see Popper, Karl. *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2002. Print.

17. Christoph Küpfer offers a general overview of the direction such cognitively-based approaches have taken, breaking the general thrust of the field into seven major areas of study: those which examine corpora of metred verse, those concerned with rules, principles, and constraints on stress patterns, those which examine the performance of metrical poetry, those which study the interactions of readers with texts in terms of perceiving and processing stress and phonological techniques, as well as the interface of cognitively-based schools of linguistics, semiotics, and applied poetics (Küpfer 14). For further reading see Küpfer, Christoph. *Current Trends in Metrical Analysis*. Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 2011. Print.

18. For a full explication of Rosch's theories and important essays in a similar vein, see Rosch, Eleanor. *Cognition and Categorisation*. Hilldale, NJ: Lawrence and Erlbaum, 1978. Print.

19. The term “flow”, in this instance does not refer exactly to the concept articulated by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his work, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990. Print.), which examines the relation of absorption in a particular activity with cognitive states. Csikszentmihalyi’s work provides an interesting model for further examinations of the concept of attention, perception and literary investigation, but is more “taxonomic” than is perhaps relevant to the present context.

Chapter One

Modern Linguistics, Cognition, and the Analysis of Literature

All poetry is experimental poetry. (Stevens, *Opus Posthumous* 187)

You could have told me all about that

but of course preferred not to,

so fearful of the first person singular

and all the singular adventures it implies. (Ashbery, *Wakefulness* 39)

Though much of the field of cognitive studies remains highly controversial and firm scientific conclusions are difficult to come by, in the field of linguistics, however, a robust body of empirically tested data, and a theoretically coherent system for experimental research has been developed in the work of Noam Chomsky. As seen in the introduction, though there is controversy regarding specific emphases in linguistic research, and at present the modelling of syntactic structure is incomplete, Chomsky's system marks the beginning of the modern era of linguistics.¹ By examining the linguistic research and the theoretical models which have guided it, it will become possible to see the applicability of such ideas and concepts to literary study in general and, particularly, to the work of "cognitively-minded" writers. In doing so, it will also be possible to see how such linguistic concepts have been specifically investigated by John Ashbery in his writing, and how his most experimental writings have explored many of the features of language that came to be central topics of interest in the first wave of modern linguistics. In considering this, it will become clear how literary experiments can yield results with broad ranging implications for cognitively-minded critics, and how Ashbery's unique approach to literary experimentation highlights properties of the interaction of language and mind that even writers using some of the same methodologies miss or de-emphasise. Indeed, such literary

investigation can be seen to function in something like the way the Prussian military theorist, Carl von Clausewitz, viewed warfare. In his formulation, war was “a mere continuation of policy by other means” (von Clausewitz 23). In the case of experimental literature, literary investigations of mind can be seen to represent something like “the continuation of cognitive studies by other means”.

The “Chomskyan Revolution”: Post-Revolutionary Changes in the Scientific

Understanding of Linguistics

When Chomsky began working in the field of linguistics, the discipline was primarily concerned with a more “external” conception of language than he felt was accurate. As discussed in the introduction, “external” conceptions of language posit that language is essentially an “object” of sorts to be found in the world and which becomes a part of a person’s mental life *via* repetition and learning strategies. Variations in languages and the motivations for such variations are to be understood as functions of geography, stimulus-response dynamics, or, possibly, the intellectual abilities of individual speakers. This conception of language fits neatly with notions of “prescriptive” grammars in which grammatical “correctness” is adjudicated by appeals to external authorities, texts, or historical usage. The dominant figure in linguistics at the time Chomsky was beginning his formal study was Leonard Bloomfield. Bloomfield’s conception of the job of linguists and linguistics was to formalise something like an “encyclopaedic” classificatory framework for the world’s languages. This was to be arrived at by the careful recording and study of the full diversity of languages identified in the world. He writes:

The first task of the linguistic investigator is the analysis of a language into distinctive sounds, their variations, and the like. When he has completed this, he turns to the analysis of the semantic structure,—to what we call the morphology and syntax of the language, its grammatical system. (Bloomfield 61)

Thus, the job of a linguist is to *describe* a language as it appears in the world as completely as possible in terms of phonemic, lexical, semantic and—*via* semantics—syntactic structure. The idea of extending the analysis beyond external aspects of language would have been anathema to such an approach and would have been nearly incomprehensible given the presuppositions regarding language learning prior to the 1950s.² Writing of the work of the Danish linguist, Otto Jespersen, Bloomfield touches on what he believes to be the ontological character of language. Praising Jespersen for looking into the “historical” character of language, Bloomfield writes:

In his *Progress in Language* (1894) he showed that historical change in language is progressive, a phase of the evolution of man; that linguistic change leads to simpler, more flexible, more accurately and delicately expressive and less troublesome forms of speech. Whatever we take to be the relation between language and thought, Jespersen’s teaching means that in the history of language we can see the growth and development, through time ... of human emotion and reason. (Bloomfield 102)

Language, in this conception, “evolves” in the way that species are understood to evolve through a kind of crudely Darwinian natural selection. Languages start out “simple” and become increasingly “complex” or, in Bloomfield’s phrasing, “more delicately expressive” and “less troublesome”. Here, it becomes possible to see how an externalist perspective on language acquisition leads to such readings of changes in languages. If, in this construction, “language” is an object in the world, rather than an aspect of the mind, languages can be understood to move along a “progressive” continuum from less to more complex. As will be seen later, the Chomskyan model does not accept “evolution” of language in this sense. Languages may *change* in various ways, but the language faculty, the aspect of mind which allows languages to be “learnable” at all, is, in Chomskyan understanding, a permanent feature of the human mind which will have emerged through something like the traditionally understood genetic mutations

which characterise Darwinian natural selection.³ Thus, though the language *faculty* may have “evolved” as an aspect of the brain, languages only “change”.⁴

In the period of the dominance of Bloomfield’s model of “taxonomic” linguistics, the behaviourist understanding of mind underpinned many of the assumptions of the discipline. Bloomfield writes in 1945 of the mind of a child as registering as “a blank slate” (Bloomfield 298). Emphasis on language’s status as primarily a system of communication was also widely taken as a kind of baseline assumption from which all other theoretical research would proceed, as the following passage from Bloomfield, highly behaviourist in terminology, demonstrates:

The persons in a speech community coördinate their actions by means of language. Language bridges the gap between the individual nervous systems: a stimulus acting upon any one person may call out a response action by any another person in the community. Language unites individuals into a *social organism*.

In a way, language is to the social organism what the nervous system is to the individual. A stimulus acting upon any part of an animal may call forth a movement in any other part. (Emphasis in original)(Bloomfield 397)

Given this approach to the discipline, it is unsurprising that Chomsky’s early work was primarily dedicated to concepts like discourse analysis, a particular variant of which was pioneered by Chomsky’s mentor, Zellig Harris. Where Harris’ system differed from other understandings of languages was in that it sought *universal properties* of language. In the case of Harris’ approach, there were understood to be a limited number of features of language which account for the full diversity of linguistic “output” (i.e. expressed language in the world). Harris writes:

Investigation of language entails not only empirical discovery of what are its irreducible elements and their relative occurrence, but also the mathematical search for a simple set of ordered statements that will express the empirical facts. (Harris 5)

Harris' system involves not just identification of quasi-mathematical properties of language, but the ways in which such properties can be used to transform the linguistic elements which are combined or, in his terminology, "derived" from each other. Building on Harris' search for a "simple set of ordered statements" that would account for the "empirical facts" of language in the world, and with a deep interest in Romantic-era understandings of language, Chomsky began to formulate the ideas which would transform the discipline of linguistics and change the way language was viewed in other fields as well. Though not obviously an efficacious system for poetic analysis, the Chomskyan model would reveal properties of language which were not previously theorised in meaningful scientific ways and which would come to reveal much about the character of particular syntactically-concerned literary experiments.

Writing in 1959 in the journal *Language*, Chomsky reviewed B.F. Skinner's book on the nature of language, *Verbal Behavior* (1957). In the review, he provides a thorough critique of the viability of an externally-oriented stimulus-response dynamic in language learning. Here Chomsky considers the logic of "reinforcement" as a means of producing linguistic behaviour:

It seems that Skinner's claim that all verbal behavior is acquired and maintained in 'strength' through reinforcement is quite empty, because his notion of reinforcement has no clear content, functioning only as a cover term for any factor, detectable or not, related to acquisition or maintenance of verbal behaviour ... when we say that "it is the function of predication to facilitate the transfer of response from one term to another or from one object to another", we have said nothing of any significance. In what sense is this true of the predication Whales are mammals? Or, to take Skinner's example, what point is there in saying that the effect of The telephone is out of order on the listener is to bring behavior formerly controlled by the stimulus out of order under control of the stimulus telephone (or the telephone itself) by a process of simple conditioning ...

Depending on the object of which this is predicated, the present state of motivation of

the listener, etc., the behavior may vary from rage to pleasure, from fixing the object to throwing it out, from simply not using it to trying to use it in the normal way (e.g., to see if it is really out of order), and so on. (Chomsky, “Review of *Verbal Behavior*”)

Chomsky’s essential point is that the Skinnerean system not only is not sufficiently sophisticated to cope with real world “behaviours” generated (or “controlled”) by particular “stimuli”, but that the predictive capacity of a reinforcement dynamic, a critical aspect of scientific explanatory models, is virtually non-existent. Therefore, Skinner’s system is, at best, a restatement of a descriptive framework for phenomena and not a scientific *explanation* for phenomena. Chomsky treats the behaviourist conception of “conversational relevance” as a major site of differentiation between his position and the then-prevailing paradigm. Relevance, for behaviourists, accrues as multiple reinforcements occur and the “stimulus control”—the external signal producing behaviour in Skinner’s terminology from *Verbal Behavior*—is more robustly associated with a particular set of circumstances and responses. Chomsky considers this idea in relation to Skinner’s example of discussing works of art:

A typical example of stimulus control for Skinner would be the response to a piece of music with the utterance Mozart or to a painting with the response *Dutch* ... Suppose instead of saying *Dutch* we had said *Clashes with the wallpaper, I thought you liked abstract work, Never saw it before, Titled, Hanging too low, Beautiful, Hideous, Remember our camping trip last summer?* Or whatever else might come into our minds when looking at a picture. (Italics added) (“Review of *Verbal Behavior*”)

The behaviourist model can, at best, suggest what an “appropriate” response to particular data-stimuli-circumstances might be. The passage above makes clear that a response may be *triggered* by such data, but it is by no means “controlled” by such data in any normal meaning of the term. Options for possible “appropriate” responses are essentially infinitely variable.

Chomsky reinforces these points in his later book, *Cartesian Linguistics* (1966), beginning with a restatement of the externalist understanding of language learning:

empiricist speculation, particularly in its modern versions, has characteristically adopted certain a priori assumptions regarding the nature of learning (that it must be based on association or reinforcement, or on inductive procedures of an elementary sort—e.g., the taxonomic procedures of modern linguistics, etc.) and has not considered the necessity for checking these assumptions against the observed uniformities of ‘output’—against what is known or believed after ‘learning’ has taken place. (Chomsky, *Cartesian Linguistics* 102)

Chomsky is making two critical points in the passage above: first, that in an externalist, particularly behaviourist, framework, language learning is a *conscious* process which involves an awareness of the “rules” of a language which are accepted *via* reinforcement, or through a conscious process of rule “generalisation” similar in function to mathematical proofs by induction. The second point is fundamentally related: that even a fully descriptively accurate taxonomic linguistics would have difficulty in accounting for the “uniformity of output” in language as expressed by children learning their native language; children without learning disabilities, or other mental pathologies, always learn their native languages “perfectly” in the sense that they can use the language instinctively and can determine whether it is being used “correctly” by others, as in the case of individuals for whom a natural language (e.g. English or Finnish, etc.) is a second language learned in adulthood. As will be seen shortly, these uniformities are not merely “positive” uniformities (sentences that *are* produced), they involve systematic avoidance of possible “outputs” (that is, sentences) which are perfectly possible from a logical standpoint, but which are somehow never, or almost never, produced in the real world experience of language.

With these criticisms of externalist conceptions of language in mind, it is now possible to consider some of the more specific elements and proposals of Chomsky's linguistic system in detail. Understanding Chomsky's formal characterisation of linguistic phenomena will be shown to be relevant to developing a "language" for cognitive literary critique for identifying and considering non-formal explorations of the same linguistic phenomena. This said, Chomsky's thought has undergone a number of revisions since the writing of *Syntactic Structures*. Indeed, newer versions of his linguistic system dispense with key ideas articulated in the earlier versions. Despite this fact, what is critical to the present discussion is paying attention to the underlying linguistic phenomena and seeing how they are treated in formal and literary contexts. The feedback between the two means of exploration, often unconscious, can be fruitfully worked into the architecture of a cognitive literary perspective of greater depth and specificity by showing how questions about language become relevant to literary and scientific study independently and can serve to highlight different implications of the same phenomena.

Before turning directly to the question of how literature and linguistics have treated the same phenomena, it is important to more fully describe certain relevant features of language and how they relate to Chomskyan concepts so that it will be easier to understand the points being argued and to see how a narrowly-focussed, cognitively-minded critique influenced by Chomskyan linguistics can yield considerable insight into the character of Ashbery's literary experiments.

Among the most wide-ranging consequences of the Chomskyan programme has been the repositioning of the study of language under the heading of "cognitive studies". If, as Chomsky argues in *Syntactic Structures* and subsequent work, immaterial syntactic relations which are not consciously learned are the foundations of language, then not only is language "internal" to mind, language is not "learned" at all; it is a property of mind that is perhaps best described as "growing", as Chomsky has said: "The process of mental construction of experience and

interpretation of it is based on the common genetic constitution which must be rich to the extent that the outcomes are highly structured and constrained in ways that do not reflect the features of environment” (Chomsky, *Hitchcock Lectures* 2003). Critical to understanding how such a system functions is Chomsky’s notion of unvoiced syntactic structures, essentially parts of language which have no gestural or voiced content. In his early work, Chomsky described these properties as aspects of the “deep structure” of language (as opposed to the “surface structure”, the words a listener hears audibly or signs visually). To provide a clear example of the way “deep structure” was theorised in early Chomskyan theory, the example below demonstrates how the deep/surface structure dynamic was conceived with regard to passivisation:

(94) (i) John admires sincerity → sincerity is admired by John

(ii) John plays golf → golf is played by John

sincerity frightens John → John is frightened by sincerity

(95) (i) sincerity admires John → John is admired by sincerity

(ii) golf plays John → John is played by golf

(iii) John frightens sincerity → sincerity is frightened by John. (*Syntactic Structures* 78)⁵

The fact that some sentences can be rewritten certain ways and others cannot, though the sentences may consist of the same grammatical units (in the conventional understanding of the term “grammatical”), suggests that there are elements of syntax people “know” without ever being taught. A further example of this phenomenon can be seen with regard to particular classes of sentences which are, again, the same in terms of grammatical composition (i.e. they have the same classes of words in the same positions in traditional prescriptive grammar terms), but which are never reformulated in ways which are permitted to different kinds of sentences composed of the same grammatical constituents, for example, the following:

(3) have you a book on modern music?

(4) the book seems interesting.

(5) read you a book on modern music?

(6) the child seems sleeping. (*Syntactic Structures* 15)

As Chomsky writes, “there is no semantic reason to prefer (3) to (5) or (4) to (6), but only (3) and (4) are grammatical sentences in English” (*Syntactic Structures* 15). This strange feature of language, the exclusion of possible “acceptable” sentences, he suggests, means that a semantics-based approach to understanding the concept of grammaticality is not sustainable. Syntax is the critical aspect of language and it must have features which are not obvious from overt vocalised data. Language, as generated by syntactic structures, is understood as being fundamentally a property of the brain rather than a relation in the world.

At the heart of Chomsky’s argument for an internally-based notion of language was his consideration of the systematicity of “mistake”-making on the part of children when they learn their native language. When children learn their native language—as opposed to adults learning a second language—there is a curious consistency to the character of the mistakes such children make. If one were to learn a language entirely from a position of total ignorance, theoretically, an infinite variety of mistakes could be made. That certain mistakes are almost never made by children learning their native language suggests there must be some reason why certain mistakes are made frequently and others almost entirely avoided. One of the features of the mistakes children make when learning a language is the implicit presumption that there are “rules” to a language, for example, pluralisation rules, or that conjugation is something that happens to verbs. Children frequently “overgeneralise” rules; for example, saying “foots” instead of “feet”, or “go-ed” instead of “went”.⁶ In the case of the unmade “mistakes”, matters are even more revealing. As noted above in relation to Chomsky’s critique of Skinner, and the quotation from *Cartesian Linguistics*, the notion of using “linguistic output” of children to understand how the language “learning” process occurs is a two-sided affair. On one side, there is the actual expressed speech of children. On the other side, there are the possible linguistic expressions they *could* produce but

do not, essentially linguistic experiments which are never performed. In discussing these “experiments”, it is possibly best to provide a concrete example of how this process works, as there are no simple, familiar phenomena like the overgeneralised rules mentioned above to point to in this instance.

In an experiment by Stephen Crain and Rosalind Thornton, detailed in the paper, “Language Acquisition in the Absence of Experience” (1991), an attempt was made to create a context where children would be reinforced to make a linguistic “mistake” that was presumed to be counter to the syntactic properties of the mind with regard to the “settings” for English as a language. An accessible description of the experiment is detailed in David Lightfoot’s contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Chomsky* entitled, “Plato’s Problem, UG and the Language Organ”.⁷ Lightfoot writes that Crain and Thornton developed a task that “encouraged children to ask questions like *Do you know what that’s up there?” (McGilvray et al. 54),⁸ thus, attempting to induce children to make a kind of “mistake” unlikely to occur in the normal process of a child’s language acquisition. Lightfoot continues:

They hypothesized that children would generally show a preference for the reduced ’s form whenever this was consistent with their grammars. This preference is revealed in a frequency count of legitimate forms, like *Do you know what that’s doing up there?* Comparing the frequency of the reduced forms in these contexts with non-adult reduced forms would indicate whether or not children’s grammars contained the hypothetical genetic constraint. (Italics in original text) (McGilvray et al. 54)

And, thus, if structural linguistic data was inherent in the brain, it was necessarily independent of experience and reinforcement along Skinnerean lines. The experiment proceeded by “priming” the children with a question in which the verb “is” is contracted, or in the terminology, “reduced”, for example:

(7) Experimenter: Ask Ratty if he knows what that is doing up there.

Child: Do you know what that's doing up there?

Rat: It seems to be sleeping. (McGilvray et al. 54)

This was followed by a question in which a different grammatical application of “is” was used in an attempt to solicit a similar contraction:

(8) Experimenter: Ask Ratty if he knows what that is up there?

Child: Do you know what that is up there?

Rat: A monkey. (McGilvray et al. 55)⁹

The contraction, in this instance, does not take place, and, thus, a constraint is suggested.

The particular experiment with “reductions” concerns a concept which would be articulated in later Chomskyan models, particularly the “government and binding” model (1979), and in the “minimalist programme” (1995) which succeeded it. The concept is known as an “empty category”. The term is highly technical and the actual contours of what may or may not constitute an “empty category”, as far as the syntactic system is concerned, remains controversial in linguistic circles. The principle, however, that certain kinds of contractive concatenations like those above virtually never occur in native speakers of a language which has “empty category rules”—even, as in the experimental case described above, after prompting—can be seen to provide an insight into the nature and function of language which is not obvious from simple discourse analysis or observation and descriptions of lexical content and morphological properties. What is important to note about the above responses from Crain’s and Thornton’s experiment is not the specific responses of the children, but the fact that the children *never* formed a sentence like, “Squeaky, do you know where that’s?” . Though, as Lightfoot himself notes, there is more to be said about language acquisition, and, indeed, Crain’s and Thornton’s own work continues in the field at present,¹⁰ the principle that is at stake in the experiment, the possible reductions involving the word “is” available in a grammar, is well illustrated, and the example offers a formal understanding of a particular linguistic phenomenon which will be seen directly as conceived from an experimental literary perspective.

Syntactics Deconstructed: Experimental Literature and Early Non-Scientific

Investigations of Syntax

In the writing of E.E. Cummings, it becomes possible to see literary investigation of language addressing, if, perhaps unconsciously, the functionality of empty categories more than a decade before the most rudimentary scientific considerations of the question were formulated. Here, in the poem “XXXVIII” from the collection, *1 X 1* (1944), the same kind of “empty category violation” considered in Crain’s and Thornton’s experiment is enacted at the close of the poem:

love is a deeper season
than reason;
my sweet one
(and april’s where we’re). (Cummings 578)

Though, perhaps somewhat ironically, the rest of the poem is far more conventional from a syntactic standpoint than some of Cummings’ work, the “mistake” of contracting or, in the terminology of linguistics, “reducing”, “we are” as he does highlights a profound syntactic insight that it took scientifically-minded linguists another decade to notice: namely, that certain linguistic behaviours never occur except in highly artificial contexts, and even in such contexts, these behaviours—“mistakes” in the syntactic sense—do not truly “occur” in the normal sense of the term “occur”, in that they take place to manifest as things which do not take place in normal usage. By virtue of their existence, they point to features of language that go unnoticed in “correct” or “normal” usage. As will be seen in the chapter to come, this property of literature has implications for the notion of how literary intention functions, particularly when considered in relation to J.L. Austin’s notion of “locutionary”, “illocutionary” and “perlocutionary” acts.

Though Cummings’ aim is not to attempt to “explain” the phenomenon, the mere realisation of the significance of the phenomenon, and the drawing of readerly attention to it, is

quite remarkable given that it took science so long to be mystified by such linguistic oddities. In situations like these, which abound in Ashbery's writing, it may be said that literature can be seen to actually *precede* the science in discovering properties of mind, "leading the way" in the sense of which Mark Turner speaks in *Reading Minds*.

Cummings is, of course, not the only modernist figure to use syntactic relations in ways which would be familiar to students of Chomskyan linguistics. Indeed, readers of *Finnegans Wake* (1939) will notice direct parallels with linguistic examples drawn from *Syntactic Structures*, particularly the "colourless green ideas sleep furiously" sentence mentioned earlier. The following passage from *Finnegans Wake* essentially employs the same principles of syntax directed towards literary ends:

Shem is short for Shemus as Jem is joky for Jacob. A few toughnecks are still getatable who pretend that aboriginally he was of respectable stemming (he was an outlex between the lines of Ragonar Blaubarb and Horrild Hairwire and an inlaw to Capt. The Hon. and Rev. Mr. Bbyrdwood de Trop Blogg was among his most distant connections). (Joyce 169)

Words like "getatable" and "outlex" are obviously not in any individual's "training" in language (i.e. schoolteachers do not teach the terms, and they are not found in dictionaries. They are words created by individuals through the "creative" capacity of language use described in Chomsky's writing, particularly in his review of *Verbal Behavior*). Thus, their comprehensibility cannot be simply a function of the externally-based stimulus-response dynamic advocated by the behaviourist model which was becoming dominant in the non-psychoanalytic field of psychology at the time of the writing of *Finnegans Wake*. Indeed, like Chomsky's "colorless green ideas", these Joycean lexical inventions are comprehensible largely because of the syntactic roles they play. Recalling Weinstein's "typewriter" example, if the words were displaced, for example, into

“getatable a still pretend aboriginally toughnecks few”, they would be processed as individual words not as a “sentence” in the Chomskyan sense of the term.¹¹

As will be seen, this feature of syntax, its capacity to hold “language” together (sometimes language which does not involve words previously experienced by readers) will be a crucial feature of Ashbey’s own writing, especially his later works. Though both the disruptive and collusive capacities of syntax have been explored with particular focus at different points in Ashbery’s career (the disruptive element—particularly in *The Tennis Court Oath*—and the collusive element in collections like *Three Poems* (1973) and *Flow Chart* (1991)), one of the most consistent elements of Ashbery’s exploration of syntax has not been the absolute rupture or recapitulation of English syntax, but the effect of strained syntax on readers, both in regard to linguistic comprehensibility, and in terms of readerly attention. Such straining of syntax may also have roots in influences from the modernist period, particularly in the work of Wallace Stevens.

Stevens’ influence on Ashbery has been frequently noted in the body of Ashbery critical studies, not least in the influential early work of Harold Bloom, who calls him “the most legitimate son of Stevens” (Bloom 11). Lynn Keller, in the paper, “Thinkers without Final Thoughts” (1982), focusses on the role of Stevens’ influence over the course of Ashbery’s career, noting its presence particularly in early Ashbery writings, especially *Some Trees* (1956). She writes that there are “unmistakable echoes of Stevens’ diction, syntax or even ... specific lines by Stevens” which are “scattered throughout” the collection (Keller 236). Andrew Dubois, too, writes of *Some Trees* being “Stevensian in content” in his chapter “Fragmenting Attention” from *Ashbery’s Forms of Attention* (Dubois 2). Similarities are only part of the picture, however. While there are thematic similarities and similarities in terms of subject matter which can readily be identified in the writing of Ashbery and Stevens, it is Ashbery’s approach to straining syntax which is of direct interest in exploring the nature of Stevens’ literary influence for this thesis.

To consider how Stevens used syntax as a mechanism for placing demands on the cognitive faculties of his readers, it is particularly illustrative to turn to a poem like “The Snow Man” (1921) which uses long chains of conditionals and sub-clauses to create a quasi-syllogistic effect:

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. (Stevens, *The Complete Poems of Wallace Stevens* 9)

The poem essentially “resolves” in the final lines, becoming something like a kind of

“argument”. “One must have a mind of winter” to “regard” and “behold” and “not think” in the ways the poem suggests. The clauses in the first three stanzas strain attention, but do not create ruptures, indeed, the poem seems to be relying on the strain of attention for the “pay-off” of resolution in its *faux* syllogistic structure.

Ashbery’s writing most resembles the “argument”-like poems of Stevens—as noted by Lynn Keller—in early collections, as can be seen here in “The Pied Piper”:

Under the day’s crust a half-eaten child
And further sores which eyesight shall reveal
And they live. But what of dark elders
Whose touch at nightfall must now be
To keep their promise. (*Some Trees* 69)

Like Stevens’ writing, the poem begins with a preposition and relies on the syntactic pull it creates to drag the reader’s attention along the narrative as the scene is set. The line does eventually resolve syntactically, in the closing phrase “And they live”, but this merely represents *structural* resolution. The line is a “complete sentence” and a grammatical one in English (if just barely), but the kind of “argumentative” resolution of Stevens’ poem is not present. The passage exists as a sentence, but it requires more cognitive work on the part of the reader. “Hotel Dauphin” offers a further example of this tendency in early Ashbery:

It was not something identical with my carnation-world
But its smallest possession—a hair or a sneeze—
I wanted. I remember
Dreaming on tan plush the wrong dreams

Of asking fortunes, now lost
In what snows? Is there anything
We dare credit? (*Some Trees* 52)

In these poems, a definite “Stevensian” strain on the reader’s syntactic faculties can be seen, but it is rather different in character than Stevens’ approach. The “relatively minor” difficulties such poems present, in Dubois’ description of the poems for *Some Trees* (Dubois 14), push beyond the kind of complex-but-resolved Stevensian approach seen in “The Snow Man”. There is definite rhetorical similarity to Stevens’ style in both the Ashbery poems, but the lexical content works against the resolution that the strained, but ultimately “correct”, syntax permits.

Later, the even less overtly Stevens-esque, poems of *The Tennis Court Oath* will be seen not only to defer or complicate Stevensian resolutions, but to explore the capacity of syntax to actually *prevent* resolution and to leave narratives, arguments, and sentiments “open” for interpretation. Though both approaches take cognitive faculties into account, it is Ashbery’s later approach which, for all its incompleteness, will be seen to be equally implication-rich in terms of cognition.

The kind of semantic and interpretive openness that often characterises Ashbery’s work frequently results in his poetry being compared with that of surrealist writers. This is not an interpretation Ashbery supports, and it is on specifically syntactic grounds that he has distinguished his own approach to literature from that of surrealist writing.¹² As will be seen, Ashbery’s critique of surrealism may at least be understood to be somewhat Chomskyan in spirit, if not Chomskyan in practice.

Ashbery is frequently found on record dismissing the works of “surrealist” writers, particularly the practice of so-called “automatic writing”. Here, as part of a sustained comment on surrealism and surrealist writing, Ashbery critiques the notion of “automatic writing” on specifically syntactic grounds:

we must remember that the surrealists insisted on automatic writing, that is, poetry written down as rapidly and unthinkingly as possible and which could not be altered later.

While this discipline might seem to abolish all rules and to bring back spontaneity into poetry, one important rule was retained: the poets were careful to observe the conventions of grammar and syntax. ‘Take care,’ wrote Breton. ‘I know the meaning of each of my words and I observe syntax *naturally*: syntax is not a discipline, as certain oafs believe.’ But does one always observe these rules when one is writing automatically? And what, in fact, is automatic writing ... Isn’t all writing automatic? If one corrects a poem after writing it, doesn’t one happen automatically on the correction? (Ashbery, *Selected Prose* 20)

The passage above, particularly its recognition of the retention of “conventional” syntax in what is understood to be an automatic writing exercise, is important for several reasons. First, regarding process, it demonstrates a clear attention to the *concept* of syntax as material for poetic experiment. Secondly, it highlights Ashbery’s sense that, for something to truly constitute “experimental” poetry, a work must be thoroughgoing in its challenge to poetic conventions. The retention of “normal” syntax, therefore, is problematic because total liberation from what surrealists saw as “convention” would also mandate syntactic “freedom”. As seen from the Crain-Thornton experiment above, however, one has to think quite hard to get out of the structure of syntax. The two concepts “automatic writing” and “writing outside of the normal structure of syntax” would almost seem to represent a contradiction in terms. To be automatic, or “unconscious”, is to be syntactic. To be asyntactic is to be conscious. Ashbery himself notes the dynamic in relation to Pierre Reverdy’s poetry:

Reverdy’s poetry avoids the disciplines of Surrealist poetry, and is the richer for it. He is not afraid to experiment with language and syntax, and it is often difficult to determine whether a particular line belongs with the preceding sentence or the one following it. The lines drift across the page as overheard human speech drifts across our hearing: fragments of conversation, dismembered advertising slogans or warning signs in the Métro appear and remain preserved in the rock crystal of the poem. And far from

banishing poetry to the unconscious, he lets it move freely in and out of the conscious and unconscious. Since we do not inhabit either world exclusively, the result is moving and lifelike. (*Selected Prose* 21)

Ashbery's own description of his composition process as a kind of management of conscious and unconscious elements—"managed chance" is the term Ashbery apparently uses for his procedure—suggests that it is not the openness of the surrealist project that troubled him, but that the surrealist project's dedicated interest in the unconscious—such as they argued, at least—presented an impoverished picture of mind (MacFarquhar 88).¹³ A truly faithful picture of the mind "at work or at rest" must include depictions of the conscious mind working as much as the unconscious mind "resting", recalling Ashbery's statement to Packard, cited earlier, that "the conscious element" in his writing is "more important than the unconscious element, if only because our conscious thoughts are what occupy us most of the day" (Packard 118). The critically "cognitive" element of this dynamic is that in considering conscious aspects of mind as well as unconscious ones, Ashbery can be understood to be implementing a construction of "theory of mind" in the Turner-Zunshine notion of the term discussed in the introduction (i.e. the attribution or recognition of mental states, faculties, and/or processes on the part of his reader). More will be said in later chapters about the role of "theory of mind" in relation to cognitive literary theoretical approaches, but, for the moment, what is important is that such a construction necessitates the consideration of cognitive function, thus, making Ashbery's poetic explorations of mind "theories of consciousness", attributions of particular forms of *awareness* of cognitive faculties on the part of his readers, as much as poems. That syntax is critical to such literary experimentation is unsurprising, but it is the *character* of Ashbery's experiments which is remarkable and which expresses a powerful consonance with concerns in formal linguistic science.

Though Ashbery is by no means a "Chomskyist" in his literary outlook, building on the literary experiments of the modernist period, and considering the philosophical and linguistic

implications of the rise of the Chomskyan programme it becomes possible for a cognitively-minded critic to see how careful literary study can reveal important facts about language, both in terms of the way language is used, and the way language is comprehended. As will be shown directly, Ashbery is not concerned with any single feature of syntax, but numerous aspects of it, and the cognitive possibilities it presents.

Ruptures, Continuities and Repairs: The Role of Syntax in the Literary Experiments of *The Tennis Court Oath*

Ashbery's poems from *The Tennis Court Oath* directly touch on the ideas articulated in Chomsky's writing on a number of occasions. The reasons for this may be complex and varied, indeed, they may be a direct result of the experiments with literary syntax made visible by the writing of modernist writers like Stein, Cummings, and Joyce, but the background of why Ashbery's examinations of syntax coincide temporally with the first formalisations of Chomsky's theories is less central to the question of how such experiments function than what they may tell readers about both the way Ashbery conceptualises the minds of his readers (Ashbery's "theory of consciousness") and what they say about Ashbery's understanding of what poetry is capable of doing as a form.

The feedback between Chomskyan theory and Ashberyan literary practice is perhaps most clearly seen in relation to the kind of "mistakes" spoken of above in the section outlining the findings of Crain and Thornton's linguistic experiments into language learning and "empty categories". Where scientists noticed the absence of certain kinds of mistakes, the proliferation of such "unmakeable" mistakes in *The Tennis Court Oath* demonstrates that the same features of language proved to be of interest to Ashbery. The title poem of the collection provides an example of how this dynamic works on the page:

What had you been thinking about
the face studiously bloodied

heaven blotted region
I go on loving you like water but
there is a terrible breath in the way all of this
You were not elected president, yet won the race
All the way through fog and drizzle
When you read it was sincere the coasts
stammered with unintentional villages the
horse strains fatigued I guess ... the calls ...
I worry [...]. (*Tennis Court Oath* 11)

The poem's opening stanza, if read from a Chomskyan perspective, can tell the reader much about language and how the mind handles language. Even controlling for the experimental character of the poem, and the highly artificial nature of "poetry" as an object—concepts to be discussed in detail in the chapter on intentionality—the opening three lines are quite jarring from a syntactic perspective. The conventional readerly approach to reading poetry—or, indeed, reading more generally—to read the poem as a continuous statement, is confounded by the abrupt rupture of perspective necessitated by the third line. While it may be possible to consider the first and second line as "conceptually continuous", perhaps as lines of unmarked dialogue, the third line, "heaven blotted region", while retaining aspects of syntactic coherence on its own terms, radically disrupts the continuity of syntactic perspective, thus, forcing the reader to "reset" his/her cognitive relationship to the line. This syntactic experiment is rather more multifaceted than Cummings' "violations", which tend to exhaust their cognitive implications once a particular peculiarity or property of language is identified. Instead, Ashbery's experiments with syntax employ syntax as a fulcrum for opening up larger cognitive questions about language, mind, and attention, questions which encompass syntax, but which are not reducible to syntax on an aesthetic or cognitive level.

Ashbery's methodology for creating this disruption is revealing both in terms of his literary lineage and in terms of wider cognitive approaches to literature. Ashbery's approach seems almost to be taking a kind of "middle path" between the perspective of Chomsky and the perspective of Gertrude Stein with regard to how to conduct his experiments. Ashbery disrupts readerly expectations at both the *sentence* level—through syntactic ruptures—and at a higher level of complexity by inserting the disrupted syntax between passages which might otherwise be able to be linked *conceptually*, much as Stein considered "paragraphs" the full realisation of the "emotional" content of language. In this way, it is possible to see both how Chomskyan linguistics can play a role in the critical reading of literature, and also how one aspect of poetry-as-theory-of-consciousness functions: through the management and creation of cognitive expectations *via* properties of mental faculties, in this case, of syntax.

Syntax functions as a means of creating and disrupting not merely attentional and narrative perspective, as in the early lines of the poem, "The Tennis Court Oath", it actually *generates* poetic narrative. This application can be seen in the poem "They Dream Only of America" in which various ruptures in syntactic structure coincide with ruptures in the narrative of the poem and, thus, come to actually establish the "rules" for reading the poem:

They dream only of America

To be lost among the thirteen million pillars of grass:

"This honey is delicious

Though it burns the throat"

And hiding from darkness in barns

They can be grownups now

And the murderer's ash tray is more easily—

The lake a lilac cube.

He holds a key in his right hand.

“Please,” he asked willingly.

He is thirty years old.

That was before

We could drive hundreds of miles

At night through dandelions.

When his headache grew worse we

Stopped at a wire filling station. (*The Tennis Court Oath* 13)

Here, it is possible to see quite clearly both the cognitive role of syntax as described in Chomsky, as the means by which the lexical aspect of language becomes comprehensible, and how a cognitively-minded poet uses syntax to create literary effects beyond merely disrupting syntax for the sake of demonstrating a property of syntax or its use. The poem is sophisticated in its switching between continuous narrative disrupted by syntactic disjunctions and more continuous—or, crucially, *possibly* continuous—narrative passages which appear to have a kind of “flow”. This can be seen most clearly in the third stanza, in which four lines of apparently disjointed narratives flow—plausibly at least—into a narrative that continues fairly smoothly through to its fourth stanza:

He holds a key in his right hand.

“Please,” he asked willingly.

He is thirty years old.

That was before

We could drive hundreds of miles

At night through dandelions. (*The Tennis Court Oath* 13)

The lines are in no way necessarily connected as an integrated narrative, beyond their appearing

in the same poem, but the use of words like “key” and “drive” seem to gently nudge the reader into (perhaps wrongly) reading the distinct sentences of stanza three as a kind of set up to the over-spilling sentence started in the fourth line and ending in the second line of the fourth stanza. Though there is no ultimate resolution to any of the narratives in the poem, the journey itself, through the perspectival ruptures, appears to be of greatest import in generating poetic and cognitive effects.

A further example of how Ashbery’s dynamic of syntax and narrative functions in *The Tennis Court Oath* can be found in “Our Youth”, the narrative of which moves along between the syntactic disruptions:

Of bricks ... Who built it? Like some crazy balloon
When love leans on us
Its nights ... The velvety pavement sticks to our feet.
The dead puppies turn us back on love.
Where we are. Sometimes
The brick arches led to a room like a bubble, that broke when
you entered it
And sometimes to a fallen leaf. (*The Tennis Court Oath* 41)

Passages like “Its nights ... ” and “Where we are” represent grammatically incomplete, in some ways “uninterpretable” statements, if viewed along Chomskyan lines of argument. These narrative disruptions, like those in “They Dream Only of America”, can be seen to define the narrative momentum of the poem and lead to suggestive formulations as in the last quoted lines above: “The brick arches led to a room like a bubble, that broke when you entered it/And sometimes to a fallen leaf”. This passage is highly semantically ambiguous. Given the narrative disruptions *via* the syntactic ruptures in the passages above it, the reader is left to question whether the “room” or the “bubble” is what is broken, and whether the “brick arches” also led

to “a fallen leaf” or whether that line, like those before it, is a perspective shift. These complex semantic and narrative involutions must be understood to be the by-product of syntax, not merely in its capacity to be disrupted, but in its capacity to flow “normally”. Throughout the collection, “normal” syntactic expectations, and “rules”, are constantly manipulated, creating an atmosphere where narrative (and semantic) instability provides a much more open cognitive space for readers. Here, again, the poems’ value as “theories of consciousness” becomes visible, in that syntax is generally a critical property of language which allows narrative to be constructed, the disruption of it is, in conventional cases, what causes narrative to break down. Ashbery’s approach is to create a sort of “negative relief” effect by reversing syntax’s usual role in narrative creation. Narrative is composed of the ruptures rather than interrupted by them.

You, Me, He, and John Ashbery: Unsettled Pronouns in Ashbery and Their Cognitive Implications

The most sustained work on the use of pronouns in Ashbery is John Emil Vincent’s book, *John Ashbery and You* (2007). In the book, Vincent approaches the role of pronouns quite differently from this thesis, however. Though there is a “cognitive dimension” to his argument, it will be seen to resemble features of the “reader response” critical position of Wolfgang Iser rather than more self-consciously “cognitive” perspectives. Vincent essentially suggests that pronouns, in particular the pronoun “you”, are a “means of entry” of sorts into Ashbery’s work for the reader, a kind of address on the part of Ashbery to those coming to his later collections. Vincent writes:

‘You’ is a supremely elastic pronoun in these books and the lyrics they contain, but the largest sense in which later Ashbery takes ‘you’, in this case the reader, into account is by patterning his books such that each one provides a distinct point of entry. Each single poem doesn’t necessarily seem attentive to the reader, but each book has the reader’s listening firmly in mind. (Vincent 5)

Vincent's argument, thus, is somewhat similar to Helen Vendler's in *The Invisible Listener*, that the poems are addressed to an off-stage listener of whose presence Ashbery is "acutely conscious" (Vendler 57). Such readings of Ashbery have implications for understanding the role of poetic intention in the chapter to come. However, presently, it is more important to consider other aspects of pronouns than their capacity to address readers, or to make readers feel engaged directly by a text. Ashbery himself has spoken about the role of pronouns in his writing and suggested they are not necessarily externally directed addresses:

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, 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 ... I find it very easy to move from one person in the sense of a pronoun to another. (Packard 123-124)

The quotation suggests that Ashbery's use of pronouns is, if not a direct address, then very consciously a kind of dialogue with his readers and their faculties of syntax and cognition. If this is the case, the question then becomes how this dialogue functions. Again, for the purposes of the present thesis given its concerns with syntax as a concept on its own terms, Gertrude Stein seems to function as a useful literary and conceptual antecedent for Ashbery in terms of recognising the disruptive possibilities provided by pronouns *via* their syntactic roles. The reader may here recall Stein's description of pronouns from the *Lectures in America*: that pronouns are "better" than nouns in that they "are not really the name of anything", and that they, thus, have "a greater possibility of becoming something" (*Look at Me and Here I Am* 126). Such ambiguity appeals to Stein, and, clearly, as seen in Ashbery's review of *Stanzas in Meditation*, pronoun usage was something Ashbery took notice of in Stein's writing. Ashbery's approach to pronoun use, however, crucially differs. In the case of Ashbery, pronouns are less valuable for their role in naming (or in avoiding naming); they are considered more with regard to deeper syntactic properties, specifically in relation to the concept of "anaphora", the relationship between

pronouns and the words to which they refer. From the time of the so-called “Chomskyan Revolution”, anaphora has represented a major subject of linguistic research. Chomsky’s linguistics, in particular, examine the restrictions on the relation of “co-reference” in which a pronoun is understood to refer to a particular noun in a particular way, for example, as in the sentence, “Jack hurt him”, where the word “him” is understood not to be capable of referring to “Jack”. In the sentence “Jack hurt himself”, however, the pronoun is *required* to refer to “Jack” (Smith 41-42). This property of pronoun reference is not reducible to semantics, as the grammatical structure, at least in terms of conventional “prescriptive” grammar, of the two sentences is the same (noun-verb-pronoun). The difference is thought to be a property of “binding conditions” as later Chomskyan linguistics (from the “government and binding” era) articulated. Though, again, the concept is highly technical, its basic properties are easy enough to see: some pronoun relations are permitted, others are not for reasons which have syntactic, if not semantic, realisation. In his writing, Ashbery seems to work to “unchain” pronoun and referent in ways which involve both the characters featured in given poems and, also, the properties of pronouns as linguistic entities in line with the notion of “anaphora” as conceived in Chomskyan linguistics.¹⁴

A prominent example of such an experiment can be found in the poem “America”:

The pear tree

moving me

I am around and in my sigh

The gift of a the stars.

The person

Horror—the morsels of his choice

Rebuked to me I

—in the apartment

the pebble we in the bed.

The roof—

rain— pills—

Found among the moss

Hers wouldn't longer care—I don't know why. (*The Tennis Court Oath* 15)

In the poem, Ashbery exploits a number of properties of pronouns which are discussed in Chomskyan linguistic theory. For example, the lines, “Horror—the morsels of his choice/Rebuked to me I” creates a very difficult anaphoric puzzle. The passage could be read simply as “semantically empty” or grammatically “unacceptable”, but part of the reason for its unacceptability is the anaphoric disjunction between the pronouns. “Rebuked to me I” cannot be made to “work” as a sentence within English grammar not least because “I” and “me” are stuck in a grammatically indeterminable relationship. They cannot “co-refer” (i.e. name the same individual) in any sensical way. However, the construction “rebuked to me I” would almost seem to *require* a kind of co-reference, meaning something like the following: “The concept of the ‘I’ was rebuked in relation to me”. Such a reading is, obviously, beyond tendentious, meaning that, in a positive sense at least, the passage cannot be “resolved”. However, awareness of the anaphoric connections the pronouns evoke makes it possible to see how semantic irresolution is guided by *syntactic* disruption, and how such disruption interacts with basic properties of language in ways identified by Chomsky. Ashbery’s irresolution moves even beyond his early complications of Stevensesan arguments and considers the possibilities of structural as well as syllogistic irresolution.

In the poem, “Night”, also from *The Tennis Court Oath*, the following passage presents similar syntactic issues to those described above: “And the bed hung with violets/I was rampant to ask you she had been would circulate/The prisons ...” (*The Tennis Court Oath* 23). Here, again, a passage—the term “sentence” seems inappropriate—resists conventional semantic interpretability partly by exploiting difficulties posed by unconscious understandings of pronoun

relations. The reader begins, perhaps, by mentally inserting a comma at the line break after “violets” and before the line “I was rampant to ask you she”. At this point, it becomes impossible to continue reading the sentence as a continuous narrative or coherent statement. Again, perhaps the reader could mentally create a new clause after the next few words appear, essentially making the following structure: “I was rampant to ask you. She had been”. This, of course, is not what Ashbery wrote, nor, likely, is it a reading he would obviously support. However, as above, the strict “meaning” is less important than how Ashbery disrupts *possible* meanings and how readers are forced, by syntax, to engage their ability to create narrative or to “force sense” from his writing. The ambiguity created by Ashbery’s floating pronouns, like the syntactic “ruptures” described above, becomes a way of experimenting with and destabilising narrative position and, thus, to a degree, readerly perception, but, most germane to the present considerations, with the creation of syntactic ambiguities *via* the use (or “misuse”) of pronouns, Ashbery recognises the same relationships Chomsky identifies from his more formal perspective. This represents a powerful expression of literature’s ability to highlight important features of language in less formal ways than science, and, thus, to identify and represent the cognitive—as well as semantic—implications of such features. Ashbery’s own approach does not rely on the reader supplying interpretation, but actually works to manage interpretation by literary experiments with narrative context which mandate cognitive consequences and highlight cognitive implications.

Ashbery’s examination and use of the anaphoric properties of pronouns has remained a topic of interest throughout his writing life. Ashbery has also examined the kind of co-reference relations described above, notably in his later collection, *Girls on the Run* (1999). For example, in *Section VIII* of the poem, “Uncle Philip”, “or someone who’s beside himself”, speaks (Ashbery, *Girls on the Run* 16). The ambiguity created by the idiom adds another layer of complexity to the (in Chomskyan terms) “co-indexing-co-referencing” problem created by the pronoun’s anaphoric relations. In a sense, the semantic meaning of the sentence is clear, or, at least, a

reasonable reading can be teased out: the “someone who’s beside himself” is another person. The question is whether the “himself” is meant to denote position (i.e. the “someone” is “beside” Uncle Philip), or state of being (i.e. the someone is “beside himself” in the idiomatic sense). The difficulty of resolution is created by the locality conditions on anaphors discussed above. The “himself” in the clause is bound by “someone” as it is the nearest referent to which the anaphor can bind. However, Ashbery attempts to make the reader destructure the idiom and consider a syntactically unacceptable possibility. A later example from the poem is also revealing:

Nov. 7. Returned again to the exhibition. How strange it is that when we least imagine we are enjoying themselves, a shaft of reason will bedazzle us. Then it’s up to us, or at any rate them, to think ourselves out of the muddle and in so doing, turn up whole again on the shore impeached by a sigh, so that the whole balcony of spectators goes whizzing past, out of control, on a collision course with destiny and the bridesmaids sobbing. (*Girls on the Run* 12-3)

The phrase “we are enjoying themselves” is, syntactically speaking, an unresolvable pronominal reference structure. Though, as above, the grammatically acceptable “we enjoyed ourselves” or “we enjoyed them” are structurally identical (noun-verb-pronoun), the reference relations are not in any way synonymous. By using the “unacceptable” reference structure, Ashbery highlights this curious property of syntax and demands that his reader come to terms with the problem it creates in terms of interpretation. It is not the case that Ashbery or literature has “beaten” linguistic science to the concept in this case, unlike the “empty category violations” discussed above, but what is notable is that, again, Ashbery recognises, and in Ashbery’s characteristically non-systematic way, he could be said to “theorise” the implications of a concept from formal linguistics, in that he formulates an understanding of the consequences—linguistic and cognitive—of a particular feature of language, and uses this understanding of those consequences to create literary effects, literary effects with significant cognitive implications. The use of the pronominal ambiguity must almost certainly be understood by Ashbery to be the

result of a reference problem of some kind, though Ashbery has never discussed his technique in this way. The awareness of the readerly confusion caused by the use of the co-reference problem implicitly identifies reference association as a feature of pronouns in the minds of readers and makes its disruption, or ambiguation, meaningful. Syntax prises open the machinery of mind and the capacity of the reader to generate meaning.

Also notable is the fact that the “beside himself” passage from *Girls on the Run* above, like the “hurt himself” examples, suggests that the problem of pronominal co-reference represents a “subject” as well as a “site” of Ashbery’s poetic experiments. Though Ashbery is less interested in resolving or discovering the reason for the co-reference problems—indeed, quite the opposite—a cognitively-minded critic will notice instances like these as examples whereby literature-as-cognitive-experiment reveals a property of mind with implications which stretch beyond literary or aesthetic effect.

Later Approaches to Syntax: Collusion with Syntax in Long Poems and the Role of Unvoiced Language in Ashbery’s Writing

As Ashbery’s writing life has progressed, his use of the syntactic system has evolved. In later works, in particular, it appears that what interested Ashbery most about syntax was less its capacity to be “broken” in meaningful ways, but more how it held words together in the “Joycean” way described earlier in relation to *Finnegans Wake*. This later approach to syntax has been remarked upon by critics, including David Herd, who compares Ashbery’s use of syntax to that of Henry James:

Reading late James, one can follow, from clause to clause, how one thought leads to another, even as one is aware that the point for departure, the beginning of the sentence, is receding further and further from view. So it is with Ashbery’s long sentence: his syntax calling on the reader to think of understanding as a process not an end point.

(Herd 128)

This syntactic dynamic, though a far cry from the drastic disorderings of syntax in *The Tennis Court Oath*, may come much closer to the notion of cognitive “flow” as examined by his modernist stream-of-consciousness predecessors. Despite this, the system of syntax itself remains central to Ashbery’s later writings. In *Flow Chart*, the capacity for language to create a cognitive environment for the reader is in particular focus. Of special interest in regard to *Flow Chart* is less how Ashbery disrupts conventional and fundamental features of syntax, but how the continuity provided by syntactic structures of mind allows language to “flow”. It is as if, after having shown readers the negative relief of syntax for so long, Ashbery decides to finally show the relief itself. Consider this extended passage:

What enters your gate is my own inference, not some
colossal steed pawing the dust in a protracted spasm of preparedness, for what voyage
can any of us undertake until the lotus moon has risen to vanquish
squibs or rumors concerning its eligibility that blew up while one was seated,
somewhat
taken aback, disinclined to candor that day, or anything that might compromise
intelligent
speculation about the origin of dreams. (Ashbery, *Flow Chart* 71)

The passage, a single, very long sub-clause-heavy sentence, may strain attentional faculties in Jamesean ways, but it is perfectly syntactically “correct”, or “acceptable” in linguistic terminology, meaning that the constituent clauses are comprehensible within the framework of a Chomskyan notion of the grammar of English.¹⁵ If the passage is “interpretable”, it is largely a result of the cognitive unity imposed by syntax. Here again, the cognitive implications of Ashbery’s syntactic awareness become clear, though the system of syntax is not foregrounded in *Flow Chart* in quite the way it is in *The Tennis Court Oath*. This quieter investigation of the power of syntax can also be seen as a starting point for investigations of other cognitive faculties.

Where, in *The Tennis Court Oath*, it was clear Ashbery was forcing the reader's mind to cope with "forcing sense" from syntactic ruptures, in *Flow Chart*, the deceptively easy syntactic comprehensibility of given passages allows the reader to become immersed in the text without entirely being certain of his/her place in any given narrative or argument. As Herd has argued, this "wood-for-the-trees-effect" is underwritten by syntax, and proves quite seductive and powerful from a literary perspective, allowing the reader deep intimacy with the text while providing a very ambiguous set of semantic circumstances. So it is possible to see what Ashbery is saying in a strict sense, in terms of lexical choice and in terms of readability, but interpretation is resisted, and, thus, the "openness" that so many critics have noted as a hallmark of Ashbery's writing is maintained, paradoxically, by virtue of the reverse-engineering of the syntactic processes that made *The Tennis Court Oath* seem such an open and participatory (if not exactly "accessible") literary document. Where the syntactic ruptures of *The Tennis Court Oath* left major narrative ambiguities for the reader to resolve, essentially underdetermining the poetic information Ashbery allowed his reader, in *Flow Chart*, syntactic recursion creates such verbally dense structures that meaning proliferates and opens out because of the sheer profusion of possible interpretations.¹⁶

This openness is critical to seeing the cognitive implications of Ashbery's use of syntax in the ways described above. In keeping a narrative "open" by disrupting syntax, Ashbery not only employs, and comments on, the syntactic apparatus, but, also, as seen earlier, he places demands on readerly attention in (re)constructing narratives. To the reader, this process also becomes "visible"; the reader is aware of the fact that his/her mind is "making" the narrative, and is, thus, aware of his/her cognitive processes in action. The opposite of this idea is to suggest that by using syntactically "sound" recursive sub-clauses to draw the reader into flowing, ambiguous narratives, Ashbery's "openness" demonstrates the same implications of syntax and cognition in reverse while simultaneously demonstrating to the reader the reality of his/her ability to be "led" by grammatical structure.

for understanding how Ashbery's writing "dramatises" thought processes. Of particular note in "Leaving the Atocha Station", however, is the significance of the pronominal "shifts". Here, the familiar Ashbery game of "floating pronouns" permits the reader's collusion in the creation of the scene. The poem begins with "us" and "we" as what might be called the "mental setting" for events, but, after the line "the region took us back", wherein, "the person left us like birds", the "pronoun setting" shifts to the third person. The most straightforward reading of this choice of pronouns is that it reflects the confusions that confront travellers as they encounter foreign locales and languages. Indeed, the various forms of "you" and "you collective" available in Castilian Spanish (e.g. "tu/tus", "usted/ustedes", and "vos/vosotros") demonstrate another way in which Ashbery uses syntactic relations to deepen the sense of specificity of place in the work. There are many possible "yous" in Spanish, and Ashbery, aware of the many cognitive "yous" inside him, may well be drawing attention to the flexibility of the very concept of "you-ness" in the Spanish language as compared with the "flatter" character of the lexical realisation of the term in English.

Returning to the notion of the "empty category" as discussed earlier it is also possible to consider a feature of language hinted at previously, and to see its efficacy as a means of exploring syntax as subject matter and as site for cognitive experimentation. Recall that an "empty category" in linguistics is understood to be a phonetically empty component of language which retains grammatical significance (i.e. an element of language which the ear does not hear but which the cognitive faculty which "hears" syntax somehow does). Though Ashbery's writing offers many examples of "classic" empty category violations in the style of Cummings, a more intriguing use of "unvoiced language" in Ashbery is that proposed by John Shoptaw in *On the Outside Looking Out* (1994). Shoptaw suggests that, in Ashbery's writing, there exist what he calls "crypt" terms, whereby Ashbery uses a different lexical term to provoke the mind into thinking of an absent but similar term.¹⁶ For example, consider the instance Shoptaw discusses: the substitution of the words "mincing fag" for "mincing flag" in the poem "Boy" from *Some Trees*

(Shoptaw 6). Neither the mind nor the ear actually “hears” the phrase “mincing fag” but by virtue of the terms’ proximity, associations are evoked in the mind—in Shoptaw’s mind at least. This phenomenon need not actually be experienced by every reader (for example, someone from England may need the connotation of “fag” in American English explained, and, indeed, *vice versa*). However, the capacity of the mind to generate such associations *via* the absent “content” of a poem demonstrates another feature of how a poem can exist as a theory of consciousness. The poet, in using lexical terms this way, is, again, presuming certain cognitive capacities on the part of his reader.

The “crypt word” is, metaphorically, consonant with the notion of the empty category in linguistics. In a sense, it is an “empty word” without phonological representation, but which the mind may “hear”. The important feature of “crypt terms” is not the terms themselves, but the cognitive associations they may generate. In a sense, they are not unlike the “emotional” phonemes spoken of by Reuven Tsur and noted in the introduction. The lexical or phonemic content can mask or conceal its effects. The implications of this reading are less significant from a narrowly-focussed linguistic perspective, but are perhaps an effective transitional notion for beginning to think of Ashbery’s more general examination of “the mind at work or at rest”: the manipulation of the cognitive environment of his readers. As will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, the idea that writers write for readers would seem, on the surface, to be so obvious as to be completely banal, but in adopting a cognitive literary perspective, a critic may take this seemingly banal point in new and revealing directions. Seen from a cognitive perspective, the reader/writer relationship speaks as much to the functioning of cognition as to the basic tautology of literature becoming literature through the reading process or completed *via* an Iser-esque notion of “reader response”. The notion of the “crypt” term suggests not merely *that* a writer writes for readers, but hints at *how* a writer writes for readers. By exploring this “how”, it becomes possible to see both how writing engages mind, and how writers manipulate,

or attempt to manipulate, that engagement. Readers are understood to have particular competencies, and within the range provided by these competencies, it is possible to experiment.

From the Specific to the General: Considering How Chomskyan Syntax May Interact with Other Cognitive Faculties

As can be seen from the sections above, in a number of instances Ashbery identifies aspects of language that were of interest to Chomsky and appears to exploit them for literary and cognitive effect. By considering Ashbery's writing in relation to Chomsky's ideas, it is also possible to understand his unique "experimental" approach to literature in a richer way, indeed, a way Ashbery did not specifically intend, but which, given the possibilities offered by cognitive literary approaches, it is possible to discern. Ashbery's considerations of syntax and language did not merely have implications for poets like the School of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers who embraced the radicality of *The Tennis Court Oath's* experiments, but, for those with the background to see it, it also held important possibilities for understanding the relationship between literature and mind. The chapter has also shown that despite—in fact, because of—the narrowness of Chomsky's understanding of syntax, it is possible to discern critical, possibly universal, properties of a specific sub-process of mind and begin the work of considering how the highly specialised faculty of language may interact with other processes and features of mind. Having now seen how a very restrictive and specialised branch of cognitive science can illuminate literary texts and provide cognitive literary critics with generative material which may be extrapolable to larger questions of cognition, it is possible to begin to consider how literature and literary criticism can formulate those questions and engage the more integrative theories of cognition which include elements of linguistic exploration. Looking ahead, the methods and approaches Ashbery uses to dramatise, discuss, depict and question the functioning of the conscious mind will have implications for traditional understandings of authorial intention. In focussing on "conscious" processes, Ashbery also is attempting to represent or recharacterise

particular familiar aspects of mind *via* literature. In doing this, it is clear that he begins from a particular perspective: that such properties, at least experientially speaking, exist, and that they can be represented or described meaningfully. Insofar as this is the case, any representation or depiction becomes a self-conscious—literally—investigation of cognitive faculties.

Notes

1. Chomsky's system was essentially the first version of a "phrase structure grammar" (PSG) in modern linguistics, a system of syntax in which grammatical roles are recognised as having particular properties and recursive character. The idea of the phrase structure grammar was abandoned by Chomsky for technical reasons later in his career. Essentially all post-Chomsky proposals for grammar are "phrase structure grammars" in one sense or other; however there are dissident positions in the academy which emphasise particular aspects of a given set of rules. The most prominent is perhaps the first wave of post-Chomskyan linguists who broke with Chomsky over his increasingly minimalist approach to rules. Prominent examples of this school, for further reading, include Paul Postal, in particular, his book, *On Raising: One Rule of English Grammar and its Theoretical Implications* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974. Print); Postal's view is that the Chomsky's idea of surface structures converted to/from deep structures remains the correct way of characterising language despite Chomsky's change of views, and that semantic elements can be critical to the brain's processing of language (Postal xiii). Another prominent dissident position is articulated by Ruth Kempson *et al.* in their work, *Dynamic Syntax* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001. Print) which views the mind's processing of syntactic data as "building up interpretation from the sequence of words", and "establishing some structure as interpretation rather than specifying the RESULT[*sic*]" (Kempson et al. ix), meaning that in the interpretation of language, the mind is interpreting *as* it processes not merely acting on structures which are independent of the surface signal input.

2. One of the most intriguing and puzzling exceptions to this general climate was a paper published in Europe by Bloomfield himself on the Czech language. Chomsky discusses this curious example of Bloomfield seeming, against his own articulated and published understanding of language, to accept something like a "generative grammar" as the basis for language in an interview conducted by Sudheer Kolachina, Jason Lipshin and Luv Sharma titled "Interview with Professor Noam Chomsky". It can be viewed in full at the following URL:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2isewvsPiA>.

3. Chomsky discusses the possible consequences of the first appearance of language in human history in the lecture “What is Language and Why Does it Matter” (2013). He particularly cites the work of the anthropologist, Ian Tattersall, as a resource for deeper investigation into the current understanding of the role language played in evolution and evolution in language. For further information, see Tattersall, Ian. *Masters of the Planet: The Search for Our Human Origins*. New York, NY: Macmillan Science, 2013. Print. The lecture “What is Language and Why Does it Matter” is viewable at the URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iDc34AXWils>.

4. Chomsky discusses the difference between evolution and change at length in a lecture delivered at the University of Cologne entitled, “Language and Other Cognitive Systems: What is Special about Language?”. The lecture was delivered in 2011, and it can be viewed in full at the following URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2v6XFkSwVys>.

5. In linguistic notation, the arrow symbol is interpreted as “rewritten as”, meaning the original phrase is “rewritten” according to particular rules in the way indicated after the arrowhead.

6. For further reading on rule generalisation and tensing, see Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, pp. 39-45 for an accessible discussion.

7. The term “UG” refers to “Universal Grammar” the term used by Chomsky to denote the mechanism by which syntactic data becomes comprehensible as human language rather than other data from the auditory surround.

8. In linguistic notation an asterisk before a sentence means that the sentence is “unacceptable” or “not part of” a particular grammar.

9. The experiment was far-ranging and more elaborate questions were asked. Again, Lightfoot summarises the findings:

Thornton and Crain found that young children behaved just like adults, manifesting the hypothetical genetic constraint. The children tested ranged in age from 2 years, 11

months to 4 years, 5 months, with an average age of 3 years, 8 months. In the elicited questions there was not a single instance of the reduced form where it is impossible in adult speech. Children produced elaborate forms like those of (9), but never with the reduced form of *is*.

- (9) a. Do you know what that black thing on the flower is? (4 years, 3 months)
- b. Squeaky, what do you think that is? (3 years, 11 months)
- c. Do you know what that is on the flower? (4 years, 5 months)
- d. Do you know what that is, Squeaky? (3 years, 2 months) (McGilvray et al. 55)

10. To read more in depth and later work by Crain and Thornton regarding the concept of “empty categories” (and linguistics more generally) and how their understandings have evolved, see, Crain, Steven, and Rosalind Thornton. *Investigations into Universal Grammar*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998. Print.

11. Another literary text that could be understood as “proto-Chomskyan” in the sense of the term used in this chapter, preceding even modernism, is Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky” from *Through the Looking Glass* (1871). The first stanza demonstrates the “*Finnegans Wake* effect” perhaps as well as it has ever been expressed:

‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogroves
And the mome raths outgrabe. (Carroll 20)

As in *Finnegans Wake*, very few of the words have any relationship to the “normal” lexical content of English, but by preserving English syntax the passage becomes comprehensible. From another cognitive perspective, that of Reuven Tsur, much could also be said about the way the phonemic structure of Carroll’s non-word words work to create sensory and emotional effects.

12. Despite Ashbery's protestations, he continues to be classified and described as a surrealist by many critics. For an example of a particularly recent argument for seeing Ashbery's work in the surrealist tradition, see Levy, Ellen. *Criminal Ingenuity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Print (particularly pp. 133-135).

13. Macfarquhar stresses the "managed" element of Ashbery's formulation:

The word managed is important: although he, like [John] Cage, has experimented with the *I Ching*, he doesn't let it dictate poems the way James Merrill used a Ouija board. He summons chance but never entirely submits to it: chance occurrences are always filtered through his mind. (MacFarquhar 88)

14. For a more detailed and accessible analysis of anaphora, see Smith, Neil. *Chomsky Ideas and Ideals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Print (particularly the section titled "Evolution and Innateness", pp. 36-43).

15. For a full discussion of the function and structure of recursion in language, see Chomsky, Noam, and Tecumseh Fitch, Marc Hauser. "The Faculty of Language: What is it, Who Has it and How Did it Evolve?" *Science* Vol. 298, 22 November, 2002. For a detailed and accessible discussion of the concept of "recursion", see Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, pp. 130-132.

16. Shoptaw's idea of "crypt" terms resembles a concept developed in the psychoanalytic work of Nicholas Abraham and Mária Török. Shoptaw acknowledges the lineage of the term in the notes from his book, writing:

Crypt words are by no means limited to Ashbery, or to other contemporary or surrealist poets. My discussion will remind some readers of Michael Riffaterre's "hypogram" and "matrix." But this strictly semantic model would rule out sonic and visual, literal cryptography. Cryptography is a more encompassing and prevalent phenomenon. For related discussions of the impact of unwritten words and phrases, see

Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981) 1-23; Jean Starobinski, *Words Upon Words: The Anagrams of Ferdinand de Saussure*, trans. Olivia Emmet (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979); John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley: California UP, 1981) 141-42; Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok [sic], *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*, trans. Nicholas Rand (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1986); Garret Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and Phonotext* (Berkeley: California UP, 1990); Jonathan Culler, ed., *On Puns* (Oxford, Blackwell: 1988) [sic]. (Shoptaw 354)

In addition to the books listed by Shoptaw, and given Ashbery's own interest in (and involvement with) psychoanalysis, Abraham and Török's ideas may be of most interest to readers of the present thesis given its concerns with cognitive issues and how Ashbery conceives of the mind. Though Abraham and Török approach the question from a psychoanalytic perspective which presumes different baseline properties of mind, the concept itself is necessarily a "cognitive one" as it is generated *via* mental and psycho-sensory structures. The feedback between cognition and literature in this instance is made deeper given the literary frame Freud frequently used to explain his psychological conceptions. Unfortunately there is no evidence of concrete links between Ashbery's psychoanalytic treatment and his formally theorising the use of terms identified in his writing by Shoptaw as "crypt" terms. For more information on the concept within the Freudian framework of mind, see Abraham and Török's *The Shell and The Kernel* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994. Print.) and the essay, "The Lost Object—Me: Notes on Endocryptic Identification" (1975) for further reading on the concept of the "crypt" as it is related to psychoanalytic thought.

Chapter Two

Intentionality and Literary Experiment: Understanding the Literary Work as Intentional

Act

Language's concept is thought, and we must not let ourselves be put off by the view of certain sensitive people that its greatest significance is to produce inarticulate sounds. (Kierkegaard *Either/Or* 76)

Before dealing with the literary approaches to the concept of intentionality in detail, it is necessary to arrive at a workable definition of what constitutes "intention" and intentionality for the purpose of considering that notion in relation to literature. In formulating a narrower conception of literary intention, it will become possible to see "acts of literature", even ones which incorporate, or write chance into their construction, as being manifestations of intention, and in doing so, to determine how such manifestations of intention are products of cognitive faculties. As will be seen, Ashbery's writing takes a number of approaches to representing his own authorial intentions; however, without a solid and narrow understanding of the concept of intention itself, such experiments will at best offer insight into Ashbery's writing as literature and not its implications for considering the faculties of mind.

The conception of literary intention that this thesis argues for can be thought of as building on a seemingly simple assumption that is inherent to literature. Walter Slatoff, writing in *With Respect to Readers: Dimensions of Literary Response* (1970), is almost abashed in noticing and articulating the property that will guide the examinations of this chapter: "One feels a little foolish having to begin by insisting that works of literature exist, in part, to be read, that we do in fact read them, and that it is worth thinking about what happens when we do" (Slatoff 3). Slatoff's statement, however seemingly obvious, should not be viewed as simplistic. It is the starting point of not only the present study's examination of intention, but also the work of one of the major figures in the theoretisation of literary intention, Wolfgang Iser. Iser, in *The Implied*

Reader (1974), makes a similar point to Slatoff's. Iser's overarching point is that literature helps in the process of individuals' recognition of aspects of their role in the external world of social relations and culture (Iser, *The Implied Reader* xii). This goes substantially beyond the aims of the present study, which focusses instead on a different notion both of "the implied reader" and of writerly intention. It is the mental rather than the social world of the writer and reader which will be of paramount importance to the present argument, though the social, or at least the "contextual" environment of the writer, reader and literary work will also be significant.

Returning directly to Iser and Slatoff's ideas, the implications of works of literature existing "in part to be read" means that a writer, in composing work for a readership, not only may (or may not) have certain argumentative or aesthetic ends in mind while writing; the writer also presumes a number of competencies on the part of the reader which are revealing both with regard to the nature and structure of the mind of the reader, as well as that of the writer. This is particularly true of experimental literature in its expectations of particular readerly competencies and its refusals of conventions.

Historical understandings of literary intention, while articulating some of the relationships writers create with readers, are often less concerned with the implications the possession and manipulation of presumed readerly competencies represent in the writer's mind. By taking these features into account, it becomes possible to see another way in which literature, and, in the case of Ashbery, poetry in particular, become theories of consciousness as described in the previous chapter. While literature can represent and manifest consciousness on its own terms, poems, and literary artefacts more generally, will be seen to be manifestations or expressions of pure intention.

Literary Intention as a Distinct Concept: The True Meaning of “True Meanings” of

Literature

Poetry is republican speech: a speech which is its own law and an end unto itself, and in which all the parts are free citizens and have the right to vote. (Schlegel *Lucinde and the Fragments* 150)

The role of “intention” in literature and the consideration of its various manifestations have undergone considerable conceptual shifts over the course of the twentieth century. Kaye Mitchell’s book, *Intention and Text* (2008), traces the evolution of literary critical treatment of the concept of “writerly intention” and gives some indication of how the literary understandings of the term have evolved. Among the key figures Mitchell cites are the critics W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, whose essay, “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946), represents something like the beginning of the modern understanding of “literary intention”, rejecting any kind of “authorial centrality” as the originary source of meaning. Wimsatt and Beardsley argue that understanding the “intention” of a given writer in the creation of a work of literature is neither “available” nor “desirable” for “judging the success of a work of art” (Wimsatt and Beardsley 468). In this understanding of intention, the aim of determining exactly what a writer may have meant by a particular word choice is less important than how a work can be read, and what other possible connections and understandings it opens up. “Success” has become a much less prevalent term in the discussion of literature than it was in the period during which “The Intentional Fallacy” was written. However, Wimsatt and Beardsley provide a critical insight which would seem to be inarguable: that the exact intentions of a writer, as s/he is experiencing or conceiving them in the composition of a text, are not “available” to the critical audience, not least for obvious reasons like the death or inability to remember on the part of a living author, but, also because so little is known about the notion of intention in itself.

Wimsatt's and Beardsley's work tends to rely on the notion of intention in its historical literary-theoretical sense, the sense of the term that could loosely be characterised as "the true meaning the author intended to generate in the mind of the reader through the creation of the text". Such a notion presupposes both a definite meaning of the text in the mind of the author, which is an extremely problematic concept, and a reliance on the ability of language to transcend a given instant. Though language can be "appropriate" to particular circumstances, "appropriateness" is not an exact concept. Further, the evolution of understandings of what a text is "about" or what is "important" in or about a particular text evolve as rapidly, perhaps even more rapidly, than the set of social relations in the wider society. A book may have meant something specific to a particular author in the writing process—though it is likely such meaning may also evolve as a work is being written—but what the concept in the writer's mind itself may come to mean as societies and cultures evolve makes tracing meanings backward a very precarious business. The fact that even such a narrow conception of intention is so difficult to meaningfully sustain as a durable understanding for use in literary investigation only further highlights the necessity of developing a new and more "available" concept of intention for literary study, because, though certain types of questions are excluded in such an approach, a more cognitively-based notion of "intention" and intentionality opens up a wide variety of new questions.

Building on Wimsatt's and Beardsley's rejection of "true meaning"-based understandings of writerly intention is the work of Iser. Iser has a strongly cognitive outlook, if not a formally cognitive methodology, in his approach to literature. What is of critical import to the concept of literary intention, both in understanding the intellectual lineage of the concept over the last several decades and with regard to the immediate concerns of the present thesis, is Iser's notion that "author and reader" participate in a "game of the imagination" with each other (*The Act of Reading* 108), and that a text or literary work "must itself be thought of" as representing or

manifesting “consciousness” (*The Act of Reading* 154). Iser’s concept of “reader response”, essentially summarisable in his formulation that, “a literary text can only produce a response when it is read” (*The Act of Reading* ix), contributes significantly to understanding the larger phenomenon of reading literature in a cognitive way.

The difference between the present argument and that of Iser is that where Iser is concerned with the “response” aspect of the dynamic, the present study is more concerned with what the writer takes into account in the *production* of the literary text, not in the traditional sense of creating an argument, or of having a single specific meaning in mind, but in generating a text with the psychological and cognitive capacities of his/her readers in mind. Here, Iser’s writings are helpful in further framing the notion. He writes that reading “sets in motion a whole chain of activities that depend both on the text and on the exercise of basic human faculties” (*The Act of Reading* ix). These “basic faculties” will become the subject matter of this chapter, particularly the capacity to comprehend conventions of literature and to comprehend deviations from those conventions, as well as the ability of readers to process extra-linguistic elements as “parts” of a whole which, following Roman Ingarden, comes to “givenness” in the integrated literary work. The faculties of the reader, as Iser writes, are critical to this dynamic. To understand how writers investigate these faculties is to further consider the question of how writing becomes a “theory of consciousness”. Extending from the tradition of Iser, Mitchell’s own argument with regard to the concept of intention is that instead of relying on a single conscious actor (i.e. the writer), critics in search of literary intention should look to the text itself (Mitchell 114). With this idea in mind, a number of questions arise which are relevant to the argument presented in this chapter. The key difference between this thesis’ understanding of literary intention and that of Mitchell, Iser, and Wimsatt and Beardsley is the setting aside of the question of what the “argument” or “meaning” of a given text may be. Such meaning can either be articulated by a writer, or exist as an “emergent” property of the internal logic of the text itself. The *presentation* and organisation of

a text is, for the present study, most relevant to questions of intention (as a concept on its own), as well as being a manifestation of, if not “authorial intention” in the historic sense, then of the concept of “intentionality” in literature as understood by cognitive science and cognitive philosophy. Intention-intentionality represents an “act” which emerges through conscious, end-directed human actions. Thus, works of literature become not merely fora for writers to express their argumentative and aesthetic intentions—if they can be said to be such things at all. They also represent fields in which the residue of conscious intention itself can be recognised.

Intention in Philosophy: Modern Perspectives and Their Implications for Literary

Intention

The most critical question to address in the formulation of a defensible conception of literary intention is in determining what an intention actually consists of. In recent writing in the philosophy of intention considerable work has gone into disambiguating the concept of “intention” from the concept of “action”. Intention is generally conceived of as being the thought process leading to an act undertaken with particular ends in mind. “Action”, however, is simply an act undertaken without defined ends. Further distinctions have been made between “caused” actions and “basic” actions—actions like involuntary muscle movement, for example—in which no conscious “intention” lies behind the performance of an action.¹ For the purposes of the present study, it is not necessary to consider the “action”/”intention” boundary in great detail, but it is important to understand that the discussion exists because it highlights the difficulty in making any kind of statement about intention with genuine confidence.

In attempting to put forward a radically narrowed understanding of literary intention for the purpose of understanding the cognitive consequences of Ashbery’s experimental poetry, a critical distinction must here be made between *descriptive* models of theory of intention and *explanatory* models. Descriptive models of intentional behaviour were, as in linguistics, for a long time the prevalent model in mainstream philosophy. The most influential example is perhaps

Gilbert Ryle's theory of intention from *The Concept of Mind* (1949). Ryle essentially argues that the traditional notion of "intention" or of "volition" is a "causal hypothesis adopted because it was wrongly supposed that the question, 'What makes a bodily movement voluntary?' was a causal question" (Ryle 67). Ryle writes further: "Answering the question of what makes an action happen is akin to asking 'what makes the bullet fly out of the barrel of a gun'" (Ryle 81). The answer, for Ryle, is, simply, "the expansion of gasses in the cartridge" (Ryle 81).

This formulation is problematic for a number of reasons,² not least because of the kind of isomorphic relationship between action and trigger—for lack of a better term—that it presupposes. This view, however, has certainly played a role in providing the grounding for a good deal of cognitive science and cognitive philosophy over the last sixty years, and it can be understood as a precursor to the radical materialism of Skinner's behaviourism, and the later "eliminative materialism" of the Churchlands. For many philosophers, though, this approach was an unsatisfactory one. The crucial difference is that such descriptions can be provided for things people do not actually understand. To "explain" something, explanatory principles must be discovered as exemplified by the principle-driven scientific models put forward by Galileo, Newton, Einstein, or Chomsky which can also be seen to make durable predictions about phenomena. The Rylean approach essentially ignores "explanation", considering it a form of "category mistake" in favour of essentially re-describing many of the phenomena once considered under different headings (e.g. "volition" and "imagination") in a materialist framework. Philosophers, among them G.E.M. Anscombe, Donald Davidson, Alvin Goldman, Charles Altieri, Chomsky, and others, have attempted to respond to Ryle's "eliminativist" approach by considering the question of intention not as a form of "category mistake" in Ryle's sense (e.g. seeing all of the buildings that comprise a university individually but still not accepting that they *are* the university, and that there is no "university" located independently of them (Ryle

16)) but as a question of understanding *motivations*. Donald Davidson illustrates the difficulty of Ryle's position in relation to the act of turning on a light:

If I turned on the light, then I must have done it at a precise moment, in a particular way—every detail is fixed. But it makes no sense to demand that my want be directed at an action performed at any one moment or done in some unique manner. Any one of an infinitely large number of actions would satisfy the want and can be considered equally eligible as its object. (Care and Landesman et al. 181-2)

Ryle, who treats the notion of intention as reducible to the variation of particular constrained possible activities, as with moves in chess, cannot account for the infinite number of possible approaches one may take to turning on a light (e.g. doing it with one's right hand, or left hand, doing it with one's shoe, walking forward to turn on the light, walking backward to turn on the light, riding a unicycle to the switch to turn it on, etc.). The "intention", therefore, is not necessarily reducible to its manifested consequence. Further, the "appropriateness" of an action means something entirely different in the context of chess than it would in terms of actions generally. As noted above, what may be "appropriate" can have many expressions.

Context is also cited in Alvin Goldman's account of action, and in Altieri's extension of his ideas. Goldman begins with the example of a person making a hand signal in traffic, an example which he borrows from A.I. Melden in a work entitled *Free Action* (1961).³ For Goldman, the way to "access" the action is to break the wider action—signalling—into "act tokens": raising one's arm, realising that signalling would be appropriate, etc. (Goldman 57-59).

The difficulty with such approaches is that while they move beyond the eliminative model, and genuinely attempt to deal with real phenomena rather than simply claiming such phenomena do not exist, they remain essentially descriptive in character. The question of why and how an action comes to occur cannot simply be answered by appealing to the observation of

behaviour in context. This may offer *evidence* of intention but not *explanation*. The difficulty of the problem is clear. However, it will be seen that it is possible that the means used in examining literary intention can provide some insight into the question, if not exactly a resolution to the question.

Anscombe's book, *Intention* (1957), attempts to formulate a meaningful definition (for the purpose of philosophical study) of the concept of intention. The first distinction of importance—in philosophical terms—in separating “action” from “intention”, or at least “actions” from “intentional actions”, is Anscombe's statement that it is best to think of intention as “something that we can express, but which brutes (which e.g. do not give orders) can *have*” (Italics in original)(Anscombe 5). Her theory rests on the notion that it is possible to disambiguate a state of mind in which a kind of “meta-theory” is constructed by human beings in performing particular actions. To have an intention is to have something like a “meta-theory” of action, essentially a plan in which an end is formulated in the mind and the preliminary steps necessary to undertake such an act are theorised and assembled. Of course, Anscombe's distinction has difficulties, not least that “brutes” are often seen to formulate “plans” of sorts suggesting they might not simply “have” orders but may express intentions, to themselves at least, using a kind of mental “language” similar to a “language of thought” as discussed by Jerry Fodor in his book on the subject.⁴ What is, however, critical about Anscombe's notion of “expressing” intention is the fact that such expressions may have identifiable characteristics which are expressible in language, or in other communicative forms. Anscombe is most interested in finding a reliable mechanism of attribution for actions undertaken with particular intentions in mind. The crucial question she poses is the following: “is it possible to find types of statements of the form ‘A intends X’ which we can say have a great deal of certainty” (Anscombe 8). This concept of intention has a close relationship to conceptions of literary intention which ask similar questions of texts. Though Anscombe is concerned with a different

notion of intention from that which will be explored later, it is illustrative to take an example from her book which gives some idea of the range of phenomena within which such questions of intention can be asked. She posits a thought experiment in which a person is building a house:

his plan may not determine whether he has sash or casement windows; but he must decide which kind of window to have, at least when he comes to it, or the house will not get finished. And his calculation ‘if I choose this, this will be the result, if that, that; so I’ll have this’ is calculation with a view to an end—namely, the completed house; even though both alternatives would have fitted his plan. He is choosing *an* alternative that fits, even though it is not the only one that would. (Anscombe 81)

This example presents a useful framework for considering how literary-poetic intention can be conceptualised: a poet intends to write a poem, or, perhaps better, to create a literary work. The poet then selects particular forms if, for example, writing a formal poem, and varies them according to his/her choice. Within this framework, an intention becomes manifest, but it is not fundamentally determined by the original impetus. Writing a poem need not result in a sonnet, but it may; building a house need not result in a work in the style of Zaha Hadid, but it may. With this framework in mind, it is now possible to take a more explicitly linguistic consideration of the question of intention as it has evolved since the time of Anscombe’s book so that the relationship of the argument in the previous chapter and this chapter can be seen more fully.

The interaction of language and intention can be theorised as a fundamental interface of cognitive properties. This interface is succinctly expressed in Chomsky’s notion of what he calls an “i-language”—a language which is “internal, individual and intensional [*sic*]” (*New Horizons in the Study of Language and Mind* vii). An i-language is internal in that it has grown out of cognitive faculties which allow language to develop in the mind. It is also “individual” in that the language is fully known by each individual user; it is not the role of external authorities to determine what is “correct” and “incorrect” in a language. Finally, it is “intensional” in that the speaker/hearer of

a language may use language to suit his or her own desires and intentions (for communication, artistic purposes, or whatever ends s/he chooses). This conception of language is ontological in character, concerned more with the fundamental nature of language as a structure, but it has important implications for the present chapter's concern with the *telos* of language, particularly with regard to "speech-act theory" as developed by Austin.

In his *William James Lectures, How To Do Things With Words* (1955), Austin outlined the basics of "speech-act theory" wherein uses of language could be said to have particular kinds of force as assertions of truth, or recognitions of states of being, as in, for example, statements like "it is raining". Among the most important insights from the lectures is Austin's breaking down of speech acts into three classificatory types: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. Austin writes that "when we perform a locutionary act, we use speech" (Austin 99). Essentially, a locutionary act simply is an audible or visible production of lexical content that has grammatical-syntactic comprehensibility. Austin then defines an "illocutionary act" which is the "performance of an act *in* saying something as opposed to the performance of an act *of* saying something" (Italics added), meaning that the content of the speech-act is less relevant, in the illocutionary act, than the context, into which such a speech-act may enter (Austin 99). Thus, with illocutionary acts, the saying of a given statement and the context in which it is produced is as much the subject of consideration as the content of the statement itself. Finally, Austin describes a concept he calls a "perlocutionary act", an act of language in which "saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of an audience" (Austin 101). With perlocutionary acts, the possible *impact* of making a statement of some kind in a particular context is the main consideration for philosophical investigation. The perlocutionary act is of greatest significance to the notion of literary intention embraced in this thesis. In widening the field of interaction to the "audience" in Austin's terminology, or the "reader" in Wolfgang Iser's, it becomes possible to understand how the poem-as-

“perlocutionary-act” manifests as theory of consciousness. Instead of concentrating on the act of speech or literature itself (locutionary), or even on the context in which the act is uttered or presented (illocutionary), by focussing on the possible or predictable *consequences* of an act (perlocutionary), the way the producer of the speech/literary-act conceives of his/her context is also revealed to some degree, and, necessarily, so is the writer’s conception of the psychology of the audience. Audiences have minds, and works of art, as much as speech-acts, take those minds and their properties into account.

This approach to characterising intentionality in literature, with Anscombe’s earlier example of the house in mind, can be used to further refine the working definition of “intention” to be used in this chapter: the “issuance of a sentence under certain conditions”, a speech-, or, perhaps, “literary-act”, is understood to have particular properties and is produced with this understanding in mind. The “conditions” under which a literary act is produced and within which it is read are those of the form in which the reader experiences it, either as read aloud, or by the reader to him/herself. The writer then manipulates the expectations generated by these conditions (*via* the text) by assuming certain competencies on the part of the reader.

Lastly, to further refine the definition of intentionality for the purposes of examining Ashbery’s poetry in line with aspects of cognitive theory, the ideas of John Searle are illuminating. Searle’s work, too, frequently addresses the interaction of language and cognition. Rooted in the tradition of pragmatics *via* Austin,⁵ Searle’s theories of “speech-acts” examine how humans use and understand language. Searle is probably best known for proposing the so-called “Chinese Room” experiment from which this study takes its name. The experiment was developed as a means of addressing questions that remain current in the world of cybernetics and computing about the viability and nature of artificial intelligence. Searle’s critique is a response to the so-called “Turing Tests” for artificial intelligence in which people “converse” with a computer meant to simulate the actions of a conscious agent. The more “difficult” it is for

people to figure out that they are talking to a computer, the “better” the programme attempting to simulate thought is accepted to be.

In the “Chinese Room” experiment, Searle proposes that a person who does not understand the Chinese language be placed in a room alone. The person in the room is then presented with cards marked with symbols (the symbols, unknown to the experimental subject, are Chinese characters), and is then asked to pass them out of openings in the room by people outside the room who are attempting to communicate with each other using the Chinese language. The symbols are passed to him through slots in either side of the room. Eventually, in Searle’s experiment, the person, who “knows” no more Chinese than he did at the beginning of the experiment, learns to effectively manipulate the symbols so that by the end of the experiment, the person in the room is “communicating” in Chinese with the experimenters on the outside of the room who are passing him the symbols and providing instructions in hopes of communicating with each other. Searle’s question—does the person in the room then “know” Chinese?—highlights the difficulty in judging internal states merely from external output. Searle’s point is that whatever the person in the room is doing, s/he is not speaking Chinese in the normal sense, because, among other problems, s/he lacks any meaningful “understanding” of the language s/he is using in the sense that a conscious speaker of Chinese would have. S/he also lacks the “intention” to speak Chinese which, in the context of the experiment, is something only the people on the outside of the room passing the cards through it possess. As Searle writes:

It is not because I am the instantiation of a computer program that I am able to understand English and have other forms of intentionality ... but as far as we know it is because I am a certain sort of structure, and this structure under certain conditions is causally capable of producing perception, action, understanding, learning, and other intentional phenomena. And part of the point of the present argument is that only something that has those causal powers

could have that intentionality ... But the main point of the present argument is that no purely formal model will ever be by itself sufficient for intentionality, because formal properties are not by themselves constitutive of intentionality.

(HagueLand et al. 299)

The capacity of a brain to “produce” intentionality is the critical feature that prevents a brain from simply being reducible to a process which imitates it. The “production” is the key to understanding the genesis of intention, if not the actual contours of intention.

Searle’s thought experiment has—unsurprisingly—been critiqued from many different angles,⁶ but what is pertinent to the present study is the tension between the use of a language, and the *intentional* use of a language. The subject in the “Chinese Room” is using language, but is not *intending* to use language. The Chinese Room subject is essentially applying a “second order” kind of intention, using a symbolic system in a way to meet expectations according to particular needs or imperatives, but not with the instinctive grasp of grammar (voiced and unvoiced) in an unbounded creative way that characterises an i-language. The use of language in the Chinese Room by the subject is, in fact, more like the use of intention in a game like chess, recalling Ryle’s earlier example.

In the artificial intelligence context from which Searle’s argument emerged, the fact that computers can effectively recombine lexical items in ways which are meaningful to humans is taken for granted and universally accepted both by Searle and the “strong AI” advocates against whom his argument was directed.⁷ That computers can, in fact, externally be seen to perform a number of tasks, such as, regulating nuclear power plants, navigating airplanes, or killing monsters in video games, is also uncontroversial. The problem is that these tasks are not executed with the “intention” of killing monsters, or keeping a city safe from a nuclear meltdown, or flying over Pennsylvania in the way even the most rudimentary uses of language are “intentional”. Seen from the computer’s perspective—should one be willing to accept such a

thing exists—what is actually happening is that a series of orders are being carried out between segments of a circuit which then produces predetermined results, or “output”. The computer is not “aware” of the consequences of the protocols it is running, and, therefore, the fact that a plane is flying thanks to the computer, or that ten-year-olds are being entertained does not figure in the set of relations it recognises.

With this distinction in mind, it now becomes possible to pose the following question: how is the use of language in general distinguishable from the “intentional” use of language in literature and what bearing does this have on the concept of literary intention? Literary language use, as will be seen, is always “intentional” in a way that extends beyond even the intentionality manifest in non-literary uses of language (conversational, etc.), even if the consequences of literary language, the effects it produces, are not fully intended. An intentional literary act may have unforeseen or unforeseeable effects, but what is of interest to the present argument are the more straightforward effects—the ways in which the poet or writer theorises the response of his/her reader. The conscious presentation of literary language as something to be read or experienced, returning to the quotation from Walter Slatoff which opened this chapter, essentially adds a further level of intention to this application of language; it has communicative expectations which even conversational language may not have. To see how this relationship functions, it will be helpful to consider language use in literature as a kind of “presentation”. In doing so, the historic questions about literary intention are sidestepped, and the function, rather than the content, of literary intention becomes a critical feature of the work of art.

Refraining from the kind of speculations regarding the nature of “poetic intention” that Wimsatt and Beardsley critiqued so effectively, it becomes easier to see how “intention” in poetry becomes manifest, cognisable, and relevant to the questions at hand using a Searlean paradigm. A “poet” only becomes a poet when he or she accepts that the structure emerging from whatever literary, or lexical-syntactic, endeavours undertaken is a “poem”. This level of

understanding, supported by an “ostensive” act—that of identifying a work as a poem, calls to mind Duchamp’s concept of the “ready-made”, which suggests that an artwork is an artwork because an artist says it is. However, there is more to the argument than merely saying that because a poet writes something, it is poetry. The artefact does not become a poem until it is contextualised as such. And, in its contextualisation, the capacity of the reader, or the “experiencer”, of a poem to engage it emerges. The internal language use of the writer can produce any literary structure s/he may choose; only when the writer is willing to place the poem in a “poetic context” can the potential of the work as a poem be fully realised.

Ashbery, in his capacity as an experimental writer, employs a number of strategies which reveal, not only faculties of the reader’s mind, but also aspects of the writer’s mind. Such strategies manifest particular aspects of literary intention, a form of literary intention which can be described in the following way: the presentation of particular lexical and non-lexical features for consideration as an integrated work of art by readers who are presumed to have certain mental faculties and literary expectations.

The question that animates the following sections is this: what can Ashbery’s writing tell us about either first- or second-order expressions of intention? The idea of what Ashbery’s “argument” or the “true meaning” of any of his poems may or may not be is less important to the expression of his poetic choices (as realised in his works). To see how “literary intention”—in this new, more narrowly focussed conception—functions in Ashbery, one must look to the poems in a similar way to that spoken of in the epigraph from Schlegel with which this section of the chapter begins. One must pay attention to everything included in a poem, understanding that “all the parts” of a poem are “free citizens and have the right to vote”. By approaching the poems in this way, viewing every element of a poem as a fundamental constituent with “something to say”, one must be careful to not merely restrict attention to lexical selection and grammatical usages. Schlegel’s point regarding such linguistic features of poetry is well taken, and

their importance is clear. However, such features are only one aspect of any given poem. Equal in importance to the specific lexical representations that manifest the “poems” in themselves is the presentation of Ashbery’s works on the page and the structuring of entire collections. In taking these aspects of Ashbery’s “writing” into consideration, it becomes possible to form not only a more complete understanding of Ashbery’s writing process and his poetic decisions, but it also becomes possible to examine how linguistic and extra-linguistic features come to be comprehensible in a poetic context.

In this way, the questions of “poetic intention” as discussed in Mitchell’s book, the kind of “true meaning” seeking described above, are sidestepped for more abstract, yet holistic, treatments of the concept. “Poetic Intention”, from a cognitive perspective, is a question of how poetic identity—a kind of aesthetic signature—is established, not what any given line or passage “means”. The poet’s metaphorical fingerprints can be understood to be most clearly manifest not only in word choice or argument, but in the organisation and exploitation of poetic structure, the consideration of the larger “poetic context” in which any given writer is writing at any given moment in history, and the conscious management of compositional procedure in the pursuit of the realisation of a work which ultimately becomes a “poem”.

Whereas it is true that Ashbery is not attempting to resolve whether computers can think, or whether our understanding of the use of language as a form of cognitive status is incorrect, two major themes developed in the “Chinese Room” discussion feature in Ashbery’s treatment of the subject of intention in his work and in the manifestation of his more subtle explorations of the concept. The first is the capacity to “repurpose” language to different intentional ends (recall the different “intentions” on the part of the person in the “Chinese Room” and those outside passing the symbols and giving the instructions). The second is the notion of “rules” in relation to language use. As seen in the previous chapter, the “rules” of syntax and “universal grammar” may be quite different from prescriptive grammars of particular

languages. The “rules” are also different for the person inside the Chinese Room and those outside it. Inside the room, the person is essentially working out a puzzle with regard to symbols. On the outside of the room, the people passing the characters are engaged in a conversation in Chinese and are taking the grammatical rules of Chinese as a language into account. The boundaries created by the “rules” of language use in context are also key sites of experiment for Ashbery, not merely on a syntactic level, but on a more holistic level with regard to the use and presentation of language and the expectations of his readers. To arrive at an understanding of intentional language use which has particular meaningful, isolable, identifiable contours which can then be applied in the examination of literature, key features of the ideas described above will be central, in particular, the notion of an intentional language (an i-language), the conception of “understanding” in language use as described by Searle’s thought experiment, and Austin’s concept of the “perlocutionary” act.

To articulate such an understanding, it will be necessary to dig more deeply into the background of pragmatic linguistics and see how the modalities of language use—not merely its status as intrinsically “intentional”—have been theorised. In turning to the work of Paul Grice and Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, it will be possible to see how the conscious manifestation of “intention” can be seen in the use of language, particularly in creating and manifesting “context”. In seeing this, it will then become possible to conceive of how such intention is manifested (and “manifestable”) in literature.

Grice is known in the field of pragmatics for developing a model for the “cooperative” use of language as an attempt to understand what presuppositions humans bring to conversations and how conversations proceed in situations where imperfect knowledge of meanings (of words, and of uses of words) must be assumed. Grice’s theories offer a window into the way mind handles language as well. In his *William James Lectures*, Grice put forward an idea of fundamental importance to the consideration of how language and communication relate:

that the very act of communicating creates expectations which it then exploits. Grice himself first applied this idea, and its elaboration in terms of “maxims”, to a rather limited problem of linguistic philosophy: do logical connectives (“and”, “or”, “if ... then”) have the same meaning in everyday language as they do in logic? He argued that the richer meaning these connectives seem to have in natural languages can be explained not in terms of lexical meaning, but of a function he calls “implicature”. Grice’s essay “Logic and Conversation” offers an example of how implicature functions:

Suppose that A and B are talking about a mutual friend, C, who is now working in a bank. A asks B how C is getting on in his job and B replies, Oh quite well, I think; he likes his colleagues, and he hasn’t been to prison yet. At this point, A might well inquire what B was implying, what he was suggesting or even what he meant by saying C had not yet been to prison, the answer might be any one of such things as that C is the sort of person likely to yield to the temptation provided by his occupation, that C’s colleagues are really very unpleasant and treacherous people and so forth. It might of course, be quite unnecessary for A to make such an inquiry of B, the answer to it being, in the context clear in advance. It is clear that whatever B implied, suggested, meant in this example, is distinct from what B said. (Grice 24)

Language, therefore, is not simply the set of words produced, but, rather like the illocutionary speech-acts in Austin’s theory, they are words produced in contexts in which listeners are constantly interpreting and parsing meanings, not all—perhaps not even most—of which are verbally realised. Grice’s further suggestion, that linguistic semantics—the study of meanings—could be simplified by treating a large array of problems of communication in terms of implicature certainly resonates with the aim for “parsimony” in theories of language—the presumption of structural simplicity—which characterises Chomskyan syntactic theory. This aspect of implicature is beyond the present discussion, though it should be noted, it clearly has

implications for the semantics/syntax divide in linguistics more generally. For the moment, what is important with regard to Grice's ideas is that in a conversational—or, in considering literature, an “interactive” context—verbalised, written, or represented language, inference, and expectation work as a kind of dynamic. Communicative use of language is not reducible to any single element.

This understanding of linguistic context and use is extended by Sperber and Wilson in *Relevance*. For Sperber and Wilson, implicature can also be understood as a means of examining inferential communication more generally (Sperber and Wilson 37-8). To understand the implications of such an expansion of the use of the term, it is critical to take a wider view of communication as not being a concept reducible to language (nor language to communication), especially given the experimental works by Ashbery which include significant non-linguistic elements. That these “glyphic” representations also play a “communicative” role—despite, in some instances, having not only no lexical content, but no element which can be “verbalised” in a traditional sense—will provide a critical starting point for understanding how literary intention, as viewed from a cognitive perspective, functions.

In *Relevance*, Sperber and Wilson define a key term, “ostensive behaviour”, as behaviour which is meant to draw attention to the intention to communicate—in their terminology, to “make manifest” the intention to communicate (Sperber and Wilson 42). Sperber and Wilson's concept of “ostention” functions as a replacement for a “code theory” of language, in which two or more conversants attempt to “induce specific thoughts” in each other's minds during conversation. The closer such attempts come to achieving this aim, the more successful the communication is understood to be. In Sperber and Wilson's approach, the “code theory” model is replaced by a less exact framework for characterising the dynamics of conversation and expression. They write that “code theory” based accounts of communication:

either are not psychological at all, and avoid all talk of thoughts, intentions, etc., or else

they assume that a communicator's intention is to induce certain specific thoughts in an audience. We want to suggest that the communicator's informative intention is better described as an intention to modify directly not the thoughts but the cognitive environment of the audience. The actual cognitive effects of a modification of the cognitive environment are only partly predictable. (Sperber and Wilson 58)

Such incompletely "predictable" linguistic interactions comport with Gricean understandings. If a model based on such reduced certainty is, in fact, more representative of linguistic interaction than a stimulus/response model, or a "code" model, the interesting thing about communication becomes not, as Grice noted, why communication fails at times, but why communication succeeds. It would seem there is an infinite number of possible interpretations and responses available for any given speech-act. In such an environment how does successful communication emerge? Sperber and Wilson suggest that it is the notion of "mutually manifest" cognitive environments which permit communicative efficacy. Their argument is that in a "shared cognitive environment"—an environment in which two or more people are interacting with each other over a period of time or in a context in which certain assumptions (of the type Grice's theories describe) prevail, if a linguistic event (realised as, for example, a manual sign, or verbalised language) is "mutually manifest" to the conversants (meaning that they both hear particular words said, or see a given gesture), such a communicative act is not subject to the same infinity of inferential possibilities. The mutuality of the "manifestness" of any given event underwrites the acceptability of assumption of mutual knowledge. In other words, following from Grice's observation that merely engaging in conversation creates certain expectations which establish norms of discourse, successful communication emerges from the accrued mutually manifest acts of speech or gesture (Sperber and Wilson 42). Unlike, for example, Wittgensteinian "language games", the "rules" of such interactions need not be known to the participants. The rules are merely assumed (or inferred, or implied, or even intuited). Successful engagement,

however, permits (more or less) successful communication. Miscommunication is a risk of any communicative experience, as the following example from *Relevance* demonstrates:

A speaker who intends an utterance to be interpreted in a particular way must also expect the hearer to be able to supply a context which allows that interpretation to be recovered. A mismatch between the context envisaged by the speaker and the one actually used by the hearer may result in a misunderstanding. Suppose, for example, that the speaker of (7) wants to stay awake, and therefore wants to accept his host's offer of coffee, whereas the host assumes that the speaker does not want to stay awake, and thus interprets (7) as a refusal:

(7) Coffee would keep me awake.[...]

[S]uch misunderstandings do occur. They are not attributable to noise in the acoustic channel. The question is whether they happen because the mechanisms of verbal communication are sometimes improperly applied, or because these mechanisms at best make successful communication probable, but do not guarantee it. (Sperber and Wilson 16-7)

The aim, then, of verbal communication is not that an internal state be exactly transferred between one individual and another, but that an internal state or understanding becomes *comprehensible* to another person through communicative mechanisms (language, gesture, etc.).

The use of linguistic mechanisms to communicate, thus, can be understood to be as much about the capacity for misunderstanding as understanding.

In this way, a notion of “ostensive behaviour” becomes easier to comprehend. By drawing attention to some element of the communicative context, communication both takes place and comments on itself. Communication is not merely realised by “cooperation” with “rules”—such as they may be—but by meaningful *violations* of those rules. Examples of these, following those cited in *Relevance*, would be the conscious use of an inappropriate term in a

particular context. A characteristic example is the use of terms like “bad” to mean “good” in American slang, or saying “oh, great ...” when something terrible happens. Because of the “mutually manifest” cognitive environment, such violations are not interpreted as “failed” communication, but as realisations of communication.

A theoretical framework for a “cognitive theory of poetic intention” can now be articulated more clearly. Poetic intention cannot simply rely on the “authorial argument-true meaning” approach Wimsatt and Beardsley dismiss. Nor can a “meaning”-oriented idea of literary intention as generated in dialogue between reader and writer exist in the way Iser proposes, not least because of the sheer complexity in terms of expectations and presumptions between reader and writer. To adequately reflect the complex nature of the interaction of the intentional use of language in a communicative context with a hearer or reader, a cognitively-minded critic must consider the wider social and aesthetic context in which a work of literature appears. In considering such a work, a parallel with Austin’s notion of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts may be drawn. A poem is composed of its lexical content (a kind of “locution”); it is then contextualised by form, and in terms of artistic presentation as a “poem” (even, crucially, in cases of extended prose text, as in Ashbery’s *Three Poems*); this aspect of presentation could be understood as a form of “illocution”, considering the work *as* writing not merely being *of* writing. Finally, the literary work, or poem, then is understood to be placed in a context of audience expectation in which its particular realisation will have implications, like Austin’s “perlocutionary” aspect of the speech-act.

The poem-in-context, call it the “perlocutionary poem”, not only is presented within a field of expectations and Gricean understandings of what a poem may or may not be, but, upon presentation, it affects the expectations with which it will be received, thus, generating new expectations. The poem can conform to expectations, or it can disrupt expectations. If a poem is experimental in character, then the ways in which such disruptions occur, in Sperber’s and

Wilson's sense, become meaningful. They become both sites of the expression of literary intention, and develop a framework for examining the expectations they have generated. Thus, the poem becomes a means of investigating the "schema" the reader possesses, and perhaps the way the reader's mind constructs such schemata. As will be seen, the frequent disruptions of the "poetic context" Ashbery employs serve to mark out specific manifestations of poetic intention.

Cognitive Approaches to Literary Intention and Ashbery: Conceptualising and Theorising Intention Through Experimental Literature

If I did not write, I would have no idea what I can write. I suppose I write so as to find out what I can write. (John Ashbery quoted in William Paulson's *The Noise of Culture*)
(Paulson 168)

Given the nature of the writing of *A Nest of Ninnies* (1969), it presents perhaps one of the best opportunities in Ashbery's *oeuvre* to explore the narrower concept of literary intention argued for in this thesis and the limits of the traditional "true meaning" notion of the concept. The work was composed by either Ashbery or James Schuyler writing one sentence, then the other writer writing the next sentence, though as Ashbery has noted, occasionally he and Schuyler deviated from this model:

Mark Ford: Did you always write in each other's presence?

John Ashbery: Yes

Mark Ford: And in alternate sentences?

John Ashbery: At first, then we thought if one of us had more sentences to write he should be allowed to continue. (M. Ford 38)

In such a context, however, "authorial intention", as critiqued by Wimsatt and Beardsley, is seriously diluted. What Schuyler might "intend" to express in one sentence, for example, could be immediately undermined by Ashbery with the next and *vice versa*. Where the text is, in Iser's

conception, a kind of dialogue between writer and reader, *A Nest of Ninnies* is also a dialogue between two writers, and, indeed two writers as readers. The work disregards such a conception as overarching “authorial intention” by using the “one-sentence rule” Schuyler and Ashbery formulated. The only “intention” to be meaningfully spoken of was to contribute the next sentence, or perhaps to move the narrative forward. Looking at the text directly, it is clear that this was not a particular problem:

Alice was tired. Languid, fretful, she turned to stare into her own eyes in the mirror above the mantelpiece before she spoke.

“I dislike being fifty miles from a great city. I don't know how many cars pass every day and it makes me wonder.”

Marshall smiled at her and continued to remove the plastic covers from a number of dishes he had just extracted from the icebox. Kicking out her housecoat, Alice moved to the kitchen table and picked up a chicken wing.

“I don't know what you're keeping in that icebox, but it makes everything taste funny.”
(Ashbery and Schuyler 9)

The text may not be as distinctive in voice as it might be if Schuyler or Ashbery had written it singlehandedly, but it is in no way obvious that there are two distinct writers contributing passages. Along the way, however, a curious phenomenon occurs of which many Ashbery critics, and Ashbery himself (*Selected Prose* 208), have spoken: a “joint-consciousness” seems to evolve as “author” of the text. This phenomenon is, of course, not entirely unique to aesthetic literature; political and scientific writing have long traditions of joint authorship in which teasing out which writer wrote which section is difficult, even impossible. In aesthetic literature, however, where individual authorial style is generally considered an important feature of a work, the emergent consciousness of Schuyler-Ashbery enters a different field of expectations. Thus, the text becomes, at once, a “consciousness” in Iser's (and, to a degree Mitchell's) sense, and a

bi-directional experiment in theory of mind: the reader constitutes a “writer” in his mind, and the joint author-readers composing the text formulate a reader who can consider the work. A by-product of this dynamic is the existence of the text as an artefact representing creative endeavour. The text is not merely a bi-directional theory of mind, but also an expression of aesthetic intention in a sense which is broader than the sum of Ashbery and Schuyler’s personal aims in the creation of each sentence, or of the aesthetic aims of the book. A cognitively-minded critic may look at the work as a manifestation of intention in several ways. First, through the lens of the “perlocutionary” aspect of the work, the text as understood in relation to other literary texts and the literary-critical environment in which it appears. Regarding this aspect of the writing of the book, Ashbery frequently refers to the process as “writing a novel” with Schuyler rather than creating a new kind of literary form (*Selected Prose* 208-9). In viewing the work as a novel, it can, thus, be considered in relation to other novels of the time. Unlike many of Ashbery’s poetic literary experiments, the manifestation of his intention to create the work is judged not by deviation from “norms” or “conventions” of the genre, but by his success in appropriating the armature of the form, thus, producing a coherent and comprehensible work. Though *A Nest of Ninnies* may not generally be placed among the greatest novels of its time,⁸ its status as a novel—rather than a prose poem or some new form of literature—is not in question, and its surprisingly conventional character, relative to other works by the authors, can be understood as a manifestation of literary intention: the intention to conform to the norms of a form.

The extremely simple character of the creative basis, or at least the formal intention of Ashbery and Schuyler, with regard to *A Nest of Ninnies*—that of writing a “novel”—provides a basis for examining more adventurous manifestations of literary intention by Ashbery. It is often when Ashbery is at his most experimental that this seemingly-impoverished notion of literary intention reveals most about the relationship between literature and cognitive investigation.

Among the most revealing instances are in the poems where Ashbery essentially moves “beyond language” in his writing, including non-linguistic elements in poems which examine mind’s capacity to recognise a non-lexical representation as belonging to the “content” of a poem. The term “glyph” or “glyphic” will be used to describe the devices used in these explorations and will refer to images, representations, or other non-lexical and non-syntactic aspects of the contents of Ashbery’s poetry. Particularly illustrative is the quotation from “Idaho” which was first discussed in the introduction of the thesis:

Cornelia unfolded the piece of crude blue paper that is a
French telegra.

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The mouth of weeds
marriage.” She shivered. “It’s—it’s a death!” (*The Tennis Court Oath* 92)

Though the poem’s syntax is disrupted, the critical feature to notice in relation to the “extra-linguistic” aspect of the poem is the use of fourteen “hash” marks that appear between the passages with lexical content. Their “significance” is ultimately ambiguous; certainly earlier notions of “authorial intention” offer very little in interpreting them. Questions like “What does Ashbery mean with the hash marks?” seem somewhat inadequate to the complexity the marks present for the reader. However, if one considers the symbols in the wider, cognitive understanding of intention articulated above, they become representations of unresolvable authorial intention, indeed, perhaps representations of the author’s intent to make the poem unresolvable. The fact that they appear in a poem which so heavily integrates the work of another writer, in this case, A. Hamilton Gibbs, from his novel, *Soundings* (1925), would also seem to suggest they have some significance as an authorial intrusion by Ashbery into Gibbs’ text. Consider Gibbs’ original lines: “‘Yes,’ said Nancy ‘but I didn’t understand—I’m not sure that I do now. Do you mean—? That isn’t marriage.’ She shivered. ‘It’s—it’s death!’” (Gibbs

79). By including the “glyphic” non-linguistic hash marks, Ashbery is going beyond merely reconfiguring found language; he is actively disrupting it. His “poetic” intentions may not be clear, but his “authorial” intentions are quite visible. Whatever Ashbery may “mean” in his own mind by rearranging the text thus (the “true meaning” of the lines), what is unquestionable is that Ashbery has rearranged them (or, if he were later to have been found to have used a machine to do it by chance, he has presented the lines thus rearranged), and, in doing so, he has manifested a clear intention to present them. Presented as they are, they are Ashbery’s “creation” and, thus, a purely “intentional” object.

What does this tell the cognitively-minded critic about the relationship between intention, literature, and mind? There are a number of possible answers. First, if the poem is considered through Austin’s lens of illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, the disrupted sentences and glyphic intrusions can be understood as conscious, assertive authorial acts within a wider poetic context. Their obtrusiveness and irresolvability has a highly “ostensive” character in the sense of the term developed by Sperber and Wilson. They are not merely disruptions of poetic structure; linguistic disruptions of syntax alone would be sufficient for that purpose. They represent highly visible, essentially linguistically irreconcilable manifestations of authorial intent to be understood as such. They are there, in significant part, to draw attention to the fact that the poem—or, indeed, the prose of Gibbs—is being disrupted. The disruption itself is as much a part of the poem as the underlying text which it interrupts. Thus, the armature of cognitive literary theory provides both a context for interpreting the “intentional content” of these disruptions, and also for understanding the cognitive faculties that are the subject matter of the experiment in disruption. That Ashbery knows the reader will not be able to “lexicalise”, or, perhaps, even vocalise the glyphic hash marks, is clear, and, very likely, part of the point of their inclusion.

In the same poem, there are other instances of the use of non-linguistic elements to convey meaning. Of particular interest are the sequences of question marks that appear slightly before the hash-mark passage in the poem:

Can this be the one time

?? (The Tennis Court Oath 91)

Then later:

Exactly what kind of perfection?? (The Tennis Court Oath 91)

The marks appear in “proper” grammatical locations (i.e. after interrogative sentences), but the superfluous marks imbue the passage with meaning in non-lexical ways. Even beyond the “hash mark” passages above, the question marks necessitate the larger question of how they should be processed. Are they meant to intensify the character of the question, like mathematical integers with exponents? Are they meant to appear as “mistakes”, perhaps comments on the use of technology in writing? A writer using a typewriter might type thirty-two extraneous question marks, but a writer writing longhand would possibly be less inclined to do so. Why forty question marks in the earlier passage and thirty-three in the second? Again, historic conceptions of literary intention cannot adequately address such problems in productive ways. However, if viewed through a cognitive lens *via* the work of Austin, Grice, and Sperber and Wilson, they can be understood as representations of authorial intention that stretch beyond language and present cognitive puzzles for the reader. Ashbery knows that question marks are “unvoiced”, existing only in printed text, and, thus, because one superfluous question mark is as silent as thirty-nine, their significance comes in their visibility. Ashbery draws attention to the unvoiced character of the marks and, thus, draws attention to the fact that the poem is a poem on a page and subject to particular kinds of manipulation that are not available in the same way to spoken poetry. Such passages serve to remind the reader of this fact, and the fact that the poet, too, is aware of it.

The very ambiguity of these glyphic inclusions is their expressive power. For example, a number of passages in “Idaho” also contain a series of the following “glyphs”: “ ’ ”. Is the mark an inverted comma? Does its appearance in even-numbered sequences denote that it is meant to represent paired inverted commas as often used to set off speech passages, or is the glyph the Hebrew letter “yod”? Ashbery uses a representationally ambiguous symbol, but imbues it with more significance than it might have if it were used in conventional ways. Its “ostensive” value is, therefore, significant and creates an unresolvable dialogue between Ashbery and the reader that cannot be reduced to “meaning” in the sense of previous understandings of literary intention, but which encompasses multiple meanings (and non-meanings). Thus, this variant of the cognitive approach to literature offers, if not a means of comprehending this phenomenon, at least a framework for considering it which focusses attention on previously unnoticed implications of such devices and such aspects of poetry.

As with Ashbery’s syntactic experiments, here, he can be understood not only to be interested in disrupting cognitive faculties, but, in some cases, colluding with such faculties in ways which are revealing. In the case of the works in *The Vermont Notebook*, Ashbery can be seen to use cognitive faculties as means of creating poems in ways which extend even beyond Iser’s notion of reader response. In considering the cognitive implications of Ashbery’s approach to creating the poems that compose *The Vermont Notebook*, it is again valuable to return to Iser’s *The Act of Reading* for a metaphoric reference point in understanding how Ashbery’s literary experiments become “theories of consciousness”. In examining how readers construct characters in novels, Iser writes the following:

We see something in our image of an object which one cannot see when an object is actually there. We imagine Tom Jones during our reading of the novel, we have to put together various facets that have been revealed to us at different times—in contrast to the film where we see him as a whole in every situation. (*The Act of Reading* 138)

In a sense, this property is similar to Roman Ingarden's idea of cognising a work of art both in part, and as an integrated whole. This piecemeal aspect of the character of literature is of course, a by-product of the mind and the capacity of the mind to focus, to redirect attention, and to assemble such perceptions into a whole later. The more fragmentary the parts, the more work the mind must do. Ashbery, who wrote in "The New Spirit" that "leaving out" parts of a story was a "truer way" to tell it, often exploits the possibilities presented by crucial "left out" material in works (Ashbery, *Three Poems* 3). He relies on the reader's mind to "supply" the missing aspects of a description, or narrative, or sentence. A number of the poems of *The Vermont Notebook* function in this way, a way that is similar to how Iser characterises the readerly "creation" of the character Tom Jones in the novel. The poems of the collection are less "present" in terms of poetic structure than even some of Ashbery's most experimental works in *The Tennis Court Oath*. In a sense, the *The Vermont Notebook* poems represent something like a "contextual abyss" in which Ashbery essentially erases "poetic context", and begins playing by the rules of "normal" (i.e. spoken) communicative context. The long lists of body parts, names of actors, of poets, or objects, or places have little significance of their own beyond taxonomy, but in "context", as envisioned in the communicative sense of the term (Sperber and Wilson, *via* Grice's sense), they become comprehensible. Consider the following "poems":

Charlottesville, Washington, Baltimore, Macon, Manassas, Asheville, Wheeling,
Roanoke, Richmond, Charleston, Savannah, Atlanta, Chattanooga, Tallahassee, Tampa,
Orlando, Daytona, Jacksonville, Miami, Miami Beach, Key West, Key Biscayne, West
Palm Beach, Lake Wales [...]. (*The Vermont Notebook* 19)

Or, later:

Maggie and Clark Newhouse, Egon von Furstenberg, Bill Blass, Rex Reed, Pauline
Trigere, Betsy Theodoracopolous, Nan Kempner, Chessie Rayner, Arthur and Elaine

Cohen, Huntington Hartford, Bobo Rockefeller, Lady Malcolm Douglas Hamilton,
Jacques Kaplan, Larry Rivers [...]. (*The Vermont Notebook* 21)

Finally:

Anne Waldman, Tom Veitch, Hilton Obenzinger, Jack Marshall, Kathleen Fraser,
Sandra MacPherson, Anne Sexton, Maxine Kumin, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop,
A.R. Ammons, Ed Sanders, Kenward Elmslie, Nancy Ellison, Sandra Hochman, Arthur
Gregor, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler [...]. (*The Vermont Notebook* 23)

In these “poems” the reader is meant to construct the significance of the collected names. Ironically, this is perhaps as close as Ashbery’s writing gets to historical notions of the term “literary intention”. In the passages above, the reader is, among other things, invited to “decipher” the connections between the names (e.g. cities in the first passages, poets in the third). The direct meaning of the association is constructed, ultimately, by the reader with the textual assistance of the poem as “evidence”. This certainly accords with Iser’s formulation of meaning being created *via* readerly decoding of literary “evidence”. However, if viewed from a cognitive perspective, the implications are even more wide-ranging. First, take the central observation of Iser, that a “dyadic” relationship exists between reader and text (*The Act of Reading* 166-8). Post-structuralist theorists, not least Derrida in *Of Grammatology* (1967),⁹ have discussed the significance of the fundamental equivocality of words. This notion is extended, even expanded in Chomskyan theory (*via* Chomsky’s understanding of passages from Aristotle).¹⁰ Such equivocality implies a larger reference structure than a mere “dyad”. The social and historical contexts, as understood in relation to Austin’s notions of “illocution” and “perlocution”, are always present to the reader and are “taken up” by the text as it is reconsidered in later literary contexts. Beyond this, is the literary context itself, which requires a return to the notion of the poem as “perlocutionary” speech-act in Austinian terms. The context and the expectations generated by it, following Grice, characterise aspects of interpretation. The poet, in generating

the text in a particular literary context, informed by his or her biography, then creates and presents a poem for consideration which the reader then receives, bringing expectations and formative principles into the discussion (along with the inherent lexical indeterminacy noted by Chomsky, Derrida, Aristotle, and numerous others). The dialogic structure posited by Iser is, finally, too limited to characterise the full set of relations; indeed, any theory likely is.

However, a cognitive literary theory, applying Gricean notions of language use, along with Sperber's and Wilson's mechanism of "ostention", can reveal not merely facts about the context of the creation of a given literary work, but modalities of the poet's exploitation of the context. In the list-poems of *The Vermont Notebook*, for example, it is clear Ashbery is choosing to "withhold" poetic information on the assumption that the reader will supply it her/himself. This can be seen as an ostensive act of communication by "non-communication". This tactic moves the poem beyond realisation as a simple puzzle to be solved, or an exercise in literary expression. In its presumption of readerly faculties to "solve" the puzzle and arrive at meaning, the poem becomes a "theory of consciousness". Ashbery places what amounts to "raw data" before his reader assuming the reader will either know, or be able to investigate, and, thus, discover the significance of his lexical choices. In this fashion the poems accrue further meaning as the collection progresses. The ability of the reader to assemble meaning is as much the "meaning" of the poem as the words themselves, or their contextualisations. There is no "perfect" literary "code" here to be unravelled, even in the *The Vermont Notebook* "list poems", but the possibilities for interpretation, guided by context as manipulated by the writer, offer insight into both the functioning of mind, and the role of Ashbery's writing as it conceives of mind.

The openness of Ashbery's writing admits a number of other methods of experimenting with form in ways which make explicit demands of the reader's cognitive faculties. Such demands go beyond traditional approaches of creating characters and making narratives. Ashbery's engagement with the nature of "assembling" poetry results in presentation and poetic

context becoming expressions of “poetry as intention”. This can be seen in several forms, either in terms of the lexical items used in particular poems, the assembling and disassembling of texts by other writers for inclusion in his own poems, or, in a wider context, the arrangement of poetry collections in which poems themselves become the “units” which Ashbery manipulates. For Ashbery, making poems does not merely mean writing them; it also means presenting them and anticipating readerly examination of them, as the title “But What is the Reader to Make of This?” (Ashbery, *A Wave* 13).

To understand the nature of such experiments, it is valuable to consider Ashbery’s “alphabetised” collections, such as *Can You Hear Bird?* (1995), in which he arranged the poems in the collections in alphabetical order according to their titles. In a sense, this may represent another instance of Ashbery’s use of “managed chance” in which the poems, presumably not written in alphabetical order, are submitted to the pre-existing alphabetical form for the reader resulting in an overall structure of the collection which is based on essentially the luck of the alphabetical draw. Nevertheless, the ordering of collections in such an overt way makes visible the frequently “off-camera” process of ordering poetry collections for printing. The poems have very clearly been inventoried by the poet and “ostensively” arranged according to a particular system; thus, the process of arranging a poetry collection becomes “manifest” to the reader in ways in it might not ordinarily be. The frame of using the alphabet may result in chance pairings of particular poems, but the highly intentional process of choosing an alphabetical indexing structure, essentially putting what is normally at the end of a book, an alphabetised index, at the front, represents a very visible residue of manipulation by the poet. John Emil Vincent has discussed the essentially “ostensive” character and implications of arranging collections in this way:

The 103 lyrics in *Can You Hear Bird* (1995) are arranged alphabetically by title. This is the first time Ashbery has used this technique to order the poems in a book. The titles

range from “A” to “Y,” however, in a gesture to the author’s last name, rather than from “A” to “Z”. Such ordering of poems within a book could indicate to the reader that the progression of poems is incidental, based on a principle outside of the poems. If we are to read this book as a collection of poems that has been alphabetized after their composition by the first letter of each poem’s title, then any resonances between contiguous poems either must be aleatory or attest to the construction of a complicated framework. (Vincent 114)

Vincent goes on to suggest that the idea of the “book organized alphabetically preceded the composition of a sheaf of single lyrics” (Vincent 115). That is, perhaps Ashbery came up with the titles after the poems and arranged them in this way after finding other important resonances between the poems. Whatever the nature of the process, and, indeed, whatever one makes of the “A” to “Y” arrangement of the collection by Ashbery—also noted by Vincent—the clarity of the author’s hand in making the arrangement marks the structure of the book as heavily intentional and invites the reader to make sense of the structure; again, an endeavour similar in character to Ashbery’s syntactic ruptures which essentially require the reader to “force sense” from them.

These techniques are starting points for dialogues with readers which engage cognitive faculties in revealing ways. A more subtle version of the same dynamic can be seen with the collection *Three Poems* in which extended prose works are characterised as “poems”. Ashbery again attempts to influence readerly interpretation of the poems’ status in literary context. As such, the notion of the poem as “perlocutionary” object entering into a context wherein particular Gricean and Sperberian-Wilsonian expectations prevail and then disrupting them in “ostensive” ways, offers a method for identifying and characterising particular acts of literary intention which are visible and which present starting points for understanding and characterising the cognitive dialogue Ashbery’s poems initiate with their readers. It may not be possible to know exactly *what* Ashbery intends with these experiments and techniques, but it is

possible to see *how* he chooses to initiate the dialogue and some of the possible readerly responses he anticipates as being relevant to actuating the dialogue.

Literature Leading Philosophy and Ashbery's Treatment of The Relationship of Time and Mind

In this chapter, an attempt has been made to formulate a definition of “intention”, specifically literary intention, which is applicable and investigable from a cognitive literary perspective. By side-stepping previous conceptions of literary intention which seek the “true meaning” of a text or possible finalised meanings, it is possible, *via* insights from the fields of analytic philosophy, syntactic theory, and pragmatic linguistics, to develop a notion of literary intention in which the literary artefact is understood to presume particular capacities and faculties of interpretation and understanding on the part of the reader. By using the text as a starting point and asking what the role of a given literary work is in a literary context (i.e. what it takes into account, what it ignores, which conventions it cooperates with and which conventions it disrupts), the cognitively-minded literary critic does not merely discern certain possible features of authorial intent, s/he examines less “what” the meaning of a given literary text is, than “how” that literary text comes to mean anything at all. Such a conception of intention is drastically narrower than previous conceptions of the term, but, in limiting the scope of what an examination of literary intention may consist of, a number of important features of the creation of, presentation of, and interaction with, literature can be examined in greater detail. Reading Ashbery's poetry and prose with this approach to the question of literary intention in mind, a number of his more experimental texts can be seen to reveal aspects of Ashbery's writerly process, as well as his range of expectations for readerly interpretation—or misinterpretation.

Notes

1. A number of writers have attempted to formulate a theory of action including A.I. Melden, and Alvin Goldman. Others have attempted to isolate particular aspects of human actions for the purpose of creating a larger theory; they are cited throughout this thesis. The important distinction here is that in formulating aspects of a theory of action, one is contributing to a theory of intention, but in attempting to formulate a theory of action, one may be attempting to pre-empt a theory of intention. Action is a very difficult concept to theorise. Such difficulties are highlighted by Arthur C. Danto who, in attempting to sketch basic principles for a theory of action, attempts to distinguish “basic” actions from “caused” actions. He writes:

Just to take one case—a paralytic asks us what we do first when we raise an arm. We should be obliged to say we cannot answer, not because we do not know or understand what we do, but because we know and understand that there is nothing we do first. There is no series of steps we run through, and since the request is implicitly for a recipe, we cannot say how we move our arm. (Care and Landesman et al. 107)

2. An important ontological critique of Ryle’s position can be found in Chomsky’s lecture “The Machine and The Ghost” (2012), in which Chomsky suggests that Newtonian mechanics essentially refutes Ryle’s position. In an earlier lecture, *The Sidney Mintz Memorial Lecture* of 1997, he outlines the difficulty of formulating the notion of a “body” in terms that are compatible with both Newton’s physics, and the much more complex concepts of physics that have emerged in the quantum era. One of the more difficult features of the debate surrounding the contemporary philosophy of intention and action is the sense that if something can be described, it is as good as explaining it. The difficulty in explaining why, rather than how, a particular word is chosen in a conversation is profound, as seen in the linguistics chapter. As Chomsky has noted, the fact that such explanations can be applied to higher human cognitive faculties is belied by the difficulty in explaining the behaviour of less complex organisms (Chomsky, *The Sidney Mintz*

Memorial Lecture 1997). He cites, in particular, studies by Barbara Shipman on bee communication, a much more straightforward process than human language use, and organisms which are much less complex. For a brief treatment of Shipman's basic ideas, see Adam Frank, "Quantum Honeybees", *Discover Magazine*, 1 November 1997. Shipman's conclusion is essentially that bees may communicate relying on an "understanding" of the world which may involve the ability to perceive physical dimensions not visible to humans. For a detailed accounting of Newton's understanding of the implications of his discovery of gravity, see Thackray, Arnold. *Atoms and Power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970. Print.

3. See Melden's *Free Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961. Print), particularly pp. 166-8 for a full description of the experiment.

4. Fodor has also discussed the way language and thought interact particularly with regard to the notion of "connectionism" in which various neural circuits are seen to work in unison to implement cognitive imperatives, suggesting a challenge: "Explain the existence of systemic relations between cognitive systems without assuming that cognitive processes are causally sensitive to the constituent structure of mental representations" (Fodor, *In Critical Condition* 91).

This challenge implies that:

If connectionism can't allow for systematicity, it thereby fails to provide an adequate basis for a theory of cognition; but if its account of systematicity requires mental processes that are sensitive to the constituent structure of mental representations, then the theory of cognition it offers will be at best an implementation architecture for a "classical" (language of thought) model. (*In Critical Condition* 91)

It would, thus, become a kind of "syntax" recapitulating the theoretical model Fodor proposes. For a thorough treatment of the concept of a "language of thought" as distinct from verbalised

or even syntactic language, see Fodor, Jerry. *The Language of Thought*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977. Print.

5. The term “pragmatic” in “pragmatic linguistics” should not be confused with the concept of “pragmatism” as described by William James. Used in relation to linguistics, the word “pragmatics” is meant to refer to a field of linguistics concerned with the ways in which language is used. The work of Grice is a particularly influential example of “pragmatic linguistics”.

6. At the forefront of these critiques is that of Daniel Dennett. Dennett’s basic problem with Searle’s experiment is that it hints at dualism. Dennett writes:

We see clearly enough that if there were understanding in such a giant system, it would not be Searle’s understanding ... We also see clearly that there is nothing remotely like genuine understanding in any hunk of programming small enough to imagine readily—whatever it is, it’s just a mindless routine for transforming symbol strings into other symbol strings according to some mechanical or syntactical recipe ... Surely *more* of the same, no matter how much more, would never add up to genuine understanding. But why should anyone think this is true ... If ... we are materialists ... we must admit that genuine understanding is somehow achieved by a process composed of interactions between a host of subsystems none of which understand a thing by themselves. (Dennett 438-9)

Roger Penrose’s treatment of “The Chinese Room” in his book *Shadows of the Mind* (1994) also critiques Searle but from a completely different angle:

Searle’s argument is against [strong AI] *artificial intelligence* (which would assert that any “simulation” of understanding would be equivalent to ‘actual’ understanding) ... It is concerned with the *passive, inward, or subjective* aspects of the quality of understanding. It does not deny the possibility of a simulation of understanding in its *active, outward or*

objective aspects ... This suggests that he would be prepared to accept the possibility of a complete simulation of the action of a conscious brain in the act of ‘understanding’ ... My own arguments, on the other hand, will be directed against just these outward aspects of ‘understanding’ and I thereby maintain that not even a proper computer simulation of the external manifestations of understanding is possible. (*Italics in original*) (Penrose, 41)

Thomas Nagel and Chomsky, too, have considered the Chinese Room experiment and its implications. For their treatments, see Noam Chomsky, *New Horizons in the Study of Language and Mind*, page 147, and Thomas Nagel, *Other Minds*, page 88.

7. The term “Strong AI” generally refers to theorists who suggest that artificial intelligence as represented by computer simulation of human thought will be, when processing power is sufficiently robust, not merely a simulation of human thought, but the same thing as human thought merely instantiated in different material.

8. An exception is W.H. Auden who Ashbery recalls as having described the book as “destined to be a minor classic” (M. Ford 38).

9. Though Chomsky frequently distances his approach to language from that of post-modernist thought, Derrida’s notion of language as an infinite chain of possible references and associations as discussed in *Of Grammatology* fits more comfortably in a cognitive framework than it might first appear. To see Derrida’s argument in detail, see Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. Print (specifically, pages 7, 65 and 157).

10. Chomsky traces the notion of the fundamental equivocality of lexical items, as recognised by his own philosophical system, to the writing of Aristotle in *The Metaphysics*, specifically, to the following passage:

Those who define the nature of a house as ‘stones, bricks and timber’ are speaking of the potential house, for those things are the *matter*, but those who define it as ‘a covering for

animals and chattels,' or something else of the kind, speak of the actuality. Those who combine both statements refer to the concrete substance composed of matter and form.

(Emphasis in source text) (Aristotle 212)

Chapter Three

Time as a Vector For Cognitive Experiment in Ashbery's Writing

[Ashbery]: It's a pretty big question, the value of Proust. I suppose we all know time is the main subject of his writing, and it's something that has preoccupied me. As I have gotten older, it seems to me that it's what I have been writing about all these years during which I thought I wasn't writing about anything. (Labrie 29)

If literature, particularly experimental literature, can be understood (at least partially) as “the continuation of cognitive studies by other means”, perhaps the most important way in which it can be seen to “lead” the discussion forward is by opening up particular cognitive questions, perhaps allowing such questions to be “reframed” in ways which could be more meaningful to scientific investigation, and which could reveal aspects of mind that science and philosophy are yet to touch. In some cases, this can be accomplished by stretching particular cognitive faculties to their extremes. In the *New York Quarterly* interview, Ashbery is asked about a statement he once made suggesting he wanted to “stretch people’s brains”. In reply, Ashbery suggests that his statement was influenced by a similar statement by John Cage who said he “wanted to stretch people’s ears a little so that they could hear a little bit more ... I suppose what I meant was to make people more receptive to a more all-embracing or a little bit more all-embracing kind of poetry” (Packard 122). As has been shown earlier, Ashbery’s frequent strategy in *The Tennis Court Oath* was to “stretch” aspects of cognitive faculties (e.g. syntax) to their limits and beyond. This “stretching” plays a role in how his poetry is written as well as how it is received; it also plays a role in revealing properties of mind. In terms of cognitive studies, an even more complicated question than the relationship of syntax to mind is the relation of the mind to time and temporality. This chapter will begin with a discussion of the difficulties faced

by formal cognitive sciences and philosophy with regard to formulating theories about the fundamental relationship between time and mind. It will then show how experimental literature can present new ways of talking about, or of conceiving, this relationship. Specifically, Ashbery's writing will be seen frequently to undertake self-conscious experiments with readerly engagement or understanding of time and to examine the consequences of perceiving and cognising *in time* in relation to literature. These experiments will offer perspective on how literature not only examines and represents the "mind-in-time", but how it can "theorise" the nature of particular cognitive boundaries in regard to the processing of temporal data. The process of reading and responding to a poem on the page will be seen as a critical site where this dynamic is expressed and where its consequences are made most visible.

Ashbery's work explores such temporal issues from a number of perspectives. Among the most complex and idiosyncratic are the poems in which he presents paired columns of text that comprise a single poem. Such poems demand major cognitive investment by readers, and act as means by which alternative versions of the poem are created *via* the visual and linguistic data presented by Ashbery. In thematic terms, Ashbery's writing often self-consciously explores how the mind responds to the passage of time, in terms of creating concepts for measuring time, and in terms of how the data stored in the mind are altered or lost over time. Though, as always, Ashbery's explorations do not aim to mimic formal science, they have implications for, and resonances with, scientific understandings of how the mind copes with, constructs, and resists time. The poems also offer the cognitively-minded critic some of Ashbery's most robust examples of poems which explicitly conceptualise readers' cognitive capacities. Fundamental to understanding how these dialogues come together is the basic question of what the subject matter of a cognitive experiment with time may be.

The Distinction Between Cognition and Perception: A Key Question in Framing Formal

Cognitive Questions

Addressing the cognitive processing of time has historically proven a problematic concept for philosophers and cognitive scientists. Marc Wittmann and Virginie van Wassenhove sum up the difficulties in their paper, “The experience of time: neural mechanisms and the interplay of emotion, cognition and embodiment” (2009). They write:

Among our senses, the ‘sense of time’ is peculiar. First, time is intangible. One cannot point the finger at a ‘duration object’ as one could at a table or a sound source, yet time can be experienced when one waits for something to happen or to end ... Time is ubiquitous in our experiential world and yet nowhere to be found in the physical one. Second, there exists no sense organ for time perception and, as such, all sensory modalities are possible entries at the interface of physical time with perceptual time. Third, perceptual time is not ‘isomorphic’ to physical time and many factors including attention, memory arousal and emotional states are all potential modulators of time perception.

(Wittmann and van Wassenhove 1809)

The peculiarities of conceptualising time are further complicated by the absence of a specific “site” (notionally at least) in the brain for “time awareness” to be located. The closest available mechanism is the circadian body clock, but even this is not reliable in coordinating the experience of time with the perception of external time because the clock is not rigidly set. As Wittmann and van Wassenhove write:

the circadian clock (with a periodicity of approx.. 24 hours) ... regulates the daily rhythms in fundamental aspects of physiology and behaviour ... Despite all efforts, however, a similar clock has not been identified for the time sense that relates to fractions of a second to multiple minutes.

(Wittmann and van Wassenhove 1809)

Such difficulties are only one part of a very complicated story. One of the most difficult distinctions in terms of framing experiments in relation to temporal awareness has been disambiguating the concept of “cognition” from the concept of “perception”. To perceive something, an individual must “cognise” it in one sense or other. Matters become more difficult, however, when considered at a higher level of abstraction. It may (or may not) be the case that cognition is possible without perception (the mind may generate ideas and images on its own without reference to the natural world or to experience), but is perception possible without cognition? Can the awareness of and contextualisation of an event or relationship take place without other cognitive faculties (beyond mere sensory perception) being engaged? To examine this dynamic, and the different schools of thought which have given rise to contemporary notions of “cognition” and “perception” of time in philosophy, it is helpful to begin examining the phenomenological literature of the modern period, particularly the work of Edmund Husserl, one of the earliest modern “phenomenological” thinkers who addressed the interaction of time and mind. Though various modalities of specific schools of phenomenological thought will be discussed in the next chapter, for the moment, it is most critical to understand some of the baseline assumptions of the philosophy of temporal awareness and perception, and the ideas which grounded those assumptions, in order to see how the interaction of time and mind has been historically theorised.

In a collection of his writings and lecture notes entitled *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* (1917), Husserl defines the nature of the problem of understanding perception in time:

Naturally, we all know what time is; it is the most familiar thing of all. But as soon as we attempt to give an account of time-consciousness, to put objective time and subjective time-consciousness into the proper relationship and to reach an understanding of how

temporal objectivity—and therefore any individual objectivity whatever—can be constituted in the subjective consciousness of time, we get entangled in the most peculiar difficulties, contradictions, and confusions.

(Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* 3)

These “difficulties, contradictions, and confusions” can be seen by considering how a perception of an ongoing event is understood to be continuously integrated. The example to which Husserl frequently returns in his text is that of a musical passage. How is it, he asks, that the mind is able to keep both the previous notes heard and the notes one is currently hearing together in the mind as a cohesive unit? Obviously, the individual perceptions of individual notes are distinct events, but the integral structure, too, is a “perception” that is only completed when all the relevant data are configured. The critical feature of this process is the apparent fungibility of the concept of the immediate present or the “now”. Husserl offers the following explication:

Every actually present now of consciousness, however, is subject to the law of modification. It changes into retention of retention and does so continuously.

Accordingly, a fixed continuum of retention arises in such a way that each later point is retention for every earlier point. And each retention is already a continuum.

(*On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of External Time* 31)

Moments in cognition are experientially expanded by properties of cognition in Husserl’s understanding. They may be externally *realised* as distinct instances of time passing, but they are *perceived* as “continuous”. Here, one of the most influential modern divisions between perception *in* time and perception *of* time is articulated. As will be seen, this “expansive” capacity in human perceptual faculties will be the subject of some of Ashbery’s significant temporal experiments which often draw attention to the capacity of perceptual faculties to “expand” particular moments, and the way the faculties of perception actuate this expansion (or fail to do so).¹The

poems also will demonstrate the ways in which Ashbery distinguishes conceptions of awareness *of* time versus awareness *in* time.

The reader may here recall Roman Ingarden's similar question noted in the introduction: how is a literary work both an individual product of momentary perception, and yet also a whole which encompasses the preceding individual perceptions? Ingarden suggests that "just as a statue cannot be seen from all sides at once ... the literary work of art is transcendent to both diverse acts of apprehension performed during reading and the multiplicity of aspects under which it comes to givenness" (Ingarden 145). A variation of Ingarden's question, however, can be posed in a much narrower, possibly more investigable, way. What are the mechanisms of mind that produce this capacity in literature? How do writers like Ashbery, who have cognitive interests, conceptualise these functions, and how do they exploit these functions for literary ends? Also, how does the role of time, as perceived and experienced, manifest itself in creating and realising such experiments?

In Ashbery's writing, as will be seen, many of the cognitive properties by which humans perceive and organise their relationship to time, like syntax and intention in the preceding chapters, exist both as subject matter, and as material for particular poetic experiments. The passage of time in Ashbery's writing is not merely something to be commented upon in terms of rhetoric, or of lexical choice. It is something that is literally *written into* the structure of particular poems. By integrating, and, thereby, ostensibly drawing attention to the temporal "content" of a poem, Ashbery therefore extends his poems beyond lexical, or even linguistic, experimentation. Indeed, Ashbery formulates what are essentially "temporal experiments" which are as much "about" the human relationship to time as they are expressions of linguistic and lexical content.

Experiments with Time: Depictions and Manifestations of Time in Other Mid-Twentieth-Century Artistic Forms and Their Influence on Ashbery

Among the most wide-ranging and lasting of Ashbery's non-literary influences on his understanding of time is the influence of contemporary classical music. Ashbery has spoken frequently of the importance of classical music to his writing, both on a theoretical and on a practical level, and the works of two of Ashbery's contemporaries have proven especially influential: John Cage and Elliott Carter.²

It is, perhaps, somewhat surprising, given the differences between the character of Ashbery's literary experimentation and that of the major figures from the Black Mountain school—a grouping in which Cage was profoundly important—that Ashbery would, nevertheless, count John Cage as such a major influence. However, by examining the nature of Cage's influence in detail, particularly in relation to conceptions of time, it will become clear that despite the literary gulf between the New York School and the Black Mountain approach to exploring the relationship of temporality and poetry, the influence of Cage is not as unlikely as it may seem at first, Ashbery himself credits a 1952 performance of “Music of Changes” as breaking him out of an extended period of writer's block (Gooch 210).³ Perhaps Cage's most profound influence on Ashbery is in having provided him with a way to begin to view the “literary space” provided by aesthetic and literary forms (e.g. novels, poetry, drama, etc.) as a field of composition which could selectively admit (under conditions set by the artist) chance features which merely “arrive” in the artist's cognitive field over time. In doing this, the form would be defined partially by time, and yet also, in itself, define aspects of its relationship to time on its own terms by manipulating, engaging, or resisting form.

In “Choice and Change in Cage's Recent Music”, William Brooks considers Cage's understanding of time in detail, writing that, for Cage, “the materials of music consist of sounds and silence, and that the only parameter of sound that is shared by silence is *duration*. Therefore,

Cage reasoned, structure must be based on duration; and if this is the case, the sound-materials need not be restricted to pitches, but can include noise” (Kostelanetz et al. *A John Cage Reader* 84). Cage’s own writings on the relationship of his musical composition to temporality also shed light on how issues of cognition can become part of the “material of composition” as much as the subject matter of a given artistic work. Cage discusses how art can distinguish between the progressive aspects of linear time and the features of what might be called “instantaneous time”— the taking of a specific moment in time in isolation. In a response during a symposium organised by Ashbery’s long-time employer, *Art News*, entitled “Form is a Language” (1960), Cage says:

Current graphism in musical notation was implicit in my manuscripts (1951-52), where space on a page horizontally represented time. Later, space vertically represented frequency events. The common denominator of many camps of the musical avant-garde is the assumption that each aspect of sound is not available only at discrete points (scales, modes, series), but rather at any points in a total field ... Conventional notation, for as many reasons as sound has aspects, is insufficient ... One cannot determine exactly what effect the notation causes—thus, indeterminacy. The observer-listener is able to stop saying I do not understand, since no point-to-point linear communication has been attempted. He is at his own center (impermanent) of total space-time.

(Kostelanetz, et al. *John Cage: An Anthology* 135)⁴

This passage is important for a number of reasons. First among them is Cage’s interest in a “total field” of sonic possibility which liberates composition from “linear” temporality and conceives of a different kind of relationship between the listener, the work, and temporality. Cage’s notion of moving from a “horizontal” understanding of time (in his use of musical notation) to a “vertical” understanding—an understanding which explores the quasi-harmonic character of simultaneous sounds occurring in the sonic environment—is crucial to conceptualising time as a

“location”. Though the passage is complex, the notion of de-emphasising the “horizontal”, or progressive, aspect of time—its linearity—and considering the potential for a “vertical” aspect of time in musical composition can be understood to mean that the “compositional space” (the aesthetic architecture used by the artist in a particular composition) no longer privileges the “point-to-point” narrative aspect of musical structure, but instead favours the possibilities provided by “expanding” a moment and exploring the full sonic dimensions of a given instance, and the numerous perceptual and cognitive events that take place (and some of which do not take place) at that given instant. In this way, a distinct method of exploring the mind in time, and consequently, memory, is articulated. It represents a method which is less concerned with the mind as it struggles to, or succeeds in, assimilating sonic data over a temporal interval than with the ability of the mind to prioritise, organise, and investigate the sonic input of a given instant. This requires a listener to be more conscious of the “harmonics” not merely as “written” (in the “graphic” sense) by the composer, but as they emerge from the interaction of time, environment, and composed artistic content.

Cage had written about this phenomenon of “verticality” earlier in less direct ways. In a piece written for the Creative Film Foundation in 1956, Cage describes his interest in the “vertical” aspect of time as realised in art: “I am interested in any art not as a closed-in thing by itself but as a going-out one to interpenetrate with all other things ... All of these things, each one of them seen as of first importance; no one of them as more important than another” (*John Cage: An Anthology* 115). Cage goes on to provide concrete examples of what he considers an expression of the kind of “going-out” he is seeking:

Just a few years ago, I was on my way to Boston with friends. We stopped to get some lunch. The situation was a bar and a glass-walled dining room, overlooking a small lake with diving apparatus in its center. There were people swimming (I could see them); there was a juke box playing (I could hear it). I was eating lunch and conversing. It all

went together. (*John Cage: An Anthology* 116)

The ultimate expression of this philosophical approach is perhaps embodied by his work *4'33"* in which a particular "horizontal" block of time is compositionally demarcated, and, within it, the "vertical" sonic environment contained in that duration is presented as a "composition". Such an approach balances the "linear" component of the experience of time with a "vertical" approach which focusses more on the experience of time at a specific given instant, "instantaneous time" in a word.

"Instantaneity", as the term will be used in this chapter, will refer to the depiction or realisation of an "instant" of time without regard to the historical position of the poet-artist him/herself, or the personal conditions or circumstances under which the poem was written or performed. This conception can be usefully contrasted with the approach to integrating or exploring time undertaken by other experimental poets who came to prominence during Ashbery's early writing life. While Ashbery's poetry could be said to maintain an interest in the instantaneous in the way Cage describes, the Beat writers, and many of the Black Mountain poets, often stressed another concept in their use of time as an aspect of "structure" in a poem: the relation of the poem to the poet as an embodied subject in time. For these writers, the relationship of the poet and the poem to time was also important in defining the relationship of the poem to its audience. The Beats and many Black Mountain writers seemed to seek something more like an "immediacy" in their writing, a means of integrating the poet's experience of a poem with that of his/her readers. In the writing of Black Mountain poets, particularly Charles Olson, who in the essay "Projective Verse" (1950) came to define a particular aesthetic approach to experiment, the intimacy between the poet and the reader (or viewer) is described as something toward which the poet should strive. Olson writes:

What we have suffered from, is manuscript, press, the removal of verse from its producer and its reproducer, the voice, a removal by one, by two removes from its place

of origin *and* its destination. For the breath has a double meaning which latin [*sic*] had not yet lost. (Olson 22)⁵

The union of poem and poet in the poet's voice is clearly critical to the full realisation of the poem for Olson; without it, the reader cannot have the "full" experience of the poem. Though printed poetry, suffering as it does from "manuscript" and "press"—rather like the "graphism" Cage rejected—can be laid out in ways which are imitative of the physical process of the recitation of the poem by the poet, this approach can only offer some amelioration of the "restrictions" of print. Crucially, however, in this conception, a poet's presence cannot be replaced by the text. By rejecting "press" and "manuscript" as a malady, Olson implied—and his followers accepted—that the literal contemporaneous experience in (and of) time by poets together with live audiences is how ultimate poetic expression is achieved.

Olson spoke of his desire for such a form of communion with his readers on other occasions as well, notably at a drunken poetry reading in 1965, arranged for that year's Berkeley Poetry Conference, where he offered the following articulation of his vision of poetic apotheosis:

I wanna talk. I mean, you wanna listen to ... a poet? I mean, you know, like a poet, when he's alive, whether he talks or reads you his poems is the same thing ... And when he is made of three parts, his life, his mouth and his poem, then, by god, the earth belongs to us. (Rifkin 13)

However seriously one chooses to take the "three parts" section of the above text, it is clear that for Olson, when a poet is reading—or even, possibly, simply living—then the poet and the poem are taken to be part of the *same structure*, a kind of *embodiment* of the poem-as-speech-act in time. It is not merely the speech-act-poem that is of interest in this dynamic, but the poet-poem-speech-act. Such insistence on the poem as a kind of "embodied entity" no doubt foregrounds the relationship of the poet to temporality, but it does so in a way that is completely different to Ashbery's approach. As will be seen shortly, what is critical to Ashbery is not the poet's "life,

mouth, and poem”, indeed not even the fact that the poet is living, but the fact that the poem is essentially constantly alive in the embodiment of its reader. This is because the temporal structure of the poem considers less the status of the poet-poem in time than the role of the mind—a “generic” human mind the properties of which are theorised by the poet—in time. This switch of focus, in accord with the model of intentionality and syntax described in previous chapters, is onto the embodiment of the *receiving* consciousness not the consciousness producing the poem.

In Ashbery, and, to some degree in the New York School more broadly, the experience of time often appears to be a much more individualised concept than it appears as viewed by the Beats and many of the Black Mountain writers. For the New York School writers, the experience is often something unique to each individual’s perception of time, yet possessed of features which make the description or mimicking of the experience of time recognisable to others and which also make that experience capable of being analysed. The means of relating this understanding was the creation of a form of *mental* engagement rather than physical proximity, an exploration of the mutual cognitive environment shared by reader and writer relative to time. Sperber and Wilson provide a useful way to conceptualise this distinction. Where Sperber and Wilson speak of a “mutual cognitive environment” in which “ostensive” acts are undertaken to make particular communicative strategies “mutually manifest” to both communicator and interlocutor in a poetic structure (in which a poet and reader are “experiencing” a textual “environment”), the strategies used by the poet to make particular aspects of that environment more “manifest” become means, not merely of creating poetic effects, but also of creating cognitive effects. As will be seen, these strategies and modalities of “ostention”—ways of “making manifest” particular aspects of a poem—and their temporal consequences, are quite different with respect to Ashbery and many of his contemporaries. This distinction can most clearly be seen in contrasting the approach of Ashbery to that of Allen Ginsberg, a poet in many

ways very different in outlook from Ashbery, but one who considered many of the same questions. Ginsberg, though not adhering to a rigid insistence on the physical presence of the poet as a fundamental means for a reader's understanding of a poem, still foregrounded physical properties in creating poetic experiments with time.

In a 1965 interview with Tom Clark, Clark asks Ginsberg if he based the line lengths of *Howl* (1956) and *Kaddish* (1961) on classical metrical units. Ginsberg responds:

I wasn't really working with a classical unit, I was working with my own neural impulses. See, the difference is between someone sitting down to write a poem in a definite preconceived metrical pattern and filling in that pattern, and someone working with his physiological movements and arriving at a pattern ... Nobody's got an objection to even iambic pentameter if it comes from a source deeper than the mind—that is to say, if it comes from the breathing and the belly and the lungs. (Ginsberg 19)

In a later interview from 1971, Ginsberg goes on to describe how he conceptualises the means of going “deeper than the mind” with his line-lengths and in his use of devices for creating rhythmic structures:

I went over my prose writings, and I took out little four-or five-line fragments that were absolutely accurate to somebody's speak-talk-thinking and rearranged them in lines, according to the breath, according to how you'd break it up if you were actually to talk it out, and then I sent 'em over to [William Carlos] Williams. He sent me back a note, almost immediately, and he said, “These are it! Do you have any more of these?” ... It's just a very simple basic principle that you listen to speech to hear rhythms and attempt to isolate the archetypal rhythms of actual speech and then remodel them in the poems. (Ginsberg 269)

Ginsberg proceeds to link his “discovery” with Olson's concept of projective verse. Whether

Ginsberg's link is historically valid is less important than his concentration on modelling his poems not merely on speech, or idealised rhythmised versions of speech, but on the physical speech *act* (as distinguished from Austin's more conceptual notion of the "speech-act"). The act of speaking, for Ginsberg, draws an overt link between the poem as printed on the page, and the human experience in time. To read the poetic lines of Ginsberg, is, perhaps, strangely, to have an idea of what his lung capacity was like. He suggests the same when responding to one of Clark's questions in the 1965 interview. Asked if his own physiology is important to the composition structure of his poems, Ginsberg responds:

Analytically ex post facto ... Later, I have a tendency to explain it, 'Well I got a longer breath than Williams, or I'm Jewish, or I study yoga, or I sing long lines ... ' But anyway, what it boils down to is this, it's my *movement*, my feeling is for a big long cranky statement. (Ginsberg 25)

Ashbery has spoken in similar terms to Ginsberg on the role of line lengths in his writing:

I use a very long line very frequently in my poetry which I feel gives an expanded means of utterance ... It often seems to me to have almost a sexual quality to it in the sense that the sexual act is a kind of prolongation of and improvisation on time in a very deep personal way which is like music, and there's something of the expansiveness of eroticism in these lines very frequently for me, although that's by no means a conscious thing that I undertake in writing them. (Packard 124-5)

But, for Ashbery this "expanded means of utterance" is often realised through using prose as a form of poetic metre. Although the use of prose as a form of "everyday" speech would seem to embrace the spirit of Ginsberg's idea of forging a closeness between the pattern of speech and the poetic line, Ashbery's decision to abandon the breaking up of poems into lines and stanzas would seem to reject Ginsberg's use of the body's physical limitations as the ultimate point of reference for the consideration of line length. Though there would seem to be a contradiction,

or, at least, an inconsistency, between the two perspectives, it may be possible to reconcile this by returning to the notion of Ashbery as a “cognitive” poet.

Where Ginsberg seeks, in his poetic explorations, to go “deeper than the mind”, for Ashbery, it would seem that the mind itself is about as deep as it is possible for poetic investigations to dig. By collapsing poetic language into prose structures, as in the works from *Three Poems*, for example, Ashbery relies on the intuition of his readers to read his poetry as prose and, thus, establish the metrical structure of everyday speech by stealth. Thus, a metrical reading is not “forced” on the reader from a presentational perspective in the same way as in Ginsberg’s writing, and indeed, Olson’s (i.e. *via* choices related to line breaks). By not dividing lines into “poetry”, Ashbery essentially sidesteps the question of how long to make a given line. The reader’s cognitive faculties are instead “colluded” with to create a poem that is at once a literary experiment—the collapse of poetic structure in a poem—and a cognitive experiment, relying on the reader’s mind to supply “prose metre” to poetic language and, in doing so, define a distinct form of “poetic” metre in the process. This demonstrates how Ashbery embraces, in his own more mentally (or cognitively) centred way, how Cage’s idea of using time as a structuring device for artworks can be realised in a literary form. In viewing and using the interaction of the poetic form (in this case the line) and its relationship to the time it occupies (in terms of the time that passes in the reading of the line) in this way, critical features of Ashbery’s later temporal experiments come to be more visible.

In some ways, many of Ashbery’s temporal experiments can be seen as alternating between the “vertical” notion of time as emphasised by Cage—particularly in poems like “Litany” and “To the Same Degree”—and a more “horizontal” approach in which techniques are used to suspend or isolate readerly attention in time in order to emphasise the cognitive experience of time as “linear”. Ashbery discusses this dynamic in his interview with Travis Nichols in the February 2009 issue of *The Believer* magazine, again relating his approach to music:

I was very attracted to Schoenberg and serial music when I first started writing, thanks to Frank O'Hara, actually, who discovered lots of things before I did ... I was taken with the idea that tone row is a fixed thing that goes into music, that the music is organized around it, that the composer is not free to improvise, though of course, a lot of them do ... this was sort of interesting to me at the same time I first tried to write a sestina, because there you're thwarted every time you try to write the next line. The form is always there menacing you. I guess my poetry is indebted to music because it's something that unfolds in a linear way and it's not something that can be taken in immediately like a painting. (Nichols 54)

Much more will be said about the ability to "take in" a poem or a painting "immediately", but for the moment, it is more important to consider the relationship of "rule defined" boundaries to Ashbery's formal writing. Ashbery's ability to reconceptualise the rules of form becomes a means by which his temporal experiments collude with the consciousness of the reader to create a cognitive field in which Ashbery's conceptual play can be rendered meaningful. The reader has a sense of what is coming in Ashbery's formal works (e.g. his sonnets or his sestinas) and makes the journey to the future point (the rhyme or the repeated word, for example) from a known linguistic or lexical "site" established by the mandate of a formal structure. In this way, a kind of mini-narrative is created. The reader may know "what" to expect, but not necessarily "how" to expect it. The poem becomes, then, partially about getting to the next site of formal realisation. In a sense, the lexical contents of a line are positions not unlike notes in a tone row, playing defined, but still open, roles in the creation of poetic effect. The distance between points is, therefore, not merely interesting from a lexical standpoint in determining what the poem "says" on its surface, but also in how the poet uses the distance of a line in the knowledge that the reader is aware, or becomes aware, of the form's conventions and of the time such forms define. The line is not merely a means of conveying rhythm or poetic "voice", it also has a geography

defined by its physical length (either as voiced or as printed). The words matter, but so does their layout and presentation with regard to the reader's attention.

Ashbery's Poetic Experiments: The Boundaries of Attention and the Geographies of the

Page

The capacity for time to function as a location, as in Cage's 4'33" as a site where a temporal space is defined (and aesthetic material is inserted into that space), is powerfully explored in Ashbery's poems involving two paired columns of text which are understood to represent sections of the same poem. His first published formal experiment with multi-column text intended either to be read (or at least "viewed") simultaneously is "To the Same Degree" from *The Tennis Court Oath*. The poem has a number of features that are relevant to the ideas discussed above: first is the matter of its formal innovation. The laying out of poems in distinct columns on different pages is an obvious—though easily overlooked—aspect of most poetry collections; laying out two columns of poetry on the same page beside each other which are the *same* poem makes layout as much a feature of the poem as its words, lines, or the organisation of its stanzas. Again, the "ostensive" realisation of poetic intent is rendered visible. The reader is immediately aware of Ashbery's use of layout as part of an experiment and as a component of the poem. As discussed above, the columns of "To the Same Degree" also comprise a "place" in "vertical" time. They become a visual, rather than aural, representation of the beginning of the temporal placement of the poem. The poem begins taking up time at its first lines and the reader sees that two parts of the poem exist in the same temporal "location". Though, obviously, readers frequently encounter lines of poetry in which numerous words appear on the same line of text, in adding the intervening white space, Ashbery makes it clear that two distinct poetic structures are placed in the same temporal location. The poem is, thus, structured *by* time and *within* time.

The historical convention of poetic stanzas being placed after each other down the length of a page is reimagined by the work as well. The stanzas are both horizontal and vertical—like time itself as conceived by Cage. In this way, Ashbery’s notion of the longer poetic line as offering an “expanded means of utterance” takes on a further dimension (both literally and metaphorically). The “utterance” is expanded to include two statements in the same “line” of poetic text. In a sense this expansion is not unlike Husserl’s notion of the expanded moment as well. However, instead of expanding the moment to integrate data, Ashbery seems to be expanding the moment to test how much information is cognitively integrable:

From the frozen yelps squirted lust	Earnestly so-and-so
Unavoidably but without waste, though certain rusks	The fresh lumps pointed
Were being distributed. Water mains, you imitate	To Valhalla, the oboes
Our positive statement, when through the disgusting	Torturing the hobo's visor
air	
With mantle of leaves, possibly forgetting old	The “Poet's Wife” ran aground
Seizure, in some fishing village, the barbed leaves	The laxative had been
Close to the grounds, in some automobile on the	Administered ... on the grounds
grounds	
Things contained in the universal consciousness:	Of legality. (<i>The Tennis Court Oath</i> 86)

While some words (e.g. “grounds”) appear in both columns, it is clear from the outset that to follow a comprehensible, if somewhat complex, narrative the reader may select a column and read to the bottom and then begin the next column and read its complex-but-cohesive narrative. The reader’s attention is also being guided by the poetic structure in ways that directly address the relationship of mind and time. The eye moves across the columns or down them, picking up

poetic “data”, or missing it; then the reader comes to reorganise the data as the reading is completed to make sense of the two poetic structures contained in the same poem. The reader can either push on to the bottom of a single column, or reread particular sections of the separate columns at a later juncture to examine the moments of seeming narrative convergence.

Regarding the presentational layout of the later “dual-column” poem, “Litany”, the poem is frequently printed on two facing pages. Both columns are set off beneath a roman numeral, “I”. Such presentational features demand that the reader’s attention focusses on both columns of the work *at once*, though this attention must be redirected almost immediately as the reader follows the syntactic and narrative structures of the respective sentences that open the poem. As with “To the Same Degree”, the reader then can engage whatever particular “strategy” s/he may for reading the poem. The subjective experience of the reader thus becomes an aspect of the poem’s presentation and realisation. Ashbery’s openness to readers “missing” sections of the poem as they “tune in and out” is as much a part of the structuring of the poem as its actual lexical content. Larissa MacFarquhar writes that Ashbery considers a poem is “doing its job if its audience is intermittently aware of it while thinking about other things at the same time” (MacFarquhar 96). Missed words are, from Ashbery’s perspective, equally valid components of the poem as those read (or heard). This is an interesting proposition from a cognitive perspective in that it manifests a literary experiment wherein words are not necessarily the fundamental component of a poem: they are one aspect among many in a perceptual field (like Cage’s “total field”) defined over a temporal “space” in which poetic effect is as much created by the “structure” of time as by lexical content of the work. Attentional vagaries on the part of the reader are not only understood to be “part” of the poem; it could be argued they are necessary, as even the most “reader friendly” version of the poem, the recorded version, demands attentional shifts which preclude full, instantaneous experience of the poem as an integrated and fully comprehensible whole.

“Litany”’s length is, in itself, a kind of “ostensive” statement. In becoming aware of the poem’s size, the reader becomes a “character” of sorts in a drama that is both literary (in that it is generated by the text) and extra-literary (the reader’s part is not wholly defined by the text). The poem “includes” the reader, his/her body, attention span, perceptual faculties, and ability to focus. The reader, however, also defines his/her relation to the work. The poem can be read for short periods of time, or the reader can choose to focus on a particular part of the poem, or to skip it. The poem will be there to be returned to, and, following Ingarden’s ideas, it may exist differently for the reader at different times in different readings, yet it remains always the poem “Litany” by the poet, John Ashbery. The poem is a durable structure that contains time and mandates cognitive strategies for coping with how much time it actually contains.

Syntax, too, plays a role in “Litany”’s experiments with readerly attention and time. Syntactic ruptures may appear in the work, but they are not the fundamental “motor” of the narrative of the poem, as in the examples from *The Tennis Court Oath* like “They Dream Only of America”. In “Litany”, Ashbery’s syntactic approach is more ambiguous in the first instance than that of “To the Same Degree”. If the reader attempts to read across columns, the clauses are sufficiently elastic in terms of syntactic relations to permit possible continuity of narrative:

I	I
For someone like me	So this must be a hole
The simple things	Of cloud
Like having toast or	Mandate or trap
Going to church are	But haze that casts
Kept in one place.	The milk of enchantment
Like having wine and cheese.	Over the whole town,
The parents of the town	Its scenery, whatever

Pissing elegantly escape knowledge	Could be happening
Once and for all. The	Behind tall hedges
Snapdragons consumed in a wind	Of dark lissome knowledge.
Of fire and rage far over	
The streets as they end.	The brown lines persist [...].

(Ashbery, *As We Know* 3)

After a while, however, it becomes clear that the columns are meant to be distinct, though, as in “To the Same Degree”, words like “town” make the lines appear even more directly related than they are in terms of narrative. The suspension of definitive judgment of each column’s narrative discreteness is underwritten by “soft” syntactic disruption, almost in the same sense as the “Stevensian” approach to clausal nesting discussed earlier, though with less expectation of resolution. Ashbery uses the “horizontal” aspect of the poem to reveal the ultimate discreteness of the narratives. The reader must pay close attention to maintain the individual narratives if choosing to read “Litany” across its columns instead of down them, again, testing the mind’s capacity to integrate data at a specific moment, a kind of negative parallel to Husserl’s example of the retention of aesthetic data in an “expanded” moment.

“Litany” explores the interaction of time and mind in other ways as well. Having spent time discussing the formal and presentational aspects of the poem, turning to its actual lexical content, it is possible not only to see how Ashbery theorises the mind in time in his creation of the “structure” of the poem, but how the experience of time feels to embodied consciousness as described by the poem. The tension between the personal experience of time and the external experience of time, of course, forms the basis of memory, or the lack thereof, as explored in this passage from “Litany”:

But out of so much color
It still does not come again
The colors of tiger lilies and around
And down, remembered
Now as dirty colors, the color
Of forgetting grass, of
Old rags or sleep, buoyed
On the small zephyrs
That keep the hour and remind each boy
To turn home from school. (*As We Know* 10)

Here, memory would seem to fail, or to reinvent a darker reality than that which originally existed. The “small zephyrs” which “keep the hour” might seem to be a more reliable means of measuring and comprehending time than the poem’s speaker’s faulty memory. There will be much to say about memory and forgetting later in the chapter, but for the moment, it is important to note how the poem treats forgetting: as a personal, subjective matter in which time and the world of objects may or may not play a role. Time’s passage and history are “real”, whether the poem’s narrators or characters accept the fact or not or whether the narrator’s perceptual faculties can cope with the data time presents.

Memory, Measurement and Entropy: Ashbery’s Conceptualisations of the Temporal

Ashbery’s interest in exploring the way mind and time relate extends beyond the kind of highly specific formal experiments discussed above. As seen with the concepts in previous chapters, time also is the subject of poetic reflection in a number of works which do not have particular formal properties which foreground time. In discussing time as poetic subject matter, Ashbery frequently draws readerly attention to “the sensation of time as it passes”, time not only as conceived in the abstract, but time “felt” personally by individuals. In such poems, time seems

to have distinct, almost tangible, qualities as the speaker perceives or experiences it at different points. Ashbery discusses the tangible sensation of the passage of time in “Blue Sonata”:

We know that this part of the day comes every day
And we feel that, as it has its rights, so
We have our right to be ourselves in the measure
That we are in it and not some other day, or in
Some other place. Time suits us
Just as it fancies itself, but just so far
As we not give up that inch, breath
Of becoming before becoming may be seen,
Or come to see them all that it seems to mean now. (Ashbery, *Houseboat Days* 66)

Time passes and appears to have identifiable characteristics, but what is interesting about this characterisation of the feeling of time passing is the fact that time appears again as an almost entirely *external* concept, external to the body, and to consciousness. The speaker of the poem is reconciled to consciousness being imbricated with time, but does not see consciousness as being reducible to awareness of temporality. The speaker *undergoes* time, but neither fully rejects nor admits the protocols of temporality as the ultimate definition and limit of conscious perception. The narrator, rather like the narrator of “Some Trees”, is “as far from the world as agreeing with it” (*Some Trees* 51).

The same idea is explored in “Houseboat Days”:

The surge creates its own edge
And you must proceed this way: mornings of assent,
Indifferent noons leading to the ripple of the question
Of late afternoon projected into evening.
Arabesques and runnels are the result

Over the public address system, on the seismograph at Berkeley.

A little simple arithmetic tells you that to be with you

In this passage, this movement, is what the instance costs:

A sail out some afternoon, beyond amazement, astonished

Apparently not tampered with. (*Houseboat Days* 39-40)

Again, time is real and external to human consciousness, though the feeling of time's passage has distinct, identifiable qualities which can be considered a part of the perceptual field in which the poem's speaker's consciousness is situated. Time is a "place", but it is a place in mind as much as a place in the world of space-time.

Experiments with "time as material" and as "location" continue throughout Ashbery's later writing, taking new forms—and suggesting numerous possible readings—in even his most recent collections. In the collection *Planisphere*,⁶ Ashbery appears to be considering a new variation on his "dual column" layout poems as well as exploring the notion of the poem as an object containing or "creating" time. In "Tous Les Regretz" (*sic*), Ashbery places a number of words next to each other with slash-marks between them, suggesting that the individual words could be substituted for each other:

What a lovely day/street/

blank canvas/pause/orb/

old person/new song/milestone/

caned seat this is! I think so. (*Planisphere* 119)

The poem presents a complex field of cognitive possibility for the reader. One option is to read the poem as it is printed on the page, taking in all the words as they are arranged, and reading the "slash" symbols as if they are voiced. Another possible approach for the poem is to consider only a single word from the array offered and to read the poem as if that word were the "right" word. The reader could repeat this process using each possible combination of words leading to

multiple possible readings of the text. Again, what is at issue in this discussion is not what the “correct” reading or “meaning” of the poem is. What is important is the way in which Ashbery uses the poetic form to present the reader with a kind of literary “problem” which, though lacking a final resolution, offers the reader a variety of strategies to employ to attempt to “resolve” it. The reader, by making cognitive decisions along the linear axis of time (e.g. what does the reader “admit” to his/her reading, what does s/he exclude in a particular reading), then makes these decisions “become” a version of the poem. This extends the notion of the poem-as-cognitive-experiment beyond even the ambitious “co-extensive column” poems described above. Such a work is not merely difficult to “take in” all at once, indeed it is considerably easier to perceptually take in than a poem like “Litany” (primarily because, being composed of fewer words, it contains less time). The poem is, however, perhaps, harder to finally resolve for a reader because so many possibilities for structuring and reading the poem exist. Not only is interpretation deferred by the work, but aspects of the poem’s content are, in certain readings, necessarily elided.

John Emil Vincent suggests there is an “entropic” character to Ashbery’s later collections, as they depict the disintegration of poetic structure and the confusions of an aging mind. Vincent’s idea of “entropic” language is an intriguing one; however, it serves more to highlight a tension between the way language and the world interact over time, a question of ontology, than simply to act as a dramatisation of a specific cognitive state, a question of the experience of subjecthood. “Entropic” aspects, both as concepts in their own right and as a metaphor for the properties of recursive language in Ashbery’s writing are manifested in a number of ways, not just in the fragile formal structures and wandering trains of thought Vincent mentions, but often through the complex linguistic structures generated in Ashbery’s long poems. In such poems, particularly “The System”, Ashbery’s writing both addresses and embodies elements of linguistic entropy.

In the *New York Quarterly* interview, Ashbery is asked about his relationship to concepts in physics like thermodynamics, and, thus, entropy. Ashbery rejects direct influence, though he notes that his grandfather was a physicist, so perhaps “osmosis” might be responsible for any resemblance between his poetic approach and ideas in physics (Packard 120-1).⁷ As is often the case, though Ashbery seems to reject a systematic approach to science—as seen with regard to other totalising systems of philosophy and literary approach—what might be called the “theme” of entropy clearly is detectable in a number of his poems. There can be few more apposite places in Ashbery’s *oeuvre* to start in considering the breakdown of order within a closed system than Ashbery’s poem “The System”. From the poem’s famous opening paragraph, its entropic concerns are clear enough:

The system was breaking down. The one who had wandered alone past so many happenings and events began to feel, backing up along the primal vein that led to his center, the beginning of a hiccup that would, if left to gather, explode the center to the extremities of life, the suburbs through which one makes one’s way to where the country is. (*Three Poems* 53)

As in many Ashbery poems, “horizontal” time flows strangely in “The System”:

We all know those periods of balmy weather in early spring, sometimes even before spring has officially begun: days or even a few hours when the air seems suffused with an unearthly tenderness, as though love were about to start, now at this moment, on an endless journey put off since the beginning of time. (*Three Poems* 73)

The journey spoken of is endless, and, therefore, it has a dual relationship to time: it is both unbounded, and deferred. Is the journey endless because it has no end, or because it has never been started? Ashbery here exploits the complicated properties of language to further ambiguate matters, generating infinite possible meanings over finite time.

In the closing paragraphs of “The System”, language and time appear to work against each other. The word “unimaginable” leads to the following passage:

And would you believe that this word could possibly be our salvation? For we are rescued by what we cannot imagine: it is what finally takes us up and shuts our story, replacing it among the millions of similar volumes that by no means menace its uniqueness but on the contrary situate it in the proper depth and perspective. (*Three Poems* 104)

Where the unimaginable “shuts our story”, “rightness” places “us” fully in a temporal structure. Only when language fails—when even conceptualisation itself fails—does a kind of freedom emerge. The language/world tension described above highlights a paradox in the relationship of linguistic entropy and physical entropy. Language, as a conceptually infinite system—despite existing in a closed system,⁸ the material universe—lacks the sense of “horizontal” entropy which inheres in the material world. The entropic “arrow of time”, launched at a specific point and destined to fall at a specific point, may point one way in the material world, but it can point in many directions at once in the world of language as a result of the capacity of language both to take on infinite meanings for individual lexical items, and to generate syntactically comprehensible, infinitely recursive sentences. Thus, a kind of “vertical” entropy may emerge in language, not an entropic breakdown from the degrading of useful energy, but from the proliferation of possible data to be organised. Sentences become harder to understand the longer and more complex they become. Ashbery’s torrent of verbiage in “The System” seems almost to dramatise this strange asymmetrical relationship of infinity and entropy. The poem, however, ends firmly focused on time and temporality: “It is the time we have now, and all our wasted time sinks into the sea and is swallowed up without a trace. The past is dust and ashes, and this incommensurably wide way leads to the pragmatic and kinetic future” (*Three Poems* 106). The passage is at once pessimistic and hopeful. The past is “dust and ashes”, but the future is both

“pragmatic” and “kinetic”, adjectives which are not obviously related but which bear generally positive connotations. Time, the poem seems to suggest, in its constant flow, does not necessarily redeem lost or wasted moments, but at least offers a “pragmatic” future in which possibilities exist for progress once the lost time sinks away. Essentially, Ashbery seems to suggest, the past can be productively forgotten. Language, then, may be seen as a structure which allows the mind, however briefly, to escape (or at least elude) the “breaking down” of one system by immersion in another, language itself.

Contrasted with the linear-horizontal concept of entropy, and the idea of time as a finite structure, is the notion of cyclicity. Ashbery’s poetry is often just as concerned with cyclical (or possibly cyclical) features of the experience of the passage of time. Often such cycles are disjointed or misperceived, however. The parcelling of time in linear or cyclical ways underwrites one of the more conceptual features of Ashbery’s examinations of time in his writing: his interest in how time is measured.

Though Ashbery often uses conventional measurements for time in his work—“days”, “years”, etc.—Ashbery frequently uses unusual means of measuring time as well, as with the “zephyrs” in “Litany”, or as in “Many Wagons Ago” from *As We Know*. Thematically, time is also central to the narrative in “The Skaters”, another long poem that explicitly “contains” considerable time and, thus, exploits time as “subject matter” in a way similar to both “The System” and “Litany”. In the poem, Ashbery offers many unusual considerations of time, temporality, and the measurement of time’s passage, for example, the following: “And it is December again,/The snow outside. Or is it June full of sun/And the prudent benefits of sun, but still the postman comes” (Ashbery, *Rivers and Mountains* 59). To “the postman”, it doesn’t matter if it is June or December, or some point in between; there is another cycle, independent of the seasons, that must be carried out. Further, regarding the measurement of time in “The Skaters”, Ashbery suggestively picks out the most reliable method for determining time, the

movement of celestial bodies, but then goes on to complicate it in the famous, much-puzzled-over closing lines from the poem: “the constellations are rising/In perfect order: Taurus, Leo, Gemini” (*Rivers and Mountains* 63). The temporal order is about as imperfect as it is possible to be (Leo is not between Taurus and Gemini, but after both with the intervening constellation of Cancer), but “perfect” order, an ambiguous linguistic concept, is a different thing from “sequential” or “scientific” order. Language, thus, is seen to clarify or confuse situations equally. The disorder it introduces into the “system” in this case—not necessarily the world of objects—is not, however, an entropic disorder, but a “perfect order” (or, rather, a “perfect disorder”) that coincides with some inner understanding of the term “perfect” on the part of the poem’s narrator. Nature, of course, does not provide such relationships as “perfect order” any more than it does perfect circles. Humans, invariably—if somewhat ironically—decide what is “perfect” and what is not. Indeed, it is only individualised consciousness that can formulate a concept like “perfect order”. Expressions of individual perception make consciousness manifest in ways that the simple acceptance of “mind external” orderings would not (i.e. to deviate from the “externally correct” ordering of something like, for example, the appearance of the constellations, a personalised, arguably conscious choice, either of ontology, or of selection is required). Not unlike the “unmakeable” mistakes of syntax that frequently appear in *The Tennis Court Oath*, disorder is often the mark of individualised consciousness and awareness. It is through instances of “mistakes” that it becomes possible to see “ostensive” fingerprints in Ashbery’s writing. The mistakes themselves are indications that Ashbery is choosing to represent the mistake rather than the correct information. The poetic consciousness leads, or misleads, the reader through the experience of time and thus sheds light not merely on the “experience of time as it passes” but also the ways in which the individual mind attempts to cope with and make sense of such passing and its consequences. Time may be, as seen in “Blue Sonata”, a distinct property of the world with which the faculties of cognition must reckon. Ultimately, however, even this aspect of time, its very independence from the mind, is ultimately subordinated to a by-

product of those same cognitive faculties, individualised consciousness, which perceives, cognises, and interprets time according to its own imperatives.

If the relationship of time to the making of mistakes as depicted by Ashbery's writing is to be fully explored, the subject of forgetting must also be addressed. Forgetting is one of the most temporally coded aspects of human cognition. The capacity to encode and retain memory is at the heart of the construction of identity, and, it could be argued in relation to classical forms that the interplay of memory and forgetting may play a role in the development of common poetic structures.⁹ Therefore, the conceptualisation and depiction of the process of forgetting is necessarily cognitive territory. Ashbery devotes a great deal of time throughout his writing life to examining aspects of the forgetting process. Ashbery's poems are frequently concerned not merely with the fact that forgetting is a part of the human experience of cognition, but with *how* things are forgotten, as seen here in a passage from "Sleeping Animals" From *Chinese Whispers* (2002):

I forget. I've even
forgotten that I forgot
it. So go on with your
story, but make it
quick this time. (*Chinese Whispers* 5)

To remember that one has forgotten is a reminder of one's forgetfulness, and so the poem's narrator insists that any information be presented in a way which accords with the narrator's faulty memory encoding faculties. The following passage from "Down by the Station Early in the Morning" touches on similar ideas:

There's the moment, years ago in the station in
Venice,
The dark rainy afternoon in fourth grade, and the shoes then,

Made of dull crinkled brown leather that no longer exists.
And nothing does, until you name it, remembering, and even
then
It may not have existed, or existed only as a result
Of the perceptual dysfunction you've been carrying around
for years. (*A Wave* 14)

The passage has a number of important features. The first sentence begins with the word “There’s”. It would be very tendentious (though, admittedly, it would be possible) to suggest that the contraction Ashbery is using here is of the words “there was” rather than “there is”. The significance of this is that the memory that is recounted is understood to be part of the *present* tense and is, thus, the recall of recall. It is a memory that is being recovered in real time, not a scene set in the past that is being recounted or generated. The “memory” itself consists of images and objects, particularly the “dull crinkled brown leather” that “may not have existed”. This possibly non-existent leather is, the narrator suggests, perhaps a creation of a “perceptual dysfunction” which would mean that though the memory is “accurate”—the mental state recovered is felt as memory—it is a “memory” of a non-existent event, and so, not really a “memory” in the normal use of the term. The mind and the senses may, thus, be disordered, creating “real” states of mind that correspond to nothing that happened in the world. In a sense, this is similar to Ashbery’s notion of how time functions in other poems, as in the “mind-independent” passage of time in poems like “Blue Sonata”. In later collections the instability or unreliability of memory—often acutely realised memory—is also addressed, as can be seen here in “No I Don’t” from *April Galleons* (1987):

[...] Wasn’t it on this day
Exactly a year ago, that the fabric began to rustle
And strange stems with small gilded flowers on them were

suddenly

There, and obviously the seeds had been planted at some point

For it to happen, so much of it as it's only now

Turning out to seem? (Ashbery, *April Galleons* 20)

The recall of the speaker seems almost total: “exactly a year ago”; the “rustling” of “fabric” is remembered in detail, as is the appearance of “small gilded flowers”. But the fact that the narrator seems unsure about aspects of what appears to be a detailed and intense memory makes it seem that the distance between events in the mind and events in the world, even events intensely experienced, may not be quite as they are remembered by the apparatus of mind. Time (or physiology) may build in baffles against the mind recognising the data of the senses.¹⁰

In “Lost Profile” from *Your Name Here* (2000), Ashbery returns to the “clear-but-inaccurate-memory” theme:

And today I am a mad Chinese monk

chasing after his temple. Which way did it go?

Around that corner of bushes? Or was there ever

a temple? It seemed more and more likely

that it was a figment of your imagination, a figment

perhaps like many another, only a little more underripe. (Ashbery, *Your Name Here* 82)

The “temple” has disappeared despite being clearly remembered by the “mad Chinese monk”. The interrupting voice in the poem, perhaps an interlocutor, perhaps another voice in the mind of the monk (either way not set off with inverted commas to suggest it is external quotation), makes a critical observation: not only was the temple “more likely” a figment of the monk’s imagination, but that many other things may be, too. Indeed, can the monk even be sure s/he is a monk, or mad, or even Chinese? Time here would seem to be almost irrelevant to the internal state of the character. Time goes on and temples rise, fall, or are relocated, but the mind may be

isolated from events in the world of linear time by madness, failing memory, or simply self-delusion. Again, the process and feeling of the “experience of time as it passes” and the encoding of sensory data are foregrounded in the poem, and elements of Vincent’s notion of certain Ashbery poems as representing the “dotages” and vagaries of an aging mind can be recognised as well. However, what is ultimately of greatest interest in the poem, from a cognitive perspective, is the way in which the poem highlights the limits of certain faculties of memory and cognition and how such limits come to define the understanding of other limits, the limits of the external world as it can be taken in or preserved by the mind.

The Difference between Being in Time and Time in Being: Perception’s Role in Cognition

Considering Ashbery’s forms of temporal experimentation in relation to the work of other “experimental” writers of his time—particularly writers in the Black Mountain and Beat traditions—it becomes possible to see what is distinct about Ashbery’s approach. First, there is a deemphasising of the kind of direct linking of the poet’s experience of time with the reader’s experience of time. This allows Ashbery the opportunity to perform sophisticated experiments with time and understandings of temporality that rely neither on improvisation, nor on a direct consideration of the embodied poet in time *via* the “medium” of an embodied reader. As in previous chapters, it is Ashbery’s awareness of cognitive “assumptions” or competencies on the part of readers that licenses his temporal experiments. In the process of performing these experiments, it becomes clear how, at particular junctures in his career, Ashbery has theorised or understood cognitive functions. Trends within this wider experimental architecture, in terms of the use of time as subject matter in Ashbery’s poetry, and in his approach to the depiction of time-as-experience, also illustrate how he conceives of temporality as it is experienced by “the mind at work or at rest”, and the features of temporality that he considers relevant from a poetic standpoint. What is most critical for the wider aim of this study is not merely that these features

can be identified, but that they have implications for the understanding of consciousness and cognition.

Notes

1. Husserl writes elsewhere that “The real world indeed exists, but in respect of essence is relative to transcendental subjectivity, and in such a way that it can have its meaning as existing (seiende) reality only as the intentional meaning-product of transcendental subjectivity” (Husserl, *Ideas* 21). This position is generally considered a “pure” phenomenological position, and, while the present study has affinities with such a position, it bears restating that the ultimate position of this thesis is closer to a Chomskyan understanding in which it is possible that the world may exist outside of “transcendental subjecthood” but that it would not be discussable by subjects transcendental (or otherwise), and that its intelligibility would not necessarily be accessible in whole, or in part, to subjects. Regarding Husserl’s expanded moment, Wittmann and van Wassenhove address the concept as well, though in a more formal way, highlighting a key discrepancy with genuine, though difficult to resolve, consequences for cognitive investigations of the mind in time:

In discussing the question of discrete time quanta in the brain ... it is argued that although neural temporal processing may operate with certain temporal windows of integration, this resolution does not entail the conscious perception of time units, namely discrete implicit temporal processing does not equate discrete explicit temporal representation. (Wittmann and van Wassenhove 1810)

2. Though perhaps less of a philosophical influence on Ashbery than Cage, Carter could, in some ways be said to have perhaps influenced specific examples of Ashbery’s writing more directly, as suggested here in an interview with Ashbery conducted by The Library of America:

‘Litany’ may have been inspired—I’m never too sure of these things—by hearing Carter’s *Duo* performed by a violinist and a pianist who were situated far apart from each other onstage at Cooper Union. They would almost have been in different worlds except

for the fact that they were obviously listening to and spying on each other, each trying to get the upper hand. (“The Library of America Interviews John Ashbery” 7)

3. A number of examples of Ashbery speaking of the influence of music can be found in the critical literature surrounding his writing. For example, David Shapiro writes, “The development of collage ... is likened ... to the development of one of Ashbery’s favourite composers, Busoni. Busoni wrote a piano concerto entitled ‘The Turning Point,’ and all his subsequent music fittingly seems different from earlier pieces ... Similarly, in Ashbery’s poetry, the disjointed and indecisive has the look, at least, of a highly unified music” (Shapiro 22). Also, in Geoff Ward’s *Statues of Liberty*, Ashbery cites the influences of Webern and Berio on his writing: “I was tremendously moved by these isolated notes ... you hear a note plucked on a violin and it seems as though you’re hearing that note for the first time—he has the power to produce this atmosphere where everything takes on a heightened significance” (Ward’s citation is taken from an interview with *Quarto* magazine from 17 May 1981; the specific quotation can be found on page 14) (Ward 112). Also, John Shoptaw, citing a statement from Ashbery found in the anthology *A Controversy of Poets* (1965), edited by Paris Leary and Robert Kelly, quotes Ashbery on the subject of the relationship of the “argument” to music thus:

What I like about music is its ability of being convincing, of carrying an argument through successfully to the finish, though the terms of the argument remain unknown quantities. What remains is the structure, the architecture of the argument, scene or story. I would like to do this in poetry. (Shoptaw 1)

For more on the influence of music in Ashbery’s writing, see an interview conducted with John Ashbery by the poet, John Ash, in the *PN Review* 46 (12.2 November-December, 1985).

4. Perhaps some of Ashbery’s interest in Cage’s work is attributable to their mutual interest in the writing of Gertrude Stein. Cage, too, has frequently expressed admiration for Stein’s

writing and literary approach (Kostelanetz, et al. *Conversing with Cage* 133). Cage's writings also consider syntax as an important site of experiment. Cage's conception of what syntax is and how it functions, however, is dramatically different from Stein's, not to speak of Chomsky's, and indeed, all psycholinguistic syntactic theory. Interviewed by Niška Gligo in 1972, Cage is recorded as saying:

[Cage]: I think we need to attack that question of syntax. My friend Norman O. Brown pointed out to me that syntax is the arrangement of the army.

[Gligo]: Yes, that reminds me of Nietzsche's saying that our need to have grammar is proof that we cannot live without God. If you are opposed to syntax, do you think that we do not need to have God?

[Cage]: Yes. (*Conversing with Cage* 133)

5. Meaning the word "*spiritus*"; presumably Olson is referring to the differing uses of the term in relating to both the physical process of breathing, and the "nonmaterial" substance of consciousness or personality.
6. *Planisphere* is also an alphabetised collection, as discussed in chapter two in relation to *Can You Hear Bird?*
7. In physics there are understood to be two basic laws of thermodynamics. The first, known as "The Conservation of Energy", states that matter can neither be created nor destroyed. The second, known as "Entropy", states that the amount of useful energy within a closed system will diminish over time.
8. The phenomenon of infinite recursion in language, the capacity to create sentences which are grammatically correct and acceptable but which continue infinitely is discussed as a

property of the language faculty in Chomsky, Hauser, Fitch, “The Faculty of Language” and Pinker’s *The Language Instinct*. The latter offers a less technical explanation of the phenomenon.

9. For extended considerations of repetition and its role in relation to the limits of memory in epic poetry, see, Baker, Egbert J.. *Pointing at the Past: From Formula to Performance in Homeric Poetics*. Cambridge, MA: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2005. Print (particularly pp. ix-xi and 139-145). The topic is also discussed in Parry, Milman. “Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making I: Homer and the Homeric Style.” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 41(1930): 73-147.

10. A number of studies have been published which suggest memory encoding functions in ways which are not straightforward transferrings of external data to memory. In fact, it is suggested that often memory is a product of the “storage” of a few important or iconic/echoic bits of data which are then “narrativised” by the brain. Essentially, the brain appears to “write” memory as much as remember “recall” it. See Hodges, John R. and Kim S. Graham. “Episodic Memory: Insights from Semantic Dementia.” *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences* 356.1413 (29 September 2001): 1423-1434.

Chapter Four

Perception and the Cognitive Environment in Ashbery's Poetry

The “great” poetry I like best has this self-effacing, translucent quality. Self-effacing not from modesty but because it is going somewhere and has no time to consider itself.

(Ashbery reviewing Lee Harwood's *The White Room*) (*Selected Prose* 116)

He [Saul Steinberg] is interested, he says in understanding— the last of the three stages (sensation and perception being the first two) by which we are classically supposed to acquire knowledge.

[Steinberg]: The bourgeoisie is happy with perceptions. They see a Vasarely, their eyeballs twitch and they're happy. I am concerned with the memory, the intellect, and I do not wish to stop at perception. Perception is to art what one brick is to architecture.

(Ashbery, *Reported Sightings* 281)

To develop a “cognitive perspective of literary perception” in line with the ideas discussed in previous chapters one must consider the ways in which Ashbery's poetry highlights how perception *functions* in relation to other properties of cognition, which include the awareness of sensory input, the modalities of attention, and the means by which data are organised into meaningful “information”. Formulating a theoretically consistent and investigable conception of perception is a complex task, however. A number of theories have emerged to treat the concept and to pose particular relevant questions, so it is important to establish the philosophical grounding which will guide the argument of this chapter. In his introduction to the anthology *The Philosophy of Perception* (1968), G.J. Warnock outlines several such questions:

first, what are the data? and second, how do we build upon them? What is the nature of those entities of which, in perceiving, we are basically, directly, immediately aware? How is this immediate awareness itself to be characterized? And then it must be considered by what process, by what kind of inference or construction or interpretation, we pass from awareness of data to our ordinary, but complex, perceptual awareness of and judgments about the world and its contents. (Warnock et al. 1-2)

These basic questions must characterise any discussion of perception, but the difficulties they present are illustrated by essays in the same volume. For example, R.J. Hirst attempts to disambiguate the concept of “sensing”—what he describes as “a direct awareness of sense data, i.e., of colour patches, sounds, smells, etc.”—from “perception” which is, he suggests, characterised by “perceptual consciousness” involving both “sensing” and additional qualities.

He writes:

perceptual consciousness involves this [sensing] and a further mental act or process, the taking for granted or rational belief that there is present to the senses the material object specified by the sense-data; when the material object is so present this consciousness amounts to observing, to a mediated awareness of the object. (Warnock et al. 27)

In this formulation, there is the “perception” of “sense data”—“sense data” being essentially sensory information—and an awareness that this information is comprehensible as the result of the presence of some material object causing it which can be “sensed”, or “observed”. Richard Wollheim, responding to Hirst in relation to the complex matter of disentangling “sensing” from “perceptual awareness”, highlights the difficulties that can result from the terminology used to conduct the discussion of perception (Warnock et al. 46). Linguistic and terminological issues are also at the heart of H.P. Grice’s examination of H.H. Price’s conception of perception as expounded in Price’s book, entitled *Perception* (1932). In the book, Price, similarly to Hirst, argues that a material object in the world may be said to be the ultimate “cause” of a given perception.¹

Grice attempts to establish a possible basis for such a theory by suggesting that attributional aspects of perception (e.g. attributing smoke to the presence of fire) must, by necessity, be true or false in the context of other true or false statements about verifiable sensory data—a concept that mirrors the notion of “implicature” discussed earlier (Warnock et al. 112). The conception of truth or falsity in relation to questions of perception is also central to D.W. Hamlyn’s later treatment of consciousness, temporality, and perception. Hamlyn’s approach is to attempt to trace the workings of inference in connecting sense data to belief, essentially considering how an individual mind organises sensory data in ways which become meaningful for action (Hamlyn 19). Hamlyn’s overall project is a critique of the use of an “information-processing” model for the characterisation of perception *vis-à-vis* cognitive structures. For Hamlyn, the role of agency is too critical to the functioning of perception to be left out of any model, and strict information-processing models are, at best, understood to offer a mechanism by which perceptual data are used as a stimulus for expressions of agency. The critique of the information-processing model is also critical to the work of Fred Dretske. His work focusses on the nature of the relationship between information and awareness in regard to perception. No major thinker, not even Hamlyn, totally rejects the idea that information processing is a part of the perceptual process; however, the question is a matter of determining what the character of the way in which the faculties of perception process information or sensory input may be.

In *Perception and Knowledge* (2000), Dretske attempts to build a philosophical structure in which the relationship of sensory data and belief is defined *via* the questioning of the nature of perception’s status as information. Dretske distinguishes between the concepts of “experience” and “perception” with the following question: “If perception of an F is an *information (about F)-rich experience*, what, exactly, is an experience” (Italics added) (Dretske ix). To reach a meaningful answer to the question, Dretske considers the relationship of experience and mental concepts: “what sorts of material states are phenomenal states”, he asks, “and what sorts of material states

are conceptual states” (Dretske xi)? This question is critical because it distinguishes between a number of important concepts. First, Dretske recognises what he calls “states”, which are conditions that can be thought of as “interactions with phenomena”. Then, he articulates the notion of “phenomenal states” in which something like “perception”—meaning a contextualisable sensory interaction taking place in time—occurs. Also, Dretske’s structure recognises “material states” which are *materially* realised states of being, possibly including the two previous states, or independent of them. Finally, Dretske also describes what he calls “conceptual states” which permit understanding (*via* perception) of material and phenomenal states. Perceptual data is “information”, but understanding what kind of information it may be is the work of cognition. Dretske writes: “one can be aware of a thing that is F without being aware that it *is* F” (Dretske 120) (Dretske then suggests possible examples of “F”s: including “an armadillo”, or “burning toast” (Dretske 120)). The consequence being, for Dretske, “there is no *reasonably specific property F* that is such that a fact-awareness of a thing that is F requires an awareness of the fact that it is F” (Italics in original) (Dretske 120). Thus, *experience* of a thing may not necessarily be *perception* of a thing, and perception of a thing may not be identical with the “understanding” of a thing, not least along the Searlean lines discussed in the “Chinese Room” thought experiment. Thus, following Dretske’s framework, a person may, for example, see an object in Texas with four legs and a shell (this would be both a “state” and a “material state”), an object that someone who was familiar with the creature would describe as “an armadillo”. But the question would then be if the person who saw the object (perhaps later recounting his/her experience by describing the creature), understood that what s/he was seeing was an armadillo (rather than an aardvark or some other unidentifiable creature). The perceptual state would only obtain after the critical connection between the material and the perceptual state was established. If this distinction is accepted, then the experience of time, or the “experience of experience”, does not become merely a function of perception, but a *precondition* of perception which then is processed in a wider cognitive environment.

A Dretskean sense of eschewing the belief/verification dynamic discussed in Grice's and Hamlyn's work would seem to underlie the baseline understanding of perception, and the question of how mental states are represented and/or discussed in Ashbery's poetry. Dretske may provide the conceptual framework for asking questions about the process of perception, but in attempting to understand the perceptual process as a function of cognition, the mechanisms of mind must be taken into account as well—not merely the consequences of the workings of mind. Such mechanisms are the properties which allow such perceptions to be formulated in the first place. For even if a Dretskean framework is accepted as being in place in the uptake of perceptual experience, it is important to ask what the relationship is, not merely between ideas or theories of perception, but between the world and the mind which *actuates* perception?

In a lecture and question-and-answer session with the philosopher, Peter Ludlow, Chomsky offers a way of asking this question that is both narrow and investigable. He suggests that whatever the external properties of perception may or may not be, the critical question for philosophy of mind is the state of the mental organ “on the occasion of sense”:

The concept ‘internal representation’ is used in the sciences ... which don't involve a relation between an internal thing and an external thing ... there is no nature common to the thing, there is a construction of the mind which we use to talk about the world ... our ‘cognoscitive powers’ ... use the data of sense to construct an account of the world.

(Chomsky, *The Stony Brook Lectures* 2004)²

Following from this argument, what is likely to be most readily investigable is the cognitive faculty (or faculties) that make perception *possible* rather than the concepts that *constitute* perception themselves, as they are generated by these faculties. The functioning of the mind on the occasion of the awareness of sensory data is a critical beginning point for examining how perception becomes possible. Thus, literature that is cognitively-minded can work to engage this dynamic and, in a sense, following Dretske, unpick the “experience” from the “perception” and

perhaps shed light on the properties of mind, or the “cognoscitive powers”, which mediate cognition, experience, and perception.

In the sections which follow, this conception of the faculties of perception (as distinguished from cognition, a process which may *include* but which is not *reducible* to perception) as the modalities of the “functioning of the mind” on the “occasion of sense” will provide a basis for the argument that in the case of a cognitively-minded writer like Ashbery, such a notion of perception is central to a number of the aesthetic and conceptual features of literary creation. Perhaps the key feature of Ashbery’s poetry in relation to the concept of perception as explored in this thesis is his interest in the questioning of the relationship between how the mind constructs reality and how the senses record reality. For Ashbery, Dretske’s distinction between perception and awareness seems a particularly natural fit. The envelopment of the senses by the data of the natural world is a frequent subject in Ashbery’s poetry, but often the world as experienced in Ashbery’s writing is not the world as recorded or preserved by the narrators of his poems. Indeed, his poems seem often to ask a variation of Dretske’s fundamental question: how does the mind become aware “about” something not merely aware *of* something?

Regarding questions related to the depiction or dramatisation of perception in Ashbery’s writing, a number of critics, including Geoff Ward, Barbara Malinowska, and John Koethe, have discussed the relationship of Ashbery’s writing to the philosophical tradition of phenomenology. Ward, in particular, has argued that Ashbery’s is a kind of phenomenological poetry. However, it will be demonstrated that while certainly a “phenomenological emphasis” may dominate Ashbery’s writing at specific moments, particularly in his later collections, as with all philosophical and cognitive programmes, Ashbery’s approach continues to be heterodox and ultimately unsystematic or even anti-systematic. It could be characterised as phenomenological, but it is not phenomenology *per se*. The basic question going forward must relate to how Ashbery’s writing theorises the interaction of the world of perceptual data and “the mental organ

on the occasion of sense”, and how can such a theory interact with more formal means of cognitive investigation.

All of this is not to say phenomenology as a method or idea in its own right has not been of interest to Ashbery. In an essay entitled “Poetical Space”, he suggests that T.S. Eliot’s writing is “close to phenomenology”. Speaking of “*The Waste Land*”, Ashbery writes: ““You too can be a phenomenologist,”” Eliot “seems to be saying, ‘if only you’ll abandon the task, let it work through you, let the river carry you where it wants to rather than trying to immobilize it’” (*Selected Prose* 216). This method, Ashbery writes, is “[u]npalatable to the savants among us, perhaps, but to the poets the only real way of getting the job done” (*Selected Prose* 216). For Ashbery, as opposed to the “savants among us”, the idea of attempting a thoroughgoing inventory of the data of sense is, not unlike Wimsatt’s and Beardsley’s conception of literary intention, “neither possible nor desirable”. To faithfully carry out a form of phenomenology in line with such a reading requires “getting out of the way” of the data of sense. Ashbery’s interpretation of Eliot, his sense of “abandoning the task” and “letting the river carry you where it wants” certainly resonates with his own literary approach, particularly with regard to the role of cognitive and syntactic “flow”. Despite this fact, though, and as a number of Ashbery’s poems will demonstrate, sometimes it is harder than one may expect to simply “let the river carry you where it wants”.

This is also not to say Ashbery has no larger architecture of philosophical understanding. In fact, the lack of systematicity is a kind of “enacted phenomenology” of its own, not dissimilar to the approach of another artistic movement that was prominent when Ashbery’s first collections were being published, that of Abstract Expressionism. Painters like Jackson Pollock considered their work to be the depiction of an interior state, and, in suggesting such a description, themselves formed a rough theory of the qualities of that internal state.³ Ashbery, too, implicitly theorises perception in his work, essentially collapsing first- and second-order

reflections on the concept into a single act: the created poem. Nevertheless, though many critics have made a connection between Ashbery's writing, phenomenology, and Abstract Expressionism (again, Geoff Ward is prominent among these writers), as will be seen, many of the things Ashbery has noticed and written about in relation to visual art have phenomenological implications but start from different premises and pursue different objectives to those of the Abstract Expressionists. Ashbery is as much concerned with general perceptual states as he is with his narrators' personal perceptions of the world.

Though Ashbery may not feel that visual art has conspicuously influenced his poetry, Ashbery's art criticism, collected in *Reported Sightings* (1989), offers some insight into his understanding of the relation of visual art and perception, and, thus, sheds some light on how sensory states are translated into cognitive states in his understanding.⁴ As Ashbery writes of painters in a piece on Esteban Vicente, "when they write on other painters [they] often involuntarily describe their own work" (*Reported Sightings* 208).⁵ To a certain extent, this may also be true of Ashbery. Whether describing the "concatenations of unlikely objects" in Trevor Winkfield's work (*Reported Sightings* 169), or in discussing the way that "dull conventions and ceremonies from middle-class existence" serve "as a springboard to a kind of universal vision" in a piece written on Marcel Proust and Édouard Vuillard" (*Reported Sightings* 53), a reader of Ashbery can see many ideas and features prominent in his own writing in his descriptions of works of visual art. Of direct relevance is Ashbery's piece on Odilon Redon and Maurice Denis from 22 May 1963. In the article Ashbery writes:

I have always found Redon's realistic paintings more fantastic than the imaginary ones ... In paintings like the 'Still Life with Two Peppers' or the 'Still Life with a Blue Jug,' ... [H]e emerges as a kind of Cézanne of the unconscious. That is, he discovered new laws of inner vision, as striking and as valid as Cézanne's revolutionary optics. The deep cerulean shadow on the brown jar in the latter picture is a color no one has ever seen in

nature, yet it is both Romantic and right. (*Reported Sightings* 134)

This deeply personal representation of the data of perception and an “unnatural”, yet, somehow, a “Romantic and right” aesthetic could just as easily apply to Ashbery’s poetic approach to perception. In such instances, a kind of sublimation from experience to perception (as distinguished in Dretske), and then to cognition, is dramatised. Sense experience is subsumed in favour of non-empirical aesthetic or personal valuation. What is experienced is not always perceived, what is perceived is not always experienced.

Visual art seems to offer a useful metaphor for conceptualising Ashbery’s experiments with perception. In considering a visual artwork, the physical object in itself is only a part of the network of aesthetic relations a work generates. A painting, even a painting which does not attempt to represent the physical world, can never be reducible to merely the interplay of paint and surfaces. In the same way, in exploring how phenomenological concerns may inform depictions of perception in Ashbery’s writing, it may again be helpful to step away from strictly “lexical” examinations of Ashbery’s writings which concentrate on the verbal-linguistic content of given poems and take a more abstract view, taking in the structural and presentational aspects of his works. In many instances from Ashbery’s writing, he often employs one or more of a range of basic strategies for engaging his reader in poetic “discussions” of the experience and qualities of perception. In the most straightforward instances, Ashbery’s poetry sometimes attempts to mimic instantaneous perception “as it happens”. This technique has persisted in Ashbery’s work from his earliest writings up to the present. Equally characteristic, though perhaps more complex, are Ashbery’s various strategies for “ostensively disrupting” readerly attention (in a way similar to the syntactic “ruptures” of his *The Tennis Court Oath* poems). Of particular import are his attempts to “stretch” readerly attention to the breaking point with long lines or swift shifts of narrative and perspective to foreground, or to directly reference, readerly

perception as a site for poetic experiment both how attention “flows” in “real time” and how rapidly it is subsumed into more integrated cognitive processes.

Early Modern and Modernist Influences on Ashbery’s Evolving Understanding of Perception

To understand the nature of Ashbery’s experiments, it is useful to examine his work in relation to aesthetic and philosophical influences in order to see where Ashbery has internalised or theorised the role of perception as depicted or discussed in the works of others. The interaction of attention, cognition, perception, chance, and Ashbery’s philosophical influences is explored in David Herd’s *John Ashbery and American Poetry*. Herd makes reference to Blaise Pascal—one of the few philosophical writers whose direct influence Ashbery readily acknowledges⁶—and his meditation on chance from the *Penseés* (1669), wherein Pascal writes that the human mind “is not so detached as to be undisturbed by any disturbance raised round him. It does not take the noise of a great gun to interrupt his thought: the creating of a vane or pulley suffices” (Pascal 53). Herd suggests that the universe as depicted in the *Penseés*, “mobile, uncertain, contingent”, resonates with the world as seen through Ashbery’s poetry (Herd 130). To see how this point is illustrated—both conceptually and methodologically—it is valuable to turn to Ashbery’s description of the composition of the poem “Popular Songs”. The pressure placed on the apparatus of perception by the work is, for Ashbery, essentially the subject of the poem. Ashbery describes the composition process thus:

It was written in an attempt to conjure up the kind of impression you would get from riding in the car, changing the radio stations and at the same time aware of the passing landscape. In other words, a kind of confused, but insistent impression of the culture going on around us. (Shoptaw 31)⁷

Not unlike those sounds noticed by John Cage at his lunch meeting in Boston, seemingly peripheral aspects of the experience of perception are not as “peripheral” as they might first

appear. Ashbery, like Cage, seeks to abolish aspects of the hierarchies suggested in certain models of perception, in which the data of the senses is somehow classified in terms of relevance. With this tendency in mind, it is now possible to examine how Ashbery depicts the process, as well as the content of perception.

To consider the applications of the depiction, management, and exploration of perception—both instantaneous and continuous—in Ashbery’s writing, it is also helpful to analyse Ashbery’s sense of tendencies within the modernist representation of perception. In the essay “Poetical Space”, Ashbery takes a quotation from the section of “The Waste Land” (1922) beginning, “The river sweats/Oil and tar ... ” (Eliot *The Waste Land and Other Poems* 32) and examines how Eliot chooses to depict the flow of a river compared to a depiction of a river in Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” (1842). Where “The Lady of Shalott” attempts to mimic the movement of the river with the rhythmic structure of the language, Ashbery argues that the fragmented lines of Eliot:

convey something, something perhaps more to the point for us today: the blotchy, out of focus scene, the river refusing to roll, the awkwardly laid on oil, tar, and sweat add up to a picture of crisis that is mental, but just as surely takes in the visual world, transforming as it does so into a blurred copy that is all the more meaningful for being imprecise.

(*Other Traditions* 215)

While Ashbery’s own poetic approach is quite different to Eliot’s in terms of language use and form, the fractured character of the poem that Ashbery identifies, the transition from sensory experience into cognitive experience which is “imprecise” in proportion to its poignancy, recalls Ashbery’s own treatments of forgetting in those accurate depictions of inaccurate, or restricted cognitive states (e.g. false memories or forgotten facts). They manifest the expression of genuine (if unreliable) cognitive realities. In a sense, this is perhaps a reversal of some of Ashbery’s modernist predecessors’ approaches to perception, for whom fidelity to the recording of external

perceptual data was prized. What is left out of a perceptual event becomes as important, for Ashbery, possibly even the most important thing, about how perceptual data interacts with the mind.

This stands in sharp contrast to the writing of other modernists. Take, for example, the work of David Jones. Though there are certain structural similarities to Jones, the way in which such structures are used in Ashbery's writing is quite distinct. In Jones' *In Parenthesis* (1937), for example, a variant of the "stream-of-consciousness" technique is used to bring the reader into the experiential field of the characters in the story:

One groveling, precipitated, with his gear tangled, struggles to his feet again:

Left to be buggered.

Sorry, mate—you alright, China?—lift us yer rifle—an' don't take on so, Honey— but rather, mind

The wire here.

Mind the wire.

Mind the wire.

Extricate with some care that taut strand—it may well be you'll sweat on its unbrokenness. (Jones 36)

The following example from *The Tennis Court Oath*, the poem "Rain" appears superficially similar:

Fumes

Features in the lake

The light

The shadow of a hand

soft on the lock

staring wax

scraped with a pin, reflection of the face

The time

principle thing. (*The Tennis Court Oath* 29-30)

But any attempts at comprehensively conveying the perceptual environment reveal only the inadequacy of such attempts. It is the “leaving out” that is, again, crucial to Ashbery’s approach. Unlike Jones’ work, there is no sense in “Rain” that the fragmentary presentation of perceptual-sensory data will equate to a holistic experience in which the reader will come to have an intimate understanding of the situation of the poem.

Other literary influences from the modernist period have played a more direct role in the genesis and nature of Ashbery’s experiments. His critical writing on Marianne Moore provides an opportunity not merely to see Ashbery’s relationship to a key literary influence spelled out, but also to see his consideration of Moore’s treatment of the objects of perception: how she treats the material world of experiences and the constituents thereof, and how Ashbery understands their role in her poetry. In his review of *Tell Me, Tell Me: Granite, Steel and Other Topics* (1964), Ashbery’s focus on the inclusion of the ephemera of daily living in Moore’s writing may indeed provide clues to his own approach to the depiction of perception:

how to deal with the unwanted information that constantly accumulates around us ...

What can we do about those stacks of *National Geographic*, leaflets from the Bell Telephone Company, the *Illustrated London News*, the *New York Times Magazine*, business letters, overheard remarks, and also the habits of jungle flora and fauna, which we shall probably never see and which in any case can never concern us? Well, live with them is Miss Moore’s answer, recognizing them as part of the rhythm of growth, as details of life possibly helpful in deducing the whole, in any case important as details. (*Selected Prose* 86)

“Live with them” may be Marianne Moore’s answer, “write poems specifically about them” would seem to be Ashbery’s, as many of his poems from *The Vermont Notebook* demonstrate:

‘C’est écrit dans le ciel.’ And ‘Moustapha.’ What ever became of that guy? Bob Azzam? Whatever became of Sammy Kay, for that matter. And Shep Fields. But the man had wanted to speak. And all that he was able to get out was ‘thicity.’ He was talking about

himself—his ‘authenticity’? or ‘this city’? No, not likely. He’ll probably be around again though. (*The Vermont Notebook* 43)

Not only do the “overheard remarks” constitute the majority of the poem’s final stanza, the rumination on their ephemerality and incompleteness becomes the subject for the narrator’s musings. The accretion of the ephemera of perceptual experience can be seen here to be subsumed into a larger cognitive framework of expectation and classification, and, again, the work becomes something of a dramatisation of the process it depicts. The narrator of the poem records aspects of the world, but only as much as the limited faculties of perception permit.

It is not merely the interaction of the objects in the world and the mind which are of interest to Ashbery in regard to questions of perception. Language in the world is also an important subject for poetic consideration. In his essay, “Typical Ashbery”, collected in Susan Schultz’s *The Tribe of John*, John Morse considers the use of cliché in Ashbery (*via* the writing of Marjorie Perloff). Morse writes: “Lurching from subject to subject in mid-sentence but never escaping from cliché [the narrator] seems to speak a radically inauthentic language” (Schultz et al. 16). Morse then quotes Perloff to further his point regarding the omnipresence of cliché in contemporary society and its reflection of mass media culture. Perloff writes that the language of poetry is performing “in an arena where the simulacrum (prime time TV melodrama for example) exerts increasing control over the way business is actually done in the real world” (Perloff 60). “Prefabricated blocks of language” compose the clichés Morse speaks of, and they “are, after all, remnants of a culture whose distinctive characteristic is that it makes us think we once knew it” (Schultz et al. 16). Morse suggests Perloff’s highlighting of irony in the use of clichés acts as a kind of linguistic shield that prevents actual communication but which also

[s]tand[s] outside the arena of the simulacrum. To recognize irony, to recognize cliché as cliché, is after all to avail oneself of an understood standard of authentic meaning.

Somewhere in the ideal reading of “The Wrong Kind of Insurance” is a word named *right*

without quotation marks. But that word remains in deep background. (Schultz et al.

16)

Here, again, the notion of possible latent “crypt” meanings is significant, as the idea of “prefabricated blocks of language” constitute a means of realising what may be “encrypted”. In the recording of experiencing clichés, Ashbery is also recording the experience of having *heard* clichés. To experience the repetition of a cliché is, at one level, to experience the actual hearing and perception of the words used, but it is also to experience the intentional *application* of a cliché to a situation (perhaps appropriately or inappropriately) which necessarily mediates the meaning of a given verbal interaction. In taking this into account, it again becomes possible to see how Ashbery’s poetry can, from a cognitive perspective, be read as disambiguating the concept of “experience” and “perception” in a similar way to Dretske. Perception is not always, or even usually, understanding. To be true clichés, clichés both rely on a “mutual cognitive environment”, a kind of theory of common social conventions that imbue clichés with meaning and historical significance, but also on an individual’s ability to detect the “implicatures” particular phrases express or conceal.

The question must now be how such approaches to depictions of the experience of sensory perception fit into a larger philosophical conception of the role of perception in thought. What does Ashbery believe about the philosophical implications of his depictions of perception? As is frequently the case he appears to believe or, perhaps better, to “understand” the role of perception in making visible aspects of “the mind at work or at rest” in different ways at different times. Here the philosophical discipline of phenomenology provides a methodological frame for opening up questions about the nature of Ashbery’s fundamental beliefs about the relationship of the experience of perception to an overarching philosophy of perception on Ashbery’s part.

Phenomenologising Ashbery: Formal Philosophical Phenomenology and Ashbery,

Dialogues and Divergences

Geoff Ward cites Maurice Merleau-Ponty as a philosopher whose programme can be recognised (indirectly) in Ashbery's writing. In *Statutes of Liberty* (2001), Ward argues that Merleau-Ponty's philosophical project, which he describes as a developing of "a vocabulary that would reveal the underlying patterns of life" is, at times, "close to some of Wordsworth's articulations of the nature perception, as when he writes of sensations, '[f]elt in the blood, and felt along the heart'" (Ward 165). Following Merleau-Ponty again, Ward suggests that the aspect of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception most applicable to Ashbery's writing considers the relationship between time and presence: "It is what one might term the fate of perception to be led on, and then further on, never to arrive" (Ward 156-7). This, recall, is quite different to Husserl's idea of an "expanded conscious moment". In Merleau-Ponty, perception is always being led but never arrives. In Husserl, perception is constantly arriving but it is the perception of the passage of individual moments which escape the mind. Merleau-Ponty's writings, however, certainly would seem to have affinities with Ashbery's approach to depictions of perception. The "consciousness" of which we are all "somehow a part", to which Ashbery referred in the *New York Quarterly* interview, is significant in relation to the following passage from Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945):

When I understand a thing, a picture for example, I do not here and now effect its synthesis, I come to it bringing my sensory fields and my perceptual field with me, and in the last resort I bring a schema of all possible being, a universal setting in relation to the world. At the heart of the subject himself we discovered, then, the presence of the world so that the subject was no longer understood as a synthetic activity, but as *ek-stase*, and that every active process of signification or *Sinn-gebung* appeared as derivative and secondary in relation to that pregnancy of meaning within signs which could serve to define the world. (Merleau-Ponty 429)

The role of “all possible being” at the heart of “the subject himself” neatly ties together the concepts described above in this chapter. The “universal consciousness” can be understood to be present in the act of perception in Merleau-Ponty’s schema. Though, crucially, as will be seen, it is the less specific nature of perceptual experience which distinguishes Ashbery from Merleau-Ponty.

Where “subjectivity” (whether describing or disassembling it) is often at the heart of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological writings—and, in a literary sense, Gertrude Stein’s—for Ashbery, it is the general perceptual capacity of the mind (if not necessarily Ashbery’s own mind) which grounds the phenomenological possibilities of literature. Recall the “you, too, can be a phenomenologist” quotation relating to Eliot from earlier; it seems that, in his own poetry, Ashbery is suggesting that it is not so much the case that everyone “can be” a phenomenologist, more that, because of the properties of cognitive faculties, everyone *is* a phenomenologist: a perceiving subject perceiving in regularised, if individual, ways and more-or-less aware of the process at times. The process is what is general and, thus, it represents a feature of mind common to all the people Ashbery anticipates will be his readers. It is the “mental organ” which formulates perceptions “on the occasion of sense”.

Ashbery may or may not be a “true phenomenologist” in terms of method, but using Merleau-Ponty’s thought as a way into asking questions about the role of identity and cognition in relation to perception, it becomes possible for a more nuanced and detailed positioning of Ashbery’s writing within a wider cognitive framework to emerge. As noted above, the modalities of mimicking and interrupting consciousness are the primary tools Ashbery uses in his writing to generate poetic effects. Considering the role of movement and presence in Ashbery’s poetry, particularly with regard two of his key literary influences, John Clare and Frank O’Hara, it is possible to see how Ashbery applies his own understandings to perceptual questions, and how Ashbery’s writing can be situated in the tradition of other poetry concerned with perception,

both as a literary device manifested through technical strategies and as a topic of literary consideration.

Behind this discussion is the fact that literature accomplishes a strange alchemy with the concept of “the now”. The printing and publication of a text strangely freezes a particular “now” in time. Even in the case of poets like Auden, who “revise” earlier poems and republish them, the originary “now” can still be understood to have been “frozen” in the sense intended here. For such revision perhaps only serves to highlight the fact of a previous “now”. In the case of contemporaries of Ashbery like Ginsberg, Olson, or Amiri Baraka, who foregrounded performance and “immediate” presence in their works, a given poem tells the reader something about a given “now” and about some particular state of the poet at that temporal juncture (ideally, for Olson at least, the poet in a communal setting with his/her listeners). With printed works, however, as such “nows” move forward in time they become something else: a “past now” (which may be altered through revision), or the representation of a once-present “now” for the reader (who has access by using the text as a means of experiencing “someone else’s now”).

The idea of a finite sequence of “nows” characterising the natural world (as opposed to the infinite “nows” and, “thens”, and, “somedays”, too created by human consciousness) represents a starting point for considering the present as it is depicted in Ashbery’s writing. As all events in perception occur at a specific “now” mediated by consciousness, poetry concerned with the representation of instantaneous perception, as Ashbery’s often is, must develop a strategy for depicting such instances. Ashbery uses a variety of methods for both representing the “now” for his readers and of creating “mutual nows” which he shares in the creation of with those experiencing his work. Here, Ashbery’s approach builds on many of the concepts discussed thus far, including ostensive manipulations of grammar, and temporal experimentation.

Other Now: The Influence of John Clare and Frank O'Hara in Ashbery's Depictions of Experience

As Ashbery writes in his *Norton Lecture* on John Clare: “the effect of Clare’s poetry, on me at least, is always the same—that of reinserting me in my present, of re-establishing ‘now’” (*Other Traditions* 19). This “(re)establishing of now” is something other critics, some writing after Ashbery, have noted in Clare’s writing, among them John Lanchester. Writing in *The New Yorker*, Lanchester actually suggests that Clare’s poetry, in its: “in-the-momentness, its willingness to wander about and see what happens and arrive back where it started ... establishes a link with the cool school of modern flaneurs like Frank O’Hara and John Ashbery” (Lanchester “The Natural”). Literary “presentness” can be understood as a starting point for exploring the conveyance of experience, and the depiction of perceptual awareness. The following passage from Douglas Crase’s essay, “The Prophetic Ashbery”, celebrates the immediacy of Ashbery’s poetry by saying: “It takes a strong constitution to live into the present so ruthlessly available to whatever is waiting there” (Lehman et al. 33). To “live ruthlessly into the present” also entails representing the experience of the present. Among the ways poets often depict or represent that experience, to revisit the syntactic concerns of this thesis’ first chapter, are verb tenses. Tensing plays a complicated role in Ashbery’s own poetry in relation to his exploration of the “present”. The reader may recall here that Ashbery has spoken of being acutely conscious of the role of verb tensing in the poetic consideration of “the experience of experience”, saying, in the *The Craft of Poetry* interview, that he likes to use “all” verb tenses “simultaneously” because there are “things that are happening in our minds all the time which I’m attempting to reproduce in poetry” (Packard 118). John Clare’s poetry, including Clare’s treatment of perception *via* the use of verb tenses, will be seen to be influential on, though quite different from, Ashbery’s own. The poet may “re-establish the now” for Ashbery, but Clare and Ashbery approach the “now” in very different ways. One of the most crucial distinctions is the fact that the poetry of Clare is frequently set in the present tense. “Summer Morning” offers a representative example of one of

Clare's "in-the-present" present-tense poems:

I love to peep out on a summer's morn,
Just as the scouting rabbit seeks her shed,
And the coy hare squats nestling in the corn,
Frit at the bow'd ear tott'ring o'er her head;
And blund'ring pheasant, that from covert springs,
His short sleep broke by early trampling feet,
Makes one to startle with his rustling wings,
As through the boughs he seeks more safe retreat.
The little flower, begemm'd around with drops
That shine at sunrise like to burnish'd gold,
Tis sweet to view: the milk-maid often stops,
And wonders much such spangles to behold;
The hedger, too, admires them deck the thorn,—
And thinks he sees no beauties like the morn. (Clare 19)

Reprinting the entirety of Clare's poem emphasises the centrality of the present tense to the work. Not only are the events in the world of nature taking place in "real time"—the hare "squats", the rabbit "seeks her shed"—but the observations in the work are also taking place in real time. The hedger "admires them" and "thinks he sees no beauties like the morn".

Considering the profundity of Clare's influence, and the specifically cited feature Ashbery chooses to highlight in his *Norton Lectures*, the "re-establishing of 'now'", it is perhaps surprising to read that Ashbery finds writing in the present tense "annoying" (*Other Traditions* 18). Ashbery says he has some difficulty with "the poet ... simultaneously having an experience and handing it over to you in the form of a poem" (*Other Traditions* 17-8). If the poet is to represent instantaneous experience, how can it be done organically without relying on the present tense as the primary syntactic methodology of doing so?

The answer for Ashbery seems frequently to “drop the reader in” to various scenes which are then described from without by observing narrators. The opening lines of “Clepsydra” are a prominent example:

Hasn't the sky? Returned from moving the other
Authority recently dropped, wrested as much of
That severe sunshine as you need now on the way
You go. (*Rivers and Mountains* 27)

“No Way of Knowing” from *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975) offers another:

And then? Colors and names of colors,
The knowledge of you a certain color had?
The whole song bag, the eternal oom-pah refrain?
Street scenes? A blur of pavement
After the cyclists passed calling to each other,
Calling each other strange, funny-sounding names?
Yes, probably, but in the meantime, waking up
In the middle of a dream with one's mouth full
Of unknown words takes in all of these. (Ashbery, *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror* 55)

Here, the reader enters a thought or a conversation already in progress and is then posed a series of questions which appear to require answers. Any possible answer from the reader is suddenly cut off by an answer from the narrator: “Yes, probably”. Readerly attention is led by the structure of the poem and ruptured with the narrator's answer. The use of the gerund form “waking up” is also important. Though the present progressive tense is “present” in the gerund, it is also absent, in that one can say, “he was waking up” in the past, or “he will be waking up” in the future. The poem itself does not necessarily make clear when the “waking up” is taking place. A perfectly viable argument could be made that it is, in fact, intended to express the “present

tense”, but the narrator’s ambiguous postulation that “waking up/in the middle of a dream with one’s mouth full/of unknown words takes in all of these” is sufficiently destabilising to keep the poem out of the “genuine” present tense. The narrative data destabilises the poem, yet it forces the reader into a “now” of his/her own, as s/he is made to contemplate a personal response to the unstable text. Thus, again, a poem represents aspects of a kind of “theory of consciousness”, presupposing cognitive faculties and potentials, and exploiting them not merely to linguistically describe a state of affairs in the world (or on the page), but also in terms of forcing the reader to reason out meanings for the text. The reader may follow the language and structure of the passage, but the ultimate destination in terms of meaning is possibly less important than the means used to arrive at it and the cognitive tools used to decipher it.

An example of this dynamic can be found in one of Ashbery’s most explicit references to John Clare’s writing, “For John Clare” from *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970), which engages questions about the process and the depiction of instantaneous perception on a number of levels. The opening lines of the poem seem to directly address the distinction between instantaneous perception and the mediation of perception by cognition:

Kind of empty the way it sees everything, the earth gets up to its feet and salutes the sky.
More of a success at it this time than most others it is. The feeling that the sky might be
in the back of someone’s mind. Then there is no telling how many there are. They grace
everything—bush and tree—to take the roisterer’s mind off his carolling. (Ashbery, *The
Double Dream of Spring* 35)

Thus, instead of attempting to use language to demonstrate perceptual experience, Ashbery uses the language of perceptual experience to examine cognitive questions, considering not the sky above the speaker’s head, but the sky at the back of the mind of which there may be an infinite number. There can be, the poem appears to suggest, as many skies as there can be “nows”.

The world (both in its natural and anthropogenic aspects) has, of course, changed considerably since the time of Clare, and Ashbery's poem reflects the changed attitude toward the natural world that characterises many contemporary sensibilities. As the following passage indicates, nature is rarely seen on its own terms in Ashbery:

There ought to be room for more things, for a spreading out, like. Being immersed in the details of rock and field and slope—letting them come to you for once, and then meeting them halfway would be so much easier—if they took an ingenuous pride in being in one's blood. Alas, we perceive them if at all as those things that were meant to be put aside—costumes of the supporting actors or voice trilling at the end of a narrow enclosed street. You can do nothing with them. Not even offer to pay. (*The Double Dream of Spring* 35)

The failure to perceive the detail and diversity of the natural world is, for the narrator, reinforced by the inadequacy even to fully reckon with the radically more limited built environment. A Clarean “natural sublime” is replaced by a kind of “urban sublime” which is equally expansive, but less reassuring:

There is so much to be seen everywhere that it's like not getting used to it, only there is so much it never feels new, never any different. You are standing looking at that building and you cannot take it all in, certain details are hazy and the mind boggles.
(*The Double Dream of Spring* 35)

Above, the present tense returns in the poem, but, ironically, it appears not to simultaneously denote the experience of an event and the “handover” of that event transcribed in poetic form, but to reflect on the inadequacy of the narrator's perceptual capacities in producing a description of the event that neither the narrator, nor the reader, can experience fully.

Now and The Present: Understanding Ashbery's Metaphysics of The Present in Relation to Perception

It is not merely the depiction of the experience and the mental processing of the sense data of the world that is key to Ashbery's representation of perception in his writing, the unified consciousness of the perceiver is also centrally important. To discuss the ways in which Ashbery engages the idea of creating "consciousnesses" to "narrate" his poems and to express the "experience of experience" would seem to necessitate addressing of one of the most important strains within the wider body of Ashbery critique, that of the post-structuralist school of thought, because the differences between Ashbery's understanding of the way individualised consciousness reacts to the present *via* perception is quite distinct from many of the dominant strains animating post-structuralist thought. In exploring this distinction, much can be learned about how Ashbery theorises aspects of the faculties of perception.

Jacques Derrida, in particular, is among the post-structuralist thinkers most frequently discussed in relation to Ashbery's writing. Among the critics who do so is Laurent Milesi who considers the role of form in the poem "The Skaters" *via* Derrida's ideas, suggesting that Ashbery's approach to structuring the work creates what Milesi refers to as "a metapoetic dramatization of techniques of montage-genealogies of Romantic-Modern(ist) writing on poetic originality", allowing Ashbery to both express and conceal influence (Milesi 46). Jody Norton, too, in "Whispers Out of Time?: The Syntax of Being in John Ashbery's Poetry" (1995) explores Derrida's ideas in relation to Ashbery's poetry, writing that "Ashbery's principle concern—a concern that mirrors its poststructuralist theoretical moment—is to explore the shifting configurations of subjectivity" (Norton 282). Norton goes so far as to suggest that "Ashbery's writing cannot be understood outside of the context of contemporary philosophy of language, and especially the work of Heidegger, Derrida, and Wittgenstein" (Norton 282). Indeed, even Ashbery's own statements of disappointment regarding the difficulties readers have in

comprehending his work as it is printed on the page as opposed to when it is read aloud (MacFarquhar 88), would seem very much in keeping with Derrida's attempt to destabilise what he considered the "logocentricity" of much of western philosophy, and its reliance on the spoken rather than the written word. Derrida writes:

I shall try to show ... that there is no linguistic sign before writing. Without that exteriority, the very idea of the sign falls into decay. Since our entire world and language collapse with it, and since its evidence and its value keep, to a certain point of derivation, an indestructible solidity, it would be silly to conclude from its placement within an epoch that it is necessary to 'move on to something else,' to dispose of the sign, of the term and the notion. (Derrida 14)

Ashbery, too, has spoken of the sense that, for him, poetry is a fundamentally graphic entity (i.e. it is best experienced read on the page), but despite this area of seeming agreement, it is known that Ashbery has been reluctant to associate his writing with continental philosophy, and particularly the work of Derrida, as the following exchange from an interview with John Koethe demonstrates:

Koethe: Many of those who are interested in your poetry seem to be interested in it in connection with theoretical ideas, particularly French theoretical ideas, like those of Jacques Derrida. Do you ever read works by such theorists, or do their views influence you secondhand or do you ever use them in any way?

Ashbery: No. I think I'm very good subject matter for people who are trying to elaborate new theories of criticism. Perhaps it would be better for me if I didn't know anything about them because then I might consciously try to write stuff that would fit their theories. (Koethe 181-182)

Perhaps the beginnings of an answer as to why Ashbery does not see his own poetry as a form

of “Deconstruction” lie in methodological concerns and presuppositions. In the preceding chapters attempts have been made to identify the features of what has been called “Ashbery’s theory of mind-consciousness”. Though no all-encompassing, programmatic understanding can be finally identified, it is in Ashbery’s depiction of the process of perception that one of the sharpest distinctions between Ashbery’s approach and that of aspects of the Derridean school of post-structuralism can be found. As noted, Ashbery is frequently concerned with the examination of instantaneous perception and the consequences of perception for the conscious mind. Though such examinations may not be articulated by a Robert Lowell-esque “confessional” narrator with a readily identifiable personality and a presumption of stable subjecthood, nevertheless, Ashbery’s recording of instantaneous perception, even instantaneous misperception and presenting it to the reader would seem to rely on a “metaphysics of presence” of exactly the kind Derrida hoped to critique in his own work. Derrida describes his project in the following way:

Western metaphysics, as the limitation of the sense of being within the field of presence, is produced as the domination of a linguistic form. To question that origin of that domination does not amount to hypostatizing a transcendental signified, but to a questioning of what constitutes our history and what produced transcendental itself. (Derrida 23)

Derrida goes on to write that, in relation to Heidegger’s idea of “let[ting] the word ‘Being’ be read only if it is crossed out” (Derrida 23), that negation of the sign represents

the final writing of an epoch. Under its strokes the presence of a transcendental signified is effaced while remaining legible ... [the transcendental signified] is destroyed while making visible the very idea of the sign. In as much as it de-limits onto-theology, the metaphysics of presence and logocentrism, this last writing is also the first writing. (Derrida 23)

Ashbery’s own understanding of presence appears to be connected to a “metaphysics” which,

though not programmatic, is clearly assumed as articulable in ways Derrida appears to reject. Why is this the case? Because, in presenting his readers with poetic “data” in a particular way, Ashbery *via* his “theory of consciousness” posits that particular cognitive faculties will exist which will make the work comprehensible (in Sperber’s and Wilson’s terms) if not “understandable” (in Wimsatt’s and Beardsley’s). Ashbery is not consciously “anti-Derridean” in this sense, but he would appear to be less concerned with the elimination or complication of metaphysics of presence than in the use of (a kind of) metaphysics to examine the present (if not presence itself). Ashbery’s frequent attempts at positioning his narrators or his poems in the “now” and his expectations that readers will be able to understand them as such suggests that he is a poet who at the very least, has an implied metaphysics of the present, if not a genuine—if idiosyncratic—metaphysics of presence.

One of the most influential models for considering the perceiving subject interacting with the “present” in line with a particular notion of “metaphysics” in Ashbery’s writing is articulated by John Koethe. Koethe’s approach is to identify particular “models” of subjecthood with particular writers. In his essay on Ashbery, Koethe associates a “Humean” model of cognition with Frank O’Hara, a model in which personal consciousness is minimal, favouring instead the observation of phenomena and the assembling of “visual collages” which do not rely overly on rhetorical or confessional intrusions of poetic personality. Koethe is, in his formulation, referencing Hume’s statement from *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739): “When I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble upon some particular perception or other . . . I never catch myself at any time without a perception and can never observe anything but perception” (Hume 165). Though Hume’s conception of the relationship between cognition, the self, and perception is not the final word on the interpretation of the self in Ashbery, or O’Hara, with the “Humean” approach in mind, O’Hara’s “A Step Away From Them” provides an opportunity for the reader to see how Koethe’s schema relates to the

representation of unified consciousness in O'Hara's writing:

It's my lunch hour, so I go
for a walk among the hum-colored
cabs. First, down the sidewalk
where laborers feed their dirty
glistening torsos sandwiches
and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets
on. They protect them from falling
bricks, I guess. Then onto the
avenue where skirts are flipping
above heels and blow up over
grates. The sun is hot, but the
cabs stir up the air. I look
at bargains in wristwatches. There
are cats playing in sawdust. (O'Hara 257)

Though there could certainly be some argument about the role of the “self” in the poem—O'Hara's depiction of experience does appear to be filtered through a relatively stable consciousness, though perhaps with “Humean tendencies” to foreground perception—the emphasis on perceptual aspects of experience is clear. O'Hara's world is as much occupied by the “torsos”, “sandwiches”, “cabs”, “wristwatches”, and “cats playing in sawdust” as the consciousness which records them. In some ways O'Hara could, perhaps, be thought of as “urbanising” the “John Clare approach” to perception, conveying experience through perceived details in real-time recorded by a unified (if not entirely “inventoried”) conscious mind. Such urban, O'Hara-esque, “Humean” perceptual and experiential wanderings appear frequently in Ashbery's writing.⁸ Ashbery is perhaps most “Humean”—in Koethe's sense of the term, at least—in the poems from *The Tennis Court Oath*. “Leaving the Atocha Station” and “The

Shower” are particularly O’Hara-Humean in character with regard to depictions of perception. In “The Shower”, Ashbery’s narrator passes through scenes without even the O’Hara-esque “assessment” mentioned by Koethe, merely observation:

The water began to fall quite quietly as pipes decorate laminations of
City unit busses pass through.

A laborer dragging luggage examined

The wet place near a bug. (*The Tennis Court Oath* 90)

In Ashbery’s city, not only is there no time for reflection on perceptions, or on their cognitive implications, there is barely time for a thought to complete itself before the next one interrupts. It could be argued that this suggests there is even less of a notion of a centralised perceiver or “self” in Ashbery’s writing than in O’Hara’s. This is only a part of the story, however. While the individual subject is not at the fore in the works, there is no question of a unified cognitive presence guiding such poems. It could be argued that it is Ashbery’s very “metaphysics of presence/the present” which is the subject (in both the sense of subject matter and of the central perceiving consciousness) of the poem. The reader sees what the narrator sees (and does not see), and Ashbery anticipates that these accrued perceptions will be sufficient to make the reader aware of the content of the poetic situation. The more centralised consciousness of a “Cartesian poet”—using Koethe’s terminology and example—like John Berryman, in some ways mediates the raw metaphysics of the depiction of the present. Without the structures Ashbery relies on to receive the poetic data, the poem would not be comprehensible, but by making those structures the main site of engagement, Ashbery is implicitly (and, indeed, almost explicitly) theorising the existence of the perceptual structures of the mind, the “mental organ” and its particular features.

To speak more directly about how such “invisible narrators”, to suggest a mirror image of Helen Vendler’s “invisible listener”, are manifested, it will be illustrative to see the functioning

of the dynamic in the context of a poem. “Leaving the Atocha Station” scarcely has a unified consciousness of any kind guiding it, as the following example shows:

comfort of your perfect tar grams nuclear world bank tulip

Favourable to near the night pin

loading formaldehyde. the table torn from you

Suddenly and we are close

Mouthing the root when you think

generator homes enjoy leered

The worn stool blazing pigeons from the roof

driving tractor to squash

Leaving the Atocha Station steel. (*The Tennis Court Oath* 33)

The perceptions seem to crash into one another and, much like the syntactic ruptures in the poem discussed in earlier chapters, the perceptual and attentional ruptures present the reader with the “experience of the now” as managed by the mind much more directly than even Clare’s writing, which, at least, concedes to syntax and, often, to received forms. Later in the poem, the following lines appear:

for that we turn around

experiencing it is not to go into

the epileptic prank forcing bar

to borrow out onto the tide-exposed fells

over her morsel. (*The Tennis Court Oath* 34)

Here, the ruptures are not only syntactic, but perceptual, rather like the “attentional” ruptures discussed above. Something is always beginning before the previous thing has ended. As soon as the reader’s attention seems to get a fix on a narrative, the narrative abruptly shifts. This

technique constitutes a kind of literary experiment in cognition. The reader's attention is directly presented with the cognitive field generated by the poem's narrator, and the "behind the scene" poet (using structure, form, and presentation as ostensive sites of experiment) constantly readjusts them. Indeed, the poem could be seen to, perhaps, have been influenced by the "Humean" O'Hara himself, whose poem "The Lunch Hour FYI" bears at least superficial structural resemblance to aspects of "Leaving the Atocha Station":

Plank plank	tons of it
plank plank	
marching	the streets
up and down	
	and it's all ours.
2	
what we all want is a consistent musical development heh heh	
	tappety-tap drrrrrrrrrrrp!
3	
Just as aloha means goodbye in Swahili	
	so it is 9.-5
and I must go to work	roll OVER dammit
	(see previous FYI)

hip? I haven't even coughed yet this morning. (O'Hara 421)⁹

Similar, too, to O'Hara's denumerated "sections" above, the poem "Europe" from *The Tennis Court Oath* not only strips away the first-person narration, leaving only an implied "I" or mind-consciousness as narrator, but it also uses much tighter focus in terms of "content" in individual sections. Despite their accrued length, the individual sections of "Europe" are sometimes as brief as "Section 3", which consists of only the phrase, "a few berries" (*The Tennis Court Oath* 64).

What the poem may lose in personalised characterisation it could be said to gain in perceptual intensity. Ashbery almost seems to be attempting to represent the quantising of thought as it

passes through the mind—either as manifested in instantaneous perceptual snatches like the above, or in the more languid pace of the quoted (and manipulated) passages from William Le Queux’s *Beryl of the Biplane* (1917), as here from “Section 8”:

In the falling twilight of the wintry afternoon all looked dull and cheerless.

The car stood outside with Ronald Pryor and Collins attending to some slight engine trouble—the fast, open car which Ronnie sometimes used to such advantage.

(*The Tennis Court Oath* 65)

Perceptual thought fractures while “received thought”, presented to consciousness in the form of literature, flows. In some ways, perhaps surprisingly, Ashbery’s writing in “Europe”, a poem largely composed of cut up magazine articles, resembles both the technique and the aim of the writing of William S. Burroughs, who describes the intention of his well-known “cut-up” technique thus:

Mak[ing] explicit a psychosensory process that is going on all the time anyway.

Somebody is reading a newspaper, and his eye follows the column in the proper Aristotelian manner, one idea and sentence at a time. But subliminally he is reading the columns on either side, and is aware of the person sitting next to him. That’s a cut-up ...

a juxtaposition of what’s happening outside and what you’re thinking of. (Burroughs

Gysin 4-5) ¹⁰

In texts involving “cut-ups”—or, in Ashbery’s case, perhaps the term “remix” is more appropriate, works in which the source text remains visible—external material is integrated into a text creating a dialogue not only between readerly and writerly perception, but also between the writer’s perception and other literary objects in the world. It should be noted, however, that despite being less overt, the authorial presence is in no way diluted in such cases. The author still directs the attention of the reader—in the case of “Europe”, through ostensibly arranged, sometimes syntactically ruptured, sections of text—but the author-speaker is again “off-stage” in

a way that is not usually the case in O'Hara's, or Clare's, writing. Ashbery's conception of a perceiving mind-subject is not necessarily less "unified" or "present" than, for example, O'Hara's, but it is often far less direct in terms of representation within the lexical features of a given poem. Ashbery, however, trusts the structures of perception to both be recognisable to his readers (so that they can extrapolate the context of the presentation of the poetic data), and to actually form the poem in the reader's mind: the words presented and the images they generate "become" the poem as they accrue.

Flow Charts and Fragments: Form, Attention and Perception in Ashbery's Writing

As seen in previous chapters, with the use of "double columns" printed beside each other and the mixing of prose and poetry, form—even the absence of conventional poetic form—is often a central concern in Ashbery's writing. With regard to the handling and depiction of perception, form plays a major role in Ashbery's writing as well. In Ashbery's longer poems, critics and writers tend to emphasise the "flowing" nature of his writing, as thoughts seem to pour into one another over the course of a poem. David Herd explicitly considers the "flow" of "Clepsydra" speaking of "moments of relief" in the poem, during which:

Although the flow has by no means ceased, a feeling of clarity sets in. The poem does not linger unduly over such moments, but they are here ... Such moments are familiar—Wordsworth called them spots of time, Eliot called them still points—and Ashbery's poetry does not deny the reader the reality of their satisfactions. (Herd 108-9)

Such "spots of time" dramatise the nature of continuous perception in relation to the small "epiphanies" of which Ashbery's poems are often made. This is done most effectively when situated in the kind of rapid flows Herd describes. Herd feels that the torrent of intense imagery in "Clepsydra" "[l]eave[s] the reader little choice but to go with the flow ... the purpose of the poem is not simply to chart the speed with which events now appear to flow towards one, but, as far as possible, to find ways of living with that flow" (Herd 108). In "finding ways of living

within the flow” the reader is not merely aware of the flow, s/he is also aware of his/her position within “that flow”. In becoming aware of this, the reader then must consciously apply cognitive faculties to the demands of the poetic situation. It is not a matter of merely accepting that one is in a literary “flow” in such works, but of deciding how one copes with the character of the flow. By placing his reader in such circumstances, Ashbery’s writing both comments on the mind of the reader and makes clear that he feels that the reader’s mental strategising applied to the reading of the poem will make the flow manageable. The balance of data noted and data missed suggests possible sites of genuine cognitive thresholds (not unlike George Miller’s notion of “magic numbers” being used by memory).¹¹

Such “flow” is also frequently discussed with regard to the appositely named *Flow Chart*.¹² The title of “Flow Chart” can be understood in various ways, both as a possible reference to the flow of consciousness, and, as an example of Ashbery’s snowballing “found language” inclusions noted earlier with regard to cliché, for the expression “flow chart” entered the popular lexicon in the decade preceding the collection. Dara Wier’s brief essay on reading *Flow Chart* to a group of other poets highlights the “aqueous” aspects of the poem’s structure and, in doing so, also considers how thought, like water, flows. Wier writes, “[e]ntering into *Flow Chart* felt more like an immersion” (Wier 175). Wier’s experience appears to have been shared by the other poets in the group. Wier writes:

Our analogous drives ... went straight for bodies of water or far into untethered space.

And when rivers or a single river continued to come up there would always be several versions, in one version, one is standing on a levee watching a river go by. In another we’re in a boat on a river taking in one side then another side of the river’s banks. (Wier 175)

Wier explicitly connects the “stream”-like flow of the poem to the neurological environment:

“one has encountered a stream of poetry so unlike any other it requires that one be prepared to

allow hither to fore disconnected or possibly loosely connected circuits and pathways to be opened in one's brain" (Wier 175). Certainly, a reader can find the kind of "flowing" long lines familiar from the "prose Ashbery" in a number of places in the work:

And there were many sets of fraternal twins on earth
to share in a new sense of disparity and reward with everyone for what they would have
done anyway, inasmuch as there always comes a time when congratulations fall
just short of the doormat, loved ones are sorely tried, and associates
go blindly about their business, some business at any rate, all to keep the shelving
from imminent collapse by destroying relationships
that were good in the past but have now come to naught
as we see each day in the papers. (*Flow Chart* 79-80)

The long, rambling sentence "spills" over a number of ideas which are not entirely related but, by virtue of their inclusion in the sentence, become related. Thought spreads over and subsumes all manner of subjects, and the prose-like lines (though not quite prose in the same sense of *Three Poems*, in that line breaks are defined in the text) reinforce the "flowing" character of the thoughts. However, in the poem, there are also significant breaks in terms of layout and in terms of lexical content which mirror the kind of ruptures noted in other contexts, rapid shifts of perspective, subject matter, and style:

[...] I think the constant costume changes
caused it to mistrust itself, yet there was a game to be played, and rules to abide by—
so what? It's true in other walks of life ... But it all led rapidly to the crunch
of where the fuck do you think you're going? *This* is the frontier.
Beyond lies civility, a paradise of choices—maybe. But it wasn't made to be tested
by such primitive assaying tools as you, and only you, come equipped with.

I saw your face on some bookjacket. It looked beautiful. May I write to you?

I wouldn't really swallow poison if it was you. (Flow Chart 134)

In a sense, this dynamic creates a “rapids” of consciousness, as opposed to a “stream”, a consciousness that is represented as being both composed of instances of attention-absorbing perceptual awareness that are often abruptly cut off, and characterised by the capacity to assimilate the input and reflect on it in more measured ways for periods of time. Here the “dramatic” conception of Ashbery’s writing discussed earlier has great resonance. Even if Ashbery is not consciously dramatising his own thought process, he is conveying recognisable features of the cognitive environment to readers who he believes will make the necessary connections.

Frequently, Ashbery’s formal experiments provide a means of stopping perception (or thought) in its tracks as with his experiments with haiku in *A Wave*, for example, such as the following: “A pencil on glass—shattered! The water runs down the drain”,

“Too late the last express passes through the dust of gardens”,

“Did you say, hearing the schooner overhead, we turned back to the weir?” (*A Wave* 38)

All these ‘pseudo-haikus’ modulate the relationship of perception in time (which is a basic idea behind haiku’s form).¹³ Though Ashbery only addresses mental states openly—though not in a resolved or reducible way—in one of his “thirty-seven haikus”: “What is the past, what is it all for? A mental sandwich?” (*A Wave* 38); essentially every Ashbery haiku among the group could be said to be both about perception and composed *of* perception. Ashbery’s haikus often discuss, relate, or represent a state of affairs in the world as mediated by perceptual faculties, but the poems are also *of* perception in that they are not syllogistically concerned like the poems of Stevens which often seek resolution, nor are they extended meditations like “Litany”, nor are they heavily structured formal works like Ashbery’s sestinas. The haikus are as close to representations of distilled, instantaneous perception as Ashbery’s writing tends to have gotten

since “Europe”. In many cases, the haikus also embody aspects of Dretske’s notion of awareness as well. The works make the perception of a state of affairs in the external world visible from an individual perspective, stressing the awareness *of* that state of affairs rather than necessarily awareness *about* it. In some haikus, like “[t]he dreams descend like cranes on gilded, forgetful wings” (*A Wave* 38), the language recapitulates a Dretskean move from experience to perception; the dreams are understood to “descend”—already a metaphor—while the addition of “gilded forgetful wings” moves the poem out of the present tense by virtue of the sheer artificiality of the metaphor. The speaker is personifying the dreams and is, thus, reflecting. The experience of the state slowly ripens into the awareness *of* that state, if not *about* that state, and, thus, into a form of perception.

Line length can also be seen to be critical to Ashbery’s experiments with readerly perception and attention. The long line is used to great effect in Ashbery, as seen, particularly in prose works and, at times, in *Flow Chart*. Ashbery has spoken of the construction of prose works in explicitly cognitive terms, as seen in the quotation discussing the “arbitrary divisions” of poetry into lines from the *New York Quarterly* interview cited in the introduction. This idea has a number of implications. First, it describes an explicitly cognitive impetus for using prose as a form of poetic metre. Also crucial is the fact that Ashbery felt that the reading process was something to take into consideration when creating poetry, reinforcing the idea that the reading structures mandated in poems like “Litany” take into account readers’ cognitive faculties and, thus, again, represent “theories of consciousness”. Finally, the passage shows that Ashbery, despite feeling that “divisions” in poetry were “arbitrary”, nevertheless theorised the psychology of the line break explicitly, and, thus, this must be read as a component of Ashbery’s poetic strategy of experimentation in later works. Despite seeking to “abolish” the divisions of poems into lines during the *Three Poems* period of his career, the short—in some cases extremely short—line also plays a role in Ashbery’s handling of readerly attention as seen here in “Get Me

Rewrite” from *Your Name Here*:

The

ghoulish

resonance

of

a

cello

resonates in a neighbor’s cabana. (*Your Name Here* 26)

In the poem, there is a drip-like effect as a single word at a time appears until the final line alters the treatment of the poem dramatically (a very short poem becomes much “longer”—in multiple senses—than it might ordinarily be). In this way, the poem has an almost musical aspect. The poem can be said to have a “tempo” on the page which the reader “retains” throughout—in the Husserlean-Ingardenean sense—until that tempo is interrupted by the final line as the carefully managed attentional structure gives way.

In considering the implications of poems like “Get Me Rewrite” it is possible to note a phenomenon that emerged in the collections after *Flow Chart* as a means of engaging the reader’s perceptual faculties—the shift toward much “lighter” lines in terms of lexical density. Where the middle period of Ashbery’s career saw several experiments with strains being exerted on readerly attention with long lines *via* overwhelmingly large poems, culminating in *Flow Chart*, 1992’s *Hotel Lautréamont* represents perhaps the beginning of another small trend in Ashbery’s writing. This shift has been characterised by shorter, more fragmentary poems, a kind of “radical fragility” similar, in some ways, to M. L. Rosenthal’s 1967 description of the writing of Robert Creeley: “Creeley makes the poem bear the weight of many possible interpretations of thought and feeling” (Rosenthal 155). This is an idea which readily relates to Sperber’s and Wilson’s notion (building on Grice) of “weak” and “strong” “implicatures” with regard to metaphor creation:

In general, the wider range of potential implicatures and the greater the hearer's responsibility for constructing them, the more poetic the effect, the more creative the metaphor. A good creative metaphor is precisely one in which a variety of contextual effects can be retained and understood as weakly implicated by the speaker. In the richest and most successful cases, the hearer or reader can go beyond just exploring the the immediate context and the entries for concepts involved in it, accessing a wide area of knowledge adding metaphors of his own as interpretations ... and getting more very weak implicatures, with suggestions for still further processing. (Sperber and Wilson 236)

In this structure, the “weakly implied” content of a metaphor—the aspects of a metaphor where exact definitions of terms or meanings of usages is unclear—puts the onus on the reader to “fill in the blanks” as discussed earlier in relation to poems where “content” is “left out”. Again, literature can be seen to represent a form of cognitive dialogue between reader and writer in which the poem remains essentially incomplete until read. Sperber and Wilson offer an example of this dynamic to illustrate:

The surprise or beauty of successful creative metaphor lies in this condensation, in the fact that a single expression which has itself been loosely used will determine a very wide range of acceptable weak implicatures.

Take, for example, Flaubert's comment on the poet Leconte de Lisle:

(108) His ink is pale. (Son encre est pale.)

A strictly literal construal of this utterance is clearly ruled out ... Nor is there any obvious strong implicature. The only way of establishing the relevance of this utterance is to look for a wide range of very weak implicatures.

(Sperber and Wilson 237)

The initial difficulty in formulating primary “meaning” allows secondary, perhaps more personally resonant, interpretations to emerge. In Rosenthal’s reading of Creeley, the “disintegrating” effect noted may be less about the “fragmentation” of the poem itself—though that is, almost certainly, at least an effect if not an intention—than about the conveyance of the “experience of experience” rather than experience as reflected upon in the traditional “confessional” fashion dominant during the period of Creeley’s early writings. This notwithstanding, a similar “disintegrating” effect can be seen throughout later Ashbery. The “risks of collapse” in Ashbery’s most recent collections perhaps serve to “dramatise” mental activity in the sense of the “dramatisations” discussed in earlier chapters. Andrew Dubois’ idea, that perhaps Ashbery is mimicking the aging mind, in the poems Dubois describes as “late juvenilia”, has some resonance, but it is only part of a much more complex set of relations (Dubois 112). Using the term “dotages” for the poems, he writes: “Dotage gives a paradoxical coherence to what otherwise is incoherent in the late work. The very incoherencies that characterize dotage ... gives the poems emotional narrative and formal coherence” (Dubois 114). While it may be true that from a narrative standpoint Ashbery’s later work is more fragmentary and seemingly “incoherent” at times, incomprehensible elements have been a part of Ashbery’s experimental repertoire since the days of *The Tennis Court Oath*. The shift in emphasis in later collections may represent something of a “turn” in later Ashbery, a turn not solely concerned with depicting mental senescence, perhaps more likely representing a new authorial strategy for investigating mind on Ashbery’s part, both his own and that of his readers.

For example, Ashbery’s 1995 collection *Can You Hear Bird?* maintains the radically fractured structures that emerged after *Flow Chart*. Despite the Creeleyan fragility of the diction or tone of *Can You Hear Bird?* it is, in some ways, a more conversational collection than many others in Ashbery’s career, continuing the appropriation of “found language” statements which are then “remixed” with quasi-stream-of-consciousness internal discourse, as seen here in “Five O’Clock Shadow”:

Don't just stand there, Kiki
You're onstage. They're all looking at you.

“Along life's weary path I glide ...”

Leda, when it came time
to consider the swan's suggestion, humbled
her braces, brought success to heel.

Tell her half the story. (Ashbery, *Can You Hear Bird?* 47)

The poem's disarmingly clichéd title belies the complex shifts in tone the poem contains. The third line appears, in terms of presentation, to be an offhand thought, but the stilted quality of the language suggests that it is, in fact, a deliberate representation of what a reader could consider a “fragmentary” thought. The orthography is carefully constructed to reinforce the strangeness of the content of the sentence. Few people when thinking to themselves in the year 1995 would be likely to construct the phrase “Along life's weary path I glide ...” complete with capitalisation and ellipsis when reflecting on personal boredom. The later inclusion of the mythic scene, recalling Yeats, only further removes the poem's content from the territory its slangy title suggests. The poem is, at once, extremely disjointed in terms of structure, and in terms of conceptual content, though it is also quite accessible in terms of language use. The fragility of the structure does not become “confrontational” in the same way the radical, interpretation-resistant poems of *The Tennis Court Oath* do, but permits an openness or multiplicity of interpretation.

Perception, Cognition, and Literary Experiment as a Foundation for the Conceptualising of a Grammar of Aesthetics

Despite the considerable thematic crossover in the consideration of temporality and perception, much can be learned from foregrounding of perception as a distinct entity in its own

right in the examination of Ashbery's poetry from a cognitive perspective. By devoting specific attention to the modalities used by Ashbery to disrupt and sustain readerly attention one finds some of the most direct examples of the kind of "cognitive experimentation" in Ashbery's writing. Conceptually "disambiguating" features of temporality from features of perception also offers insight into Ashbery's individualised conception of what constitutes and characterises the perceptual faculties (as distinct from other cognitive features) of the mental organ "on the occasion of sense" and allows the application of techniques of perceptual manipulation to be seen with greater clarity. While it is not an easy matter to disambiguate temporal awareness and perceptual awareness (and "perception" without "awareness" in the Dretskean sense), there are hints in Ashbery's writing as to how this might be accomplished. Two important features are the following: the highlighting of particular sensory data, and, perhaps more importantly, the depiction of "misperception" in instances where "incorrect" perceptions help to define the boundary between perceptual "awareness"—the awareness that a state obtains—and cognitive awareness—awareness of the properties of this state. Such a state is understood or processed as part of a wider cognitive structure (physical, personal, social assumptions, etc.). Simply perceiving things in the world may be revealing, but as the concept of perception itself is not simple, the point at which the mind's "conception" of the world diverges from actual "perceived" data represents a critical site for cognitively-minded investigation.

As well as offering specific perspectives on aspects of Ashbery's experiments with the boundaries of cognition and perception, the preceding chapter also provides further means of considering the wider question of how the mind organises cognitive data. Different forms of data, as discussed above, may be organised in different ways according to different cognitive protocols and intellectual hierarchies, and perceptual input, and the functions of attention, may guide how such hierarchies are constructed. Ironically, it is partially because Ashbery takes such a "flat" approach to depicting the perceptual process, including the ephemera of daily life in a way

similar to Moore and refusing to hierarchicalise one object over another, that the functioning of the perceptual faculties are more starkly revealed. If the poem presents the world to a reader in all its complexity and banality, then what a reader takes from it says as much about the reader's mind as it does the content of the poem. Ashbery's experiments reveal both features of how this process takes place, and how data are often excluded. The relevance of such data to providing a more complete picture of mind must also take in more general questions about how the mind responds to and "aestheticises" particular kinds of data including poetry (or "potential poetry). With an understanding of some of the modalities by which experimental literature touches upon such questions, aspects of a larger process are suggested. What, if any, are the recognisable features of a neural architecture of aesthetic awareness or appreciation? Such a question is large, but not so large that meaningful research programmes cannot be articulated. The notion of a "grammar", in the Chomskyan sense, may play a central role in conceptualising the ways in which the brain responds to, generates, and engages aesthetic data.

Notes

1. Of particular interest in relation to the interaction of cognition and perception are the sections of Price's book entitled "Nature of Sense Data", "Relation of Perception and Sense Data to One Another", and "Relation of Sense Data to Matter". The sections consider the boundaries of cognition and perception in detail and how particular cognitive faculties interact. For further reading, see H.H. Price *Perception*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981. Print (specifically, pp. 103-170, and pp. 204-277).

2. Here, Chomsky builds on ideas articulated by the so-called "Cambridge Platonists" and "minor Cartesians" including Thomas Reid and Ralph Cudworth. For further reading see Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785), and Ralph Cudworth, *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* (1731), which build on a variation of Cartesian epistemology in investigating cognitive faculties.

3. Though a number of perspectives on the aims and ideologies involved in the Abstract Expressionist movement exist, a radio interview with Jackson Pollock by William Wright broadcast in 1950 on WERI radio touches on important features of Pollock's approach which often appear in other discussions of the Abstract Expressionist movement by both painters and critics:

WW: Mr Pollock, the classical artists had a world to express and they did so by

representing ... that world. Why doesn't the modern artist do the same thing?

JP: H'm—the modern artist is living in a mechanical age and we have a mechanical means of representing objects in nature such as the camera and photograph. The modern artist, it seems to me, is working and expressing an inner world—in other words—expressing the energy, the motion, and other inner forces. (Karmel 21)

Pollock's formulation, though a personal position rather than a general ideological one to which all Abstract Expressionist painters subscribed, gives some indication of the distance between the very fully articulated approach to depicting the experience of perception and "inner forces" to Ashbery's more nebulous approach.

4. Ashbery tells *The New York Quarterly*, "I don't feel that the visual part of art is important to me, although I certainly love painting" (Packard 130).

5. Ashbery uses this formulation again in relation to poets in his lecture on John Wheelwright from *Other Traditions*: "Poets, as has often been noted, in writing about other poets tend to write about themselves, even to the point of seeing as faults in others what they take to be virtues in themselves" (*Other Traditions* 70).

6. Ashbery explicitly discusses the philosophers who he feels have influenced his work in his extended interview with Mark Ford: "I read philosophy that is close to poetry: Plato, Epictetus, Montaigne, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, William James. Wittgenstein a little" (M. Ford 60). Ashbery goes on, revealingly, to discuss his own difficulty with the work of "David Hume":

There was one philosopher, probably Hume, who based everything on the necessity of having a clear and distinct idea of something, in which case all systems are go. I could never figure out how you are supposed to know when you have a clear and distinct idea of something, and I still can't. (M. Ford 60)

The philosopher in question is not likely to be Hume, but, in fact, Descartes, see René Descartes *The Meditations on First Philosophy*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992. Print (particularly page 40 for use of the term “clear and distinct”).

7. Shoptaw cites Sue Gangel, “John Ashbery” (from Bellamy, Joe David. *American Poetry Observed: Poets on Their Work*. Urbana, IL: Illinois University Press, 1988. Print.), as the source of the quotation.

8. Koethe identifies Ashbery’s understanding of individual subjecthood as being closer to Kant’s notion of a transcendental subject. The question for this chapter is less about the specifics of Koethe’s schematic and more about the way specific aspects of perception are theorised and depicted by Ashbery’s poems.

9. Frank O’Hara was an influence on “Leaving the Atocha Station” in other ways as well. Ashbery speaks of the poem growing out of a trip to Madrid with O’Hara (*M. Ford* 47).

10. David Herd also uses sections of this quotation from Burroughs in *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (Herd 87). The concept of the “cut-up” in Ashbery’s writing is also discussed in an interview with Ashbery in which the interviewer, citing Ashbery’s companion, David Kermani, suggests that Ashbery’s poem “Hoboken” precedes Burroughs’-Gysin’s use of the “cut-up” method. The interview is available at the following URL:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNJYSKWH2qI>.

11. For a more complete examination of the role of neuro-cognitive limits on perceptual intake, see George Miller’s “The Magic Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on our Capacity for Processing Information.” *Psychological Review* 63 (1956).

12. Flow is a recurrent term in relation to both Ashbery’s writing and his writing process. A prominent example of such a use in relation to his process can be found in a metaphor from Ashbery’s interview with Larissa MacFarquhar in the *New Yorker* in which his understanding of

his method of composition is described. MacFarquhar writes that Ashbery's writing process is like "lowering a bucket down into what feels like a kind of underground stream of poetry flowing through his mind—a stream of continuously flowing poetry, or perhaps poetic stuff would be a better way to put it" (MacFarquhar 88).

13. "Haiku" is a contentious term. As a translated form, there are questions as to whether any poem in English can be a "true" haiku. Writing in *An Introduction to Haiku: An Anthology of Poems and Poets from Bashō to Shiki*, Harold G. Henderson offers a basic, though, as he acknowledges, imperfect schema for the "basics" of a "true" haiku:

Perhaps it would be as well to try to explain just what a haiku is; but this is not so easy as it seems, for probably no two Japanese would quite agree on exactly what constitutes a haiku. Primarily it is a poem; and being a poem it is intended to express and to evoke emotion. It is necessary to insist upon this point, because it has been the custom to translate "haiku" into "epigram," and this is quite misleading. Secondly, a haiku is a very short poem with a traditional and classical form, and with special characteristics of its own ... they gain their effect not only by suggesting a mood, but also by giving a clear-cut picture which serves as a starting point for trains of thought and emotion. (Henderson 2-3)

Other aspects of "definition" with regard to haiku include that it is a poem of 17 syllables, that it must reference the time of year, the natural world, and be interpretable as a metaphor for human existence. Ultimately, Ashbery's use of haiku may (or may not) ignore salient features of the "canonical" definition of the term, but his poems' attempt to capture instantaneous experience is in many ways true to the ideals guiding the form.

Conclusion

The Status of Cognitive Critiques in Relation to Historical Ashbery Criticism

And then there always came a time when
Happy Hooligan in his rusted green automobile
Came plowing down the course, just to make sure everything was O.K.,
Only by that time we were in another chapter and confused
About how to receive this latest piece of information.
Was it information? Weren't we rather acting this out
For someone else's benefit, thoughts in a mind
With room enough and to spare for our little problems (so they began to seem),
Our daily quandary about food and the rent and bills to be paid? (*The Double
Dream of Spring* 17)

In concluding this study, it may be helpful to return to the questions which opened it, “can literature play a role in the study of mind?”, and “what can John Ashbery’s poetry tell readers about the mind (and *vice-versa*)?”. The evidence presented suggests that experimental literature can play a significant role in conceptualising cognitive faculties and presenting literary data that challenge or reveal properties of specific cognitive faculties with literary experiments sometimes preceding more scientifically formulated ones. The first chapter of the thesis established that, with regard to properties of syntax, literature has a long and varied history in producing linguistic experiments which reveal unusual properties of language that more formal science may ignore. Texts that pay specific attention to syntax as a site of experimentation, as Ashbery’s have done (during the *The Tennis Court Oath* era in particular) can often highlight

seemingly (or actually) invisible characteristics of the apparatus of syntax which may be either too obvious, or too obscure, for ordinary discourse and analysis to notice.

As the second chapter of the thesis demonstrated, this capacity may also play a role in helping to conceptualise aspects of the faculties of cognition which involve language but which are not entirely reducible to language. The exploration of intentionality *via* the methods and expressions of experimental literature provides a way into asking one of the most difficult questions in cognitive science and philosophy, the question of how intention can be represented. Though no form of literary theory will provide a magical key to the understanding of the exact intention of a writer in the composition of a given work, taking a cognitive perspective on literary objects offers the opportunity to see literary artefacts as “intentional objects” that offer insight into the workings of literary intention, if not the content of a specific author’s intention at a given moment. In works like those explored in the second chapter, Ashbery demonstrates that when a writer creates a work of literature, the modalities of experiment s/he chooses depend very much on the properties of mind of his/her intended audience. Any given literary experiment requires particular cognitive faculties to make it meaningful—otherwise such an “experiment” has no reasonable expectation of comprehensibility. As seen, particularly with the poems from *The Vermont Notebook*, Ashbery clearly has a robust understanding of the literary context his poetry creates for his audience, and, in formulating and exploiting this theory of context—by either conforming to, or flouting, conventions and expectations—the ways in which Ashbery uses language intentionally become visible.

This notion that experimental literature theorises properties of mind also underpins the argument put forward in the third chapter of the thesis which examines both the difficulty cognitive science has in representing and experimentally formalising the relationship between the mind as an organ, cognition, and temporality, and the ways in which Ashbery’s poetry challenges and cooperates with the cognitive faculties which “undergo” time. Ashbery’s writing, though in

no way a manifestation of formal cognitive “science”, manifests an experimental project that explores perceptual and attentional boundaries that function as a kind of dynamic over a temporal interval. What is taken in and what is ignored or missed in poems like “Litany” depends on the cognitive faculties and strategies of a given reader. Such poems “stretch” the mind’s abilities in ways that may be revealing for the structuring of more formal cognitive experiments. Cognitive science may, then, in fact, find new strategies of testing liminal points in perceptual awareness by taking such deliberate challenges to the apparatus of memory and perception as starting points.

The faculties of perception have more salient properties than just their intake capacity with regard to time. As the fourth chapter shows, the nature of the relationship between perception and understanding is one of the frontiers of cognitive studies. What is perceived is important, but how perceptual data is processed and internalised is so too. Its import lies partially in what it tells interested theorists about the way the mind takes in data, but also in how the mind constructs a theory of the world through the way the perception of data is cognised. The reliability of such theories and narratives about the world are the subject matter of many Ashbery poems, and the instabilities such theories contain make up some of the most poignant explorations of Ashbery’s later writings. They also constitute some of the most pertinent features of his explorations of the mind, representing both a dramatic portrait of the mind as a cohesive perceiving structure, and forming a basis for the construction of subjecthood.

Regarding larger questions about the status of Ashbery’s poetry from a more strictly literary perspective, his work has been seen both to represent an example of writing which is readily amenable to “cognitive” reading, and which is self-consciously to be understood as investigation of the mind. The preceding chapters have established, however, that although Ashbery regards his writing as a means of investigating aspects of mind, particularly, the conscious mind, he does not adhere to any strict philosophical or ideological system of belief as a

fundamental reference point. Ashbery fundamentally sees himself as an “experimental poet”, not a “cognitive” poet. It is, perhaps, less in spite of than because of this openness that his poetry offers so much to cognitive readings.

The critical aspect of his writing that has been stressed in preceding chapters, the awareness on Ashbery’s part that his writing will be received by readers whose minds possess particular features which will make experiments of certain kinds comprehensible and meaningful, is possibly most valuable as an insight into his work in that it provides a way of asking questions which, though they may not ultimately resolve cognitive issues (or, indeed, poetic ones), they nevertheless highlight features of mind which are in some ways mysterious.

Taking a wider view of the interaction of literature and cognition, and having seen what Ashbery’s writing offers cognitively-minded critics, it is worth considering whether there are other literary movements, or key figures, whose work would also benefit from cognitive treatments. Possibly most directly germane to the topics discussed in this thesis is the writing of the School of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers who, in many cases, claim direct, lineal influence from the writing of Ashbery, and who explore many of the same topics.

New Horizons in the Study of Literature and Mind: Further Applications of Cognitive Literary Studies

The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets were among the writers quickest to acknowledge the influence of Ashbery’s writing, and, indeed, the then-widely-reviled *The Tennis Court Oath*. Rae Armantrout speaks about Ashbery’s influence on her work, saying that “there is something about the way he says a thing while also somehow unsaying it that I feel close to” (Rahaim “Liz Rahaim’s Report on John Ashbery’s Influence on four ‘language poets’”). In similar terms to John Shoptaw, Armantrout seems almost to intuit a kind of “crypt” structure in Ashbery’s writing, suggesting that the words are as much about the possibilities they conceal as the ones

they reveal. Bruce Andrews—quoted in George Hartley’s book on the School of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers, *Textual Politics and the Language Poets*,—once wrote that *The Tennis Court Oath*

pose[s] for us [the School of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers] a radical questioning of established forms, yet at the same time, and so appropriate to its own form, it explores the implications of that questioning—not as an idea, but as an experience and as a reading. (Hartley 23)

Ashbery, himself, however, has distanced himself from the writing of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets in terms of aesthetic approach,¹ and there are other, more overtly political differences between Ashbery’s approach and that of the School of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers. Their project exists, in part, as a critique of “socially-determined frames” (Hartley xiii), while Ashbery’s verse is, from his own perspective at least, avowedly non-political in its outlook. L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, however, often experiments with syntax in ways which resemble Ashbery’s, both in form and in consequence. And, as Liz Rahaim—following Hartley—notes, their approach to poetry “no longer commands the reader how to read or think, but allow[s] ... the reader to become active in the poetic process itself” (“Liz Rahaim’s Report on John Ashbery’s Influence on four ‘language poets’”). Certainly such an approach would be recognisable to cognitively-minded readers of *The Vermont Notebook*. Ron Silliman, speaking to Rahaim, notes that given the fact that he is familiar with linguistic science and psycholinguistic theory himself, the writing of Ashbery “serves as verification rather than theory when I’ve read it” (“Liz Rahaim’s Report on John Ashbery’s Influence on four ‘language poets’”). Such a characterisation suggests that Silliman also finds points of articulation between Ashbery’s writing and topics discussed in linguistic science. Though Silliman focusses on the distinctions between such formal approaches and the approach of poetry (Ashbery’s writing is “verification” of existing theories rather than a “theory” of its own), by merely noting the

dialogue, Silliman in some ways anticipates the value of reading Ashbery in light of such theories. If the writings are “verifications”, cognitively-minded critics must, at least in part, address how this is the case. Though the “harder” approach of the School of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E with regard to exerting syntactic strain on readerly consciousness may distinguish it from Ashbery’s writing, this work would provide a similarly rich vein of poetic material for cognitively-minded critics to pursue.

As noted previously, a body of something that could rightly be called “cognitive literary theory” is beginning to cohere, and throughout this thesis a number of possible topics for cognitively-minded literary research have been suggested. But in terms of the larger notion which Mark Turner proposed of how literature can perhaps “lead” in directing areas of formal cognitive studies, possibly the most far-reaching concept that a more fully developed cognitive theory of literature could help to articulate relates to how the mind handles artistic information; the question of whether there is a cognitive “grammar of aesthetics”—a system of principles and parameters which underwrite the ability of the human mind to appreciate, engage, and classify data as “artistic” or “aesthetic”. Such a grammar may not be as far-fetched a concept as it might seem at first glance. Part of the rationale for supposing that such a faculty exists is the fact that there is empirical evidence that virtually every human society studied, explored, or discovered has engaged in, or engages in, some form of endeavour that could be considered “aesthetic”; in other words, they have visual, sonic, participatory, or linguistic properties and characteristics that are considered relevant, primarily, or solely, for the emotional content they generate alone (“Literary Universals” 226-227).

The mere evidence of the universality of such data in the world is one matter, as seen with Patrick Hogan’s notion of “literary universals”, the question of how such data are perceived and understood, however, is more difficult. In examining this question, it is perhaps helpful to turn to the discussion surrounding the notion of a possible “grammar of ethics” in the social and

cognitive sciences, the concept of a similar set of principles which may guide ethical decision-making in the way Chomskyan syntactic “grammar” does language learning. The idea of a “grammar of ethics” would, on the face of it, seem impossible given the diversity of ethical positions not merely across cultures, but even across people in the same families. Nevertheless, the work of the political philosopher, John Rawls, regarding ethics and governance suggests the idea of a grammar of ethics might actually be viable. As with the data of language (e.g. the diversity of languages in the world, the change in lexicons in single dialects), the surface diversity may belie deeper regularities which are not trivial.

A Grammar of Aesthetics: A Chomskyan-Rawlsian Paradigm

The notion of “grammars”, or generative systems of fundamental relations in disciplines other than language studies and linguistics has long been a metaphorical feature of nearly all forms of critical discussion (“grammars” of painting, sculpture, film, etc.). Until the Chomskyan programme, however, particularly the “principles and parameters” model, the structure of non-linguistic, yet cognitively-based, grammars remained difficult to theorise. In his book, *A Theory of Justice* (1971), John Rawls attempts to articulate a theory of ethics which extends beyond variations on utilitarianism. Rawls aims

to generalise and carry to a higher order of abstraction the traditional theory of the social contract as represented by Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. In this way I hope that the theory can be developed so that it is no longer open to the more obvious objections often thought fatal to it. (Rawls xviii)

In appealing to a “higher order of abstraction” Rawls attempts to account for cultural differences in values and practices. His theory, a notion of “justice as fairness” (Rawls 3), is rooted in what Rawls refers to as

an account of certain distributive principles for the basic structures of society. I assume that any reasonably complete ethical theory must include principles for this fundamental

problem and that these principles, whatever they are, constitute its doctrine of justice.

The concept of justice I take to be defined, then, by the role of its principles in assigning rights and duties and in defining the appropriate division of social advantages. (Rawls 9)

Rawls' vision, therefore, is somewhat prescriptive in character, yet its approach of seeking universal, fundamental "principles" which vary over parametric ranges has proven a starting point for a search for a "grammar" of ethics in line with the "principles and parameters" approach to linguistics. A theoretical model for an ethical framework such as that proposed by Rawls is explored in Hauser's book, *Moral Minds* (2006), where he describes the structure thus:

like language, moral systems are limitless in their scope of expression and interpretation. From a finite and often limited set of experiences, we project our intuitions to novel cases. Children take in a limited set of linguistic experiences, but output a broader range of linguistically appropriate utterances. What comes out is much richer than what went in. Moral input and output appear similarly asymmetric. (Hauser 72) ²

In such a framework, the "principles" of moral decision-making, the fundamental properties that allow the mind to actuate such decisions, vary across cultures in numerous ways which seem to have an almost infinite variation. This appearance of infinite variation belies the universal principles which underlie such expression. Different moral precepts may be sanctioned or prohibited in different cultures, but the prohibitions and sanctions themselves and the reasoning applied to them are what are of interest in a Rawllean-Hauserean model. The question for those seeking a grammar of ethics is the following: "what are the principles which permit such variation to be relevant to ethical *faculties* of mind?". By asking such a question, the fundamental properties which make such a dynamic of principles and parameters meaningful may be revealed. To relate this concept to the earlier constructions, the Rawllean dynamic of permission/requirement/prohibition which he believes underpins ethical decision-making, and

the syntactic dynamic of acceptability conditions for sentences which are believed to underlie all languages (despite surface differences) also provide a mechanism for viewing how fundamental neurological structures may guide the classification, intake, and organisation of external data. Having established “what” such a neurological system might be, the question now becomes how such a system might function.

A Mechanism for Conceptualising a Chomskyan-Rawlsian Grammar of Aesthetics

The notion of a “grammar of aesthetics” would necessarily take as its fundamental subject of study the cognitive faculties which make aesthetic works comprehensible and contextualisable. Clues as to how such a project would be undertaken can be found in the work of cognitively-minded critics writing across aesthetic forms. Though rooted in a fundamentally different understanding of mind, the ideas articulated in Robert Solso’s book, *Cognition and the Visual Arts* (1997), offer a framework for understanding how the questions could be posed and how such methodologies of investigation might proceed. In his book, Solso offers several hypotheses on the technical means by which the brain processes and accepts or rejects works of art. His ideas have applicability in the study of literature as well. Solso’s argument is that a “neoassociative” cognitive framework exists composed of what he calls “prototypes” which he describes thus: “Prototypes are abstractions of stimuli against which similar patterns are judged ... it is possible ... to store impressions that embody the most frequently experienced features of a class of objects” (Solso 250-51). These concepts and associations exist in “schemata”:

The organization of this information and the rules that govern its use and combination are called schemata. Schemata represent the structure of an object, scene or idea. When we look at a street scene, we activate the ‘street schemata’ which informs of the features we might see and how they interact. (Solso 116)

Solso goes on to describe an experiment he devised in which a series of faces were shown to subjects composed of facial “units” (e.g. eyes, noses, foreheads, etc.) from a police identification

kit. In the experiment, Solso also composed a “prototype face” which would serve as a base for creating the other faces. The subjects in Solso’s experiment overwhelmingly reported having seen the prototype face when they were shown it after the experiment despite the fact they were never shown it during the experiment. The subjects also gave high “confidence ratings” for the certainty of their decisions, much higher rates than Solso and his co-experimenters predicted. Solso feels that this experiment further confirms the likelihood of a “prototype” system existing in the brain (Solso 251).

Applying his idea to painting, Solso describes the possibility of the mind possessing similar structures for different artistic approaches, positing the existence of an “impressionism schema” or “pop art schema” in which a “prototype” frames mental responses to the visual content of works of art (Solso 116). It is ironic then that Solso describes his system as being “neoassociative”, since the “prototypes” he describes, and the “false positives” in the face recognition experiment, in particular, would seem to resemble more the Chomskyan conception of “principles and parameters”—a system of innate mental principles the organisation of which allows for variation across a specific parametric range. Perceptual input, if it is, in fact, organised by the kinds of “schematae” Solso speaks of, is likely quite distant from models of externalist “neo-associationism”.³ If external data is processed by pre-existing mental structures, the data, at best, becomes the material which activates the system, not the material which defines it. To argue otherwise would be something like arguing that food is what makes one’s stomach work.

The corollary of the “schema” system proposed by Solso is, of course, the (ostensive) interruption of that schema to produce meaningful aesthetic dissonance. Solso himself cites Jasper John’s use of green and grey instead of red and blue in the rendering of an American flag as an example of such a disruption (Solso 133). It is, of course, not particularly difficult to imagine how to apply the system to literature. One can easily comprehend the notion of a “realist schema” or a “Beat schema” or a “New York School schema” and judge works of art

accordingly with regard to their conformity or divergence from the schema (such an approach would likely offer little to high-level literary study, beyond a quick set of superficial points for an unfamiliar reader or critic to reference). How such a system of evaluation would work would vary from one dynamic to another but, for example, one might notice long, flowing sentences, discussions of Buddhism, and lots of male camaraderie and then frame the work in the “Beat Schema”, judging all deviations from “Beat norms” against the pre-existing understanding. The problem, of course, is that it is just as likely that “Beat” writing could be fitted into a different schema, for example, one of “American Romanticism”. The point is that, from a cognitive perspective, the key matter is not the contents of a given schema, but **how a given schema can be disrupted**. Ultimately, Solso’s notion of underlying mental “prototypes” maybe a useful one, but only within a framework of a mind constructed, for its own reasons, to allow the emergence of such prototypes, not a system in which the mind takes the prototypes from the external world and *then* forms patterns. Problems with an externally-based conception of such prototypes include the aforementioned “false positive” example, as well as the unresolved question of an “infinite regress” as suggested above (if there are, essentially, an infinite amount of possible schemae, how do prototypes cohere in the first instance?).

Any dispute about ontology is less important for the present purposes than attempting to understand the value of Solso’s basic approach. The “schemae” of which he speaks are essentially mental structures generated by mental faculties and which have consequences which could rightly be called “aesthetic” in terms of making judgements about the characteristics of visual data in ways which can be applied to artistic forms. The crucial task of a cognitively-minded critic attempting to formulate a grammar of aesthetics would be in disarticulating the “cross-platform” properties of mental faculties (i.e. the aspects of mind which are not unique to a mental “faculty of aesthetics” and those which are unique to the faculty). Reuven Tsur’s work in particular seems an important first step in identifying the subjects of concern to theorists

interested in identifying the principles of a grammar of aesthetics. He identifies not merely *that* particular phonetic patterns are considered emotionally resonant in some way, but asks the deeper question of how and why this is the case and, in doing so, begins to articulate the forms of questions which would need to be asked to understand how the brain-mind aestheticises objects and concepts. Are such properties merely accidentally resonant, “spandrels” in the terminology of Stephen Jay Gould, or unintended consequences of the existence of other systems; or are they properties that are somehow unique to the aesthetic faculties of mind (Gould-Lewontin 584)? Possibly or possibly not, but with the notion of a “grammar of aesthetics” as a fundamental point of reference, the nature of the question can be more fully and narrowly articulated.

As seen in the last two chapters in particular, one of the most difficult tasks is defining the specific boundaries where one cognitive faculty may or may not be included inside the structures of another cognitive faculty. How the mind understands itself is also a problematic concept in terms of another question regarding awareness. Where Dretske’s work has offered perspective on the question of how awareness and perception may be distinct, at a higher level, the question of how one becomes aware of *whether* and *how* something is manifested as a cognitive faculty may itself be difficult to answer. Ashbery’s poetry, of course, particularly as seen in his experiments with haiku, makes this distinction and its characteristics (and emotional consequences) quite visible, but in more formal terms, conceiving of the basic principle at stake in the formation of the question of how concepts are taken up and assimilated by mind is extraordinarily difficult. Perhaps the easiest way to conceive of the problem is to consider concepts like numeracy. As Susan Carey has noted, there is a definite point in the mental life of children when numbers are understood as part of an infinite sequence as opposed to the counting numbers they encounter in daily life (Carey 290-293). Is this distinction a property of mind (i.e. does the mind mature in some way that means a deeper, infinite individuation among

numbers becomes cognisable), or is it a matter of learning (i.e. do children use some property of mind external to the mental faculty regarding conceptualising individuation to link the distinct concept of infinity with the concept of numbers)? Or, as is often the case, is some aspect of both possibilities true? If so, where does one end and another begin? It is here that the kind of critical narrowing of scope this thesis argues for demonstrates its greatest value. Though the kind of generative power of more wide-ranging theoretical models for literature can be seen in the work of literary theorists embracing continental models, in terms of attempting to approach questions about the structures of mind by seeking particular features, properties, or capacities, and then attempting to isolate these faculties of mind as completely as possible, then using particular approaches to exploring that faculty through literary experimentation may render that faculty more visible or more familiar (or unfamiliar) in ways that scientific or philosophical conceptions may have procedural difficulties in doing. This thesis has argued that literature which consciously takes mind and mental phenomena as its subject matter can offer significant insights into this dynamic. Ashbery's poetry provides a major inroad not merely into the understanding of experimental literature, but a variety of ways for conceiving of the mind itself.

Notes

1. One of the difficulties of characterising Ashbery's relationship to the School of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers is in defining exactly who should be included in the "School". Hartley notes that by one accounting, as many as 120 poets may be included (Hartley xi). He himself offers a narrower list which resembles a slightly more taxonomic version of one of Ashbery's *Vermont Notebook* poems:

Bruce Andrews, Rae Armantrout, Steve Benson, Charles Bernstein, David
Bromige, Clark Coolidge, Allen Davies, Ray Divalma, Robert Greiner, Carla
Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, Steve McCaffery, Michael Palmer, Robert

Perelman, Kit Robinson, Peter Seaton, James Sherry, Ron Silliman, Diane Ward, Barrett Watten, and Hannah Weiner. (Hartley xi-xii)

2. Recently, Hauser's career has been dogged by controversy regarding the data of specific experimental results. It is not the position of this thesis to endorse Hauser's experimental conclusions, merely the principle that guided his research. For more on the controversy, see Carolyn Y. Johnson, "Author on leave after Harvard Inquiry", 10 August 2010, *Boston Globe*: www.bostonglobe.com Web. Available at URL: http://www.boston.com/news/education/higher/articles/2010/08/10/author_on_leave_after_harvard_inquiry/?page=2, and Eugenie Samuel Reich, "Marc Hauser admits to errors as US government finds misconduct", *Nature News Blog*: www.nature.com. Web. 5 September 2012 21.59 BST, available at URL: <http://blogs.nature.com/news/2012/09/marc-hauser-admits-to-errors-as-us-government-finds-misconduct.html>.
3. Solso's embrace of the "parallel distribution process" (PDP), in which networks of neurons are activated and carry out associative functions simultaneously, as the default assumption for the structure of mind, is another key area of divergence from the approach of the present thesis. The PDP model holds great appeal for cognitive theorists working in the more "externally oriented" range of the discipline. This includes theorists like Daniel Dennet, Joshua Tenenbaum, and, ironically, given his embrace of a linguistic programme largely rooted in Chomskyan understandings, Steven Pinker. The appeal is perhaps partially because the PDP model extends ideas articulated in the "Identity Theory" of U.T. Place which essentially considers the brain a form of computer and which attempts to see neurological architecture and ontology in strictly computational terms. Some of the critical features and difficulties of this position are illustrated by Searle in the Chinese Room experiment.

Though this thesis is not directly concerned with the taxonomy of philosophical movements, greater context for the understanding of the cognitive debate in which it engages

can be provided by the examination of the modalities of “functionalist” theory, of which Place’s work is an example, and of which work like Fodor’s can be understood to be a variant. Possibly the most important distinction is between the less materialist writers classified as functionalist and the more materialist minded writers like Place himself. Place’s is a theory which posits the identification of mental processes with brain processes rather similarly to the “eliminative materialism” of the Churchlands, but which takes a different fundamental stance. Place’s theories are rooted in a materialistic view of mind but an attenuated one, one which recognises the possibility of mental phenomena as something other than “illusions”. Brain processes, therefore, constitute mental *events*, and these include, for example, pain, or beliefs (Place 5). Putting matters in Place’s own words:

We realise that there is nothing that the introspecting subject says about his conscious experience that is inconsistent with anything the physiologist might want to say about the brain processes that cause him to describe the environment and his consciousness of that environment in the way he does. (Place 51-2)

Place’s approach is less dogmatically externalist than the behaviourist approach, but, ultimately, it rather resembles the Vienna Circle’s attempt to create a more “exact” kind of “language” which does not “mistakenly” slip into mentalist terminology. One may speak of mental states but only in materialist terms (e.g. saying “it appears”, or “it seems” or “it looks/feels”)(Place 52). The similarity to Jamesian “radical empiricism” is also quite evident. To see Tenenbaum’s arguments in greater detail see, Thomas L. Griffiths, Charles Kemp, and Joshua B. Tenenbaum, “Bayesian Models of Cognition” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Computational Cognitive Modelling*, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

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