

EXPERIMENT AND REPRESENTATION : THE
DOMESTIC SURREAL IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH
AND AMERICAN POETRY

Malcolm Phillips

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
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Experiment and Representation: the Domestic Surreal in
Contemporary British and American Poetry

Malcolm Phillips

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of
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Abstract

In order to counter what I regard as premature and reductive formulations of a 'native' British postmodernism, I identify a specific tendency in contemporary writing which I name the domestic surreal, and which I trace through the poetry of John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Roy Fisher, Christopher Middleton, John Ash, Peter Didsbury and Ian McMillan. Through close reading and a comparative approach, I uncover key preoccupations with idiosyncratic perception, shared experience, urban space and poetic play. I also describe a network of allegiances and influence among these writers which reveals the domestic surreal to be one of the contemporary manifestations of an imaginative tradition which stretches back through the Surrealist and Cubist movements to Baudelaire and Rimbaud. For the poets of the domestic surreal, engagement with an aesthetic tradition is inextricably linked with their response to contemporary conditions. Drawing on dialectical and poststructuralist perspectives, I propose that the domestic surreal attempts to resist the constraints of social and aesthetic consensus in Britain and America in the period following the Second World War.

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INTRODUCTION

Exilé ici, j'ai eu une scène où jouer les chefs-d'œuvre dramatiques de toutes les littératures. Je vous indiquerais les richesses inouïes. J'observe l'histoire des trésors que vous trouvâtes. Je vois la suite! Ma sagesse est aussi dédaignée que le chaos. Qu'est mon néant, auprès de la stupeur qui vous attend?¹

Exiled here, I have had a stage wherein to put on the dramatic masterpieces of all literatures. I would show you the untold riches. I observe the history of treasures that you found. I see what follows! My wisdom is scorned, like chaos. What is my nothingness, compared with the stupor that awaits you?

Rimbaud's 'Vies' ('Lives'), from which I take my epigraph, offers a paradigm for experimental art, formulated by a poet who is himself an enduring paradigm of the experimental writer. 'Vies' is divided into three parts, each of which tells the story of a life viewed in retrospect: all three also end with visions of the future. This quotation is the closing sentence of the first part. Having pronounced an end, the poem begins again, twice, and indeed experimental poetry has more than once been pronounced to be at an end only to begin again. In 1929, in an essay on Surrealism in which Rimbaud features prominently, Walter Benjamin describes 'less a historical evolution than a constantly renewed, primal upsurge of esoteric poetry'.² Forty years later, Michael Hamburger surveyed the consequences for modern poetry of Rimbaud's own retirement as a poet at the age of eighteen:

¹ Arthur Rimbaud, *Poésies, Une Saison En Enfer, Illuminations*, ed. by Louis Forestier (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1993), p. 163. Poems are given in their original form as well as in translation: discursive prose will be quoted in translation only, with a page reference to the original. Translations from the French are my own unless otherwise stated.

Together with Lautréamont [...], Rimbaud became the precursor of Surrealism and other experimental movements of this century. It is worth remembering, therefore, that Rimbaud and Lautréamont regarded their own experiments as failures; not on artistic grounds, but because the wheel had come full circle: as Baudelaire predicted, the hypertrophy of art must inevitably lead to its atrophy [...] The wheel had come full circle – by 1873! But the history of literature shows no reluctance to repeat itself; and no wonder, since it's made by individuals whose aspirations and follies are not determined by history alone, nor by those literary and philosophical 'trends' in which historians are forced to deal. The same wheel is turning still; rather more sluggishly, perhaps, but steadily all the same.³

Hamburger moves rather casually from literary history to the abstract category of history itself in this passage, but the recognition of persistence and recurrence and the warning against the illusory notion of progress offered in the history of trends are both salutary. More than a decade after Hamburger's *The Truth of Poetry* first appeared, Jean-François Lyotard too sought to resist a narrative of progress in art, characterising postmodernism 'not [as] modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant'.⁴

The passage from 'Vies' is richly suggestive not only because it deals with the paradox of ends and beginnings, but also because it demonstrates interrelationships between the personal and the historical past, and a hallucinatory vision of the future. In a state of exile, alienated from his

² Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London: Verso, 1997; repr. 1998), p. 231.

³ Michael Hamburger, *The Truth of Poetry: Tensions in Modern Poetry from Baudelaire to the 1960s* (London: Methuen, 1969; repr. Manchester: Carcanet, 1982), p. 9.

⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984; repr. 1997), p. 79. The essay 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?' from which I quote appeared first, in French, as 'Réponse à la question: qu'est-ce que le postmoderne?', *Critique*, 419 (April 1982).

surroundings, the artist revives a cultural heritage which forms a kind of 'home', in a performance which will only incur a further rejection and exile. Yet this predicament is subtly distinguished from what is seen as the sole and intolerable alternative in a darkly ironic formulation which privileges 'nothingness' over 'stupor'. This is a superb allegory of the experimental artist who engages in play in order to respond both to alienation and a sense of inheritance. The distinction between 'nothingness' and 'stupor' is a validation of artistic difficulty as the sole alternative to the facile. This serves to indicate the confrontational nature of this kind of art.

When modernism was, to use Lyotard's word, nascent, the 'history of treasures' with which experimental artists like Rimbaud engaged was very easily distinguishable from their own activity. One hundred and thirty years after the wheel's first 'full circle', experimentalism has its own history. This thesis is concerned with a number of recent poets who, in devising an experimental response to their contemporary situation, draw upon, acknowledge and address that emergent tradition. Although these poets are not aligned within a group with a manifesto, they are aware of one another's work, and for the younger poets John Ash, Peter Didsbury and Ian McMillan, the work of John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Roy Fisher and Christopher Middleton functions as a set of precedents for engagement with European writing in a wider context of hostility to experiment. Writing of the influence of Fisher on his poetry, McMillan recalls his first encounter with the poet: 'I was impressed by the risks he took, by the

way that his poems weren't anything like the poems I was doing for A-level or reading in the few little magazines that I could get hold of'.⁵ Ash writes of Fisher that 'if [he] is something of an isolated figure in this country it is, in large part, because he has refused to be isolated from the rest of the world: specifically, he refused to be isolated from the modernist and post modernist poetry of Europe and the Americas'.⁶ Elsewhere, he praises Middleton in similar terms: 'Middleton's way of looking at things is profoundly un-English - if we allow Englishness to be defined by our current crop of poets and critics'.⁷ The New York School exemplifies the possibilities of an internationally 'shared sensibility' for Ash:⁸ in an interview with David Kennedy, Ash mentions 'Rimbaud and a bunch of other French poets' as influences he holds in common with Ashbery, and suggests that O'Hara is the 'unifying poet' of 'the original New York school [...] in the ways you can related things in the other three's work to things in his work because it's so oceanic and contains everything'.⁹

Didsbury makes his own acknowledgement to the New York School in his poem 'The Flowers of Finland' when he refers to 'verse epistles from gifted New Yorkers', and Sean O'Brien has revealed the existence of an unpublished poetic tribute to Christopher Middleton called 'Christopher Middleton in September'.¹⁰

⁵ Ian McMillan, 'Poets I go back to...', *The North*, 22, (1998), pp. 22-23 (p. 22).

⁶ John Ash, 'A Classic Post-Modernist', *Atlantic Review*, new ser., 2 (Autumn 1979), pp. 39-50 (p. 44).

⁷ Ash, 'The Poet's Grandmother and Other Dilemmas', *P.N. Review* 47 (1985), pp. 38-40 (p. 39).

⁸ For a literary-historical account of the New York School, see David Lehman, *The Last Avant Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).

⁹ David Kennedy, 'John Ash Talking with David Kennedy', *Verse*, 11:1 (1993), pp. 39-43 (p. 41).

¹⁰ Sean O'Brien, *The Deregulated Muse* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998), p. 290.

Didsbury also follows O'Hara in invoking the name of the French poet Pierre Reverdy in one of his poems. In 'A Step Away From Them', O'Hara writes that 'my heart is in my / pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy', while in 'The Smart Chair' Didsbury recalls 'the poems by Reverdy and Desnos I got shewn after breakfast'. Although personally receptive to European work, Didsbury's review of Michael Hamburger's *The Truth of Poetry* reveals that his sense of the prevailing British attitude to experiment is identical to that of Ash:

On its first publication in 1969, *The Truth of Poetry*, with its largely European emphases, appears to have met with the kind of acclaim one might expect in a country where Larkin's massive 'No!' to foreign poetry has been received with such affection [...] It is a sad reflection on the intervening years that one is not too sanguine about the chances of a more intelligent critical reception the second time round, when Mars gets more attention than our continental neighbours.¹¹

The reference to Mars is informed by a sense that Craig Raine and Christopher Reid, described by James Fenton as the 'Martian School',¹² represented the poetic establishment once occupied by Larkin and Kingsley Amis: in his polemical article 'Drool Britannia', Ash complains that 'the Martian invasion is an event in the history of publicity [...] as poetry editor of Faber, Raine can publish more or less what he wants'.¹³ The common perception of an anti-European 'mainstream' has helped to make Ash and Didsbury ambivalent towards British literary culture.

¹¹ Peter Didsbury, 'History and Geography', *Poetry Review*, 73.3, (September 1983), pp. 76-77 (p. 76).

¹² James Fenton, 'Of the Martian School', *New Statesman*, 20 October 1978, p. 520.

¹³ Ash, 'Drool Britannia', *Voice Literary Supplement*, February 1987, pp. 18-19 (p. 19).

The older poets have sought to situate their work in relation to each other as well as in the context of a European tradition. Thus, Fisher has indicated his admiration for O'Hara ('so much comes through in a little diagonal passage of that man's mind'),¹⁴ and for Middleton ('work that embodie[s] knowledge, curiosity, invention and obvious talent'),¹⁵ while also acknowledging an early debt to 'surrealist and neo-surrealist texts' and poets such as Apollinaire.¹⁶ Ashbery, meanwhile, wrote an important introduction to the posthumous *Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* which underlines the importance of French writing to O'Hara's work and indeed his own. I quote from it extensively because it is so useful in indicating the scope of this thesis:

His poetry [...] is part of a modern tradition which is anti-literary and anti-artistic, and which goes back to Apollinaire and the Dadaists [...] The poetry that meant the most to him when he began writing was either French – Rimbaud, Mallarmé, the Surrealists: poets who speak the language of every day into the reader's dream – or Russian – Pasternak and especially Mayakovsky, from whom he picked up what James Schuyler has called the "intimate yell." [...] Except for some rather pale Surrealist poetry written in England and America during the 1930s, and an occasional maverick poet like John Wheelwright or Laura Riding; except for Hart Crane in his vatic moments and the more abandoned side of Dylan Thomas and the early Auden, there was nothing like a basis for the kind of freedom of expression that Frank instinctively needed. One had to look to France, and even there the freedom was as often as not an encouraging sentiment expressed in poetry ("*Il faut être absolument moderne, plonger au fond du gouffre*") than as a program actually carried out in search of new poetic forms. Even French Surrealist poetry can be cold and classical, and Breton's call for "*liberté totale*" stopped short of manipulating the grammar and syntax of the sacrosanct French language.

¹⁴ Roy Fisher, *Interviews Through Time & Selected Prose* (Kentisbeare: Shearsman, 2000), p. 95.

¹⁵ Fisher, *Interviews Through Time*, p. 124.

¹⁶ Fisher, *Interviews Through Time*, pp. 36-37.

It is interesting that Ashbery should explain the relevance of French writing in terms of what was missing from poetic writing in English: this will receive further discussion later. What is immediately interesting is the poet's focus on experimental aesthetics and the contingencies of contemporary life. In this thesis, I propose the term 'domestic surreal' to convey the simultaneous emphasis on the everyday and the extraordinary which is most crucial to the poetry I discuss, and which is formulated by Ashbery as 'speak[ing] the language of every day into the reader's dream'. Fisher's interest in O'Hara's poems as 'diagonal passage[s] of mind' reveals a similar concern with poetry as access to consciousness.

O'Hara himself wrote in his 'Statement for *The New American Poetry*' that 'it may be that poetry makes life's nebulous events tangible to me and restores their detail; or conversely, that poetry brings forth the intangible quality of incidents which are all too concrete and circumstantial'. This passage resonates strongly with Benjamin's description of 'a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday'.¹⁷ The interplay of the intangible (or impenetrable) and the tangible (or everyday) allows us to see how modern life divides into experiential categories: according to Benjamin, this constitutes 'profane illumination', a vision of radical change. In his work on Baudelaire as well as the essay on Surrealism from which this quotation is taken, Benjamin is concerned to show how the idiosyncrasies of French poetry actually mark a

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street and Other Writings*, p. 237.

response to urban experience which has radical potential even when it appears apolitical. In this thesis, I argue that the domestic surreal is marked by the same configuration of the idiosyncratic, the urban and the political. Benjamin is therefore an important figure for the domestic surreal, and indeed his ideas have had a direct impact on Christopher Middleton's thinking.

In his essay 'For Márton, Erwin, and Miklos', Middleton refers to Benjamin's theory of the auratic dimension of art to describe a quality of Baudelaire's poetry he considers to be lost to subsequent work:¹⁸

[Once] poetry was a minute exegesis of creation, scrupulously composed by one who could believe that he participated in creation's formative processes. And this is what Baudelaire still meant, with his poetics of 'reciprocal analogy', where metaphor is the linguistic agent which divines links between microcosm and macrocosm, between individual body-consciousness and the life of the universe.

Poetry could still, theoretically, function as a bridge between the opaque and the luminous, the unstable body-world and the spiritual-electric aura of supreme fictions. Since then the aura has been lost (Walter Benjamin) and poetry's ground has shifted.¹⁹

It has to be said that this is an unconventional understanding of the 'aura', which is normally understood to refer instead to the authenticity of fine art works. What is interesting however is the Romantic understanding of art as a participation in 'creation's formative processes' which links the 'unstable body-world and the spiritual-electric aura of supreme fictions'. Middleton's phrasing is certainly unusual, but it does recall the experiential categories of O'Hara and

¹⁸ Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 217-252.

¹⁹ Christopher Middleton, *The Pursuit of the Kingfisher: essays* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1983), p. 48.

Benjamin.

The change in poetic possibility since Baudelaire described here should not be understood purely in terms of loss: in the second of the two 'Lettres du Voyant' [Letters of the Seer], Rimbaud articulates his own perception of a historical shift, praising Baudelaire as 'the first seer, king of poets, *a true God* [Rimbaud's italics]', but insisting that 'the form so vaunted in him is cheap: the inventions of the unknown require new forms'.²⁰ For Rimbaud, the departure from Baudelaire's poetics is a utopian moment of new possibility, and when Ashbery quotes 'il faut être absolument moderne' from Rimbaud's *Une Saison en Enfer* in his introduction to O'Hara he understands this as an incomplete project.²¹ Middleton refers to poetry as 'exploration beyond the frontiers of the ego', recalling the French poet's frequently cited formulation of linguistic self-construction in the second 'Lettre du Voyant':

I is another. If some brass awakens as a clarion, it is through no fault of its own. That is obvious to me: I am present at the birth of my thought: I watch it, I listen to it: I gesture with my bow: the symphony begins its movement in the depths, or leaps onto the stage.²²

Referring to this passage in another essay, 'Writing as Expression', Middleton talks of 'the pursuit of translogical elements dwelling in language or in the

²⁰ Rimbaud, *Poésies, Une Saison En Enfer, Illuminations*, p. 205.

²¹ 'We must be absolutely modern'. Rimbaud, *Poésies, Une Saison En Enfer, Illuminations*, p. 152. Recent scholarship points to different interpretations of this line. See Jeremy Harding, 'Fleeing the Mother Tongue', *London Review of Books*, 9 October 2003, pp. 24-27 (p. 26).

²² Rimbaud, *Poésies, Une Saison En Enfer, Illuminations*, p. 202.

unconscious' which has characterised experimental writing since Rimbaud.²³ Seeking to describe this writing further in 'For Márton, Erwin, and Miklos', Middleton tentatively suggests that the New York School shows evidence of a 'sensitivity' he also identifies in European experimental work as well as in Anglo-American modernism and which he refers to as 'exigent poetry':

Exigent poetry tends to have archipelagic structures. Its movement tends to be a dance, not a walk. It is a poetry balanced over gulfs of silence, a poetry of surprises, of enigmas, scrutiny followed by vertiginous distance, a poetry of broken uncertain surfaces, of foregrounded hinterlands. Prototypes early in the century were some of the 1911-13 poems by Apollinaire ('Le musicien de Saint-Merry'), some poems by Tzara (later his *L'homme approximatif*), Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Pound's *Sextus Propertius*. I cannot rightly say what has become of this particular sensitivity in the versions of it appearing in poems by several New York poets. John Ashbery certainly has roots in it. The American zigzag has an optics determined by American urbanity (including the soul-shredding experience of big-city life).²⁴

Middleton recognises here that there is more to urban poetics than the faithful depiction of surface detail: it is the organisation of visual imagery in the poem rather than the images themselves which may reveal most about the urban dimension of writing. Ashbery's review of an exhibition of 'New Realists' recalls the terms of Middleton's argument quite clearly:

The artists in this exhibition are at an advanced stage of the struggle to determine the real nature of reality which began at the time of Flaubert. One could point to other examples in the arts today (elsewhere for instance the "objective" novels of Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute, or the importance of objects, especially artifacts, in the recent films of Resnais or Antonioni) of

²³ Middleton, *The Pursuit of the Kingfisher*, p. 61.

²⁴ Middleton, *The Pursuit of the Kingfisher*, p. 48.

this continuing effort to come to grips with the emptiness of industrialized modern life. The most successful way of doing this seems to be to accord it its due. That is, to recognize that the phenomena evoked by the artist in this show are not phenomena, but part of our experience, our lives - created by us and creating us.²⁵

Thus Ashbery too suggests that artists may derive from the processes of contemporary life the means to respond to contemporaneity. Perhaps the first statement of this idea occurs in Baudelaire's preface to the *Petits Poèmes en Prose*:

Who among us has not dreamt, on his more ambitious days, of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical without rhythm or rhyme, supple enough and uneven enough to adapt to the lyrical movements of the soul, the undulations of daydream, the jolts of consciousness?

Above all it is in wandering around enormous cities, in coming across their innumerable intersections that this enthralling ideal is born.²⁶

Middleton's description of the 'broken uncertain surfaces' of his twentieth-century examples suggests that the prosodic innovations of poets since Baudelaire have allowed verse poems the latitude to be 'supple' and 'uneven' in the manner dreamt of by the French poet, but it is also a justification of a necessary struggle over meaning. Lacking the stable 'bridge' between the 'unstable body-world and the spiritual-electric aura of supreme fictions', this poetry is 'balanced over gulfs of silence'. What has changed since Baudelaire could perhaps be characterised as the stance towards 'jolts of consciousness'. In this understanding, the 'poetics of reciprocal analogy' 'adapts' to these disruptions and contains them within a stable mimetic frame, whereas exigent

²⁵ Ashbery, *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles, 1957-1987*, ed. by David Bergman (Cambridge, MA:

poetry is subjected to disruptions which affect the frame. This development has its positive aspect in Rimbaud's injunction to find 'new forms' in which to attain the 'unknown': thus, disruption is a vital and dynamic aspect of the creative process. Its negative aspect, on the other hand, is that it registers the traumatic effects of modernity, 'the soul-shredding experience of big-city life': in this context, disruption is experienced as the negation of harmony and order in the art work. Middleton, like Benjamin, sees writing as an attempt at dialectical interpenetration of these two aspects which could produce a revelation of change:

Poetic work reverses the modern work scheme: it reverses reification, insofar as it projects into the opaque world of objects signs of intense mental life (sometimes just this side of madness). [...] For all its integratedness, a good text explodes with difference. It may not change life, but it gives an indication of how life might be differently perceived. No, it is naive to suppose that poetry can change life, change the ways in which people construe life. Yet it does subvert norms with which people mystify and atrophy themselves.²⁷

Middleton's criticism forms a bridge between the domestic surreal and the critical movements in France and Germany which have engaged with avant-garde work. His essays reveal his familiarity with the Frankfurt School to which Benjamin belonged:²⁸ they also reveal an ambivalent attitude to

Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 81-82.

²⁶ Charles Baudelaire, *Ceuvres Complètes*, ed. by Michel Jamet (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1980), p. 161.

²⁷ Middleton, *The Pursuit of the Kingfisher*, pp. 49-50.

²⁸ Benjamin is mentioned in 'Ideas About Voice in Poetry', 'Reflections on a Viking Prow', 'Hölderlin's Andenken', 'Seventeen Hiccups on the Question of Novelty', and 'Translation as a Species of Mime'; Adorno is discussed in 'On Imagination and Lyric Voice'; Marcuse is quoted in 'The Rise of Primitivism and Its Relevance to the Poetry of Expressionism and Dada'.

poststructuralism. In the notes to *The Lonely Suppers of W. V. Balloon*, Middleton quotes extensively from Deleuze's *Proust and Signs* in order to explain the organising principle behind the collection,²⁹ and in the quotation above there is a decidedly poststructuralist cast to his valorisation of textual 'difference', but in the introduction to *The Pursuit of the Kingfisher* he reproves Derrida for the 'aphilia' he sees as the inherent risk in any 'critique of power'.³⁰

The Frankfurt School and poststructuralism provide crucial accounts of the main issues confronted by the poets of the domestic surreal, namely the significance of experiment in art, the relation of art to life and the condition of modernity. A schematic survey of these debates will help to map out the key concerns on which my close readings will concentrate: it will also inform my subsequent critique of the existing critical work on the poets. So far in this introduction I have used the term 'experimental poetry' in a broad sense to indicate a notional commonality between the isolated figures of Rimbaud and Lautréamont, the organised avant-garde of the Surrealists, and the contemporary poets whose work is the focus of this thesis. In doing so, I take advantage of theoretical work which has differentiated artistic experiment from the art conventionally named 'modernist'. Equally, my use of the term 'domestic surreal' in this thesis arises from my belief in the need for more differentiation between different forms of practice conventionally named 'postmodernist'. Later in this introduction I consider accounts of the poetry of John Ash, Peter

²⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: G. Braziller, 1972).

Didsbury and Ian McMillan by the critics David Kennedy and Ian Gregson. Kennedy and Gregson present these poets as exemplars of a strain of postmodernism peculiar to Britain by virtue of its relationship to realism. The main part of this thesis is given over to close readings of the poetry of the domestic surreal in order to argue that this poetry is the contemporary manifestation of an imaginative tradition which begins with Baudelaire and which undergoes successive transformations in the work of Rimbaud and others until it is given a belated but important reception in English-language poetry. Clearly, since this tradition begins before the modernist period as it is delineated in Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane's *Modernism, 1890-1930* and continues beyond that time to emerge as a presence in postwar English and American poetry,³¹ we need a more flexible understanding of writing practice than the vocabulary of modernism and postmodernism alone can provide. The comparative critic Charles Altieri has remarked on the misleading nature of some canonical definitions of these periods:

Consider the charts of contrasts between the modern and the postmodern that we find in theorists like Ihab Hassan, in "POSTmodernISM," and David Harvey, in *The Condition of Postmodernity* [...] The issue is not that some of the oppositions are simply inaccurate, although that is also the case. The charts do clearly indicate directions of change, but they are constrained to working with static binaries rather than complex dynamic struggles to find adequate alternatives, and consequently they lose sight of what is constantly pressing on the margins or emerging in the gaps created

³⁰ Middleton, *The Pursuit of the Kingfisher*, p. 11.

³¹ Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, *Modernism, 1890-1930* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).

by exploring new possibilities.³²

It is my contention that until we can articulate more clearly what in modernist and avant-garde work has remained useful to contemporary poets, there can be no truly persuasive account of what postmodernism is. Furthermore, existing surveys of postmodernism, and particularly those dealing with British poetry, are insufficiently attentive to the breadth and scope of current writing practice. In using the term 'domestic surreal', it is my intention not only to find better distinctions within the diachronic framework of the modern and the postmodern but also to avoid a distortion of the synchronic picture whereby the poets I discuss are seen to be more or less 'postmodern' than contemporaries like J. H. Prynne, Tom Raworth, Denise Riley or John Wilkinson.

Before examining Kennedy and Gregson's work more closely, then, I must give my independent critical assessment of the major theoretical accounts of art and its relation to modernity. I will concentrate on two critics writing within the tradition of the Frankfurt School, Jürgen Habermas and Peter Bürger, and the poststructuralist thinker Jean-François Lyotard. I make additional reference to Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and others as the discussion begins to focus more closely on controversies regarding realism and its critics. We will then be in a better position to assess the claim of Kennedy and Gregson that

³² Charles Altieri, *Postmodernisms Now: Essays on Contemporaneity in the Arts* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), p. 9, n7.

British postmodernism is characterised by its attachment to realism.

Experiment and Modernity

Peter Bürger and Andreas Huyssen have argued for a finer discrimination between modernism and what they term the 'historical avant-garde': in the context of the Marxist critical tradition, modernism and the avant-garde, as well as their immediate precursor Aestheticism, develop after the period of 'classical realism' defined in the work of Lukács.³³ Huyssen points out that 'from a European perspective it makes little sense to lump Thomas Mann together with Dada, Proust with André Breton, or Rilke with Russian constructivism'.³⁴ Bürger begins his extended analysis with an explanation of how nineteenth-century Aestheticism had dissociated art from life in order to negate 'the means-ends rationality of the bourgeois everyday'.³⁵ In other words, it celebrated art's uselessness in protest at the utilitarian values underpinning the everyday world of labour. Modernism maintained this separation of art and life and continued to provide autonomous art works: a modernist work might have social critique as content, but within the category of art work it could not intervene in social life. This ensured that its critique would be without consequence and offer

³³ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the avant-garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 1.

³⁴ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 162-163.

³⁵ Bürger, *Theory of the avant-garde*, p. 49. Aestheticism in this sense is represented by the poetry of Mallarmé, for example.

merely an outlet for discontent which would help to maintain the status quo. The historical avant-garde, on the other hand, sought to 'reintegrate art into the life process' by modifying or attacking the 'function, production [and] reception' of the autonomous art work.³⁶ Bürger sees Dadaist 'manifestation', Surrealist automatic writing and Duchamp's readymades as examples of the avant-garde's challenge to the institution of art.³⁷ The reception of art works was traditionally private and contemplative: 'manifestations' sought to engage the viewing public in the process of making by confronting them and encouraging intervention and reaction from the audience. The submission of readymades to exhibitions was intended to highlight what was perceived as the false division of art and life maintained by the exhibition space: if everyday objects could be contemplated as art works, such a division should no longer be credible. Automatic writing, meanwhile, was the foremost method by which avant-gardists hoped to replace the notion of the individual artist and 'genius' with an art practice in which all could potentially participate.

For Bürger, the avant-garde project thus understood was inevitably a failure: the possibility of social critique in autonomous art works was dependent on their distance from life and consequent freedom of perspective, so that the attempted removal of that distance in avant-garde work simultaneously abolished art's critical power. The period of the historical avant-garde is succeeded by 'a post avant-gardiste phase', but Bürger emphasises that this does

³⁶ Bürger, *Theory of the avant-garde*, p. 50.

not mean that the achievements of the avant-garde can be ignored or consigned to the past: it is simply that their formal innovations are now deployed within the category of the autonomous art work, the possibilities of which are now expanded by virtue of avant-garde techniques.³⁸ The two main features of the post avant-gardiste phase are the co-existence of avant-garde and realist forms (neither of which can claim universal validity), and the advent of the nonorganic work. The latter is in fact partly a consequence of the former, for the co-existence of different forms leads to the possibility of combining avant-garde and realist elements in one work: furthermore, since the avant-garde had attacked the idea of unity in the art work, the nonorganic work is under no obligation to reconcile its disparate elements: 'it is no longer the harmony of the individual parts that constitutes the whole; it is the contradictory relationship of heterogeneous elements'.³⁹

Lyotard too makes a distinction between two approaches to art in the period of modernity, but they do not correspond to categories of modernism and the avant-garde, consisting instead in two 'modes' of the latter, one of which emphasises 'the powerlessness of the faculty of presentation' and 'the nostalgia for presence felt by the human subject', while the other celebrates 'the power of the faculty to conceive' and 'the increase of being and the jubilation which result from the invention of new rules of the game'. These 'modes' very much resemble the positive and negative aspects of disruption which I have outlined

³⁷ Bürger, *Theory of the avant-garde*, pp. 51-53.

in Middleton and Benjamin's accounts of poetry since Baudelaire:⁴⁰

What I have in mind will become clear if we dispose very schematically a few names on the chessboard of the history of avant-gardes: on the side of melancholia, the German Expressionists, and on the side of *novatio*, Braque and Picasso [...] The nuance which distinguishes these two modes may be infinitesimal; they often coexist in the same piece, are almost indistinguishable; and yet they testify to a difference [...] on which the fate of thought depends and will depend for a long time, between regret and assay.⁴¹

Since these two approaches issue from attitudes which persist, there is no need to posit the existence of successive historical periods of the avant-garde and the post avant-garde, as Bürger does: furthermore, the co-existence in the art work of elements belonging to different kinds of practice is now seen to have been possible from the inception of the 'modern'. For Lyotard, 'postmodern' art then becomes an redoubled effort of *novatio*:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.⁴²

Both Bürger and Lyotard regard experiment as a radical response to historical conditions. Their different conceptions of the durability and power of that response stem from differences in their understanding of the historical

³⁸ Bürger, *Theory of the avant-garde*, p. 57.

³⁹ Bürger, *Theory of the avant-garde*, p. 82.

⁴⁰ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, pp. 79-80.

⁴¹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 80.

condition of modernity. Bürger acknowledges his debt to 'the tradition of dialectical theory that extends from Hegel via Marx, Lukács, Bloch to Adorno and Habermas', and correspondingly he sees modernity as synonymous with the ascendancy of capitalism and 'bourgeois society'. Following Marx and Habermas, he understands these economic and social developments as evolutionary steps, not only away from the repressive power structures of feudal society but towards a state of collective self-understanding: 'bourgeois society is the logical place from which a systematic cognition of society (or reality) becomes possible'.⁴³ That there is no mention of postmodernism in Bürger's outline of the 'post avant-garde phase' is a reflection of the fact that reference to postmodernity implies another evolutionary step has been taken, and Habermas insists that this is untrue.

What has changed, according to Habermas, is not modernity itself but its accompaniment by a cultural project of self-understanding. The institutions and modes of reasoning developed in the Enlightenment are no longer seen to inform one another in an ongoing process of reform towards the ultimate goal of a society of 'enlightened' and empowered participants. The 'public sphere' of the eighteenth century, which provided a forum for a larger number of informed and capable subjects to influence the decision making of a delegated political sphere through discussion, has been replaced by 'publicity', defined as the specialised operations of bureaucrats and special interest groups manufacturing

⁴² Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 81.

a figment of public opinion which has no roots in actual rational participatory debate.⁴⁴ Habermas distinguishes between two meanings of consensus to match positive and negative models of self-understanding. Consensus achieved by publicity represents the 'neutralization of social power and rationalization of political domination in the medium of public discussion',⁴⁵ while the reestablishment of the Enlightenment project sought by Habermas would involve a method of 'intersubjective' communication which could secure agreement on a genuinely common interest on the basis of which all decision-making could take place:

The agreement made possible by discourse depends on two things: the individual's inalienable right to say "yes" or "no" and his overcoming of his egocentric viewpoint. Without the individual's uninfringeable freedom to respond with a "yes" or "no" to criticizable validity-claims, consent is merely factual rather than truly universal. Conversely, without empathetic sensitivity by each person to everyone else, no solution deserving universal consent will result from the deliberation.⁴⁶

A theory of 'discourse' is necessitated by the need to establish a rational rule-based language of discussion which could be employed by all participants: in a society marked by a proliferation of specialisms, each with their own discourse, the grounds for understanding are otherwise lacking. From this, we can see that Habermas is not a revolutionary theorist but a reformist: a more democratic society is to be established through improved communication rather than the

⁴³ Bürger, *Theory of the avant-garde*, p. lii.

⁴⁴ *The Habermas Reader*, ed. by William Outhwaite (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p. 28.

⁴⁵ *The Habermas Reader*, ed. by Outhwaite, p. 30.

⁴⁶ *The Habermas Reader*, ed. by Outhwaite, pp. 198-199.

sudden and violent replacement of one economic structure by another.

This helps us to articulate the role Habermas and Bürger assign to art. Habermas himself suggests that art may contribute to the development of a 'non-reified communicative everyday practice', while Bürger seeks in the nonorganic work 'a new type of engaged art' which will contribute to the political self-understanding of its audience. For both critics, art forms part of a cultural project. Thus, for Bürger, the value of the avant-garde movements is found in their will to respond to the condition of modernity in a way which is conditioned by modernity itself, without reference to techniques sanctioned by organic tradition, as Richard Sheppard recognises when he says that 'Bürger [...] probably wrote the first major work on modernism based on the clear understanding that the relationship between modernism and modernity involved a dialectic rather than abstraction or mimesis'.⁴⁷

Lyotard, like Habermas, is a reformist. In *The Postmodern Condition*, he specifies that 'there is no question here of proposing a "pure" alternative to the system: we all now know, as the 1970s come to a close, that an attempt at an alternative of that kind would end up resembling the system it was meant to replace'.⁴⁸ Lyotard also offers an analysis of the contemporary significance of consensus as 'a component of the system, which manipulates it in order to maintain and improve its performance',⁴⁹ thus recalling the interplay of publicity

⁴⁷ Richard Sheppard, *Modernism – Dada – Postmodernism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), p. 23.

⁴⁸ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 66.

⁴⁹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 60.

and consensus in Habermas. However, Lyotard emphatically rejects the idea of a future community of consensus established through discourse and consequently also the incorporation of art into a wider project of self-understanding. For Lyotard, all forms of consensus are repressive, and postmodernity is defined as the moment when an 'impure' alternative to present and projected systems becomes possible. Experiment is the chief weapon to be deployed in opposition to consensus. Lyotard's definition of postmodernity is often referred to, but as we shall see later in this introduction, it is sometimes misunderstood. For this reason I give an extended account here.

The Postmodern Condition is 'a report on knowledge in the most highly developed societies',⁵⁰ offering an analysis of the structures in which the pursuit of knowledge takes place in contemporary society. Technical restructuring in the wake of Keynesianism has resulted in a gradual transition towards the organisation of labour by temporary contracts: meanwhile, historical developments in the sciences have led to a rising number of distinct disciplines and research institutes centred around new forms of knowledge. Empirically, these developments are not disputed between different schools of thought. But where a dialectical analysis would see the proliferation of specialisms as an increase in alienation, Lyotard refutes that idea by declaring the end of the 'grand narratives', which are held to have justified research as either the

⁵⁰ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxv.

liberation of humanity (in the case of the 'narrative of emancipation')⁵¹ or the development of a unified field of human knowledge (in the case of the 'speculative narrative').⁵² These narratives are stories of progress towards unity of the subject: they are part of the Enlightenment project of cultural self-understanding to which Habermas remains committed. Until either narrative reaches its end, the subject is incompletely developed, and is thus alienated from its destiny. The pursuit of knowledge is legitimated by its contribution to the progress of the subject from alienation towards unity. Lyotard argues that since there are two narratives, each with its own ending, the possibility of ultimate unity is already denied:

The mode of legitimation we are discussing, which reintroduces narrative as the validity of knowledge, can thus take two routes, depending on whether it represents the subject of the narrative as cognitive or practical, as a hero of knowledge or a hero of liberty. Because of this alternative, not only does the meaning of legitimation vary, but it is already apparent that narrative itself is incapable of describing that meaning adequately.⁵³

If, as poststructuralism teaches, the self is irrevocably divided, unity of the subject is a chimera. If we no longer see the pursuit of knowledge as progress towards unity of the subject, the presence of a multiplicity of disciplines is no longer the sign of an irrevocable and debilitating alienation, and offers instead multiple possibilities for the realisation of a positively valorised difference.

Furthermore, since research need no longer justify itself by appeal to one

⁵¹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, pp. 31-32.

⁵² Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, pp. 32-37.

⁵³ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 31.

of the grand narratives, they find their validation in localised instances of discovery and innovation. To describe this process, Lyotard uses Wittgenstein's idea of language games, which replaces the idea of a universally applicable language with a language adapting to different rules of usage pragmatically in specific situations. Research becomes a network of 'heteromorphous' games open to experimental 'moves' which have the potential to change the rules of the game within which they were made.⁵⁴ Lyotard sees the development of relativity among 'a makeshift "academy" formed by [...] engineers [and] amateur philosophers' as an example of the ability of one innovative move to alter accepted positions in a discipline.⁵⁵ In such circumstances, consent is a threat to innovation, since it seeks to impose stability:

The stronger the "move," the more likely it is to be denied the minimum consensus, precisely because it changes the rules of the game upon which consensus had been based. But when the institution of knowledge functions in this manner, it is acting like an ordinary power center whose behavior is governed by a principle of homeostasis.⁵⁶

This obviously has political implications. Where Habermas hypothesises a totalised community in search of 'universal consent', Lyotard proposes that we move through different communities:

A *self* does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at "nodal points" of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may

⁵⁴ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, pp. 63-66.

⁵⁵ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 201, n221.

⁵⁶ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 63.

be.⁵⁷

It can be objected that in such a 'fabric of relations', people only ever have partial access to information, and thus only partial control over the decisions that affect their lives. However, the development of an economy based on the rapid exchange of information allows a more positive approach to the diversity of knowledge. The system needs to allow the transfer of knowledge in order for accumulation to continue, but if knowledge is made freely available, political power becomes despecialised since more people will have access to the information needed in order to make decisions. Thus, while the system depends on certain developments for its continued function, those same developments make it possible for those within the system's control to overcome it.

This logic then informs Lyotard's understanding of artistic experiment. Like John Ash and Peter Didsbury, he perceives the contemporary moment to be one of general hostility to experiment:

In the diverse invitations to suspend artistic experimentation, there is an identical call for order, a desire for unity, for identity, for security, or popularity (in the sense of *Öffentlichkeit*, of "finding a public"). Artists and writers must be brought back into the bosom of the community, or at least, if the latter is considered to be ill, they must be assigned the task of healing it.⁵⁸

In this context, realism is seen as the aesthetic equivalent of social and political consensus: it involves the suppression of dissent and of varying

⁵⁷ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 15.

perspectives in favour of a unified perspective and meaning, recognisable identities, secure values, and the ultimate criterion of popularity, where 'public' has the inevitable sense of 'target audience' or 'greatest market share'. However, just as the information economy relies on developments which expose its vulnerability, the system of scientific and capitalist development which creates the demand for the 'real' undermines stable notions of reality:

No physics is possible without a suspicion of the Aristotelian theory of motion, no industry without a refutation of corporatism, of mercantilism, and of physiocracy. Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the "lack of reality" of reality, together with the invention of other realities.⁵⁹

Once more, Lyotard comes close to identifying the positive and negative disruptions identified in poetry since Rimbaud by Middleton and Benjamin: the optimistic search for new forms allows the 'invention of other realities', while the discovery of the poverty of the existing reality is experienced as a kind of trauma. To what extent, then, are poststructuralist and dialectical accounts of experiment reconcilable?

In his introduction to *The Postmodern Condition*, Fredric Jameson makes an interesting comparison between the struggle of experiment against a repressive social formation and 'Lyotard's related vision of nonhegemonic Greek philosophy (the Stoics, the Cynics, the Sophists), as the guerrilla war of the marginals, the foreigners, the non-Greeks, against the massive and repressive

⁵⁸ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 73.

Order of Aristotle and his successors'.⁶⁰ Here we can begin to perceive a similarity between Lyotard and two earlier figures in the dialectical tradition, Adorno and Benjamin. As Bürger acknowledges, Adorno saw in avant-garde art not the endeavour of progress but a form of intellectual survival against the odds:

Adorno not only sees late capitalism as definitively stabilized but also feels that historical experience has shown the hopes placed in socialism to be ill-founded. For him, avant-gardiste art is a radical protest that rejects all false reconciliation with what exists and thus the only art form that has historical legitimacy.⁶¹

Lyotard does in fact acknowledge Adorno alongside Wittgenstein as an instigator of the critique of Enlightenment values on which he builds in his work on the postmodern,⁶² but Jameson insists that poststructuralism and the Frankfurt School are incommensurable. Thus, while he compares Lyotard's notion of experiment with the 'schizophrenic ethic' of Deleuze and Guattari as 'a way of surviving under capitalism',⁶³ he also contrasts 'Deleuze's influential celebration of schizophrenia [...] with T. W. Adorno's no less influential and characteristic denunciations of cultural reification and fetishization'.⁶⁴ But reflecting on Benjamin's idea that history should be told from the perspective of the defeated in a passage of *Minima Moralia*, Adorno's depiction of marginal

⁵⁹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 77.

⁶⁰ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xix.

⁶¹ Bürger, *Theory of the avant-garde*, p. 88.

⁶² Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 73.

⁶³ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xviii.

⁶⁴ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, pp. ix-x.

resistance resembles the defective 'schizophrenic ethic' more than the engaged technological project imagined in dialectical formulations of the avant-garde:

It is in the nature of the defeated to appear, in their impotence, irrelevant, eccentric, derisory. What transcends the ruling society is not only the potentiality it develops but also all that which did not fit properly into the laws of historical development. Theory must needs deal with cross-gained, opaque, unassimilated material, which as such admittedly has from the start an anachronistic quality, but is not wholly obsolete since it has outwitted the historical dynamic. This can most readily be seen in art [...] in Satie's pert and puerile piano pieces there are flashes of experience undreamed of by the school of Schönberg, with all its rigour and all the pathos of musical development behind it.⁶⁵

Where dialectical theorists and poststructuralists converge is in their fascination with the unassimilable: the paradox, as Adorno recognises, is that the intention to resist assimilation may be surpassed in its results by kinds of activity which are undertaken without express political and technical motivation. Benjamin in particular sought to articulate the value of artistic experiments which were not linked to a coherent political strategy, and also articulated the strategic value of the defective in a way which is invaluable to an understanding of the poetry of Roy Fisher, as I will argue in Chapter Three. More generally, it is my conviction that where the emphasis in these critical accounts falls on eccentric rather than programmatic opposition, there may we find the political significance of the domestic surreal. Both dialectical theory and poststructuralism offer indications as to how experiment becomes a response which can register harm while

⁶⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978; repr. 2000), p. 151.

simultaneously seeking moments of possibility in which a positive alternative, however compromised, can be perceived. These theoretical developments have been essential in countering reactionary critiques of experimental writing which denounce the avant-garde uniformly as élitist and irrelevant. Richard Sheppard identifies the main faults in conservative critiques:

Critics writing about experimental or avant-garde twentieth-century poetry often fall into two traps. First, they can write as though experimental or difficult writing were all of a piece and deliberately obscure out of authoritarianism or élitism. J. G. Merquior, for example, claimed that modernism "generally meant obscurity, 'difficult' art and literature" and that this "threw the modern artist, willy-nilly, into a strongly authoritarian position" such that modernist "art was experienced as a *tyranny of the creative imagination* over the public, even the cultivated one." Second, by focusing on the very obviously experimental surface of modernist poetry, they can easily forget that the "anxious attempts" of modernist work to deal with incoherence do not simply derive from "a failure of will, or élitist hauteur," but are "the marks of actual struggles over meaning."⁶⁶

We need to understand the domestic surreal as both emerging from and responding to anxieties about the experience of modernity and the imposition of consensus and 'reality'. Sheppard's work on the relationship between modernism, modernity and postmodernism focuses on Dada as the link between these different concepts and acknowledges Christopher Middleton's 'pioneering' criticism of the avant-garde,⁶⁷ thus making the link between historical and contemporary experimental work. A further benefit of Sheppard's theoretically fluent criticism is that it places great emphasis on the heterogeneity of

⁶⁶ Sheppard, *Modernism - Dada - Postmodernism*, p. 102.

⁶⁷ Sheppard, *Modernism - Dada - Postmodernism*, p. 236.

modernism, rejecting reductive accounts which seek to impose uniform procedural definitions and linear models in favour of a broad perspective which even reveals elements of pre-modernist styles in modernist writing. This acts as a corrective to Lyotard and Bürger's tendency to see realism and the avant-garde as mutually exclusive (at least until the advent of the nonorganic work, in Bürger's case), and also makes us aware of the complex internal debates in modernist art:

While many modernist experimenters felt that the old linguistic certainties had evaporated, they were simultaneously attached to what appeared to have evaporated or been discarded. As a result, much early modernist writing is informed by the (relatively invisible) desire to hold on to the presuppositions of Realism and Naturalism (according to which language was capable of grasping and mastering the external world) or Symbolism (according to which poets could redeem language from its deformation by convention and turn it into a vessel in which to preserve a sense of the transcendent). But equally, much early modernist writing is informed by the (more visible) awareness that both these projects had become or were becoming impossible.⁶⁸

The domestic surreal, equally, registers social pressures through a realism of observation even as it disrupts stable perspectives on reality using idiosyncratic and surreal visual imagery. The work of Ashbery and Frank O'Hara is marked more particularly by the anxieties facing gay men in postwar America, while Roy Fisher's poetry deals with attempts to shape the urban environment of working-class Britain. Christopher Middleton's writing investigates how poetry can work as an alternative to abstract critique of the barbarism of capitalist

⁶⁸ Sheppard, *Modernism - Dada - Postmodernism*, p. 103.

society. Ash's poetry reveals how the dream of an alternative way of life is commodified by the tourist industry. Peter Didsbury explores the complex interpenetration of communal custom and individual practice, expressing the need for a mode of belonging which protects difference. Ian McMillan portrays the breakdown in communication experienced in a community facing economic decline and dispossession.

It has been necessary to go into detail about the relationship between experiment and modernity because relatively little ground work has been done in previous accounts of British poetry. It is ironic, having given an outline of the discourse theory of Habermas, to have to observe that the conditions for even minimal critical consensus on the terms of debate about experimental poetry in Britain are currently absent. This problem undermines both Ian Gregson and David Kennedy's accounts of British postmodernism, as I must now demonstrate, before finishing with an explanation of the methodology I have adopted in this thesis and an outline of the chapters that follow.

The Idea of British Postmodernism

In *New Relations: the Refashioning of British Poetry 1980-94*, David Kennedy responds to an article by Ian Gregson which had suggested that Ash and McMillan's 'powerful social awareness and sense of place' were due to a 'characteristically British refusal totally to eschew realism' by providing an

outline of 'a poetic that assumes a healthy scepticism about postmodernism itself and a wide degree of selectivity about the practices it involves'.⁶⁹ Later the same year, Gregson's own account of 'British postmodernism' appeared in his book *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism : Dialogue and Estrangement*, where Peter Ackroyd's work is discussed alongside that of the three poets already mentioned.⁷⁰

The first thing to note in reading these accounts side by side is that postmodernism is regarded as a specific style among other styles available in the same historical moment. Both books are presented as overviews of recent developments in British poetry, among which postmodernism is counted and duly accorded one chapter. The relevant section in *New Relations* is entitled "'Just the Facts, Just the": A Rough Guide to British Postmodernism',⁷¹ while *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism* includes 'John Ashbery and British Postmodernism'.⁷² This is interesting in itself because it is already in contrast with the way in which modernism has customarily been presented, as for example in now canonical accounts such as Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane's *Modernism, 1890-1930*, the very title of which promotes the idea that there was an era of history defined by modernist style.

Indeed, the historical moment within which postmodernism is situated is

⁶⁹ Ian Gregson, Review of *The New Poetry*, *New Welsh Review*, 22: 6.2 (1993), pp. 78-80 (p. 80); David Kennedy, *New Relations: the Refashioning of British Poetry 1980-94* (Bridgend: Seren, 1996), p. 79.

⁷⁰ Ian Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism : Dialogue and Estrangement* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996).

⁷¹ Kennedy, *New Relations*, pp. 79-119.

not postmodernity, since, if it were, all the kinds of poetry discussed in these books would be read in that context. In fact, postmodernity is only really discussed in the chapters relating to postmodernism, and in Gregson's book the distinction is barely made. *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism* contains little concerning the definition of its central term, and the introduction to the book is instead taken up with a questionable division of contemporary poetry into 'modernist' and 'mainstream'⁷³ styles, the proponents of which are then renamed 'estrangement poets' and 'dialogic poets' respectively,⁷⁴ although the author happily concedes that these terms 'are not mutually exclusive'.⁷⁵

Gregson does eventually acknowledge the critical writing of postmodernism when he asserts the influence of 'recent French thinking' on Ashbery in the chapter entitled 'John Ashbery and British Postmodernism', which seeks to contrast that poet 'and his American followers' from the 'less thoroughly postmodernist' British writers, but here also we encounter problems. The repeated references to a critical-geographical map of clearly demarcated national traditions demands further elucidation, which it does not receive. The assertion of a lesser impact of 'French thought' on Ash is misleading, as I will demonstrate in Chapter Five, and in any case the claim that Ashbery has read and absorbed the work in question is unsupported. This is particularly important because when Gregson finally quotes from a postmodernist

⁷² Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism*, pp. 209-237.

⁷³ Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism*, p. 1.

⁷⁴ Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism*, p. 10.

⁷⁵ Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism*, p. 9.

theoretical text, it is Lyotard's essay 'Answering the question: What is Postmodernism?',⁷⁶ which is a polemical text written in defence of avant-garde work. It is of a crucially different nature to the now canonical account of postmodernity offered by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*. When Lyotard refers to 'the postmodern' in 'What is Postmodernism?', he is militating for radical art practice, whereas in *The Postmodern Condition*, he is concerned with a somewhat different phenomenon:

I have decided to use the word *postmodern* [...] It designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts.⁷⁷

To say that Lyotard's polemic has had an impact on Ashbery's work would suggest that Ashbery is operative within the context of a postmodernist avant-garde. Ashbery's own statement on the avant-garde, to which Gregson makes no reference, reveals no sense of a coherent movement taking up positions according to prior critical work, but gives the impression, rather, of solitary experimental activity involving a heuristic approach for which Jackson Pollock is seen as the exemplar:

In 1950 there was no sure proof of the existence of the avant-garde. To experiment was to have the feeling that one was poised on some outermost brink [...] It must often have occurred to Pollock that there was just a possibility that he wasn't an artist after all, that he had spent his life "toiling up the wrong road to art" as Flaubert said of Zola. But this very

⁷⁶ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, pp. 71-82.

⁷⁷ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiii.

real possibility is paradoxically just what makes the tremendous excitement in his work. It is a gamble against terrific odds.⁷⁸

This passage is strongly reminiscent of Frank O'Hara's description of experimental work in the poem 'Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul':

It is good to be several floors up in the dead of night
wondering whether you are any good or not
and the only decision you can make is that you did it

This suggests that Ashbery's understanding of what experimental art involves predates postmodernist theory and also differs from the notion of the modernist avant-garde on which Lyotard bases his idea of a postmodernist successor in 'What is Postmodernism?' When John Shoptaw compared Ashbery's poem 'Litany' with Jacques Derrida's book *Glas*, he was careful to point out that Ashbery had not read Derrida and that 'Litany' could not be regarded as a versification of the philosopher's thought, but he also quoted Ashbery as suggesting that 'it is probably not a coincidence that we've been addressing ourselves to similar problems and that these sorts of things tend to happen simultaneously in history from certain causes'.⁷⁹ However, Gregson gives the impression of a coherent ideological movement rather than a range of dialectical responses to a given historical condition.

⁷⁸ Ashbery, 'The Invisible Avant-Garde', *Reported Sightings*, pp. 389-395 (pp. 390-391).

⁷⁹ Quoted in John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 229. Gregson makes no reference to this book or any other critical work on Ashbery during the course of his chapter.

In contrast, Kennedy devotes the first part of his chapter on postmodernism to an interrogation of the term which draws on major critical accounts by Lyotard, David Harvey, Linda Hutcheon and others. He also makes a distinction between the condition of postmodernity and postmodernist critique. However, in doing so, he misrepresents Lyotard in two ways, firstly in his characterisation of postmodernity:

It is important to understand the essential condition of postmodernity as the sense of an ending of what Lyotard calls the "master Narratives" or "grand Narratives" of our culture and society. These "master Narratives" take on any number of forms: they may be traditional poetic forms, models of class and gender, ideas of nation or theories of economic practice.⁸⁰

Leaving aside how quickly an 'essential condition' becomes merely a 'sense', these are not the 'master Narratives' to which Lyotard refers in *The Postmodern Condition*, as I have already demonstrated. The proliferation of narratives leads to incoherence in the section of the chapter entitled 'Master narratives: English narratives', where the post-war consensus, History, and the Romantic poets are described as narratives. In fact, Lyotard replaces the notion of a post-war consensus with that of a period starting in the Depression and ending in the rise of consumer capitalism: this period had marked liberal capitalism's 'retreat under the protection of Keynesianism during the period 1930-1960'.⁸¹ In this analysis, the era of consensus represented a temporary delay before the collapse of grand narratives in the postmodern era. The abstract notion of History,

⁸⁰ Kennedy, *New Relations*, p. 80.

meanwhile, would form part of the 'Hegelian speculative narrative': Romanticism would be variously an emanation of the speculative narrative or the narrative of emancipation.

None of these three examples, however, would in itself be a grand narrative. This undermines Kennedy's attempt to establish Ash, Didsbury and McMillan as postmodernist in relation to them. The second misrepresentation of Lyotard does further damage in this respect. In one passage, Kennedy seeks to establish 'the precise nature of the relation between postmodernism and modernism':

Lyotard writes in 'Note on the Meaning of "Post-"' that "We know that in the domain of art, for example, or more precisely in the visual and plastic arts, the dominant view today is that the great movement of the avant-garde is over and done with. It has, as it were, become the done thing to indulge or deride the avant-garde – to regard them as the expression of an outdated modernity". For Lyotard, modernity is "outdated" because it represents the final episode in the 'master narrative' of the belief in humanising progress which may be traced back to the Enlightenment. "The great movement of the avant-garde" is similarly outdated because it represents the culmination of art as critique or, in Lyotard's words, "a long, obstinate, and highly responsible work concerned with investigating the assumptions implicit in modernity".⁸²

Kennedy interprets Lyotard as subscribing to this 'dominant view' when it is clear that he is opposed to it. Furthermore, 'modernity' has now inexplicably become the 'final episode' in one of the 'master narratives' that defined it. Kennedy rejects the 'dominant view' and uses his misrepresentation of Lyotard

⁸¹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 38.

⁸² Kennedy, *New Relations*, p. 84.

to herald an independent British postmodernism which sets itself in opposition to 'the more apocalyptic claims made on behalf of postmodernist theory' by virtue of its renewal of commitment to 'social and political critique'. But that critique was never lost – at least, not to Lyotard's notional postmodernist avant-garde. Once more, the distinguishing features of British postmodernism are in doubt.

The problematic presentation of postmodern culture and theory in Gregson and Kennedy's work cannot leave their empirical analyses of Ash *et al* undisturbed. My concerns are not peripheral, though they may seem to concern very specific details of these presentations: they arise from my conviction that the perceived need for a specifically British postmodernism is evidence in itself of the extent to which these books remain bound by the terms of the 'dominant [anti-modernist] view' from which they struggle to distinguish themselves. What we are seeing in these books is the domestication of a phenomenon which is considered to be alien, and this is why distortions inevitably arise: not as a result of mere incompetence, but rather as a consequence of the attempted translation of radical culture into terms acceptable to a conservative critical orthodoxy. For however we theorise the extent of postmodernism's radicality, it is connected to the culture of experiment in art which has developed during the course of the nineteenth, twentieth and now twenty-first centuries, as both Gregson and Kennedy recognise. The dispute over the nature, limits and legitimacy of experiment has taken a unique shape in the critical reception of

poetry, particularly but not exclusively in Britain, and there is a detectable unease relating to that dispute in both *New Relations* and *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism*, making both books seem like apologies for their subject, as I will now demonstrate.

As I have already mentioned, Gregson begins by dividing contemporary poetry into two categories, 'mainstream' and 'modernist': the latter at this point in his argument comprises both modernism proper and postmodernism, as well as 'retro-modernism', the term he coins to describe the work of Roy Fisher, Christopher Middleton and Edwin Morgan.⁸³ The coinage is only briefly explained as 'referring to the extent to which [Fisher, Middleton and Morgan] owe their most important allegiance to the classic modernism of the 1920s, to the generation of Eliot, Pound, Williams and Joyce, born about forty years before them'.⁸⁴ In his introduction, Gregson states his intention to correct 'the neglect which has been suffered by [these] three senior poets', the origin of which he finds in the early nineteen-sixties:

Unfortunately for [the 'retro-modernists'] that was a period of exceptional narrowness in the outlook of those in charge of the commanding heights of the poetic economy. In particular, a powerful prejudice was operating - thanks to the realist legacy of the Movement - against the Modernist tradition to which all three owed allegiance.⁸⁵

But in referring to these poets pejoratively as 'retro-modernists', Gregson has already ceded ground to the 'prejudice' which dictated that modernism was

⁸³ Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism*, p. 1.

finished. To characterise something as 'retro', after all, is to imply nostalgia or the revival of something from the past. Only in the late twentieth century have decades become generations in the way that Gregson's '1920s' modernism implies. The *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* has it that 'the average length of time in which children become ready to take the place of their parents' is 'usu[ally] reckoned at about thirty years'. In discussing the relationship between Pound and Middleton, for example, we would then essentially be moving between two successive generations, which would suggest continuity rather than revival. This is certainly the understanding according to which Neil Corcoran describes the work of Middleton, Fisher, and J. H. Prynne as 'neo-Modern'. Corcoran develops this term from previous critical work by Frank Kermode and Alan Young, and outlines 'three essential characteristics' of the poets to whom it refers:

A turning against what these poets read as a played-out native humanist or empiricist tradition; a deliberate indebtedness to the work (poetic, critical and aesthetic) of Ezra Pound and, through him, of an American writing whose central figure is Charles Olson; and a readiness for an exploratory or experimental formal inventiveness not common in post-war British poetry.⁸⁶

Gregson makes no reference to this prior account of continuities between pre-war and post-war poetry, despite the fact that it offers a clear context for experimental work following on from modernism, and avoids a simple and

⁸⁴ Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism*, p. 127.

⁸⁵ Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism*, p. 1.

⁸⁶ Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry since 1940* (Harlow: Longman, 1993), p. 164.

reductive linear model whereby modernism is succeeded by postmodernism: different kinds of experimental art practice exist concurrently.

Gregson's treatment of 'retro-modernism' fails to address this issue, as does his account of Ashbery's postmodernism. In 'John Ashbery and British Postmodernism', Gregson protests against the idea 'that there is something unBritish about non-realist ways of writing',⁸⁷ despite having previously predicated the existence of native postmodernism on a 'characteristically British refusal totally to eschew realism'.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, he goes on to accept that the most important models for non-realist writing are foreign to Britain, and then rejects the case for any consideration of those models:

Ashbery himself is most accurately seen as a late manifestation of a kind of profoundly sceptical modernism whose most important roots are in French post-symbolism. But it is undoubtedly the case that this provenance has powerful links with those of Morgan, Fisher and Middleton, and to try to disentangle all these interpenetrating roots would be a futile exercise.⁸⁹

In this passage, Gregson refutes his own characterisation of Ashbery as paradigm of the postmodernist poet and gestures towards a large area of scholarly enquiry only to dismiss it as 'futile'. In the light of this contradiction, it is surely impossible to determine the extent to which Ashbery's influence on younger British poets is seen as an isolable effect, and later in the chapter the critic admits his own uncertainty on this point:

⁸⁷ Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism*, p. 215.

⁸⁸ See footnote 69.

⁸⁹ Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism*, p. 215.

Even as I have tried to focus on Ashbery's influence on these British poets I have discovered other influences at work – Reverdy and Cendrars on Ash, the novel on Ackroyd, Middleton on Didsbury. Moreover, what is impossible to determine is the extent to which what looks like the influence of Ashbery is actually the direct influence of earlier poets who were also influential in making Ashbery the poet that he is.⁹⁰

Again, Gregson is forced into making claims about the 'French' tradition which the terms of his chapter do not allow him to justify. This results in a confusing attempt to distinguish between Ashbery's 'attitude of thorough detachment', which apparently emerges from a tradition of 'non-realism', and Ash's 'attachment' to 'things French'. This argument is never fully developed. In Gregson's criticism, French literature and philosophy could almost be characterised as repressed elements in a Freudian sense, so insistent is the pattern of their return and rejection. In his next book, which is ostensibly taken up with portrayals of masculinity in postwar poetry, a section on Frank O'Hara's 'deployment of camp' becomes a meditation on the American poet's debt to Pierre Reverdy, which concludes by insisting that despite this influence the two poets display a 'very different' understanding of the rôle of the ego.⁹¹

The lack of a coherent account of the diachronic and international aspects of experimental poetry in either book is compounded by the insufficient attention given to synchronic developments. Elsewhere in *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism* Gregson refers to a 'group' of poets 'outside' the 'mainstream' 'which has achieved more cohesion than most', namely 'the poets anthologised

⁹⁰ Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism*, p. 225.

in *A Various Art* and in the section of *the new british poetry* [sic] headed "A Treacherous Assault On British Poetry" – most prominently J. H. Prynne, Andrew Crozier, Douglas Oliver, and Iain Sinclair'.⁹² But the only evidence given in support of this 'cohesion' is the appearance of the anthologies themselves. Gregson makes no independent assessment of the field of writing from which these anthologies select, nor do his analyses of the poets named make reference either to the original collections in which their poems appeared or to the critical work already available on those poems. After a brief consideration of Prynne and Crozier which asserts the influence on their work of 'Jakobson, Freud, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Lacan', Gregson announces his intention to devote the rest of the chapter to the poetry of Veronica Forrest-Thompson and Denise Riley:

I have to own up to my own inability to read the work of most of [the poets featured in *A Various Art*] in any sustained way. I want to believe in a poetry that could absorb these influences and still be as exciting and moving as I find the poems of Wordsworth, Browning, Eliot – and also that of Pound and Williams. But in fact it is only the work of two women poets associated with this group – Veronica Forrest-Thompson and Denise Riley – that I respond to in this way because it is as intelligent as that of Crozier, Prynne *et al* but less concerned to keep reminding the reader of that intelligence.⁹³

The admission of incompetence might be thought to subvert the purpose of a

⁹¹ Gregson, *The Male Image: Representations of Masculinity in Postwar Poetry* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 168-173 (p. 173).

⁹² Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism*, p. 192; Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville, eds., *A Various Art* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987); Gillian Allnutt and others, eds., *The New British Poetry 1968-88* (London: Paladin, 1988).

⁹³ Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism*, p. 195.

book that announces itself to be an overview of contemporary poetry: the subsequent shift from a critical position to one governed by personal aesthetics is an unintentional but instructive demonstration of Lyotard's idea of incompatible legitimating narratives. On the one hand, the title of *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism* implies a speculative ambition to contribute to the impersonal progress of knowledge, while on the other, the author's recourse to personal preference reveals the book to be part of the process of his self-development.

Kennedy's work is less concerned with matters of influence, but like Gregson, he suggests that Ash, Didsbury and McMillan are writing in the aftermath of an exclusion of experiment. Whereas Gregson traces this to an orthodoxy imposed by the Movement, Kennedy theorises a model of the 'inherited British poem' which is not attributable to any particular cause:

A poem may be empirical but it cannot be phenomenological and if a poem must always be valued by how 'real' it is, this leaves little room for experiment, play and pleasure.⁹⁴

In his reference to empirical poetry, Kennedy may be alluding to Andrew Crozier's essay 'Thrills and frills: poetry as figures of empirical lyricism',⁹⁵ but the essay is not discussed. The dichotomy here between the 'real' and the experimental is assumed but never established, and would have benefited from reference to Richard Sheppard's work. There is also a hesitation over the true

⁹⁴ Kennedy, *New Relations*, p. 88.

⁹⁵ Andrew Crozier, 'Thrills and frills: poetry as figures of empirical lyricism', *Society and Literature 1945 - 1970*, ed. Alan Sinfield (London: Methuen, 1983), pp. 199-233.

critical value of the 'real', which earlier in the chapter represented a virtue and which now constitutes an inhibition.

Later, Kennedy contrasts Ashbery's poetry of 'élite and impenetrable masque' with British postmodernism's association with 'wider currents of 'populism' and 'democratization' in British poetry'.⁹⁶ While these currents are presumed to be immediately coherent to the reader and of positive value, the closing chapter of *New Relations* is markedly more critical in attitude, revealing Kennedy to be sensitive to just the unease which I have found to underpin his and Gregson's work. Kennedy perceives this unease at the heart of the 'dominant order' of new poetry:

This order dictates safety and comfort, a place where 'innovation' is to be contained within the frame of 'accessibility'; or as one reviewer of *The New Poetry* (1993) put it "... surely the myth of modernism, progressivism, and the perpetual avant-garde was laid to rest years ago?". The tentative, almost anxious phrasing of the question signals that it engages with a number of uncomfortable truths [...] His rhetorical flourish inscribes both a wish that poetry would stop being 'difficult' and a corresponding awareness that, try as we might, we can't stop it being so.⁹⁷

I began this introduction by saying that experimental poetry had repeatedly been seen to be at an end only to begin again. The debate on postmodernism in poetry is in a sense only the latest recurrence of this phenomenon. Some critics, like the reviewer quoted by Kennedy, have proceeded as if to deny the 'legitimizing narrative' of avant-garde work were automatically to render

⁹⁶ Kennedy, *New Relations*, p. 118.

⁹⁷ Kennedy, *New Relations*, p. 250.

contemporary experiment invalid. The paradox of this kind of criticism is that it claims to attack 'progressivism' only to declare, self-defeatingly, that we have progressed beyond such an idea. Thus, Mutlu Konuk Blasing excuses herself from the responsibility of actually reading any of the disparate writers known as 'Language poets' by consigning them to the 'late-modern' past on the basis of a reading of Charles Bernstein's poetic theory,⁹⁸ while Thomas Travisano seeks to build on Jerome Mazzaro's research into Randall Jarrell's use of the word 'postmodern' while similarly excusing himself from a consideration of avant-garde work.⁹⁹

Poets such as Lowell, Jarrell, Bishop, and Berryman, though persistently innovative in matters of form and content, resisted inscribing themselves within particular theoretical models or popular myths of innovation or recovery – myths that remain fundamental to a theory of the avant-garde – and in doing so each remained at the service of the particular poem he or she was then trying to write.¹⁰⁰

It is not clear how a failure to account specifically for one's understanding of innovation can be regarded as inherently superior to inscription 'within particular theoretical models'. Moreover, Travisano places value on understanding of the 'particular poem', but denies any such privilege to experimental poetry, and, in a footnote to this paragraph, cites Peter Bürger's *Theory of the avant-garde* in support of this exclusion. Blasing, too, refers to

⁹⁸ Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry: O'Hara, Bishop, Ashbery, and Merrill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 26.

⁹⁹ See Jerome Mazzaro, *Postmodern American Poetry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980).

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Travisano, *Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman, and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), p. 9.

Bürger, but both critics make use of his ideas disingenuously, since neither investigates whether his dialectical theory is actually compatible with their wider arguments. Travisano's rejection of 'theoretical models' in favour of 'particular poems' depends on the assumption that theory distorts or impedes practice rather than informing it: although this rejection is made in the context of a defence of a supposedly atheoretical artistic practice, it has ineluctable consequences for his critical approach. The anti-theoretical view is clearly refuted during the course of Bürger's defence of the dialectical tradition:

The commonly held view that one need only look closely to grasp the peculiarity of poetic texts [...] does not take into account that this "looking" already rests on certain assumptions [...] The immediacy of the glance that believes it is focusing on phenomena is self-deception.¹⁰¹

Furthermore, the attempt made by critics like Blasing to dismiss experiment as simply anachronistic cannot seek aid from Bürger's critique, since *Theory of the avant-garde* is punctuated by warnings against this simplistic and undialectical position:

The impression might be created that the avant-garde movements have no decisive significance for the further development of art in bourgeois society. The opposite is the case. Although the political intentions of the avant-garde movements [...] were never realized, their impact in the realm of art can hardly be overestimated.¹⁰²

The concept of an 'end' to experiment should be viewed as part of a wider

¹⁰¹ Bürger, *Theory of the avant-garde*, p. lv.

¹⁰² Bürger, *Theory of the avant-garde*, p. p. 59.

ideological project, as should the 'order' which enforces 'accessibility' as the criterion of contemporary writing. Inasmuch as such an elusive and ideological value as 'accessibility' may be theorised, it would be as a form of consensus, since it imposes a notional level of permissible difficulty beyond which any 'move' is unacceptable. Those who declare an end to experiment do so in the interests of social and aesthetic consensus: if we are to give experimental poetry a sympathetic hearing, we need to evolve alternative terms in order to avoid reducing this poetry to the terms of that consensus. I will now explain the methodology I have adopted as a result of these considerations.

My method is comparative: I treat each poet's collected work as an evolving system of meaning where each poem signifies in and of itself while simultaneously contributing to a more sustained argument, and I examine specific engagements with prior poems as they occur in particular works. The large amount of primary material has obliged me regretfully to limit the extent of my readings of the older poets. I have chosen to conclude my accounts of their work at the point where the younger poets have started to publish, in the 1980s. The three surviving older poets (O'Hara died in 1966) all published retrospective selections during this time, helping to confirm that this was a reasonable point at which to stop. Ashbery's *Selected Poems* (1986), Fisher's *Poems 1955-1980* (1980), and Middleton's *111 Poems* (1983) define the period of their work covered in this thesis, but I have not restricted myself to their selections within that period. In the case of Ashbery and Fisher, my imposed

limit precedes the publication of a major long poem: in my defence, I would say that Fisher's *A Furnace* (1986) and Ashbery's *Flow Chart* (1991) are significant departures which would require considerably more space. Furthermore, in Chapter Three I explain why I think *A Furnace* represents Fisher's move away from the domestic surreal.

Considerations of space have also affected my treatment of the experimental tradition. To trace the development of 'exigent poetry' in the work of Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Jarry, Reverdy, Apollinaire and Breton would constitute a book in itself. Instead, I take up the work of these poets in the specific instances where its influence can be registered in the poetry of the domestic surreal. As Peter Bürger has said, 'precursors can always only be identified after the fact'.¹⁰³ The imaginative tradition I have identified is constituted in and by the poetry which responds to it. Although I prefer the idea of influence to that of intertextuality, I reject Harold Bloom's individualist theory, which seeks to identify 'strong poets' in agonistic struggle with 'strong precursors',¹⁰⁴ thus allowing the remarkably francophobic Bloom to read John Ashbery's 'Fragment' exclusively in terms of the poetry of Wallace Stevens when it is clear from all available scholarship that in form and imagery the poem is indebted to French models.¹⁰⁵

However, I have chosen to write separate chapters on each poet rather

¹⁰³ Bürger, p. 115

¹⁰⁴ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 5.

than a thematically organised survey. I have done so in order to emphasise what Richard Sheppard calls 'heterogeneity of response', thus avoiding the risk of reducing the domestic surreal to a reductive schema. Since these poets valorise eccentric perspective, it would be contradictory to organise my readings in terms of a systematic poetics, and the emphasis on close reading throughout is intended to respect the specificity of each *œuvre*. This is also my intention in offering particular historical contexts within the chapters, rather than establishing one dominant narrative in this introduction, especially since in any case I regard the poetry as a response to a fundamental historical condition which I have outlined here.

Thus, in Chapter One I combine a historical account of the political discourse of homophobia in postwar America with an analysis of John Ashbery's writing on the Surrealist movement in order to suggest that his 'logic of strange position' is a poetic attempt to find a place for the alien within a repressive social order. In Chapter Two, I demonstrate the relation between Frank O'Hara's poetic treatment of New York and the experimental tradition of writing on Paris in order to demonstrate the extent to which O'Hara's poetry is a dialectical response to everyday life in an urban environment. Chapter Three examines Roy Fisher's exploration of the effects of the postwar settlement on urban space and his development of an idiosyncratic vision similar to that of Benjamin. The interplay between Christopher Middleton's critical articulation of the 'eccentric'

¹⁰⁵ For example: 'The French have never valued originality'. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. xv.

perspective and his poetic critique of everyday life forms the subject of Chapter Four. In Chapter Five, I demonstrate John Ash's engagement with a tradition which invents alternative realities and his critical awareness of the commodification of this process by the tourist industry. Chapter Six concerns Peter Didsbury's playful unmaking of the categories of individual and communal practice and the making strange of familiar places and quotidian time frames. Chapter Seven examines Ian McMillan's everyday surrealism and its relation to the experience of damage and decline in the mining communities of Yorkshire. In my conclusion, I will make general remarks about the nature of the domestic surreal and offer my understanding of its place in future surveys of postmodernism. I maintain that without specific examination of tendencies in writing such as the domestic surreal, those surveys will lack the detail, the international perspective and historical scope necessary for a full understanding of postwar British and American poetry.

Chapter I

'LOGIC OF STRANGE POSITION': THE POETRY OF JOHN ASHBERY

I once interviewed the poet Henri Michaux, who said that, though he did not think of himself as a Surrealist, Surrealism had been the chief influence on him as a writer because it gave him the permission (*la grande permission* was his phrase) to do as he pleased. In this sense we are all indebted to Surrealism; the significant art of our time could not have been produced without it.¹

All beauty, resonance, integrity,
Exist by deprivation or logic
Of strange position.

('Le livre est sur la table')

The word 'strange' is derived from the Latin *extraneus*, describing something 'foreign to the object to which it is attached or which contains it', according to the *OED*: thus, even before one considers the foreign influences on John Ashbery's work, his poetry is demonstrably taken up with the notion of the foreign as it occurs within one language. Recognising this allows us to appreciate the extent to which Ashbery's poetry is an exploration of how any given system accommodates its diverse elements, and how the strange is construed. It may be celebrated as the source of beauty, as in 'Le Livre est sur la table'. It may also be seen as threateningly alien, as in some other poems I will examine in this chapter. Ashbery's poetry seeks 'permission' to be strange: it is not simply an unbridled display of irrationality, as the presence of the word

'logic' makes clear. It is calculated, rather than automatic, and we must note that Ashbery has described 'the finest writing of the Surrealists' as 'the product of the conscious and the unconscious working hand in hand'.² There is a desire to liberate ideas and phenomena from their fixed allegiances and referents, but there is no illusion that this is undertaken in the name of a purified language: 'Everybody knows Mallarmé's dictum about purifying the language of the tribe. In my case I don't feel it needs purifying. I try to encourage it.'³ Ashbery's poetry participates in what Daniel Cottom calls 'the anomia that is our condition in everyday speech'⁴ and in fact absorbs 'purified' or specialist discourses back into an erratic performance of the highly literary and lowly demotic. The dexterity of these negotiations can be traced even in the title of the poem quoted in my epigraph, which acts at once as a positioning (of a book on a table) and a parodic example of the foreign as it is received and recognised through the medium of the phrase book. Further, it also helps to situate Ashbery in an American literary tradition, recalling Stevens's habit of using French phrases as titles. Already the coexistence of the foreign and the familiar is in play on different levels here.

If these games seem removed from everyday life, it is worth examining a different aspect of the poet's 'position' in American society in order to grasp

¹ Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, pp. 6-7.

² *Reported Sightings*, p. 6.

³ Quoted in Robert Crawford, *Identifying Poets: Self and Territory in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), p. 112.

⁴ Daniel Cottom, "'Getting It": Ashbery and the Avant-Garde of Everyday Language', *Sub-Stance; A Review of Theory and Literary Criticism*, 23/1 (1994), pp. 3-23 (p. 18).

some of the political resonance of his early work. Ashbery has described the climate of America in the 1950s, the decade in which he achieved poetic maturity and had his first collection, *Some Trees*, published:

In the early 50's, I went through a period of intense depression and doubt. I couldn't write for a couple of years. I don't know why. It did coincide with the beginnings of the Korean War, the Rosenberg case and McCarthyism. Though I was not an intensely political person, it was impossible to be happy in that kind of climate. It was a nadir.⁵

Having gone on government record as a homosexual so as to escape the draft for the Korean War, Ashbery confesses to having been 'afraid that we'd all be sent to concentration camps if McCarthy had his own way. It was a very dangerous and scary period'.⁶ This fear was by no means unfounded, for the McCarran (Internal Security) Act of 1950 had authorised the government to set up 'concentration camps' in emergency situations to deal with the perceived Communist threat,⁷ and in the eyes of government and public, homosexuality and Communism were often linked: in 1950, the Republican minority floor leader Kenneth W. Wherry urged Congress to 'get rid of the alien-minded radicals and moral perverts in this administration',⁸ while the historian David Cauter notes that '[a] newsletter sent to seven thousand party workers by Republican National Committee chairman Guy G. Gabrielson accused the

⁵ Quoted in John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out*, p. 5.

⁶ Shoptaw, p. 5.

⁷ See Cedric Belfrage, *The American Inquisition 1945 - 1960: A Profile of the "McCarthy Era"* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973; repr. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1989), p. xii.

⁸ Quoted in David Cauter, *The Great Fear, The Anti - Communist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1978), p. 36.

government of covering up for traitors, subversives and sexual perverts'.⁹ A memorandum to President Truman from White House staff, July 11 1950, suggested that 'the country is more concerned about the charges of homosexuals in the Government than about Communists'¹⁰.

John D'Emilio argues that the McCarthyite situation actually helped to create the American gay community:

Homosexuals and lesbians found themselves under virulent attack: purges from the armed forces; congressional investigations into government employment of "perverts"; disbarment from federal jobs; widespread FBI surveillance; state sexual psychopath laws; stepped-up harassment from urban police forces; and inflammatory headlines warning readers of the sex "deviates" in their midst. The tightening web of oppression in McCarthy's America helped to create the minority it was meant to isolate.¹¹

But what of the communities that sponsored this 'web of oppression'? Cate includes in a profile of the electoral constituency that voted McCarthyites into power 'large numbers of people who distrusted the Ivy League, New York, liberals, homosexuals and Britain,'¹² (as a Harvard-educated gay poet living in New York, Ashbery fails on many counts here). This absurd list might have come straight from Ashbery's *The Vermont Notebook*, where words are listed seemingly without fidelity to any one class of vocabulary:

⁹David Cate, *The Great Fear*, p. 37.

¹⁰Alan D. Harper, *The Politics Of Loyalty, The White House and the Communist Issue, 1946 - 1952* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1969), p. 166.

¹¹John D'Emilio, 'Gay Politics and Community in San Francisco Since World War II', in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. by Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey, Jr. (London: Penguin, 1989; repr. 1991), p. 459.

¹²Cate, p. 49.

Darkness, eventide, shadows, roost, perch, leaf, light, evasion, sentinel, plug, dream, mope, urchin, distress, ways, many, few, found, dreaming, unclad, season, solstice, many, before, few, undid, seam, artery, motor, before, sleep, come, mouth, asshole, behaving, foundered, sleep, reef, perfect, almost.

The suggestion of a paratactically compressed narrative is tempting in this particular case, but offers no clue to the wider organisational principle of the book, when another page sees a list of board games juxtaposed with a list of crimes including sodomy, bootlegging and impersonating an officer. *The Vermont Notebook* is Ashbery's most openly surrealist work because of its foregrounding, page by page, of the techniques of juxtaposition and associative play, and it is also one of his most explicit engagements with the idea of America, putting the *socius* back into free association, one might say, and in the process uncovering some of the more threatening aspects of its pluralism.

America and Surrealism represent potent paradoxes for a poet in Ashbery's position, for they are both sources of unprecedented freedom, constitutional or aesthetic, but their pledges of allegiance and manifestos also seek to imprison the subject within a network of responsibilities. Looking back at the prewar loyalty courts of André Breton in the context of a review of Dada and Surrealist art for *The New Republic*, Ashbery writes:

As the Surrealist movement pursued its stormy course, exclusions, anathemas and even suicide followed in the wake of Breton's rulings and pronouncements. Sexual liberty, he proclaimed, meant every conceivable kind of sexual act except for homosexuality - a notion that would have seemed odd to the Marquis de Sade, the Surrealists' unimpeachable

authority on matters sexual. This exception may seem unimportant, since homosexuality affects a relatively small fraction of humanity, but to restrict something proclaimed as "total" is to turn it into its limited opposite. And in this case one of the most brilliant of the Surrealist writers, René Crevel, happened to be a homosexual. His suicide a few days after a notorious row between Breton and Ilya Ehrenburg (who with his customary finesse had qualified the Surrealist movement as "pederastic"), at the time of an international Communist cultural congress in Paris from which the Surrealists were excluded, was a blow to Surrealism and to literature. Though Maurice Nadeau in his *History of Surrealism* avoids linking Crevel's suicide to this incident and calls it an act of "attempted affirmation" (of the irrational, apparently), it seems obvious that Crevel must have felt like an exile in the promised land he helped discover.¹³

I quote extensively from this not only because it hints at Ashbery's recognition of parallels between the 'Land of the Free' and the movement of total liberty, but also because it reveals his concern always to uncover repressed histories like that of Crevel. On a more aesthetic level, this extends to Ashbery's persistent interest in writers who are exiled in one way or another from the 'promised lands' of their time, so that he prefers proto - and renegade surrealists like Lautréamont, Roussel, Reverdy and Artaud to Breton's dogmatic, 'official' surrealism, while his recent book *Other Traditions*¹⁴ is concerned in a different sense with writers in varying states of exile: Clare and David Schubert in asylums, Beddoes, Riding and Roussel abroad, Wheelwright as a 'Marxist Christian' 'isolated [...] from the mainstream of Socialism'.¹⁵ While Ashbery is careful never to make too much of an issue of exilic states, referring in the essay on John Clare to the 'vogue for insanity, due in part to the influential writings of R. D. Laing and Michel

¹³ Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, p. 6.

¹⁴ Ashbery, *Other Traditions* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000)

Foucault',¹⁶ the attention to biographical detail throughout the book does suggest the identification of a commonality of its subjects which goes beyond purely literary terms (indeed, these six writers have little in common on the page).

A word of caution might be in order before proceeding further. There exist several gender readings of Ashbery's poetry, Shoptaw's being the most rigorous and developed, but it is not my intention here to argue that the poetry originates solely in issues of sexuality, as Shoptaw and more recently Ian Gregson have done.¹⁷ 'Our question of a place of origin hangs / Like smoke', Ashbery once wrote, and the poems at once invite questions as to their origin even as they work towards alternative performances of meaning which are just as important. This chapter is concerned with those performances, and seeks to demonstrate how the dual movements of 'putting down' and 'leaving out' enact a struggle to find a place for the alien which will not involve its naturalisation: acceptance without assimilation. The 'logic of strange position' responds to a social order characterised both by discrimination and conformity: juxtaposition becomes a political act because it allows heterogeneous elements to coincide, while the process of 'leaving out' makes an enigma of what it leaves, disrupting the system of relations which stabilises identity. A utopian alternative can be glimpsed in Ashbery's celebration of the opacity of everyday consciousness in

¹⁵ *Other Traditions*, p. 72.

¹⁶ *Other Traditions*, p. 12.

¹⁷ See Ian Gregson, *The Male Image*.

his longer poems, which respond to what Middleton calls the 'American zigzag' with a movement between successive 'living presents' independent of any unifying principle, thus recalling the terms of Bürger's 'nonorganic work'. This chapter is attentive to both the positive and negative aspects of the condition of 'strange position'. While state homophobia and, later, the different pressures of an expatriate existence have a demonstrable effect on the poetry, there is also a playful impetus to invent poetic landscapes and an exploration of the possibilities of syntax, the most basic form of positioning in language. Both of these developments bear the mark of Ashbery's engagement with French poetry, as I will make clear. Later in the chapter, I turn to the long poems I have mentioned: I end with an examination of the poet's interest in the landscape and everyday life of America in the early 1970s.

The Politics of Strange Position

The clearest example of the politics of the logic of strange position in the early poetry is 'The Mythological Poet':

Close to the zoo, acquiescing
 To dust, candy, perverts; inserted in
 The panting forest, or openly
 Walking in the great and sullen square
 He has eloped with all music
 And does not care. For isn't there,
 He says, a final diversion, greater
 Because it can be given, a gift
 Too simple even to be despised?
 And oh beside the roaring
 Centurion of the lion's hunger

Might not child and pervert
 Join hands, in the instant
 Of their interest, in the shadow
 Of a million boats; their hunger
 From loss grown merely a gesture?

This is deliberately and mischievously threatening, playing on the traditional homophobic confusion, implicit in the use of the word 'pederast' by Ilya Ehrenburg, of homosexuality and paedophilia, and we have already seen to what extent the word 'pervert' was synonymous with 'homosexual' at the time of this poem's publication in 1956. 'The Pied Piper' also draws parallels between the poet and the threatening figure who abducts the children and whose 'love was strongest / Who never loved them at all, and his notes / Most civil, laughing not to return.' The gay poet will not return to the fold, preferring to play on stereotypes of threat in order to subvert the none too 'civil' order of the town, and in 'The Mythological Poet' too, the poet is the pied piper who 'has eloped with all music / And does not care.' His indifference is one more example of how alien he appears to the civic order of 'the great and sullen square'. The poem taunts the fearing public with flagrant innuendo ('inserted in / The panting forest [...] He has eloped with all music') and finally positions child and pervert together, the child's hunger for candy and the pervert's hunger for the child 'grown merely a gesture', a provocative moment of commonality. The final sentence of the poem is cast grammatically as a request for permission: 'might not child and pervert / Join hands', and the equivocation of that 'might not' is left unresolved, unanswered at the poem's close.

A lighter, more optimistic example of the permission to join together is offered in 'Some Trees.' Two individuals, 'you' and 'I', meet 'as far this morning / From the world as agreeing / With it', an odd and equivocal relation to have with the world which keeps it at a distance without cutting it off. No relation is simple in this poem, in fact, for how can we 'Arrang[e] by chance // To meet'? Only, perhaps, in a poem where communication is 'a still performance' achieved by trees 'merely being there'. But the unnamed lovers find in this 'mere being', which perhaps recalls the mere gesture of 'The Mythological Poet', the promise of imminent permission to be intimate: 'soon / We may touch, love, explain.' Intimacy has its own mode of communication, where the unsaid ('a silence already filled with noises') is the most meaningful and pleasurable. Omission also amplifies what is left behind: 'our days put on such reticence / These accents seem their own defense'. In Ashbery's later poetry, omission is not described but enacted, but despite its relative formal conservatism, 'Some Trees' makes clear that silence and enigma can be tokens of intimacy as well as estrangement, and this is of enduring significance for the poet's work, as we will see.

Imaginary Landscapes

In contrast to the celebration of retreat from the world in 'Some Trees', 'The Instruction Manual' offers the kitsch artifice of the poem-postcard. The jobbing writer of the instruction manual begins to dream of Guadalajara, yet

ironically the evocation of the city is no less workmanlike than a manual, or at least a holiday brochure: it proceeds dutifully from the public square with its bandstand to the flower girls, the married couple, the young lovers, and then to the church tower for a panoramic view. The language is banal rather than elevated, the simplicity of its colours suggesting an almost childlike vision: 'Each attractive in her rose-and-blue striped dress (Oh! such shades of rose and blue) [...] her shawl is rose, pink, and white [...] That church tower will do - the faded pink one, there against the fierce blue of the sky [...] There is the rich quarter, with its houses of pink and white [...] There is the poorer quarter, its homes a deep blue.' The final routine summary ('We have seen young love, married love, and the love of an aged mother for her son') brings the writer back to his instruction manual. A different kind of fidelity imprisons the poet here: it is a dreary empiricism, an obligation to dichotomies of 'here' and 'elsewhere', 'everyday' and 'exotic'. In order to represent the unseen place, one must effect a departure from the real, rooted perspective, and it is sheer boredom with this kind of structure that creates such a parody as 'The Instruction Manual', with its hilariously contrived and mechanistic departure from the real towards the city the speaker could not visit during his trip to Mexico. Geoff Ward and Marjorie Perloff see the poem as a parody of the structure of Romantic meditative lyric,¹⁸ but there is also an interesting point of reference in French Symbolist poems of departure toward the exotic. In 'Le Voyage', Baudelaire describes a child

¹⁸ See Geoff Ward, *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets*, 2nd edn (Houndmills:

'amoureux de cartes et d'estampes' (in love with maps and stamps) and exclaims 'Ah! que le monde est grand à la clarté des lampes!' (Ah! the world is so large by the light of lamps!) before announcing departure toward the unknown.¹⁹ In 'Brise marine', Mallarmé picks up on the image of the lamp when he declares:

Rien, ni les vieux jardins reflétés par les yeux
 Ne retiendra ce cœur qui dans la mer se trempe
 O nuits! ni la clarté déserte de ma lampe
 Sur le vide papier que la blancheur défend

Nothing, not the old gardens reflected in my eyes
 will hold back this heart which soaks itself in the sea
 O nights! nor the desolate light of my lamp
 on the empty paper forbidden by whiteness²⁰

The paradox is that the longing for departure, which would provide escape from the writing desk, provides the means of overcoming creative sterility ('the empty paper') and thus keeps the writer in the study. This is the melancholy fate to which Ashbery's poem is resigned, but the now routine and mechanical nature of this impulse to write and of the structure in which it results are parodied by the idea of the instruction manual.

Elsewhere in Ashbery's poetry, place is never so laboriously constructed: a desire that the seen and the unseen should be juxtaposed on a single plane results instead in a phenomenological sense of space. What will be carried forward from 'The Instruction Manual' however is the mode of digression, a

Palgrave, 2001), p. 101-104, and Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 263-265.

¹⁹ Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. by Michel Jamet (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1980), p. 96.

²⁰ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Poésies* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), p. 40.

permitted departure from the subject to which one was supposed to have committed oneself. In Ashbery's later poems, there is no return, but only further digression, the most widely quoted example being 'The Pursuit of Happiness' from *Shadow Train*, which identifies the digressive mode as Ashbery's own declaration of independence:

It came about that there was no way of passing
Between the twin partitions that presented
A unified façade, that of a suburban shopping mall
In April. One turned, as one does, to other interests

Such as the tides in the Bay of Fundy. Meanwhile [...]

Ashbery is rarely as direct as in 'The Mythological Poet' or 'The Instruction Manual'. 'Two Scenes', is more typical in its refusal to provide a 'context that relates "a" to "b"', as Marjorie Perloff puts it.²¹ Statements succeed one another without seeming to build up: they remain discrete utterances, and this is emphasised by the capital letters that begin each line (a feature of Ashbery's poems in many subsequent collections). The poem promises imminent understanding from its self-defeating opening 'We see us as we truly behave' (when behaviour is normally what conceals rather than what is concealed) to the more teasing close of the second section: 'As laughing cadets say, "In the evening / Everything has a schedule, if you can find out what it is"'; yet the schedule remains unfound, forcing us back on the numinous landscape

²¹ Marjorie Perloff, 'Poetry 1956: A Step Away From Them' at <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/perloff/1956.html>

of the 'canal machinery'. Geoff Ward identifies this poem as an example of what Auden saw as Ashbery's inheritance from Rimbaud: 'that, in childhood largely, in dreams and day-dreams entirely, the imaginative life of the human individual stubbornly continues to live by the old magical notions',²² and indeed the availability of any detail for landscape, real or imagined, is Rimbaud's answer to the longing to depart which we have seen in Symbolist poetry:

Depuis longtemps je me vantais de posséder tous les paysages possibles, et trouvais dérisoires les célébrités de la peinture et de la poésie moderne.

J'aimais les peintures idiotes, dessus de portes, décors, toiles de saltimbanques, enseignes, enluminures populaires; la littérature démodée, latin d'église, livres érotiques sans orthographe, romans de nos aïeules, contes de fées, petits livres de l'enfance, opéras vieux, refrains niais, rythmes naïfs.²³

For a long time I wanted to possess all possible landscapes, and found the celebrities of painting and modern poetry to be derisory.

I loved dumb paintings, decorated lintels, interior decor, the trampolines of acrobats, shop signs, popular illuminations; unfashionable literature, church latin, erotic books with misspellings, granny novels, fairy tales, little books from childhood, old operas, inane refrains, naïve rhythms.

Here, in 'Alchimie du Verbe', Rimbaud looked back on the poetry he was soon to abandon and listed its heterodox sources. His poem 'Enfance' ('Childhood'), from *Illuminations*, foreshadows the enclosed landscapes of 'Two Scenes' and other surreal poems such as 'A Boy', and like them it draws on sources that may be autobiographical or literary, pictorial or architectural:

accessed on Wednesday, 24th October, 2001, at 5:00.

²² Quoted in Ward, *Statutes of Liberty*, p. 97.

C'est elle, la petite morte, derrière les rosiers. - La jeune maman trépassée descend le perron. - La calèche du cousin crie sur le sable. - Le petit frère (il est aux Indes!) là, devant le couchant, sur le pré des œillets. - Les vieux qu'on a enterrés tout droits dans le rempart aux giroflées.²⁴

It's her, the little dead girl, behind the rosebushes. - The young deceased mother comes down the flight of steps. - The cousin's calash cries on the sand. - The little brother (he is in the Indies!) there, before the setting sun, on the meadow of marigolds. - The elders they buried standing up in the wallflowered ramparts.

As Michel Riffaterre has commented,²⁵ two representations compete within the same sentence: one depicts a family scene, while the other makes the family absent through death or displacement. 'Enfance' thus presents its own dual play of intimacy and estrangement, or advertisement and protection as Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' later has it in a complex rhetorical moment neatly formulated by Harold Bloom, who describes the action of Parmigianino's swerving hand as a 'reaction formation or rhetorical *illusio*, since what is meant is that the hand acts as though to advertise what it protects':²⁶

As Parmigianino did it, the right hand
Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer
And swerving easily away, as though to protect
What it advertises.

In other words, the 'leaving out' or 'deprivation', to quote again from '*Le livre est sur la table*', enriches what is 'put down' or strangely positioned, and inversely

²³ Rimbaud, *Poésies / Une Saison En Enfer / Illuminations*, p. 139.

²⁴ Rimbaud, *Poésies / Une Saison En Enfer / Illuminations*, p. 157.

²⁵ Michel Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 121.

²⁶ Harold Bloom, 'The Breaking of Form,' in *John Ashbery*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York:

the remnant objects are as items rescued from a trauma or some other hidden event:

A building is against the sky -
The result is more sky.
Something gathers in painfully.

('Sonnet')

The classic account of all this, and the first place in the work where 'putting down' and 'leaving out' occur, can be found towards the end of the first part of 'The Skaters', Ashbery's first truly successful (and very funny) long poem. Indeed, the poet announces his intention to explain himself, in a typically bathetic and humorous way, interrupting his own sudden digression into the story of a young woman named Helga who lives in an apartment in Jersey City, and who reads like Ashbery's parody of the young typist in her room in Eliot's 'The Waste Land':

It is time now for a general understanding of
The meaning of all this. The meaning of Helga, importance of the setting,
etc.
A description of the blues. Labels on bottles
And all kinds of discarded objects that ought to be described.
But can one ever be sure of which ones?
Isn't this a death-trap, wanting to put too much in
[...]
But this is an important aspect of the question
Which I am not ready to discuss, am not at all ready to,
This leaving-out business
[...]
I cannot think any more of going out into all that, will stay here

With my quiet *schmerzen*.

This is the funnier side to the unmentionable 'Something' that 'gathers in painfully', though the humour does not entirely conceal hurt. The reservation about description, which the poet goes on to diagnose as a 'madness to explain', is again a symptom of the wish to free phenomena from their empirical setting, the failure of which lies at the heart of the boredom in 'The Instruction Manual'. The parody of *The Waste Land*, in turn, issues from Ashbery's distaste for the allegorical weight given to everyday landscapes in that poem, as he makes clear in an essay on Reverdy:

In Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the real world appears with the dreams that belong to it, but it is always artificially linked to an allegorical meaning - the gashouse and the "dull canal", for example.²⁷

Thus, the importance of objects imbued with a hidden significance must be balanced against Ashbery's fascination with quiddity or 'mere being', a kind of focus that the poet has found in the experimental alternatives to Anglo-American Modernist poetry provided by Reverdy and also by Joseph Cornell, whose boxes he describes in a review:

Each of his works is an autonomous visual experience, with its own natural laws and its climate: the thing in its thingness; revealed, not commented on; and with its ambience intact.²⁸

²⁷ Ashbery, 'Reverdy en Amérique', *Mercure de France*, 344 (1962), pp. 109-112 (p. 111).

²⁸ Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, p. 16.

Ashbery's own interest in 'thingness' is developed in a number of different ways in *The Tennis Court Oath*. It is with this collection that the presence of Pierre Reverdy becomes apparent, and it is worth considering this poet's work for a moment partly because he is so often referred to in discussions of Ashbery and O'Hara without actually being read.

The Influence of Reverdy

Ashbery makes clear the importance of Reverdy to his own work when he says that 'Reverdy [in contrast to Eliot] manages to restore to things their true name, to abolish the eternal dead weight of symbolism and allegory.'²⁹ 'Nomade' (Nomad), from Reverdy's classic volume *Les ardoises du toit*, is one example of what Ashbery means here. The title of the poem bears no immediate relevance to its contents and by the end, none has been imposed. A succession of anaphoric relative clauses³⁰ convey, syntactically as well as by the initial capitals in each line, the synecdochal method ('the hand that passes') and the varying arrangement of the lines on the page, a kind of rootlessness of the decontextualised image that may suggest a form of mimesis:

La porte qui ne s'ouvre pas
La main qui passe
Au loin un verre qui se casse

²⁹ Ashbery, 'Reverdy en Amérique', p. 111.

³⁰ For a full and illuminating discussion of Reverdy's syntax and style, see Anthony Rizzuto, *Style and Theme in Reverdy's Les Ardoises du toit* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1971). I am particularly indebted here to Rizzuto's discussion of 'Nomade', pp. 61 - 62.

La lampe fume³¹

The door that does not open
 The hand that passes
 Far off a glass that breaks
 The lamp smokes

The notion that this all revolves around the idea of the nomad may or may not be confirmed by the final line, 'La maison où l'on n'entre pas' ('The house one does not enter'): the relation remains indeterminate, as does the 'on', a pronoun that carries much ambiguity in French and most especially in Reverdy's poetry, where its capacity to mean 'we', 'you' or 'one' is exploited to the full. Ashbery's own by now extremely well known pronominal ambiguity was already evident in earlier poems like 'The Grapevine', written before he would have had the chance to read Reverdy, but he can only have felt confirmed by the earlier poet's example, and as we shall see, the numinous, unreal focus on objects afforded Reverdy by his sparse poetic is of great importance in *The Tennis Court Oath*.

Reverdy would have been a sympathetic figure for Ashbery for a number of reasons: like Ashbery, Reverdy was often regarded as the closest poetic equivalent to Picasso, Braque and Gris, with whom he associated, so that while Ashbery is sometimes referred to as an abstract expressionist³², Reverdy was

³¹ Pierre Reverdy, *Plupart du Temps, 1915 - 1922* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989, repr. 1993), p. 195.

³² For more on Ashbery's association with painters such as de Kooning, see Lehman, *The Last Avant Garde*, esp. pp. 19-64 passim. For a reading of Ashbery's work in relation to Abstract Expressionism see Albert Cook, 'Expressionism Not Wholly Abstract: John Ashbery', *American Poetry*, 2:2 (Winter 1985), pp. 53-70. For a dissenting view relating Ashbery's poetry to the work of Jasper Johns, see Charles Altieri, *Postmodernisms Now: Essays on Contemporaneity in the Arts* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), pp. 53-81 passim.

described, perhaps more aptly in his case, as a Cubist poet.³³ As I have already mentioned, Reverdy was also a proto-Surrealist whose theory of the poetic image appears prominently in Breton's first 'Manifeste du surréalisme' in 1924,³⁴ though the poet first published it in the journal he co-edited, *Nord-Sud*, which Shoptaw cites as the inspiration for *Locus Solus*, the periodical edited by Ashbery and other members of the New York School.³⁵ Reverdy's definition of the image offers the most concise formulation of the technique of juxtaposition which Roger Shattuck sees as central to an understanding of modern art:³⁶

[The image] cannot be born of a comparison but of the placing together of two or more distinct realities.

The more distant and exact the relation between the two realities being combined, the stronger the image - the more emotional power and poetic reality it will have.³⁷

This definition of juxtaposition is informed by a notion of poetic craft to which Breton took exception because a rational will would interfere with the products of the unconscious.³⁸ Ashbery, on the other hand, scorned the the 'rulings and pronouncements' of 'official' Surrealism and considered the most successful of Surrealist works to be 'the product of the conscious and the unconscious working hand in hand', indicating that his sympathies would lie with Reverdy

³³ See for example Andrew Rothwell, *Textual Spaces: The Poetry of Pierre Reverdy* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B. V., 1989), pp. 15-44.

³⁴ See André Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985, repr. 1996), p. 31.

³⁵ Shoptaw, p. 47.

³⁶ See Roger Shattuck, 'The Mode of Juxtaposition', in *About French Poetry From Dada to "Tel Quel": Text and Theory*, ed. by Mary Ann Caws (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974), pp. 19-22.

³⁷ Pierre Reverdy, *Nord-Sud* (Paris: Flammarion, 1975), p. 73.

and not Breton. The hushed austerity of representative poems like 'Nomade' is less often present elsewhere in the American poet's work, but it is frequently apparent in *The Tennis Court Oath*, as for example in the poem 'Rain':

The spoon of your head
crossed by livid stems

The chestnuts' large clovers wiped

You see only the white page its faint frame of red
You hear the viola's death sound
A woman sits in black and white tile

Why, you are pale

Light sucks up what I did
In the room two months ago
Spray of darkness across the back,
Tree flowers...

Taxis took us far apart
And will...

over the shuddering page of a sea

'The spoon of your head' suggests a stylised, spoon-shaped head, but a spoon is also both a convex and a concave mirror into which the head may look and see distorted images of itself. The distortion and obscuring of figures recurs in 'Rain': the head is 'crossed by livid stems', the 'clovers wiped', 'Light sucks up' the action of a suddenly appearing first person narrator and there is a 'Spray of darkness across the back'. As in 'Nomade', these mainly visual data, which remain glimpses rather than full images, are suspended and unresolved by

³⁸ Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme*, pp. 48-49.

means of syntactic disjunction: the main verb is omitted from the first three lines, and in fact no two lines are definitively linked until lines 8 and 9, which are then disrupted by a 'Spray of darkness'. 'Rain' goes even further towards obscuring the implied referent of its title than Reverdy's poems, and uses the visual arrangement of the page not only to emphasise the disparate, isolated nature of its phenomena but also to indicate mimetically the process of 'leaving out', as is made explicitly clear in the much later prose poem 'The New Spirit' in Ashbery's fifth collection, *Three Poems*:

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

clean-washed sea

The flowers were.

As has been noted, the title *The Tennis Court Oath* refers to an unfinished painting by David where the painted heads of French revolutionaries appear on nude, sketched figures. Geoff Ward views this as suggestive of a poetry that has 'disintricated and laid bare all its internal workings'³⁹, while John Shoptaw makes parallels between David's sketch and the 'purposely unfinished canvases of de Kooning and [Larry] Rivers.'⁴⁰ But if we accept David Herd's point that *The Tennis Court Oath* is also Ashbery's exilic 'reassess[ment of] relationship with

³⁹ Ward, *Statutes of Liberty*, p. 111.

⁴⁰ Shoptaw, p. 45.

his culture' during his prolonged residence in Paris,⁴¹ can we not see this incomplete monument to the French republic as paradigmatic of the relationship between the epically ambitious titles, or heads, ('Europe', 'America', 'A Life Drama', 'A Last World') and the denuded bodies of the poems? The indentations then become somatic, visual counterparts to the alienated body-parts ('spoon of your head' ['Rain'], 'Noise that thought came from his own leg' ['Night'], 'The eyes and clitoris a million miles from / The small persistent tug' ['The New Realism']) and dismembered phrases strewn throughout the poems, the language of a citizen cut off from the republic, or body politic. In this context, the few occasions where direct statement makes it through result in a new intimacy in contrast to the surrounding estrangement, as in 'America':

And I am proud
of these stars in our flag we don't want
the flag of film
waving over the sky
toward us - citizens of some future state.
We despair in the room, but the stars
And night persist, knowing we don't want it

The antipathy to cinema's propagandistic representation of the flag, 'the flag of film', is one more example of the tendency in this collection towards ambivalent relations with popular media, as John Shoptaw and David Herd have demonstrated.⁴² In an interview with John Ash, Ashbery explicitly separated

⁴¹ David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 70.

⁴² Shoptaw, pp. 42 - 73 passim; Herd, pp. 69 - 92 passim.

poems like 'Rain', 'They Dream Only of America' and 'How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher', which were written in the earliest stages of his ten year stay in Paris, from the later cut-up experiments such as 'Europe' and 'Idaho', and expressed a guarded regret at not having 'developed [this] earlier style further'⁴³. It is not that their influence cannot be seen in those later poems in *The Tennis Court Oath*, where the isolating of each 'thing in its thingness' on the page undermines the simple realism of the popular fictions which are Ashbery's source texts: rather, it is that the 'ascetic sensualism', as one poem's title nearly has it, does not quite mesh. 'Europe' contains local moments of interest, as in the opening lines:

To employ her
construction ball

These lines seem to comment mischievously on the poem's use of cut-up material from the popular novel *Beryl of the By-plane* as a 'construction ball' to destroy the novel and construct the poem simultaneously. Unfortunately, the resolute determination to use only cut-up fragments of text prevents any subsequent development of this idea, resulting instead in what Geoff Ward calls 'a casual Surrealist pile-up of decontextualized bits and pieces'. Again, as in 'America' and as David Herd has identified in this case⁴⁴, the sudden contrast of the fifty-seventh section brings a sense of striving towards communicative

⁴³ John Ash, 'John Ashbery in conversation with John Ash', *PN Review*, 46 (1985), 31 - 34, (p. 31).

⁴⁴ See Herd, pp. 88-89.

intimacy, a will to 'touch, love, explain':

Precise mechanisms
Love us.

He came over the hill
He held me in his arms - it was marvelous.

But the map of Europe
shrinks around naked couples

Even as you lick the stamp
A brown dog lies down beside you and dies

Can a mechanism love? Are these the precise mechanisms of cut-up technique, and if so who is grouped in the collective first person? Texts, perhaps? The brief and stilted moment of loving embrace cannot be sustained by the shrinking map of Europe, and if the difficulty of 'The Instruction Manual' is in maintaining the representation of place, the greater problem of the place-named poems of *The Tennis Court Oath* is how to construct an alternative to such representations. Even as the communicative moment is sealed and prepared, the Surrealist pile-up claims another victim. Ashbery's solution was to develop a poetic syntax which allowed the most basic elements of language to contribute to his logic of strange position, as I will now demonstrate.

Logic of Strange Preposition

Confronting the problematics of space and place head-on, Ashbery's next

book, *Rivers and Mountains*, begins with 'These Lacustrine Cities', which immediately announces what will become the familiar Ashbery 'style', abandoning the experiments in page layout of *The Tennis Court Oath* and employing a syntax which, although distinctively altered in a way that we shall discuss, is nevertheless remote from the violent disjunctions of his cut-up works. To compare this poem with 'The Instruction Manual' is to see how much more quickly a notional place can come in and out of focus, and how much more complex its position in the poem can be. In two quatrains, the 'lacustrine cities' are brought close to us and then folded away in a space determined by a more intricate play of desire than the wistful virtual tourist of *Some Trees* could conceive of. The opening words of the poem imply that the narrative voice and the reader share a space: the unsupported deictic 'these' draws us in, despite the unusual appearance of the word 'lacustrine'. But how, then, does a city grow out of loathing? These cities grow 'Into something forgetful', 'something' presumably because even the speaker has forgotten what it is, although it is 'angry with history'. The cities begin to look like allegories: 'They are the product of an idea: that man is horrible, for instance, / Though this is only one example.' In the next stanza 'a tower / Controlled the sky, and with artifice dipped back / Into the past for swans [...]' and we begin to wonder if the tower is the indented poem emerging and then 'dipping back' into a tradition of poetic imagery, so that the poem is recounting its own making. David Kalstone notes

that in Ashbery's work, 'the poem refers to itself as part of the past'⁴⁵ and this interpretation is somewhat confirmed by the remark in the next stanza that 'Then you are left with an idea of yourself / And the feeling of ascending emptiness of the afternoon'. The poem contemplates different ways of filling its emptiness:

Much of your time has been occupied by creative games
 Until now, but we have all-inclusive plans for you.
 We had thought, for instance, of sending you to the middle of the desert,

To a violent sea, or of having the closeness of the others be air
 To you, pressing you back into a startled dream
 As sea-breezes greet a child's face.
 But the past is already here, and you are nursing some private project.

The joke is at once funnier than in 'The Instruction Manual' and more menacing because the narrative voice that purports to direct the poem casts its play in the language of espionage or possibly cruel and certainly unusual punishment. Spatially, the poem 'emerges' only to dip back as it achieves self-consciously 'poetic' status ('with artifice'), rising again with 'emptiness' until once more it is 'pressed back' into a 'startled dream' which again is associated with the past. The poem concludes by looking back 'into' itself: 'Thoughtfully pouring all your energy into this single monument [...] Whose disappointment broke into a rainbow of tears' thus suggesting at once the inevitable failure or 'disappointment' of the poetic project and its fulfilment in a mere gesture, a

⁴⁵ David Kalstone, 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', in *John Ashbery*, ed. by Harold Bloom, pp. 91-114 (p. 111).

'rainbow of tears'.

The logic of strange prepositions here foreshadows the later and much more extended enterprise of the long poem 'Fragment', which we will come to shortly. In an interesting article included in a special issue of *PN Review* devoted to Ashbery's work, Penny McCarthy casts the author as 'the poet of the prepositional mode of knowing.'⁴⁶ McCarthy discusses Lakoff's theory of an 'experimental world of embodied perceivers' where the physical world is shared by perceivers who remain 'of and in a particular culture'. The linguistic relevance of this is that thought and imagination are embodied, 'made possible by the body, in that our metaphors take off from (this sentence is itself one example) our perception and our body movement, as well as our manoeuvrings in social space'. McCarthy refers to Ashbery's subversion of spatial schemas based around an opposition of interior and exterior, and praises his 'generalised imagery' which allows one to 'step[...] inside the skin of the poet', while expressing reservations about the poem 'Daffy Duck in Hollywood' from *Houseboat Days* which she deems 'fairly impenetrable to someone who has never been an American child, or who hasn't steeped themselves in the 'higher' culture, viz., surely, most of us'. She concludes that:

Ashbery is both all-purpose and rooted in particulars. As he has been writing like this since 1956, and the work of the specialists in psychology, linguistics and philosophy which broke the old modes of thinking about

⁴⁶ Penny McCarthy, 'About Ashbery', *PN Review*, 99 (1994), 63 - 64, (p. 63).

thinking took off from the 1970s, one mark of his greatness must be that he has been an antenna of the race which he has turned into an egg and spoon race, devoid of racism, but racinated.

This somewhat bizarre ending (perhaps suitably so, given its context) is a little problematic. Ashbery's writing has changed considerably since 1956, and his use of prepositions particularly so, arguably as a result of the cut-up period of *The Tennis Court Oath* where an isolated line might pivot on a preposition or another, normally overlooked grammatical unit, as in 'rolls on them' in section 88 of 'Europe'. Also, to protest the occasional impenetrability of Ashbery's particulars misses the action of 'leaving out' which they perform as *disembodied* parts of an omitted or inadmissible whole. Like the images of rubble I identify in Roy Fisher's work in Chapter Three, and the ephemera of Frank O'Hara's everyday poems which I discuss in Chapter Two, Ashbery's particulars are deployed precisely as *disjecta membra*. We must recall Benjamin's notion of 'the 'dialectical optic' of Surrealism, which 'perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday'. The most immediate aspects of our quotidian existence are a quickly devalued currency: the real becomes unreal, remote and intangible.

A further point worth raising is that a classic account of embodied perception by the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty⁴⁷ was actually published in 1945, rather than in the 1970s, and its author was still teaching in Paris when Ashbery arrived there in 1955. I have seen no evidence to suggest

that Ashbery ever read Merleau-Ponty, who died tragically in 1961 at the age of 53, a year before *The Tennis Court Oath* was published, but an illuminating discussion of some of his ideas is included in Geoff Ward's chapter on Ashbery in *Statutes of Liberty*, and there has been renewed philosophical interest in his work as a result of recent work in cognitive science.⁴⁸ That Merleau-Ponty's ideas about spatial perception should have been developing contemporaneously with Ashbery's own experiments 'in the field', as it were, is highly intriguing and worthy of further examination. Merleau-Ponty writes:

When one speaks of high or low morale, one does not extend to the mental a relation which would only make sense in the physical world, one uses "a direction of signification which, so to speak, traverses the different regional spheres and receives in each one a particular meaning (spatial, auditory, spiritual, mental, etc.)" Dream fantasies, or those of myth, each man's favourite images or even the poetic image are not linked to their sense by a relation of sign to signification like that which exists between a telephone number and the name of the subscriber; they truly contain their sense, which is not a notional sense, but a direction of our existence.⁴⁹

It can already be seen from this excerpt that the language of direction, and thus most immediately the preposition, will play a fundamental rôle in the orientation of desire in language: the importance of this idea for Ashbery's poetry, which also traverses spheres of empirical, imaginative and oneiric data,

⁴⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris: NRF, 1945).

⁴⁸ See for example Mark Wrathall and Sean Kelly, 'Existential Phenomenology and Cognitive Science', accessed at:
<http://ejap.louisiana.edu/EJAP/1996.spring/wrathall.kelly.1996.spring.html>
 and also Franson D Manjali, 'Dynamical Models in Semiotics/Semantics, Lecture Seven: Body, Space, and Metaphorical-Cultural Worlds', accessed at:
<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/epc/srb/cyber/man7.html>

⁴⁹ My translation, Merleau-Ponty, p. 329.

cannot be underestimated. Merleau-Ponty was later to modify his views on sign and signification through his interest in Saussure, but John Lechte's description of Merleau-Ponty's later work only suggests further parallels with Ashbery's poetry:

Language here is fundamentally the 'living present' in speech. To speak, to communicate - to use language - is in part equivalent to becoming aware that there are only successive living presents.⁵⁰

This recalls Ashbery's comment on his long poems and thus will bring us, finally, to 'Fragment':

I feel in the case of the long poems, that they have another dimension, because of having been written on different days, when I was a different person from the one I was the other day - sometimes it takes quite a long time between the writing sessions. The reader of course doesn't know when I stopped, and when I picked up the thread again; and I don't know of any other way in which one could write a poem which would be richer from having been written by or through different states of mind which necessarily come about through the passage of time.⁵¹

'Fragment' is a collection of fifty dizains: 'collection' because the extent to which they connect remains indeterminate. John Shoptaw describes the use of the dizain, which Ashbery took from the 16th century French poet Maurice Scève, as giving the poem 'an intriguing instability: neither fragment nor whole, it functions neither as a stanza in a connected argument or narrative nor as a

⁵⁰ John Lechte, 'Maurice Merleau-Ponty', accessed at: <http://students.pratt.edu/~arch543p/help/Merleau-Ponty.html>.

⁵¹ Piotr Sommer, 'An Interview In Warsaw,' in Michael Palmer ed. *Code of Signals, Recent Writings in Poetics* (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 1983), pp 294 - 314 (p. 310).

relatively independent poem in a lyric sequence.⁵² Shoptaw's extended reading of the poem⁵³ draws on an impressive range of material from Ashbery's own manuscripts to Scève's long poem *Délie*, and also provides biographical contexts for some sections of the poem. It is not my intent to compete with this reading, or even to match it in scale: rather, I simply wish to indicate what I believe to be Ashbery's most extended experiment in the logic of strange spatial positioning, particularly since its peculiar abundance of prepositions seems to have gone unnoticed.

'Fragment' is something of an exception among Ashbery's long poems in that the reader can know when the poet stopped and when he picked up the thread again, if only to the extent that in interview he has admitted to having written the poem two dizains at a time as a kind of discipline.⁵⁴ This provides a further enfolding two-by-two motion to a poem concerned with enclosures from its very beginning, where the first block, or dizain, begins:

The last block is closed in April. You
 See the intrusions clouding over her face
 As in the memory of older
 Permissiveness which dies in the
 Falling back toward recondite ends,
 The sympathy of yellow flowers.

Shoptaw produces seemingly incontrovertible evidence as to the hidden event to which these lines refer (the death and burial of the father) but in terms of the

⁵² Shoptaw, p. 111

⁵³ Shoptaw, 111 - 124 passim.

poetic surface we are offered, the block is already tomb-like, echoing Mallarmé's 'Calme bloc ici-bas chu d'un désastre obscur'⁵⁵ ('Calm block here fallen from an obscure disaster') from 'Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe' ('The Tomb of Edgar Poe'). The 'intrusions' cloud over, and in its turn this image of the oppressive sky evokes Baudelaire's 'Spleen': 'Quand le ciel bas et lourd pèse comme un couvercle'⁵⁶ ('When the low, heavy sky weighs down like a lid'). The image of the grave beneath the enclosing sky returns in the 25th (and thus central) stanza: 'The whole / Is a mound of changing valors for some who / Live out as under a dome, are participated in / As the ordinary grandeur of a dome's the thing that / Keeps them living'. The 'whole' poem has become a hole, a mound beneath the dome of the sky that some 'Live out as under': one may be out of the grave and still 'under' the sign of one's mortality, living 'out' one's life of 'changing valors' (a reference to the poem's revisions of Renaissance form?) until its end.

In the first stanza as in the twenty-fifth, the 'désastre obscur' is acknowledged but kept distant: in the first, the 'leaving out' of the trauma recalls previous exercises of omission, 'the memory given you of older / Permissiveness which dies in the / Falling back toward recondite ends'. As in 'These Lacustrine Cities', the movement 'back' into the past is made physical, and the admission of 'recondite ends' also recalls that poem's 'private project'. Emblems of bereavement are put in ('The sympathy of yellow flowers') but are quickly

⁵⁴ John Koethe, 'An Interview with John Ashbery', *SubStance*, 9:4/10:1, 178-86 (p. 184).

⁵⁵ Mallarmé, *Poésies*, p. 94.

⁵⁶ Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes*, p. 54.

dismissed as the event is once more obscured, 'Never mentioned in the signs of the oblong day / The saw-toothed flames and point of other / Space not given, and yet not withdrawn / And never yet imagined: a moment's commandment.' In a moment, the 'point of other / Space' can be conjured, though it be simultaneously absent and present, 'not given, and yet not withdrawn', or 'as far from the world as agreeing with it' as 'Some Trees' had it. In the twenty-fifth stanza, this obscuring motion is also something of a falling back ('The apotheosis had sunk away') but also a refusal to name the event while retaining its outline or 'reach': 'Aiming where further identifications should / Not be worked for, are reached'.

The vertical axis of perception developed in this first stanza is maintained in the second, which also introduces the horizontal axis of interior, exterior, centre and surroundings. A face, which may or may not be 'hers' from the first stanza, is identified as 'the only real beginning', the surface where we see us as we truly behave: again the recognition of the face leads to a falling back, as 'this first / Salutation plummet[s] also to the end of friendship / With self alone', but this fall 'ends' the recondite project of a solipsistic 'friendship / With self alone' forcing the poem into a dialogue of 'I' and 'you' which, however notionally, implies an Other. That this dialogue could become the formalising impetus behind the development of a poetic surface that overcomes the nameless event leads to the realisation of the poem as an outward motion ('open[ing] out / New passages of being among the correctness / Of familiar patterns'). In the last lines

of the stanza, the 'I' and 'you' appear to oppose one another and then fuse in the use of 'you' in the sense of 'one' as the advertising 'patterns' of the fictive stance announce a protection:

The stance to you
 Is a fiction, to me a whole. I find
 New options, white feathers, in a word what
 You draw in around you to the protecting bone.

The outward motion of the poem returns in the fifth stanza, where a 'stable' emptiness draws 'masses' in around it 'Where this energy, not yet or partially / Distributed to the imagination creates / A claim to the sides of early autumn' and we note that distribution is etymologically an outward assignation (*dis* - meaning 'away' or abroad', *tribuere* meaning to grant or to assign, [OED]) which spreads the masses further 'to the sides' of the year, which is itself on its way out. The stanza continues:

Suffocating, with remorse, and winking with it
 To tablelands of disadumbrated feeling
 Treetops whose mysterious hegemony concerns
 Merely, by opening around factors of accident
 So as to install miscellaneous control.

The comma between 'suffocating' and 'remorse' underlines the ambiguity of the subjectless verb: if we choose to see this as continuous with the first half of the dizain, (which we are by no means obliged to do), it is the 'masses' that suffocate, simultaneously unable to take in or remain open, 'winking' instead. In Old High German, *winken* is to move sideways or stagger [OED], and as we

stagger sideways towards the plateau we may notice that the 'mysterious hegemony' of treetops recalls 'Some Trees', where a sudden or disadumbrated feeling was brought about by the mere being of the trees. The treetops open around aleatory 'factors' in order to 'install' the correctness of familiar patterns, resulting in 'the product of the conscious and the unconscious working hand in hand', to bring us back to Ashbery's description of surrealist writing.

The palpably physical struggle of prepositions and other spatial terms in 'Fragment' represents an attempt to get past the imprisoning structures of interior and exterior that it enacts. Sometimes the poem seems resigned to its prison: 'Thus your only world is an inside one / Ironically fashioned out of external phenomena' (stanza ten). At other times it asserts its breakthrough to 'the living present': 'This time / You get over the threshold of so much unmeaning, so much / Being, prepared for its event, the active memorial.' But what present does the poem explore? Ashbery began writing the poem in 1964, and it was first published two years later. Meanwhile, Lyndon B. Johnson sent 5,000 US Marines into Vietnam,⁵⁷ initiating a terrible and sustained period of national unrest and international war. Does this impinge on Ashbery's 'living present'?:

Our daily imaginings are swiftly tilted down to
 Death in its various forms. We cannot keep the peace
 At home, and at the same time be winning wars abroad.
 And the great flower of what we have been twists

⁵⁷ See Hugh Brogan, *The Penguin History of the United States of America* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 674.

On its stem of earth, for not being
 What we are to become, fated to live in
 Intimidated solitude and isolation. No brother
 Bearing the notion of responsibility of self
 To the surrounding neighborhood lost out of being.

Once again, Merleau-Ponty is oddly resonant:

I arrive in a village for the holidays, happy to leave my work and my ordinary surroundings. I settle down in the village. It becomes the centre of my life. The river that lacks water, the harvest of maize or walnuts are events for me. But if a friend comes to see me and brings me news of Paris, or if the radio and the newspapers inform me that there is a threat of war, I feel exiled in the village, excluded from real life, confined far from it all. Our body and our perception seek always to take as centre of the world the landscape they offer us. But this landscape is not necessarily that of our life [...] In addition to the physical or geometric distance that exists between me and all things, a lived distance connects me to the things that matter and exist for me, and connects them to each other. At each moment this distance marks the limit or extent of my life. Sometimes there is a certain play (*Spielraum*) between me and events which guards my liberty without their ceasing to affect me. Sometimes, on the contrary, lived distance is at once too short and too great: for the most part events cease to matter to me, while those most immediate to me haunt me. They envelop me as the night and rob me of individuality and liberty. I can literally no longer breathe. I am possessed.⁵⁸

Can we then see the imprisoned subjectivity of 'Fragment' as exploring a lived distance haunted by 'Death in its various forms', exiled from the public space, 'the surrounding neighborhood lost out of being', no longer breathing because 'suffocating, with remorse'? Ashbery's interest in the movements of consciousness means that rather than directly comment on war, he prefers to attempt an understanding of how news filters through to us and the problems

⁵⁸ My translation, Merleau-Ponty, pp. 330-331.

that poses when we are already at odds with quotidian flux:

This was the first day
 Of the new experience. The familiar brown trees
 Stirred indifferent at their roots, deeply transformed.
 Like a sail its question disappeared into
 An ocean of newsprint.

This fluctuating perspective, the expanding and contracting of 'lived distance', continues to trouble the speaker of the poem as he wrestles with the ethics of 'gladly building' within the comfort of 'familiar patterns':

But why should the present seem so particularly urgent?
 A time of spotted lakes and the whipporwill
 Sounding over everything? To release the importance
 Of what will always remain invisible?
 In spite of near and distant events, gladly
 Built? To speak the plaits of argument,
 Loosened? Vast shadows are pushed down toward
 The hour. It is ideation, incrimination
 Proceeding from necessity to find it at
 A time of day, beside the creek, uncounted stars and buttons.

The shadows may be the receding reports of war as they 'cease to matter' or are 'pushed down'. The poet is exiled among looming pastoral images as the 'invisible' consciousness seeks to guard its freedom from events. In 'Evening in the Country', earlier in the same collection, far from the 'smokestacks and corruption of the city' in the country of 'magnificent outposts', 'my remotest properties', Ashbery put the question more optimistically:

Have you begun to be in the context you feel
 Now that the danger has been removed?

At the end of the poem, the value of the work is possibly that these questions remain unresolved:

But what could I make of this? Glaze
 of many identical foreclosures wrested from
 The operative hand, like a judgment but still
 The atmosphere of seeing?

In a sense, by this stage the speaker has perhaps already hinted at the answer in inviting the other's participation in recognising and appreciating the problem, and at this stage the 'you' could fruitfully be regarded as the reader:

The words sung in the next room are unavoidable
 But their passionate intelligence will be studied in you.

What 'Fragment' represents is the extreme of Ashbery's 'putting down' and 'leaving out', at least as far as his mature work after *The Tennis Court Oath* is concerned, because the Mallarméan surfaces of the poem are so delicately pitched between the disclosure of suffering and the protection of privacy. From *Rivers and Mountains* onwards, Ashbery's work develops different strategies to negotiate with what is shared in our culture as well as what is private. These strategies emerge from the idea that what is shared and what is private have a common root in our consciousness. Ashbery's lyrics of everyday consciousness lead the poet towards a new meditation on the external world which issues in a series of poems about America and suburbia. The last part of this chapter

concerns this period of transition in Ashbery's work.

A Luminous Backdrop: Everyday Life, from Background to Foreground

Ashbery's surreal theory of everyday life is articulated at key points in his work, as in 'The System' :

The facts of history have been too well rehearsed (I'm speaking needless to say not of written history but the oral kind that goes on in you without your having to do anything about it) to require further elucidation here. But the other, unrelated happenings that form a kind of sequence of fantastic reflections as they succeed each other at a pace and according to an inner necessity of their own - these, I say, have hardly ever been looked at from a vantage point other than the historian's and an arcane historian's at that. The living aspect of these obscure phenomena has never to my knowledge been examined from a point of view like the painter's: in the round, bathed in a sufficient flow of overhead light, with "all its imperfections on its head" and yet without prejudice of the exaggerations either of the anathematist or the eulogist: quietly, in short, and I hope succinctly. Judged from this angle the whole affair will, I think, partake of and benefit from the enthusiasm not of the religious fanatic but of the average, open-minded, intelligent person who has never interested himself before in these matters either from not having had the leisure to do so or from ignorance of their existence.

The relaxed prose of *Three Poems* allows full rein for Ashbery's humour and the narrator has fun with the idea of the historian's project,⁵⁹ but in 'the painter's' view, luminous and equivocal ('without prejudice') we may still recognise the surreal perspective of Ashbery's poetic, reminiscent of the paintings of de Chirico whose 'Double Dream of Spring' provided the title of Ashbery's

⁵⁹ The very title is a slightly mischievous provocation, given the extended prose form of the works, even taking into account the fact that by the time of publication the prose poem was 101 years old (Baudelaire's *Le Spleen De Paris* having been published in 1869).

previous collection. Much later, in the long title poem that concludes 'A Wave', Ashbery returns to the theme of the 'fantastic reflections' so often threatened by their own sheer multiplicity:

One idea is enough to organize a life and project it
 Into unusual but viable forms, but many ideas merely
 Lead one thither into a morass of their own good intentions.
 Think how many the average person has during the course of a day, or
 night,
 So that they become a luminous backdrop to ever-repeated
 Gestures, having no life of their own, but only echoing
 The suspicions of their possessor. It's fun to scratch around
 And maybe come up with something. But for the tender blur
 Of the setting to mean something, words must be ejected bodily,
 A certain crispness be avoided in favor of a density
 Of strutted opinion doomed to wilt in oblivion: not too linear
 Nor yet too puffed and remote.

Once more there is the concern with the lived present, the fictional 'average person's' quotidian experience, recalling Ashbery's remark in conversation with David Herd that 'I suppose I try to write from the point of view of the unconscious mind of 'l'homme or femme moyen sensuel''.⁶⁰ The concern then becomes how to turn this 'density / Of strutted opinion' into an 'active memorial', in the terms of 'Fragment': in other words, how to render the impenetrability of the everyday.

One of the most formally daring responses to the challenge of the 'active memorial' is the long poem 'Litany' which begins Ashbery's 1979 collection, *As We Know*. An 'Author's Note' at the beginning of the poem informs us that the

⁶⁰ David Herd, 'John Ashbery In Conversation', *PN Review*, 99 (1994), 32 - 37, (p. 36).

two parallel columns of the poem are meant to be read 'as simultaneous but independent monologues.' As Marjorie Perloff has noted, this invites the reader to follow the poem in any order we wish although the full implication of simultaneity has been explored in a recording, as Ashbery reveals:

I've taped it with another poet, a woman poet; we both read simultaneously and that works very well, in a way. Of course you lose enormous amounts of the text because of the clash of the voices, but what you do hear seems to be very effective: suddenly one voice will stop, there'll be a break, and the other voice will go on and this suddenly takes on an importance that it didn't have a minute ago. It was my attempt at mimesis of the way experience and knowledge come to me, and I think to everybody. I think we're constantly in the middle of a conversation where we never finish our thoughts, or our sentences and that's the way we communicate, and it's probably the best way for us, because it's the one that we have arrived at.⁶¹

In this context, each voice becomes the 'luminous backdrop' of the other, occasionally revealed by one or the other's pausing, almost like Max Ernst's Surrealist painting technique of grattage where one picture is painted on top of another and the obscured image is revealed here and there by scratches in the surface layer of paint. 'Litany' speaks its own obsession with the different levels at which experience seeps through to consciousness:

The world
 Is vaguer and less pejorative, a time
 Of stressful headache but also
 Of architectonic inklings and inspiration:
 Agony for a day, and then the refreshing dream
 Bubbles up like an artesian well in all its
 Wealth of accurately observed detail,

⁶¹ 'An Interview In Warsaw,' p. 309.

Its truth of being, on the surface
 But striking long, pointed roots into the dull earth
 Behind the mask.

A succession of 'living presents' will tend to cancel one another out unless actively, poetically engaged, and the poem recognises and warns of this threat:

Yet we who came to know them,
 Castaways of middle life, somehow
 Grew aware through the layers of numbing comfort,
 The eiderdown of materialism and space, how much meaning
 Was there languishing at the roots, and how
 To take some of it home before it melts (as all
 Will, dreams and mica-sparkling sidewalks, clouds
 And office buildings, the conversation
 And the trance, until
 A day when they can do no more, and the mass
 Of scenery wanders partially
 Over the defunct terrain of broken fences
 And windows stuffed with rags)

'Litany', then, is a singular example of Ashbery's continued attempt to make everyday confusion 'readable', and inversely to make poetry accommodate an everyday level of 'reading' attention, as the poet has made clear:

I'm a very scattered, disorganized kind of person. I will sit down, read a few pages of a book and then put it aside, maybe take it up again, maybe read something else, maybe go out and get drunk, and go and see a friend, go to the movies. And therefore, I give other people the opportunity that is actually quite normal procedure.⁶²

A series of lyrics in *The Double Dream of Spring* address the more threatening

⁶² 'An Interview In Warsaw,' p. 308.

aspects of 'strutted opinion' directly, and with black humour, at a level of discourse. 'Definition of Blue' keeps an impossibly straight face as academic discourse struggles to fit into the tight clothes of free verse, the rhyme of its second and third lines recalling the 'day of general honesty' in 'Two Scenes':

The rise of capitalism parallels the advance of romanticism
 And the individual is dominant until the close of the nineteenth century.
 In our time, mass practices have sought to submerge the personality
 By ignoring it, which has caused it instead to branch out in all directions
 Far from the permanent tug that used to be its notion of "home."

'Definition of Blue' enacts its argument, absorbing critical discourse only to subvert it as the poem 'branches out' towards a final and defiant assertion of irreducible individuality surrounded by the monumental 'blue of definition':

[I]t results in a downward motion, or rather a floating one
 In which the blue surroundings drift slowly up and past you
 To realize themselves some day, while, you, in this nether world that could
 not be better
 Waken each morning to the exact value of what you did and said, which
 remains.

'Decoy' is much darker, beginning in the elevated words of the founding fathers only to announce the American nightmare:

We hold these truths to be self-evident:
 That ostracism, both political and moral, has
 Its place in the twentieth-century scheme of things;
 That urban chaos is the problem we have been seeing into and seeing into
 [...]

Once more, the 'average person' is positioned as being spatially at odds with this

alienated discourse: in this case, rather than being surrounded by blue, the 'homme and femme moyen sensuel' are violently 'kick[ed] out into the morning, on the wide bed, / Waking far apart on the bed, the two of them: / Husband and wife / Man and wife'. Ashbery affects a kind of resignation about this which only reinforces the startling ostracism of the poem's final image.

To rescue life from its recorded, reduced accounts while accommodating the 'luminous backdrop' as well as the isolation of everyday life in America: these concerns achieve a particular prominence in Ashbery's work of the early to mid - seventies, as collected in *The Vermont Notebook* and *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, both published in 1975. In the shadow of Watergate and America's withdrawal from Vietnam, and a year from the celebrations to mark the country's 'bicentennial', the poet takes stock of the nation:

America is a fun country. Still, there are aspects of it which I would prefer not to think about. I am sure, for instance, that the large "chain" stores with their big friendly ads and so-called "discount" prices actually charge higher prices so as to force smaller competitors out of business. This sort of thing has been going on for at least 200 years and is one of the cornerstones on which our mercantile American society is constructed, like it or not. What with all our pious expostulations and public declarations of concern for the poor and the elderly, this is a lot of bunk and our own president plays it right into the lap of big business and uses every opportunity he can to fuck the consumer and the little guy. We might as well face up to the fact that this is and always has been a part of our so-called American way of life.

This deliberately banal vernacular depiction of American corruption works to suggest that beneath the casual veneer of suburban conversation, much stranger forces are at work. Indeed, the suburb represents a kind of suppressed theatre at

the peripheries of the city, quietly dramatising the conflict of 'individualism' and 'mass practice' in the very construction of their houses. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, William Levitt capitalised on the great need for housing by building large, cheaply assembled suburbs in New York and Pennsylvania, both named Levittown⁶³. These became paradigmatic of the postwar American suburb, decried by some as homogenous and unfinished, and yet they quickly acquired a new kind of consumer individuality through the endeavours of their residents, who competed in a contest run by *Life* magazine to 'personalize' the interiors and exteriors of their houses. Peter Bacon Hales has described how Levittown's history 'contains the paradoxes and failures of the American Dream, including racial covenants in the early Levitt-controlled years', covenants set up to protect property prices by segregating the towns into white and black neighbourhoods. Thus, not only the new constructive optimism but also the seething tension of the new era could be witnessed in the arena of the American suburb, and this is perhaps the key to its continuing and seamy allure for American artists such as the film-maker David Lynch. In a moment we shall see how this allure is also manifested in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*⁶⁴.

The Vermont Notebook seems to pick up where poems like 'Decoy' left off before the long spiritual meditations of *Three Poems*. Its prose style is about as far from that of *Three Poems* as one could conceivably get, at least at first glance:

⁶³ For an interesting cultural and graphic history of Levittown, see Peter Bacon Hales's site at <http://tiger.uic.edu/~pbhales/Levittown.html> to which I am indebted here.

the lists of people, place names and other everyday objects read like a catalogue of precisely that which was left out of the previous collection, namely specificity of any kind. What happens in *Self-Portrait* is that the metaphysical sweep of prose works like 'The New Spirit' is brought to bear on the catalogues and suburban landscapes of its smaller counterpart. So the 1975 collection's opening poem, 'As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat', begins 'I tried each thing, only some were immortal and free', seeming to announce a spiritual revelation, but then turns its back on this privileged moment, or rather 'comes down to earth' to use the spatial metaphor of the poem itself: 'Elsewhere we are as sitting in a place where sunlight / Filters down, a little at a time, / Waiting for someone to come.' As so often in Ashbery's work, the promised enlightenment is expectantly awaited, and sometimes one even suspects that it has arrived:

Only in that tooting of a horn
 Down there, for a moment, I thought
 The great, formal affair was beginning, orchestrated,
 Its colors concentrated in a glance, a ballade
 That takes in the whole world, now, but lightly,
 Still lightly, but with wide authority and tact.

It is entirely in keeping with the world of a poet who claims to incorporate in his work the interruptions, such as telephone calls, that occur during his writing sessions⁶⁵, that the sounding of a car horn in the street should seem to announce this 'great, formal affair.' But in a shift out of the sun into night which typifies

⁶⁴ Henceforth referred to as *Self-Portrait*.

⁶⁵ 'Ashbery has observed [...] that an event as small as the ringing of the phone can divert the

the mysterious play of diurnal and nocturnal throughout the book, all the specificity of everyday objects retreats into the privacy of the uniform darkness which robs the cities of their individuality:

[A] sigh heaves from all the small things on earth,
 The books, the papers, the old garters and union-suit buttons
 Kept in a white cardboard box somewhere, and all the lower
 Versions of cities flattened under the equalizing night.

In 'Grand Galop' the everyday is literally consumed and regurgitated before us, as another Ashberyian list, this time of today's and tomorrow's lunch ('Spanish omelet, lettuce and tomato salad', 'sloppy joe on bun, / Scalloped corn, stewed tomatoes, rice pudding and milk') is soon followed by a sudden fit of nausea in the face of itemisation:

Puaagh. Vomit. Puaaaaagh. More vomit. One who comes
 Walking dog on leash is distant to say how all this
 Changes the minute to an hour, the hour
 To the times of day, days to months, those easy-to-grasp entities,
 And the months to seasons, which are far other, foreign
 To our concept of time.

There is in this poem a vast impatience to match the expectation of 'As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat', as the poet's caravan passes through the suburbs despairing of the formal affair:

These khaki undershorts hung out on lines,
 The wind billowing among them, are we never to make a statement?

The quick succession of houses and objects allows for no celebration of difference, threatening to subsume everything into one of the reductive schema of which the poet is so wary:

Too bad, I mean, that getting to know each just for a fleeting second
Must be replaced by imperfect knowledge of the featureless whole,
Like some pocket history of the world.

How to redeem the threateningly featureless whole of contemporary America? This question occupies one of Ashbery's most interesting lyrics of the period, 'The One Thing That Can Save America', the reading of which will conclude my survey of his work in this chapter.

The poem is distinctive in having recourse to actual place-names, and in its relatively direct mode of address. Indeed, the opening of the poem connects the two as it ponders whether rooted, named place is the necessary condition for public, or 'central' address and whether such legitimation should be sought:

Is anything central?
Orchards flung out on the land,
Urban forests, rustic plantations, knee-high hills?
Are place names central?
Elm Grove, Adcock Corner, Story Book Farm?
[...] they come on like scenery mingled with darkness
The damp plains, overgrown suburbs,
Places of known civic pride, of civic obscurity.

These are connected to my version of America
But the juice is elsewhere.

The actions of time and growth, whether economic growth or the sprawl of

suburbs, and the peculiarly evocative particularity of place names, all work outward so that there is no longer a stable or authoritative centre: 'the names [...] branch out to other referents', as 'Grand Galop' has it, and civic pride is quickly transformed into civic obscurity. The juice is always elsewhere, a ceaseless differentiation which characterises late twentieth century life even as it recalls deconstruction, and once more it is the luminous backdrop that we are turned towards: 'A mood soon to be forgotten / In crossed girders of light, cool downtown shadow / In this morning that has seized us again'. This leads to Ashbery's most confessional moment, where, as in 'Fragment' but with greater frankness, he lays bare the processes of his art:

I know that I braid too much my own
 Snapped-off perceptions of things as they come to me.
 They are private and always will be.

The question then, as Ashbery acknowledges, is where to proceed from this privacy:

Where then are the private turns of event
 Destined to boom later like golden chimes
 Released over a city from a highest tower?
 [...] Where are these roots?

Reviewing *Self-Portrait* in *Poetry Review* in 1978, Peter Didsbury quoted this passage and replied: 'Somewhere deep in the language itself, presumably'⁶⁶ and

⁶⁶ Peter Didsbury, 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', *Poetry Review*, 68 (April 1978), 62-65 (p. 63).

it is indeed in a coincidence of word and place, as Didsbury's other American poetic father, William Carlos Williams might have put it, that the poem ends, coming to the verge of naming the 'formal affair' for which the poet has been waiting:

All the rest is waiting
 For a letter that never arrives
 [...] The message was wise, and seemingly
 Dictated a long time ago.
 Its truth is timeless, but its time has still
 Not arrived, telling of danger, and the mostly limited
 Steps that can be taken against danger
 Now and in the future, in cool yards,
 In quiet small houses in the country,
 Our country, in fenced areas, in cool shady streets.

This is Ashbery's typically equivocal answer: an answer, of course, that only provokes further questions, but which guides us across a wide, nameless and poetic landscape, the linguistic or phenomenal 'juice' wrung from the empirically imprisoned locations which the speaker had earlier rejected. Thus the poet's permission to dream is gained by a kind of loyalty to the notion of a shared place which admits the coincidence of the quotidian and the national even as it seeks to particularise itself beyond simple identifications. This paradox points to something like that condition which Robert Crawford calls 'the constant making-new of America in which his identity is found and lost'.⁶⁷ In this chapter, I hope to have shown that Ashbery's serious play between permission and loyalty, 'leaving out' and 'putting down', advertisement and

protection, forms a complex response to contemporary conditions. The interplay between these terms is characteristic of the play of reality and unreality in the poetry of the domestic surreal.

⁶⁷ Crawford, *Identifying Poets*, p. 119.

Chapter II

'THE GREAT ACCIDENTAL ARCHITECT': FRANK O'HARA AND
THE POETRY OF POSTMODERN LIFE

Lying in a hammock on St. Mark's Place sorting my poems
 in the rancid nourishment of this mountainous island
 they are coming and we holy ones must go
 is Tibet historically a part of China? as I historically
 belong to the enormous bliss of American death

Frank O'Hara constantly and brazenly dramatises the tensions of the domestic surreal, strewing neatly formulated Baudelairean paradoxes throughout a poetry of excess and discontinuity. The twin impulses to momentous speech and a casual vernacular tone may have been variously emphasised in the collections O'Hara saw published during his own lifetime, as the titles *Odes* and *Lunch Poems* illustrate, but neither was privileged over the other. In his 'Introduction' to the *Collected Poems*, John Ashbery describes O'Hara's work as 'both modest and monumental', and echoes the poet's celebration of New York's 'rancid nourishment' when he describes the city as a 'lovely, corrupt, wholesome place'. The tensions of the poetry and the city intertwine, and although Ashbery denies the centrality of New York to all the 'New York School' poets other than O'Hara, elsewhere he is more willing to consider his own poetry in this same context, as in the interview with John Ash where he takes delight in Ash's description of his poetry as 'a kind of improvisatory architecture':

I think that's rather a beautiful formulation, architecture being so non-improvisatory [...] New Yorkers are always bemoaning the tearing down of lovely old buildings and the construction of ugly new ones, but that seems to me very much the way the whole place is organised – it's a sort of disposable city and always has been.

[Ash] Perhaps you would agree that your own diction and syntax imitate that, in the sense that you will use very shop-worn phrases, very slangy phrases, neologisms, and lyrical, 'poetic' language and any kind of diction juxtaposed.

[Ashbery] Yes, I would.¹

It is by now commonplace to view architecture as paradigmatic of postmodern art, following Linda Hutcheon's argument in *A Poetics Of Postmodernism*² and the geographer David Harvey's equally influential book *The Condition of Postmodernity*³. This paradigmatic relationship takes on a renewed importance, however, in the context of the domestic surreal, since the use made of architectural metaphors by Ashbery and O'Hara reveals an underlying concern with the shaping powers of poetic and architectural imaginations as well as an interest in locality which mark points of continuity between their work and that of Roy Fisher, their British contemporary. John Ash's remarks on Fisher help to articulate the literary and cultural contexts of O'Hara's work also:

Fisher's "City" is already a city of the mind. His Birmingham is also Baudelaire's Paris where everything, "scaffoldings, building blocks and old suburbs," becomes an allegory ("tout, pour moi, devient allégorie"); it is Eliot's "Unreal City, / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn"; it is the

¹ Ash, 'John Ashbery in conversation with John Ash', 34.

² Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics Of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988; repr. 1992).

³ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

hallucinatory Petersburg of Andrei Bely and Aleksandr Blok (which is also Mandelstam's "Petropolis"). And of course, it owes a lot to the example of Williams' *Patterson* [sic]. It is no longer a city temporally and spatially fixed. In some sense, against all the odds, Birmingham has become an aspect of Fisher's ideal, "Pan-European city of art."⁴

O'Hara's poetry, too, is concerned with the possibility of a 'Pan-European city of art', but from a markedly different because American perspective. It is in this context that O'Hara's description of Frank Lloyd Wright as 'the great accidental architect' can be seen as a self-identification, as part of the establishment of an aesthetic specific to New York which nevertheless implies a European other, since Wright designed the Guggenheim museum which helped to institutionalise Abstract Expressionism as part of the history of modern art. Serge Guilbaut's analysis of the rivalry between New York and Paris as cultural centres in the postwar period is often cited in critical work on O'Hara, but what is less often remarked is the continual presence of Paris in O'Hara's poetry.⁵ If O'Hara creates a Manhattan of the mind, at the back of that mind is Paris, and it is the Paris of a specific avant-garde tradition in which O'Hara's rôle as poet and proselytizer for a new movement in the visual arts finds its origins. O'Hara's work as a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (documented extensively elsewhere),⁶ his criticism,⁷ and his close friendship with painters

⁴ Ash, 'A Classic Post-Modernist', p. 46.

⁵ Serge Guilbaut, *How New York stole the idea of modern art : abstract expressionism, freedom, and the Cold War* trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

⁶ See Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*, 2nd edn (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), esp. pp. 75-112, and David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde*.

⁷ Frank O'Hara, *Art Chronicles 1954-1966* (New York: George Braziller, 1975), and *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, ed. by Donald Allen (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1983).

such as Willem de Kooning, Larry Rivers and Jasper Johns, all demonstrate his immersion in art at a time when New York was establishing itself as the focal point of international developments in painting and sculpture.⁸ Moreover, and more pertinently, O'Hara's rôle recalls that of two of his poetic models, Pierre Reverdy and Guillaume Apollinaire, who were both closely linked to the Cubist movement in painting as well as overseeing the transition in literary terms from Symbolism, through Cubism towards Surrealism, a term that Apollinaire invented.⁹ Apollinaire's journalism, and particularly the *chroniques* written for the *Mercure de France* (the journal where Ashbery would later publish the article on Reverdy to which I refer in Chapter One),¹⁰ must surely have been the principal model for O'Hara's own art chronicles, which mix anecdote and criticism to 'attain a kind of prose poetry', as Geoff Ward has remarked.¹¹ Like O'Hara, Apollinaire was also an inveterate *flâneur* and explorer of the city, the intermediary figure between Baudelaire's *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne* (The Painter of Modern Life) and the surreal urban explorers, Breton and Aragon.¹² A brief account of the rôle of the *flâneur* will help establish the importance of this urban French tradition to O'Hara's New York poetry.

It was in *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne* that Baudelaire gave his classic

⁸ Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

⁹ See Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: the Origins of the Avant-Garde in France, 1885 to World War I*, rev. edn (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 294.

¹⁰ See Guillaume Apollinaire, *Chroniques d'art 1902-1918*, ed. Leroy C. Breunig (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1960; repr. 1981).

¹¹ Ward, *Statutes of Liberty*, p. 37.

definition of the *flâneur* (literally, stroller) as he sought to contrast the painter Constantin Guys with the social type of the *dandy*. Where the *dandy* is aloof or indifferent, Guys is impassioned. Nor is Guys a philosopher, since 'his excessive love of visible, tangible things, condensed in plastic form' leads him to disparage metaphysicians.¹³ The *flâneur* immerses himself in the everyday world of the tangible while remaining somewhat intangible himself: 'to be at the centre of the world and to remain hidden from the world' is his goal.¹⁴ The *flâneur*, therefore, explores the boundary between private and public existence in the city, and Benjamin emphasises that this affects not just the nature of the *flâneur* as an individual but also the surrounding environment: 'the street becomes a dwelling for the *flâneur*; he is as much at home among the façades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls'.¹⁵

The *flâneur* recreates the city, but the city bodies forth the *flâneur*: this relation is characteristic of the dialectical response of experimental writing, and O'Hara's Paris is an example of how literary representations of cities can combine with the direct experience of urban life as the poets of the domestic surreal engage with both their contemporary situation and the avant-garde tradition. The nation, as well as the city, is constituted in this engagement, for just as Apollinaire described the innovative poetry of his time as 'a particular

¹² Apollinaire, *Le flâneur des deux rives* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1928; repr. 1975); Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes*, pp. 790-815.

¹³ Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes*, p. 795.

¹⁴ Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes*, p. 795.

¹⁵ Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1997; repr. 1999), p. 37.

lyric expression of the French nation'¹⁶, so did New York School poet Kenneth Koch declare O'Hara's work to be 'the last stage in the adaptation of twentieth-century avant-garde sensibility to poetry about contemporary American experience'.¹⁷ The tension between national-literary affiliation and O'Hara's more problematic individual status as a homosexual in the McCarthyite, pre-Stonewall era deserves further exploration, and can be shown to coincide in some of the poems with the interpenetration of domestic and surreal elements. O'Hara's fascination with the artistic creation of the self has a resounding impact on his handling of lyric form, so that self-definition, national identification and poetic craft are seen as interrelated aspects of his approach.

An early poem, 'A Doppelgänger', provides a starting-point for a consideration of O'Hara's take on artistic self-constitution and brings to light some of the special conditions under which we read his work. Donald Allen's work as editor of O'Hara's posthumous oeuvre allows the general reader access to details of the original manuscripts and anecdotal information regarding the circumstances of the poems' composition. The reader of contemporary poetry is rarely in this position, which would normally obtain only in the case of much older and more established canonical authors on whom extensive scholarly research had been done. Given the anecdotal, highly personal nature of O'Hara's poetry, the presence within the *Collected Poems* and *Poems Retrieved* of such an abundance of contextual information adds to the strange form of

¹⁶ Shattuck, *The Banquet Years*, p. 295.

intimacy that the poems themselves promote. 'A Doppelgänger' confronts the reader with the strangeness of that intimacy because if we refer to Allen's notes, we discover the hidden history of the poem's addressees. In each of the four main stanzas of the poem, a 'you' is questioned regarding its image of the 'I':

Do you mean that
 my yellow hair like
 thrashing wheat hangs
 wild over my forehead
 and blue limpets peer
 above my cheekbones
 Rilkean discoveries?

In the coda, this 'you' is revealed to be plural:

is it any of these my
 friends you visit when
 you think you think of me?

The syntax is ambiguous: are 'my friends' the disparate images of selfhood, the doppelgänger that O'Hara has enumerated, or is this an apostrophic address to 'my friends'? The omission of a comma after 'these' playfully brings this into question, and illustrates the peculiar function of the apostrophe as it is described by Jonathan Culler, that is as 'a device which the poetic voice uses to establish with an object a relationship which helps to constitute him.'¹⁸ Here, Culler is discussing apostrophes to inanimate objects, but his essay begins with

¹⁷ Bill Berkson, and Joe LeSueur, *Homage to Frank O'Hara* (Berkeley: Creative Arts Book Company, 1980), p. 208.

¹⁸ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, literature, deconstruction* (Routledge, 1981; repr. 2001), p. 157.

Quintilian, whose definition of the trope defines the addressee as simply 'some person other than the judge'¹⁹, and goes on to suggest that apostrophe may be central to the very condition of the lyric, citing John Stuart Mill: 'The lyric is not heard but overheard.'²⁰ Culler sees the apostrophe as establishing a 'temporality of writing', separate from empirical or narrative time, where the poetic utterance takes place *now* rather than in the past or in a narrative sequence, making the lyric a 'monument to immediacy',²¹. The wider implications of this for O'Hara's poetry will be discussed at length, but returning to 'A Doppelgänger' we can now appreciate the strange hall of mirrors that the poem constructs, for if the poetic voice constitutes its identity through the eyes of a 'you' whose referents have been suppressed, there is then in fact a reciprocal construction of a hybrid 'you', neither plural nor singular, constituted solely by its imputed images of the poetic voice. However, the ambiguous status of 'my friends' is complicated by our knowledge that the 'you' does have referents, for Allen's note on the poem reveals that in the manuscript, names of O'Hara's friends were written beside each stanza: John Ashbery by the first, Lyon Phelps by the second, George Montgomery by the third, and Ed Hale by the fourth. Thus the 'you' repeatedly invoked in the poem is revealed to be a guise, a series of 'doppelgänger' no more fixed in identity than the addresser but instead the result of hidden 'turns' (apostrophe literally means 'turn away') that minimise the features of the addressee even as the addresser maximalises his self-representations. This

¹⁹ Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, p. 151.

'monument to immediacy' dissolves into double-vision, and the last line of the poem renders this mimetically in 'you think you think'.

'A Doppelgänger' was never published in O'Hara's lifetime, so we cannot know whether he would have included the names as subtitles: naming, however, was to become one of the most radical features of his poetry, as can be seen even from a cursory examination of the titles of the poems: 'Poem Read at Joan Mitchell's', 'Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul', 'Joe's Jacket'. Ashbery has expressed reservations about this aspect of his friend's work:

[O'Hara's] poems are full of reminiscences of his friends. I don't do that. What is somebody who doesn't know who Norman and Jean-Paul and Joan are going to think of this? But that's the way he did it, and I think that it's the enthusiasm and euphoria that he got from his relationships with the people that is effective in his poems, even though he was writing a very personal kind of poetry.²²

The emphasis Ashbery places on the poetic constitution of relationships as opposed to the specific people with whom the relationships occur actually helps to articulate the affinity between him and O'Hara, just as the shifting pronouns of 'A Doppelgänger' serve to foreshadow Ashbery's own explorations of contingent subjects as much as O'Hara's. The interplay of intimacy and distance that I have discussed with relation to Ashbery can be seen to be equally central to an understanding of O'Hara's work. Charles Altieri comments:

To know a lunch counter is called Juliet's Corner or a person O'Hara

²⁰ Quoted in Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, p. 152.

²¹ Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, p. 168.

²² Piotr Sommer, 'An Interview In Warsaw', p. 307.

expects to meet is named Norman is a reminder for the reader that the specific details of another's life can appear only as momentary fragments, insisting through their particularity on his alienation from any inner reality they might possess.'²³

James Breslin amplifies this point and relates O'Hara to Ashbery:

O'Hara offers both the most vivid instance *and* the most powerful critique of his generation's poetics of immediacy. In O'Hara, as in the poetry of Ashbery, an elusive immediacy always remains other, and if O'Hara's lunch hour poems strain toward a literal realism, their rapidity (they do move much faster than time actually does) suggests an uneasiness with reality, as if O'Hara kept moving because he was afraid to stop and get involved.'²⁴

Ashbery worries that O'Hara's 'personal' naming is something that must be overcome by his treatment of relationships, where in fact they are inseparable aspects of his work, so that just as names become talismans of identities recovered from the threat of subsumption under official records in Fisher's later work, so in O'Hara's later poetry names resist generality and insist on the irreducible specificity of the life of others, a specificity which is the site of desperate celebration. Indeed, in the work of both poets, the act of naming which seems to invoke presence often actually signifies a troubling absence.

Here is Fisher:

Suddenly to distrust
the others' mode;
the others. Poinsettias or moths,
or Kenny and Leslie and Leonard,

²³ Altieri, 'From "Varieties of Immanentist Expression"', in *Frank O'Hara: To Be True to a City*, ed. by Jim Elledge (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), pp. 189-208 (pp. 193-194).

²⁴ James E. B. Breslin, 'Frank O'Hara', in *To Be True To A City*, pp. 253-298 (pp. 268-269).

Edie and Bernard and Dorothy,
the intake of '35.

The listing of names only serves to underline the remoteness of those who became 'the intake'. In O'Hara's poetry, we witness the conflict between an insatiable poetic need for others through whom one's self can be constituted and sustained, and the economic and cultural dynamic of the city which concentrates people in a small area even as it alienates them from one another through the pressures of work and social life. The importance of this experience of the city to an understanding of O'Hara's work was identified by Ashbery in his introduction to the *Collected Poems* in his discussion of 'livable space' [sic]:

That space, in Frank O'Hara's case, was not only the space of New York School painting but of New York itself, that kaleidoscopic lumber-room where laws of time and space are altered - where one can live a few yards away from a friend whom one never sees and whom one would travel miles to visit in the country.

The paradoxical effect of this combination of economic and social conditions is everywhere registered in the poetry. In 'All That Gas', forces of trade are juxtaposed with the poet's absent friends, suggesting without defining a causal link:

Tradewinds where are you blowing
Allen and Peter why haven't you come back
[...]
where have you gone, Ashes, and up and out
where the Sorbonne commissions frigidaires
from Butor and Buffet and Alechinsky storages

What Altieri identifies in his reading of 'The Day Lady Died' as O'Hara's pronounced "'and" rhetoric'²⁵ serves to link events, thoughts, and quotidian objects into the temporality of the poem without situating them in narrative or empirical time: the effect is to confront us with a choice between taking the poem as an invitation to construct links in an ongoing process of composition and reading the poem as a resistant surface, a record of the death in representation of the unrecoverable ephemera of everyday life:

and the rainbow is slooping over the Chrysler Building
like a spineless trout, ugly and ephemeral
it is no sign of hope when things get ugly

The poem will not allow us to choose one option over the other. It continually absorbs objects into an implied consciousness: 'a 6th Avenue conscience [...] a limburger prescience [...] a lower East Sideness' without ever explaining, for example, how a processed cheese might endow the poet with foreknowledge of the future, the joke being that all ephemera can do in a poem is foretell their own death:

and the slender Ziegfeld-Egyptian tobacco
smiles and (roll your own) rolls on
where it makes the puddle even browner
not as skin is brown but as souls go bad

What is important in the poem is the relation between the speaker and the named people and objects, and this relation is not allowed to achieve a clarity of

²⁵ Altieri, 'From "Varieties of Immanentist Expression"', 205.

perspective which would reveal the poet as omniscient creator: rather, he walks up the muggy street, in the shadow of the abattoir, and experiences the evasions of the city, its refusal to be thoroughly assimilated to the poet's purpose. His friends are absent, and the tradewinds blow tobacco into puddles: even abstract categories like beauty recede into throwaway reference: 'Beauty! said Vera Prentiss-Simpson to Pal Joe / and the hideaway was made secure against the hares'.²⁶ In Allen's note on the poem, Christopher Middleton is quoted pointing out that the latter line contains half of the title of a book of poems by André Breton²⁷, so that the retreat from beauty into the 'hideaway' of reference is double, since the 'hideaway' is a disguised literary reference. The allusion does not 'unlock' the text – its mimetic and textual significances remain separate and unresolved, so that while it can be read as a signifier for obscurity and concealment, its origin in surrealism becomes what Timothy Mathews calls a 'talismán closed in on itself' in his discussion of Apollinaire's poem 'Les Fenêtres', where the line 'Quand on a le temps on a la liberté'²⁸ refers to Parisian newspapers of the pre-First World War period, *Le Temps* and *La Liberté* in a lower case which obscures their context, inviting a literal reading even as it secretly admits its roots in the quintessentially quotidian experience of the newspaper.²⁹

²⁶ These characters appear in *Pal Joey*, a Rogers and Hart musical based on short stories written by John O'Hara (no relation) for the *New Yorker* and adapted to film in 1957 with Frank Sinatra, Rita Hayworth and Kim Novak. See

<http://www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/albm76.html>

²⁷ The title is *Jeunes cerisiers garantis contre les lièvres*, or 'Young cherry trees made secure against the hares'.

²⁸ Apollinaire, *Caligrammes* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1925; repr. 1996), p. 25.

²⁹ Timothy Mathews, *Reading Apollinaire: Theories of Poetic Language* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).

This demonstrates one of the many ways in which O'Hara was influenced by Apollinaire, and indeed the origins of this specific technique are directly acknowledged in the opening line of 'Poem Read at Joan Mitchell's', 'At last you are tired of being single', which is a bathetic rendition of 'À la fin tu es las de ce monde ancien' (At last you are tired of this antique world'), the first line of Apollinaire's 'Zone'.

'All That Gas' presents everyday life as oppressive: the poet cannot celebrate its disjunctions but experiences them instead as irreducible noise, ending in the bizarre image of the parrot who sings and defecates simultaneously, an acknowledgement of the poem's strange combination of lyric and expurgatory urges. Elsewhere and in more rhapsodic mood, O'Hara attempts to orchestrate the noise, and one of his most effective techniques for doing so is the apostrophe, where the addresser and addressee construct a reciprocal significance in identity which, because it partakes of a 'now' of discourse, creates the illusion that a spatial relationship can overcome the effects of time, even as it creates the illusion of spontaneous outburst. Whitman's paeans provide one towering precedent:

Sea of the brine of life and of unshovell'd yet always-ready graves,
Howler and scooper of storms, capricious and dainty sea,
I am integral with you, I too am of one phase and of all phases.³⁰

But O'Hara's apostrophes never assert such a cosmic unity of self and world.

³⁰ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Penguin, 2000), p. 42.

What happens to Whitman when he is adapted to a European verse tradition is that his expansive modes of address are harnessed to a more sceptical and fragmented subjectivity:

Ô géraniums diaphanes, guerroyeurs sortilèges,
 Sacrilèges monomanes!
 Emballages, dévergondages, douches! Ô pressoirs
 Des vendanges des grands soirs!³¹

(O diaphanous geraniums, sorcerous warriors,
 Sacrilegious obsessions!
 Packaging, debauchery, showers! O presses
 Of the great evening grape harvests!

Thus did Laforgue, Whitman's first French translator and famously one of the forerunners of Anglo-American modernism, begin one of his most surreal songs of self from the pivotal collection *Derniers Vers*. As Anne Holmes remarks, 'the passage has meaning only if the reader relates each unit to an absent narrator', and the surreal apostrophic subject thereby constituted is one that is ready to make the return journey across the Atlantic:

Oh! kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas!
 You really are beautiful! Pearls,
 harmonicas, jujubes, aspirins! all
 the stuff they've always talked about

still makes a poem a surprise!
 There things are with us every day
 even on beachheads and biers. They
 do have meaning. They're strong as rocks.

The transformation of these surreal conglomerates into subjects draws them into the poet's construction of self. However, the objects belong to no apparent semantic code, as James Lowney notes:³² furthermore, there is no indication as to who 'they' are, these people who might otherwise have provided the unifying context for these objects. This kind of 'stuff' can surely only be 'with us' every day on the plane of the imaginary, especially if they are to be present on 'beachheads and biers', which suggest warfare. Their strange disunity, and the absence of a clear context from which they emerge, prevents the poetic self from dominating them and creating an over-arching system of meaning which could repress their difference and turn them into 'ideas' in a symbolic order which would be anathema to O'Hara as to his poetic master here, Williams, who proclaimed 'No ideas / but in things',³³ but their ephemerality is challenged by the epic backdrop of war against which their continued vitality is asserted. As Lowney says, these are 'hardly the "things" to which Williams refers' in 'A Sort of a Song', and yet Lowney omits to point out that in both poems the war represents the threat against which the poetry of everyday life must defend itself. 'A Sort of a Song' is, after all, placed at the head of a collection, *The Wedge*, in which the author insists on the continued importance of poetry during wartime:

³¹ Jules Laforgue, *L'Imitation de Notre-Dame la Lune, Le Concile féérique, Des Fleurs de bonne volonté, Derniers vers*, ed. by Pascal Pia (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1979), p. 209.

³² John Lowney, *The American avant-garde tradition : William Carlos Williams, postmodern poetry, and the politics of cultural memory* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press ; Associated University Presses, 1997), p. 112.

³³ William Carlos Williams, *Collected Poems II: 1939-1962* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), p. 55.

But who will stay to be these numbers
when all the lights are dead?

Juxtaposition becomes a way to reassert the presence of the dead spatially to compensate for their absence in time.³⁵ However, the poem is conscious of the doomed nature of its aspirations: its ever-changing landscape has been charted extensively elsewhere,³⁶ and every act of critical reading fixes the lyric at a specific point in time which is the critic's encounter with the text, so that the poem's flow is arrested or fixed as an identity. O'Hara's poem 'The Critic' casts the critic as 'the assassin // of my orchards', but in 'In Memory of My Feelings', the artist's own activity in 'finishing' a work of art reveals that the first act of criticism has always already been performed when we encounter a poem:

And yet
I have forgotten my loves, and chiefly that one, the cancerous
statue which my body could no longer contain,
against my will
against my love
 become art,
I could not change it into history
 and so remember it,
and I have lost what is always and everywhere
 present, the scene of my selves, the occasion of these ruses,
 which I myself and singly must now kill
and save the serpent in their midst.

This is a defining moment in the development of the domestic surreal, where the

³⁵ In an extended reading of this poem, Geoff Ward comments: 'the historical sweep of O'Hara's poem may finally be read as a series of spatial images standing for a temporal plight.' Ward, *Statutes of Liberty*, p. 78.

veteran, Jack, who finds that his wife Violet has a new lover, John. In O'Hara's poetry, the memory of the Second World War and its significance as a reminder of the preciousness of everyday life merges with the ongoing experience of the Cold War and the struggle of America's gay and black populations in the oppressive atmosphere of the 1950s and 1960s. O'Hara aligned these two groups repeatedly, as in 'A Young Poet' and 'The Day Lady Died', and a comparison of the two poems is useful in demonstrating how O'Hara's best poems succeeded by eschewing declamation. 'A Young Poet' narrates the progress of the gay poet John Wieners as he gives a reading, writes, and is threatened by police. The poem ends:

The threats
of inferiors are frightening
School,
or a painter too drunk
to fight off a mugging,
the insight which comes as a kiss
if you are a Negro choosing your own High
or a poet exhausted by
and follows as a curse.

While we may feel that the painter should simply be more careful, it is clear that a kind of nobility is being asserted here, a portrayal of blacks, artists and homosexuals as heroes suffering together. This poem demonstrates that O'Hara could be moved to declamation, but it lacks the control and subtlety necessary to make that declamation effective. However, as Lowney has noted³⁸, in 'The Day

³⁸ Lowney, p. 116.

Lady Died' (O'Hara's elegy for Billie Holiday) the seemingly casual references to authors made by O'Hara are in fact pointers to a history of the oppression of artists:

In the GOLDEN GRIFFIN I get a little Verlaine
for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard although I do
think of Hesiod, trans. Richmond Lattimore or
Brendan Behan's new play or *Le Balcon* or *Les Nègres*
of Genet

Genet and Verlaine were both gay writers who spent time in prison, while Behan was imprisoned as a member of the IRA, and Billie Holiday herself was pursued by the FBI, while the concert at which O'Hara remembers seeing her perform in the last lines of the poem was an impromptu one which was strictly illegal, since '[her] cabaret card had been revoked because of her heroin use'.³⁹ In this poem, the cigarettes, liqueur, snacks and details of appointments mix company with the books, helping to draw attention away from the signifying power of the books' authors' names until the sudden revelation of the poem's ending, which retroactively charges these details with meaning, in contrast to 'All That Gas' where no such galvanising force can be found. Thus O'Hara is able to orchestrate the noise of everyday life, registering oppression as it occurs amid the tangle of quotidian events and struggles. This way of communicating tragedy through near indifference partly recalls Auden's 'Musée des Beaux

³⁹ Lehman, *The Last Avant Garde*, p. 198.

Arts',⁴⁰ but in O'Hara's poetry the speaker is not the wry lecturer in contemplation of the masterpiece but is instead the 'someone else' who is 'just walking dully along'. O'Hara often refers directly to acts or threats of violence in just this indifferent manner, as in 'Poem ('I live above a dyke bar and I'm happy')', where O'Hara ironically pretends that the police might be outside the bar to protect and to serve rather than to conduct one of the raids that was customary in the years before Stonewall (by which time O'Hara was dead):⁴¹ 'the police car is always near the door / in case they cry / or the key doesn't work in the lock'. In 'Far From the Porte des Lilas and the Rue Pergolèse', O'Hara casually enumerates 'the danger of being Proustian / and the danger of being Pasternakesque / and the cops outside the BALAJO frisking Algerians / who'd been quietly playing "surf" with their knuckles'. Rather than make these events the subject of public and monumental protest, O'Hara preserves the shock of their violence by situating it in the ongoing process of everyday life, and in this way the poet comes to resemble Pasternak's Zhivago, of whom O'Hara wrote that 'passively withdrawn from action which his conscience cannot sanction, [he] finds the art for which an occasion will continue to exist. This qualitative distinction between two kinds of significance is as foreign to our own society as it is to that of the U.S.S.R.'. Action in this case includes the poetry of direct protest, and this essay is particularly important to an understanding of O'Hara's politics because as the preceding quotation makes clear, it deliberately refers

⁴⁰ W. H. Auden, *Collected Shorter Poems, 1927-1957* (London: Faber, 1969), 123-124.

beyond its Russian setting, reflecting back on the American poet's own sense of social pressures:

Poetry does not collaborate with society, but with life. Soviet society is not alone in seducing the poet to deliver temporary half-truths which will shortly be cast aside for the excitement of a new celebration of nonlife.

Calling this article 'far in advance of anything else being written in the West' at the time *Dr Zhivago* was published in America, David Herd has discussed the relevance of Pasternak to New York School politics:

As [Pasternak] put it (and to reiterate his most compelling formulation), 'People nowadays imagine that art is like a fountain, whereas it is a sponge. They think art has to flow forth, whereas what it has to do is absorb and become saturated.' What art was to absorb and become saturated by were the circumstances in which it was made.⁴²

Pasternak, then, like Apollinaire, takes his place in the evolution of a poetics that must work against the contradictions between the ephemerality of circumstance and the monumental immediacy of the lyric,⁴³ or as Paul Goodman puts it, 'the enormous problem of being plausible to the actuality and yet creatively imagining something unlooked-for'.⁴⁴ Goodman's article, 'Advance-guard writing in America: 1900-1950', from which this quotation comes, played a major part in formulating O'Hara's own approach to poetry through its formulation of 'Occasional poetry':

⁴¹ See D'Emilio's comment on this, quoted in Chapter One.

⁴² Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, p. 36.

⁴³ Although *Dr Zhivago* is a novel, it is one in which lyric poetry has the last word, for it culminates in the poems written by its central character.

Finally, the essential aim of our advance-guard must be the physical re-establishment of community. This is to solve the crisis of alienation in the simple way [...] In literary terms this means: to write for them about them personally, and so break the roles and format they are huddled in [...] Yet such personal writing can occur only in a small community of acquaintances, where everybody knows everybody and understands what is at stake; in our estranged society it is just this intimate community that is lacking. Of course it is lacking! Then give up the ambitious notion of public artist. The advance-guard action is to create such community starting where one happens to be. The community comes to exist by having its culture; the artist makes this culture.⁴⁵

Terence Diggory makes the point that at the time O'Hara first read this article, 'he was completing his Master's degree at the University of Michigan, in circumstances that estranged him, geographically if not emotionally, from the friends he had recently made in New York',⁴⁶ friends such as John Ashbery and the painter Jane Freilicher, so that as the poet planned his return to New York the idea of an artistic community must have appeared particularly vital. A further reason for the attraction to 'intimate community' for both Goodman and O'Hara may have been their sexuality, since gay communities in postwar America were necessarily structured in this way in any case,⁴⁷ and Goodman would seem to allude to this while arguing that the advance-guard community

⁴⁴ Paul Goodman, *Utopian Essays and Practical Proposals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), p. 212.

⁴⁵ Goodman, p. 211.

⁴⁶ Terence Diggory, 'Community "Intimate" or "Inoperative": New York School Poets and Politics from Paul Goodman to Jean-Luc Nancy', in *The scene of my selves: new work on New York School poets*, ed. by Terence Diggory and Stephen Paul Miller (Orono: The National Poetry Foundation, 2001), pp. 13-32, (p. 19).

⁴⁷ See Stuart Byron, 'Frank O'Hara, Poetic "Queertalk"', in Elledge, pp. 64-69, (p. 65): 'Even if he was speaking from the grave, O'Hara was, in 1977, only the third American poet of major stature to be overtly gay - Paul Goodman and Allen Ginsberg were the others'. For more on gay community in the postwar period see D'Emilio, 'Gay Politics and Community in San Francisco Since World War II', and the discussion of this in Chapter One.

would need to go beyond such personal interests:

We know that for various moral and political reasons such movements toward community have occurred widely, sporadically, since the war. But no such community can flourish on moral, economic, or political grounds alone, for – whatever its personal satisfactions – its humane integration cannot compete with the great society, however empty it is. As a friend to all such places, I would urge them to attach to themselves their artists and give them free rein, even at the risk of the *disruptive* influence of these artists.⁴⁸

Ultimately, where O'Hara and Goodman would part company was in this notion of competition with 'the great society', for it is here that Goodman most resembles other intellectuals of the American 1950s who sought in the avant-garde a way to resist not only the social oppression of the Eisenhower administration but also the changing face of everyday life and the perceived development of a 'mass culture',⁴⁹ as is subtly hinted at by the spatial metaphor of 'heightening' which occurs in Goodman's discussion of art's engagement with the domestic:

An aim, one might almost say the chief aim, of art is to heighten the everyday, to bathe the world in such a light of imagination and criticism that the persons who are living in it without meaning or feeling find that it is meaningful and feelingful to live.⁵⁰

No clearer demonstration can be made of the contrast between this and the attitude of O'Hara than the poet's 'Personism: A Manifesto':

⁴⁸ Goodman, p. 211.

⁴⁹ See also Robert Von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture 1945-1980* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 175-196.

⁵⁰ Goodman, 212.

Too many poets act like a middle-aged mother trying to get her kids to eat too much cooked meat, and potatoes with drippings (tears). I don't give a damn whether they eat or not. Forced feeding leads to excessive thinness (effete). Nobody should experience anything they don't need to, if they don't need poetry bully for them. I like the movies too. And after all, only Whitman and Crane and Williams, of the American poets, are better than the movies.

This is a very different notion of competition with 'the great society', one in which art has no elevated vantage from which to perform its workings on the everyday. O'Hara's comments can thus be seen in the context of other pronouncements on this subject by poets of the domestic surreal. For instance, in his review of an exhibition of 'New Realists', which I quote more fully in my introduction, Ashbery insists that 'the phenomena evoked by the artist in this show are not phenomena, but part of our experience, our lives - created by us and creating us.'⁵¹ John Ash, meanwhile, suggests that 'plastics' and 'technical commodities [...] do not have to dominate us. They can be used. They can instruct and enhance'.⁵² The common theme is that we are as much constructed by everyday life as constructing it in turn, and this has implications for poetic language, implications which cause critics like Robert Von Hallberg, an American critic but in the line of Donald Davie, no small measure of disquiet:

Incorporating popular cultural subjects into poetry directly involved questions of poetic style. Most poets, like O'Hara and Ashbery, sought stylistic techniques somehow modeled on their subjects. But others, such as Hecht, Hollander, and Cassity, used the concentrations and emphases of

⁵¹ Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, pp. 81-82.

⁵² John Ash, 'The Poet's Grandmother and Other Dilemmas,' p. 40.

traditional poetic techniques as a source of measurement – sometimes critical, sometimes fond – of their subjects. And these, I think, are the richer poems, for they successfully and courageously hold pop culture up to the test of comparison with that culture represented by the masters of English poetry.⁵³

O'Hara's disdain for poetic technique as 'measurement' lies behind his attack on Robert Lowell in his interview with Edward Lucie-Smith:

I think Lowell has [...] a confessional manner which [lets him] get away with things that are really just plain bad but you're supposed to be interested because he's supposed to be so upset.

L-S: [*Laughs.*]

O'H: And I don't think that anyone has to get themselves to go and watch lovers in a parking lot necking in order to write a poem, and I don't see why it's admirable if they feel guilty about it. They should feel guilty [...] And then if you liken them to skunks putting their noses into garbage pails, you've just done something perfectly revolting. No matter what the metrics are. And the metrics aren't all that unusual. Every other person in any university in the United States could put that thing into metrics.⁵⁴

The challenge, then, is to develop a poetic which can admit both the shaping influence of everyday life and the reshaping play of the poet, so as to avoid what Terence Diggory identifies as a dichotomy between 'the romantic Self making the world' and 'the postmodern World making the self'.⁵⁵ O'Hara emphasises the rôle of New York in the development of his poetic, but also casts that poetic as an act of artistic will, foregrounding the act of composition in the writing. 'My Heart' is a statement of intent, and shapes itself using a rhetoric that explicitly sets itself against dichotomies:

⁵³ Von Hallberg, p. 177.

⁵⁴ Frank O'Hara, *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, ed. by Donald Allen (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1983), p. 13.

I'm not going to cry all the time
 nor shall I laugh all the time,
 I don't prefer one "strain" to another.
 I'd have the immediacy of a bad movie,
 not just a sleeper, but also the big,
 over-produced first-run kind. I want to be
 at least as alive as the vulgar. And if
 some aficionado of my mess says "That's
 not like Frank!", all to the good! I
 don't wear brown and grey suits all the time,
 do I? No. I wear workshirts to the opera,
 often. I want my feet to be bare,
 I want my face to be shaven, and my heart -
 you can't plan on the heart, but
 the better part of it, my poetry, is open.

One notes again the embrace of popular culture, especially in the use of negative terms as positive aims for artistic aspiration. The 'vulgar' is 'alive', and as we know from O'Hara's essay on Pasternak, it is the poet's task to collaborate with life. The nature of this collaboration will be improvisatory: 'you can't plan' on it, and as in 'A Step Away From Them', the poet triumphs over dichotomies of 'inside' and 'outside' through the displacement of his heart, emphasising the mobility and malleability of the poetic self. In both poems, the heart is the subject of a claim given weight by its placement at the poem's end, and in both cases the interiority of the heart is challenged. In 'My Heart', the heart is 'open', while in 'A Step Away From Them', 'my heart is in my / pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy'. Susan Rosenbaum comments that 'spatial metaphors of interiority fall short in defining this position, because O'Hara himself, through

⁵⁵ Diggory, 'Community', *The scene of my selves*, p. 27.

his use of temporality and movement, deconstructs the distinction between inside and outside, surface and depth, sincerity and artifice, consumption and self-production'.⁵⁶ The rôle of the heart also draws attention to the somatic and erotic aspects of O'Hara's poetic city. In 'To the Mountains in New York' (which refers to the skyscrapers of the city rather than the mountains of New York State), O'Hara combines the inversion of negative terms, the celebration of vulgarity, and the somatic rendering of the city:

I love this hairy city.
 It's wrinkled like a detective story
 and noisy and getting fat and smudged
 lids hood the sharp hard black eyes.

In 'Ode to Joy', the heightened speech expected of the ode form is delivered rhetorically by the anaphoric 'and' rhetoric, as Altieri would put it, but the eroticised contents are drawn from the popular media and low-brow culture.

Once more, vulgarity is invoked as the poet's aspiration:

for our symbol we'll acknowledge vulgar materialistic laughter
 over an insatiable sexual appetite
 and the streets will be filled with racing forms
 and the photographs of murderers and narcissists and movie stars
 will swell from the walls and books alive in steaming rooms
 to press against our burning flesh not once but interminably

Graham Clarke has proposed two poles between which literary representations of New York have developed: the vertical axis of Whitman's

⁵⁶ Susan Rosenbaum, 'Frank O'Hara, *Flâneur* of New York', in *The scene of my selves : new work on*

'Manahatta', 'in which the *vertical* growth of the city is redolent of its promise and ultimate condition',⁵⁷ and the horizontal axis of Melville's *Bartleby*, 'which rarely leaves a street-level in which the movement, such as it is, is into a dark and inner nothingness where the spirit is, literally, paralysed.'⁵⁸ O'Hara, well aware of the history of New York's representations, subverts the poles by celebrating both, and 'Ode to Joy' shows how deliberate this move is, cruising along at street-level, 'swelling' the interior space of gay bath-house culture until it becomes exterior, vertical, Whitmanian:

Buildings will go up into the dizzy air as love itself goes in
and up the reeling life that it has chosen for once or all
[...]
and the hairs dry out that summon anxious declaration of the organs
as they rise like buildings to the needs of temporary neighbors
pouring hunger through the heart to feed desire in intravenous ways
like the ways of gods with humans in the innocent combination of light

Here, the transcendent promise of Whitman's 'Manahatta' is eroticised with an allusion, perhaps, to Zeus having his 'way' with humans, while the 'disposable' nature of urban construction is linked to the promiscuity of the bath-house. O'Hara's awareness of the spatial nature of his urban allegory is made plain by the sun's reproach in 'A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island', which affirms the poet's fascination with the dirty charms of the horizontally

New York School poets, ed. by Terence Diggory and Stephen Paul Miller (Orono: The National Poetry Foundation, 2001), pp. 143-173, (p. 157).

⁵⁷ Graham Clarke, 'A Sublime and Atrocious' Spectacle: New York and the Iconography of Manhattan Island', in *The American City: Literary and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. by Graham Clarke (London: Vision Press, 1988), pp. 36-61, (p.37).

⁵⁸ Clarke, p. 38.

experienced city:

It's
easier for me to speak to you out
here. I don't have to slide down
between buildings to get your ear.
I know you love Manhattan, but
you ought to look up more often.

One aspect of the poet's inversion of terms that critics have found more troubling is O'Hara's sexually charged portrayal of blackness. Although clearly meant as a positive contribution to the reconfiguration of black / white relationships, O'Hara's treatment of blackness fails, and all the more so for the contemporary reader, because it reinforces precisely the given terms of white stereotyping of black people, as Aldon Nielsen points out when he talks about 'the standard attribution of genital centeredness that white discourse makes to the nonwhite'⁵⁹. In 'Ode: Salute to the French Negro Poets', Melville's dark interiority is given a strange sexual twist:

The beauty of America, neither cool jazz nor devoured Egyptian heroes,
lies in
lives in the darkness I inhabit in the midst of sterile millions

the only truth is face to face, the poem whose words become your mouth
and dying in black and white we fight for what we love, not are

There is a detectable desire to ground a representation of America in the triumph of love in the poem, but it is a love all too conditioned by exoticism. This is the

trade-off for O'Hara's romantic identifications, and it is a hard bargain to make, even if driven by honourable intentions:

For if there is fortuity it's in the love we bear each other's differences
in race which is the poetic ground on which we rear our smiles

In fact, the 'poetic ground' of the poem is, once more, New York, as the opening lines make clear, once more situating the poet diachronically:

From near the sea, like Whitman my great predecessor, I call
to the spirits of other lands to make fecund my existence

In a familiar move, the poet's address works to constitute his own identity through his absorption of the addressees, who become aids to fertility. This move is repeated and made more troubling in 'Answer to Vosnesensky & Evtushenko' when O'Hara, acting as representative of the 'poets of America' writes in protest against contemporary Russian poetic representations of America:

We are tired
of your dreary tourist ideas of our Negro selves

The problem is that O'Hara himself is a tourist in black America. 'Our Negro selves' is evidently intended to absorb black Americans into the poet's own plural and diverse selfhood as it is enumerated in 'In Memory of My Feelings'

⁵⁹ Quoted in Ben Friedlander, 'Strange Fruit: O'Hara, Race and the Color of Time', in *The scene of my selves : new work on New York School poets*, ed. by Terence Diggory and Stephen Paul Miller (Orono: The National Poetry Foundation, 2001), pp. 123-141, (p. 128).

where the word 'selves' is so dextrously handled. No such deftness can be attributed to the following lines:

We poets of America have loved you
 [...] and the strange black cock which has become ours despite your envy
 [...] I consider myself to be black and you not even part

Here, the attempt to make negative terms into positive markers of identity remains locked in the dichotomy it claims to escape, and the desire to assume the colour it reifies is crassly expressed: this represents a failure to judge the terms of the occasion, and thus a failure of O'Hara's critical enterprise in seeking to develop an Occasional poetry. It also points to the troubling tendency towards cultural tourism which marks O'Hara's identity-making elsewhere.

Ashbery undermined the dichotomy of 'here' and 'elsewhere' early on in his poetic career with 'The Instruction Manual' as I have demonstrated previously. Like Ashbery, O'Hara sought to collapse the opposition by absorbing everyday life, dream, identity and otherness onto the plane of phenomena so that their established positions within an empirical or perspectival consensus could be deconstructed. However, the desire to constitute all these phenomena in a framework that also acknowledged its own groundedness in the local and the specific actually led O'Hara to a Williamsian nationalism which has been replicated by some critical work on the poet, most notably by David Lehman. In this framework, New York and thus America become the centre of the international avant-garde now fully understood in

national terms, and more specifically in terms of a transition from France to the United States. Lehman's *The Last Avant Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* repeatedly emphasises the cultural capital meant to have been acquired in the process, casting the development of the New York School in the terms of the School of Paris:

The poets of the New York School were as heterodox, as belligerent toward the literary establishment, and as loyal to each other, as their Parisian predecessors had been. The 1950s and early 60s in New York were their banquet years. It is as though they translated the avant-garde idiom of "perpetual collaboration" from the argot of turn-of-the-century Paris to the rough hewn vernacular of the American metropolis at midcentury.⁶⁰

Of O'Hara, Lehman writes that 'The painters adored him. Philip Guston called him "our Apollinaire."' ⁶¹ Apollinaire features again and again as the epitome of the poet as impresario:

[O'Hara] was a poet of great originality, a relentless instigator and inveterate collaborator, as well as a champion of the avant-garde in painting and sculpture, and he managed to combine these roles more effectively and with more imagination than anyone since Apollinaire hailed the virtues of Cubism and Surrealism in Paris.⁶²

When Ashbery sent Koch the poem 'Europe', Lehman's report of Koch's response showed that this identification was already firmly established in 1960: "It seems to me that you finally succeeded in doing what Apollinaire said he & the Cubists had to do, destroy everything so it can be put back together again in

⁶⁰ Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde*, p. 2.

⁶¹ Lehman, p. 8.

⁶² Lehman, p. 172.

a new way.'⁶³ O'Hara himself made a clear statement of intent in 'Memorial Day 1950', a joyous celebration of the heritage of the avant-garde which begins with exactly that metaphor of Cubist creation-through-destruction: 'Picasso made me tough and quick, and the world; / just as in a minute plane trees are knocked down / outside my window by a crew of creators.' Towards the end of the poem, O'Hara can be found reading music 'by Guillaume Apollinaire's clay candelabra.' Two years later, in 'Day and Night in 1952', O'Hara's establishment of a *côterie*, his exoticism and his longing for Paris are all intertwined in a surreal haibun. The opening prose section combines echoes of Rimbaud and the Auden of 'The Orators' in a surreal lecture which begins with the struggle of the artist

to convey as well as those [ancient] poets the simplicity of things, the bland and amused stare of garages and banks, the hysterical bark of a dying dog which is not unconcerned with human affairs but dwells in the cave of the essential passivity of his kind. Kine? their warm sweet breaths exist nowhere but in classical metre [...]

The poem asserts its improvisatory nature by playing on the phonetic similarity of 'kind' and 'kine'. The poem becomes embroiled in a self-disgust which Geoff Ward sees as typical of gay writers before Stonewall,⁶⁴ and which is poised between the parodic and the abject in this passage:

We do not know any more the exquisite manliness of all brutal acts because we are sissies and if we're not sissies we're unhappy and too busy. Be not discouraged by your own inept affection. I don't want any of you to be really unhappy, just camp it up a bit and whine, whineola, baby. [...] What

⁶³ Lehman, p. 85.

⁶⁴ Ward, *Statutes of Liberty*, pp. 80-81.

do you want of me? or my friends? or all the dopes you make demands of in toilets, there's no gratuity for you in it.

The poet contrasts his attitude to the nameless gay 'cutie' addressee with the identity-play he indulges in with his friends:

John, for instance, thinks I am the child of my own old age; Jimmy is cagey with snide remarks [...] Grace may secretly distrust me but we are both so close to the abyss that we must see a lot of each other, grinning and carrying on [...]

This paranoiac atmosphere eventually results in rupture and silence, before the poet restores control by shifting location:

What can I do? I can

and then I, ravished and indeed under an enormous pressure of circumstance, paced the carpet, opened the casement, plunged my perspiring hands into a basin of iced cologne my mother had thoughtfully left in a corner on a large tea-table, wrinkled and unwrinkled my brow in a ripple of anxiety, and felt desperately ill.

This new departure then suddenly unwinds into a long verse column where 'of' ends every line, foregrounding the idea of the poem as a language game generated by arbitrarily adopted rules. This idea is in itself firmly grounded in avant-garde tradition, recalling the games of the Surrealists, such as the 'cadavre exquis': it also evokes the experiments of Roussel, whose *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* enclosed its verses in a proliferation of parentheses, and of Gertrude Stein, whose experiments with prepositions also had such a marked effect on Ashbery. The sudden break in the poem prompts the question as to whether this

represents a shift from day to night, as the title would suggest: possibly, the playful use of anaphora is meant to suggest the altered structures of night-time consciousness, to mime 'the pressure wheel stone of / desire'. However, this last section of the poem is marked by a very conscious disquiet about desire:

I do not want to be victim of
 the ability to enthuse myself at or of
 and especially kissy people who are of
 the darker race. Did I say Dark?

The poet's self-disgust and his identification with Africa merge troublingly when he describes himself 'pretending to be the Queen of Africa', and the connection between this exoticism and the veneration of Paris is made by their juxtaposition in this passage:

of
 what comparative device may I avail myself of
 pretending to be the Queen of Africa and of
 Suez. Perhaps most especially of
 Suez, since Aden is most beautiful of
 courses, having the famous flamingoes of
 Saratoga flown over for that weekend of
 mad irregular what else! Of
 distances I can only say Paris! you of
 the paper route, you fictitious of
 all the prancers in my ardent imagination of
 which are you not the least and most of
 what I think about the world of
 no illusion, not an iota!

Again and again this city 'prances' through O'Hara's ardent imagination: in 'Second Avenue' we have 'a Paris / of voluptuary chases, lays, choices, what we

know and savor'; in 'Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour [sic] to Joan and Jean-Paul', O'Hara contemplates the rue Frémicourt on a map of Paris and is 'happy to find it like a bird / flying over Paris et ses environs'. The poet exclaims: 'I wish I were reeling around Paris / instead of reeling around New York' and the willed, continuous presence of the poet's friends, Allen, Peter, and the recently married Jane Hazan née Freilicher (whose absence so often troubles him), becomes synonymous with the willed continuous presence of an avant-garde in New York to match that of Paris and, indeed, the continuous presence of the poem in time:

The only thing to do is simply continue [...]
 blue light over the Bois de Boulogne it continues
 the Seine continues
 the Louvre stays open it hardly closes at all [...]
 Shirley Goldfarb continues to be Shirley Goldfarb
 and Jane Hazan continues to be Jane Freilicher (I think!) [...]
 but we shall continue to be ourselves everything continues to be possible
 René Char, Pierre Reverdy, Samuel Beckett it is possible isn't it
 I love Reverdy for saying yes, though I don't believe it

As in 'In Memory of My Feelings', O'Hara finally concedes his own defeat, and once more the poem becomes a memorial, a place of memory or archive of the American avant-garde that would be archived in turn in the critical work of Marjorie Perloff and David Lehman. Jed Rasula makes the parallel between O'Hara's poetic work and his work as a curator:

Frank O'Hara is the exemplary chronicler of the shift from a museum with to one without walls, as his poems track his passage from the physical plant as such - the Museum of Modern Art, where he was a curator -

through the streets of Manhattan, which manifest themselves as a rotating exhibit to which his poems contribute the placards [...] The museum, exceeding its allotted bounds, contaminates the whole of culture, remaking it in its own image.⁶⁵

Rasula sees this chronicling activity as symptomatic of the postmodern society of simulacra, but it must be pointed out that it also parallels the activity of Baudelaire, Apollinaire, Aragon, Breton and Roy Fisher in its attempt to recover the city through the imagination. Baudelaire set the precedent for the confrontation between artist and city when he mourned, in 'Le Cygne': 'Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville / Change plus vite, hélas! que le cœur d'un mortel)'⁶⁶ [The old Paris is no more (the form of a city / Changes more quickly, alas! than the heart of mortal man)]. For Baudelaire, even the riots and disturbance of the city in revolution were a distraction to ignore in favour of the creative will of the artist:

L'Émeute, tempêtant vainement à ma vitre,
Ne fera pas lever mon front de mon pupitre:
Car je serai plongé dans cette volupté
D'évoquer le Printemps avec ma volonté.⁶⁷

(The Riot, storming in vain at my window,
Will not raise my brow from my bureau:
For I will be plunged in this passion
To evoke Spring with my will)

In taking up the rôle of flâneur, and thus of Baudelaire, in his *Le flâneur des deux*

⁶⁵ Jed Rasula, *The American poetry wax museum: reality effects, 1940-1990* (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996), p. 18.

⁶⁶ Baudelaire, *Ceuvres Complètes*, p. 63.

⁶⁷ Baudelaire, *Ceuvres Complètes*, p. 60.

rives, Apollinaire was a more committed observer of Parisian streetlife, but his book displays a curiously archival instinct in its contemplation of the little-known museums of Paris where everyday items such as streetlights and hoop-skirts were collected. Paris becomes an archive of itself during the poet's tour of a museum of discarded crucifixes:

This museum is part of a great and mysterious city composed of the former Hôtel des Haricots [a military prison now become a museum of street lighting] behind which one finds the forest of street lamps. There is also the Salle des tirages of the City of Paris, and, further out, in an immense plain, pyramids of paving stones rise up. They break them up endlessly and they remake them and sometimes one of these pyramids crumbles, with the sound of pebbles when a wave retreats.⁶⁸

For Apollinaire, as for O'Hara, the war (in this case, the First World War) determines the scale against which the everyday life of Paris finds its value, and *Le flâneur des deux rives* is full of reminiscences of the pre-war period in which the avant-garde of Shattuck's *The Banquet Years* was formed, and this same avant-garde provides Lehman's frame of reference in *The Last Avant-Garde*. For Breton and Aragon, writing after the war, the urge is to preserve the arcades of Baudelaire's era, as Margaret Cohen has pointed out in her book on Benjamin and the Surrealists, *Profane Illumination*.⁶⁹ Cohen comments on Breton's 'fondness for sites not only with an insurrectional past but also with a bohemian past and present.'⁷⁰ and refers to the 'documentary function of Aragon's

⁶⁸ Apollinaire, *Le flâneur des deux rives*, p. 18.

⁶⁹ Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁷⁰ Cohen, *Profane Illumination*, p. 94.

description of the arcades in *The Paris Peasant*,⁷¹ which tells of the poet's encounter with the arcades in the last years before their demolition in 1926 during the continuing development of the boulevard Haussman, itself a kind of monument to the civic desire to repress its insurrectionist past: it was Haussman, after all, who redesigned Paris, 'gradually remov[ing] workers from the center of the city to its northeastern peripheries'.⁷² Thus Paris was already a place of memory, an avant-garde and revolutionary archive, by the time that these classic Surrealist texts were written. Aragon refers to a 'métaphysique des lieux (metaphysics of places)' or 'divinité poétique (poetic divinity)'⁷³ waiting to be discovered in the city, but this divinity was already historical. It is ultimately this emphasis on the city as access point to the 'beyond' that leads Henri Lefebvre to castigate the Surrealists:

Revolt, protest against an insufferable reality, refusal to accept that reality, despair, hope that human redemption was immediately possible, ever-repeated departures in search of the marvellous, an imminent world of images and love, all this was mingled in a confusion from which lucid analysis was permanently absent.⁷⁴

Lefebvre wrote his *Critique of Everyday Life* in revolt against the intellectual consensus of the 1940s and 1950s, whereby 'mass culture' was regarded as the major threat to civilisation, as Von Hallberg has documented. Thus, Lefebvre's

⁷¹ Cohen, *Profane Illumination*, p. 95.

⁷² Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 41.

⁷³ Louis Aragon, *Le Paysan de Paris* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1926; repr. 1995), p. 19.

⁷⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 1: Introduction*, trans. by John Moore (London: Verso, 1992; repr. 2000), pp. 111-112.

polemic is in favour of everyday life and against 'refusals' of reality. While its Marxist overtones reveal what Geoff Ward deplores as 'the old, lame confinement to representation' in Marxist criticism, Lefebvre's attack can also be seen as occupying a particular place within a wider shift from modernist rejection of everyday life to postmodernism's engagement with it. If the poetry of the domestic surreal is to be understood, it is as part of the same move from the vision of an 'imminent world of images and love' towards an immanent one, even as it attempts to get beyond the 'lame confinement' of a representational poetic. Thus we return to O'Hara's 'Rhapsody', the poem with which I began this chapter:

515 Madison Avenue
 door to heaven? portal
 stopped realities and eternal licentiousness

Just as the Surrealists located in Paris certain 'sites of uncanny experience',⁷⁵ so O'Hara 'exhibited' a fascination with the door façade of 515 Madison Avenue, but in 'Rhapsody', the celebration of this site is conditioned by the poet's awareness of competing representations, so that for example the title refers both to O'Hara's typical mode of exultant and improvisatory lyric and also the title of a film with Elizabeth Taylor which is alluded to in the second stanza. As O'Hara contemplates the façade and speculates on the erotic possibilities contained within, his mind once more turns to Africa:

⁷⁵ Cohen, *Profane Illumination*, p. 97.

Or at least the jungle of impossible eagerness
 your marble is bronze and your lianas elevator cables
 swinging from the myth of ascending
 I would join
 or declining the challenge of racial attractions
 they zing on (into the lynch, dear friends)

Even as a fantasy of erotic, interracial encounter is evoked, the poet alludes to the New York of Hart Crane, where 'elevators drop us from our day'⁷⁶, and to Billie Holiday's 'Strange Fruit', so that the eager 'swinging' through the jungle is suddenly transformed into the aftermath of a lynching. This foreshadows the final lines of the poem in its surreal exultation in death and oppression: 'is Tibet historically a part of China? as I historically / belong to the enormous bliss of American death'. To write this in 1959, the year of China's repression of a Tibetan insurrection,⁷⁷ is arguably to push the inversion of negative terms to the utmost point. The poem subordinates all events to artistic will in order to reveal the cruel indifference of the everyday, in the knowledge that the speaker is subject to that casual yet immense violence: the poem as construction replaces the 'scene of my selves'. O'Hara's 'Rhapsody', with its paradoxical language of 'rancid nourishment', ultimately leads us to the liminal point where the

⁷⁶ *The Norton Anthology of American Literature: Volume 2*, ed. by Nina Baym, 5th edn (New York: Norton & Company, 1998), p. 1652.

⁷⁷ See William R. Keylor, *The Twentieth-Century World: An International History*, 2nd ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 381.

museum's walls disappear and the accidental architecture of the postmodern

flâneur begins.

Chapter III

LIVING BY THE EYE: THE POETRY OF ROY FISHER

All I ask for is to have the imagination regarded - this sounds like Williams I suppose - as politicised because the imagination will make the world. And if it isn't my imagination, it's Margaret Thatcher's imagination. She is a deeply imaginative woman [...] I believe that I am also describing the experience of many people who, for various cultural reasons, don't read me. Just as there are many people who are in the same boat with regard to Bill Burroughs; he describes many people's experience. Nabokov - very strong. They tell us a great deal about how we create streets, houses, workhouses, redundancy schemes, welfare, war.¹

In this city the governing authority is limited and mean: so limited that it can do no more than preserve a superficial order. It supplies fuel, water and power. It removes a fair proportion of the refuse, cleans the streets after a fashion, and discourages fighting. With these things, and a few more of the same sort, it is content. This could never be a capital city for all its size. There is no mind in it, no regard. The sensitive, the tasteful, the fashionable, the intolerant and powerful, have not moved through it as they have moved through London, evaluating it, altering it deliberately, setting in motion wars of feeling about it. Most of it has never been seen.

While it must be noted that Fisher himself objects to the characterisation of his work as 'predominantly visual'², one is forced to remark the poet's own emphasis on the power of sight to bestow significance. As unreal places loom and become more tangible in Fisher's work, so the real is changed and distanced by observation, so that whether it is the 'empirical' eye or the 'mind's eye' through which space is seen, that space is ultimately 'no longer [...] temporally

¹ Roy Fisher, *Interviews Through Time*, pp. 80-81.

² 'I'm always rather amazed and feel a bit pained when people say my imagery is only or predominantly visual.' Fisher, *Interviews Through Time*, p. 74.

and spatially fixed',³ as Ash says of *City*. In 'Without Location', this lack of fixity is so extreme that place disappears altogether, leaving a space which is celebrated as at once intimate ('just the two of us / maybe, or a few') and cosmic: 'turning about and / flaking to form a world, // patterning on the need for a world / made on a pulse.' It is still primarily experienced in visual terms, however: 'the colours - / and just the colours'. However, the instability of place is often more subtle. John Matthias remarks that 'had Fisher played in a ship's orchestra for twenty years without ever setting foot on land, and had he only seen photographs of Birmingham in a book, which of his two major early works would critics confidently call "mimetic," and which "hermetic"?'⁴ Critics continue to neglect the dialectic of the real and the unreal. In the recent essay collection *The Thing About Roy Fisher: Critical Studies*,⁵ Peter Robinson attempts a deconstruction of Ash's complaint that 'in a better world [Fisher] would be as widely known as Heaney and Hughes',⁶ proposing that 'among the many virtues' of Fisher's poems 'is their having little time for wholly imaginary, alternative places.' In a familiar move, this casts Ash as the representative of the other, less virtuous preference for 'wholly imaginary' places. It is part of the task of this chapter to establish Fisher as a positive example of responsible

³ Ash, 'A Classic Post-Modernist', p. 46.

⁴ John Matthias, 'The Poetry of Roy Fisher', in *Contemporary British Poetry*, ed. James Acheson and Romana Huk (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 35-62 (p. 40).

⁵ Peter Robinson, 'Introduction', *The Thing About Roy Fisher: Critical Studies*, ed. John Kerrigan and Peter Robinson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), pp. 1-15 (pp. 1-2).

⁶ See for example the back cover of Fisher's recent volume, *The Dow Low Drop, New and Selected Poems*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1996).

imaginative play as acknowledged by Ash, Didsbury and McMillan, and this will entail a reconsideration of the poet's imaginative relation to place and, crucially, space. If Fisher has 'little time' for the 'wholly imaginary', it is because like Ash, he insists that there is no such state: through the dialectical optic, the 'eye' perceives the imaginary in the real, the real in the imaginary.

If the eye is Fisher's main weapon, it is also his vulnerability. Challenge to the primacy of the seen is a cause of anxiety in Fisher's work, as in *The Ship's Orchestra*: 'Think of what all the people you see taste like and you'd go mad: all those leaping, billowing tastes through the world, like a cemetery turned suddenly into damp bedsheets with the wind under them.' Here, the sudden and overwhelming change of perspective brings about an equally sudden and classically surreal veer towards the visual and the tactile with the simile of the cemetery, its gravestones losing the solidity of stone for the clammy, stinging texture of 'damp bedsheets', themselves odd analogues of tastes that 'billow', that are, then, observed and rendered visually.

The surrealist simile, which is hardly a simile at all, here conveys by the distance between its two states (people and tastes) another and more deeply felt kind of distance - that which lies between the seer and the people around him. *The Ship's Orchestra*, no less than *City*, is marked by alienation, most obviously the alienation of the musicians from their labour by the terms of employment that keep them from actually playing (just as the observer in *City*, immersed in the environment of working-class Birmingham, observes no-one at work save in

the absurd act of 'making a tree', while in *A Furnace* Fisher writes angrily of 'the working- / class streets where work and wages / hid, as the most real shame'), but also the alienation of the speaker from his companions: living by the eye involves making representations almost as a refuge from the anxieties induced by the thought of communication, so that questions of addresser and addressee in Fisher's poetry are often obscured: 'there's seldom / any *I* or *you*' the poet claims in 'Of the Empirical Self and for Me', and yet the 'I', repressed or not, always returns, as it must - however decentred Fisher would like his poetry to be, the very desire for concealment presents the perceiving subject with a problem, as is acknowledged in *City*:

I have often felt myself to be vicious, in living so much by the eye, yet among so many people. I can be afraid that the egg of light through which I see these bodies might present itself as a keyhole. Yet I can find no sadism in the way I see them now [...] I can consider without scorn or envy the well-found bedrooms I pass, walnut and rose-pink, altars of tidy, dark-haired women, bare-backed, wifely. Even in these I can see order.

The anxious adjustments made by the speaker in *City* are the index of the distance of the poem from its American counterparts or putative ancestors, William's *Paterson* or Olson's *Maximus Poems* and behind them, Whitman's poems of Manhattan: although it is by now a very well-established fact that *City* is more European than American in terms of literary heritage, it is worth pointing out the specific (and perhaps particularly British) irony of the situation whereby a member of the working-class of Birmingham has none of the ease of address and relation to that class that is assumed by the much more socially

privileged Whitman or Williams when they walk around Manhattan or Paterson. The more oratorical and representative ambitions of 'Wonders of Obligation' and *A Furnace*, partly hinted at in the interview from which my first epigraph for this chapter is taken, mark a kind of rapprochement with this tradition even as an overwhelmingly visual understanding, employing techniques of juxtaposition and transformation, is retained. Fisher's poetry remains of the domestic surreal rather than the more grandiosely vatic partly through the observer's situation in an eccentric perspective, the poet's own configuration of Middleton's 'structures of eccentric feeling'.⁷ In this chapter, I wish to illustrate the poet's juxtaposition of images observed, remembered and imagined and their complex relation to frameworks of everyday life, bodily experience and eccentricity.

City was written on Fisher's return to Birmingham in his late twenties, after a spell teaching in a school in Devon.⁸ The city of the book is thus a remembered city as much as a lived environment of the present, and the two realities coexist uneasily, leaking into one another: the city is a site for the struggle to constitute identity, pitting civic planning against the memories and imagination of an individual. Does the speaker belong to the city, and to whom does the city itself belong? To identify a struggle between the agencies of authority and the

⁷ Indeed, Fisher's feeling of solidarity with that other poet of the domestic surreal inspired 'The Making of the Book', after Middleton's *Nonsequences* received a 'sneering review': 'it was bad to see work that embodied knowledge, curiosity, invention and obvious talent - and for which there might at that time have been a public - having to submit itself to an ambush-gorge where the critical language didn't rise above terms like 'tiresome', 'irritating', 'predictable', 'pretentious'. Fisher, *Interviews Through Time*, p. 124.

⁸ Fisher gives a detailed account of his life up to this point in 'Antebiography', which appears in *Interviews Through Time*, pp. 9-33.

individual in the poem is not to suppose them two coherent separable entities: rather, both are layered and contradictory. The traces left by successive city plans, the distinctively 'radial' pattern of urban expansion still readable through repeated superimpositions, is brilliantly apprehended by the speaker:⁹

In the century that has passed since this city has become great, it has twice laid itself out in the shape of a wheel. The ghost of the older one still lies among the spokes of the new, those dozen highways that thread constricted ways through the inner suburbs, then thrust out, twice as wide, across the housing estates and into the countryside, dragging moraines of buildings with them.

John Kerrigan has written of Fisher's interest in maps,¹⁰ and recourse to cartography gives *City* an optical range far beyond that of the everyday knowledge its citizens use to orient themselves: as O'Hara explores the 'kaleidoscopic lumber-room' of New York with an eye on the literary 'maps' of the city by Melville and Whitman, the speaker of Fisher's sequence varies his focus so that the city looms and recedes in the eye, as the poet attempts to give his 'unseen' city a similar multi-dimensionality. Thus, the broad sweep of the prose passage quoted above is juxtaposed in the sequence with the versified, nocturnal dream reality of 'a concrete garage out of sight' where cars 'sweat mercury and lead'. That such places have a hidden significance for Fisher is made clear by his return to the garage in a later poem 'After Working'. This remarkable lyric will receive further attention later in the chapter, but for now it

⁹ See Peter Hall, *The Containment of Urban England, Vol.1: Urban and Metropolitan Growth Processes; or Megalopolis Denied* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1973), p. 508, for an account of Birmingham's radial development.

is important to underline the significance of the poet's decision to 'leave looking' and 'fall away' into 'the half-light of a night garage / without a floor', and then further down to finish on 'a sort of grass'. This subterranean version of the 'dusty grass' by the reservoir where the poet squats after work is disquieting because we cannot know to what purpose we have been brought to it: the deliberate, prosaic understatement of 'a sort of grass' is incongruous with the mysterious route by which it is reached and which builds anticipation of a revelation to come. As Ian Gregson says, 'it takes repeated readings of "After Working" [...] to identify at what point the poem slips into the surreal.'¹¹ 'After Working' is Fisher's counterpart to 'Rhapsody', by O'Hara: the garage is a 'site of uncanny experience' which, like the door to 515 Madison Avenue, relates Fisher's city to the Surrealists' Paris, and just as Paris was reconstructed by Haussman to re-establish civic control in the wake of insurrection, so the postwar settlement, in planning as in other areas, sought to control potential unrest, as David Harvey has underlined:

The political, economic, and social problems that faced the advanced capitalist countries in the wake of World War II were as extensive as they were severe. International peace and prosperity had somehow to be built upon a programme that met the aspirations of peoples who had given massively of their lives and energies in a struggle generally depicted (and justified) as a struggle for a safer world, a better world, a better future. Whatever else that meant, it did not mean a return to the prewar conditions of slump and unemployment, of hunger marches and soup-kitchens, of deteriorating slums and penury, and to the social unrest and political instability to which such conditions could all too easily lend themselves.

¹⁰ John Kerrigan, 'Roy Fisher on Location', in *The Thing About Roy Fisher*, pp. 16-46 (p. 23).

¹¹ Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism*, p. 178.

Postwar politics, if they were to remain democratic and capitalistic, had to address questions of full employment, decent housing, social provision, welfare, and broad-based opportunity to construct a better future.¹²

'Sites of uncanny experience' are, then, places where unpredictable imaginative play evades the control of town planning and seeks to subvert the stability of the urban everyday life patterns that that planning helps to encode in the topography of inhabited space. The nature of those life patterns will occupy us later in the chapter, when we come to examine Fisher's writing on everyday work.

But why the 'concrete' or 'night garage'? The answer may lie in the garage's potential, as an enclosed space, to remain hidden from view, and particularly, since it is customarily a windowless space, from street lighting. Hence the repeated emphasis on downward motion, away from the overhead light: 'Thrust down your foot in sleep [...] thrust it deep, / Into a concrete garage out of sight' (*City*); 'fall away [...] into the half light [...] then down its concrete stems [...] in the darkness' ('After Working'). In *City*, street lighting is dangerously omnipresent, projecting upwards into the night sky a 'yellowish flare, diffused and baleful, that hangs flat in the clouds a few hundred feet above the city's invisible heart' and downwards into the streets: 'there are lamplit streets where the full darkness is only in the deep drains and in the closed eyesockets and shut throats of the old as they lie asleep; their breath moves red tunnel-lights.' Here, the red of bloodvessels in the eyelid and of 'shut throats' is

¹² David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 68.

transformed into the functional red of the city's incursion underground, their respiration becomes the city's own self-perpetuation through light, and their sleeping bodies are thus displaced into the narrative of urban alienation, their sleep and that of the city made 'aqueous and incomplete, like that of a hospital ward.' A quite Baudelairean malevolence provokes the speaker to tear up the built city in order to expose the passivity of its inhabitants: the sleep 'could be broken like asphalt, and the men and women rolled out like sleeping maggots.'

However, the speaker of *City* has none of Baudelaire's aristocratic poise, so that in confrontation with a city of recesses and layered identity stands an equally unstable agent, 'lying stunned' on the 'surface' of life, and once more we must note that the successful resistance to oppression is figured as a downward escape: 'lovers' have 'disappeared for entire hours into the lit holes of life', although in the paragraph before, the act of making love is seen as the disappearance of energy and hope 'down that dark drain'. The axis of feeling in itself produces an anxiety of awareness, a 'fear of being able to feel only vertically, like a blind wall.' That the speaker as well as the street lights might stand, hierarchically, above others, despite his show of humility, is suggested by Ian Sansom in his reading of 'Toyland', a poem which was originally included in *City* but subsequently published separately.¹³ Sansom remarks that a 'privileged hawk's eye perspective is [...] quickly established in the poem's opening lines - 'Today the sunlight is the paint on lead soldiers / Only they are people

scattering out of the cool church'. The withdrawal up and away from the people is clearly a necessary act'.¹⁴ This reads like the work of someone determined to see experimental poetry as inevitably and essentially 'privileged', and indeed Sansom goes on to damn Fisher faintly by association with Eliot, who is an unequivocal presence in Fisher's work, but not in the way suggested here. There is nothing necessarily privileged about the viewpoint of the observer in 'Toyland': he is able to hear the 'secret laugh', it is true, but he cannot understand it, and the 'God-like omnipresence' Sansom alleges in Fisher's 'knowledge of the little people's lives' could just as easily be read as complicity in a known routine vivid in memory. The lines to which Sansom refers here actually seem to mimic with bathos the tone of the 'rector' who 'goes off in his motor', a more fitting target for allegations of privileged escape: 'And we know what they will do when they have opened the doors of their houses and walked in: / Mostly they will make water, and wash their calm hands and eat'. This was the Anglican tone mastered by Auden, also present in these lines, and the routine to which the people of 'Toyland' are subjected is as much part of the game in which they are toys as the 'secret laugh' which 'picks them up and shakes them like peas boiling': peas in a pot, crowded together, but also shaken like toy soldiers swept up by a child. The 'secret laugh' is the dark humour of the inaccessible play of power which is elsewhere registered in the processes of

¹⁴ 'Toyland' was included in the 1961 edition but not in the revised version printed in *Collected Poems 1968*. See Derek Slade, 'Roy Fisher: A Bibliography', in *The Thing About Roy Fisher*, pp. 313-366 (p. 314).

city development:

And when destruction comes, it is total: the printed notices on the walls, block by block, a few doors left open at night, broken windows advancing down a street until fallen slates appear on the pavement and are not kicked away. Then, after a few weeks of this, the machines arrive.

Again and again in *City*, identities are shown to be composite and unstable: in 'The Entertainment of War', the speaker identifies himself with the victims of the air-raids, those later called upon in 'Wonders of Obligation' as 'the poor of Birmingham'. Yet the death of relatives is remembered as an experience of unreality, as 'something I needed to keep a long story moving'. In the next poem, 'the fiction' is further complicated by evocation of 'North Area', 'a place where I can never go.' The 'real' nature of 'North Area' is left unclear, but the speaker's fictionalisation in this short verse piece and in the prose which directly follows it, perhaps remembered from childhood imaginings, perhaps impromptu, significantly relates to the mingling of the man-made and the natural, urban and rural: 'dunes with cement walks, / A twilight of aluminium', for instance, fuses the two. In the prose, Fisher achieves a bemused lyricism:

Pithead gears thrust out above the hawthorn bushes; everywhere prefabricated workshops jut into the fields and the allotments. The society of singing birds and the society of mechanical hammers inhabit the world together, slightly ruffled and confined by each other's presence.

It is interesting, from the perspective afforded us now by Fisher's

¹⁴ Ian Sansom, 'The Secret Laugh of the World', in *The Thing About Roy Fisher*, pp. 193-208 (p.

'Antebiography' and by Peter Hall's work on city planning, to reflect that this is the point in the sequence at which the identities of the speaker and the city are in greatest proximity, at least inasmuch as *City* is autobiographical. In 'Antebiography', Fisher describes his maternal family's 'quasi-rural nostalgia' and relates his move, in later life, from Birmingham to Derbyshire, to 'the paradox I was given as a child - the sensation of having been born in a state of exile from some unknown countryside - which forced me to stare so hard at all the particulars of my city surroundings'.¹⁵ That intensity of observation, partly born out of 'blissful, almost visionary experiences on outings and walks' in the country as a child, leads the observer of *City* to realise that the city is moving back into the countryside, as Peter Hall has documented in his account of late twentieth-century cities which 'diffuse into the countryside at progressively lower densities'.¹⁶ Thus the tendency of the domestic surreal to juxtapose realities has its analogue in economic and historical developments, heard in *City* as the combined sound of 'singing birds' and 'mechanical hammers'.

Elsewhere, the incursion of the city into the countryside is more destructive in its imposition of a new identity, covering over 'the marshy valley of the meagre river that now flows under brick and tarmac.' What survives of the rural? One could see the 'Lullaby and Exhortation for the Unwilling Hero' as a kind of surreal return of the folkloric in mutated urban form: although its imagery is modernist, its rhythms and occasional full rhymes are, as the title

suggests, throwbacks to a premodern culture:

*The pearl in the stocking,
The coals left to die,
The bell in the river,
The loaf half eaten,
The coat of the sky.*

The idea of a repressed nature making its presence felt is the source of one of *City's* most oddly moving images, that of the recidivist from the police court 'discovered at midnight clinging like a tree-shrew to the bars of a glass factory-roof. He made no attempt to explain his presence there; the luminous nerves that made him fly up to it were not visible in daylight, and the police seemed hardly able to believe this was the creature they had brought down in the darkness.' Again it is night which threatens established identities, and it is indicative of Fisher's anarchic sense of irony that in the moment of his transformation, the criminal is suspended above the scene of daily work 'in the authority webs of the city', as Eric Mottram says.¹⁷

Just as the criminal takes on an animal aspect, so too does the natural become urbanised as the inhabitants of the city start to make a tree from steel (not even a mineral occurring in nature, but an alloy), furthermore a tree which is in part modelled on the female body, and which must incorporate somehow the odd urban detritus assembled in advance by the men (and they are men – the women cook and model the bole): 'a great flock mattress; two carved chairs;

¹⁵ Fisher, *Interviews Through Time*, p. 16.

cement; chicken-wire; tarpaulin; a smashed barrel; lead piping; leather of all kinds; and many small things.' Immediately, comparisons with sculptures by Schwitters or Ernst spring to mind, but here there is a more dialectical engagement with the material, a sense that the human body has undergone transformation as a result of industrial and post-industrial processes. Indeed *City*, like all Fisher's work, is thoroughly somatic: 'fat cooling towers caress the sky'; 'the back streets filling in the widening spaces between them like webbed membranes'; 'the suburb lies like a hand tonight, / A man's thick hand'. Fisher has insisted on this aspect of his work in interview: 'what I talk about has got body analogues all over it, because I'm a committed puritanical sensualist; I want to talk about body imagery'.¹⁸ As the city is bodied forth, its inhabitants grow more constructed:

In an afternoon of dazzling sunlight in the thronged streets, I saw at first no individuals but a composite monster, its unfeeling surfaces matted with dust; a mass of necks, limbs without extremities, trunks without heads [...] the creature began to divide and multiply. At crossings I could see people made of straws, rags, cartons, the stuffing of burst cushions, kitchen refuse. Outside the Grand Hotel, a long-boned carrot-haired girl with glasses, loping along, and with strips of bright colour, rich, silky green and blue, in her soft clothes. For a person made of such scraps she was beautiful.

This passage makes literal the notion of a social identity constituted in and by everyday life, as the populace is hallucinated into being as the sum of their own detritus. Fisher creates an image of beauty in the midst of this as an act of

¹⁶ Hall, *The Containment of Urban England*, Vol.1, p. 43.

¹⁷ Eric Mottram, 'Roy Fisher's Work', *Stand*, 11:1 (1969-1970), pp. 9-18 (p. 11).

¹⁸ Fisher, *Interviews Through Time*, p. 53.

resistance against the rational processes of the governing authority which seek to remove the refuse and rehouse the people in similarly large-scale, impersonal operations, but ultimately the multiplicity of the city's identity is no less cause for anxiety for the speaker trying to fix it in memory than for the authority planning its future:

I want to believe in a single world. That is why I am keeping my eyes at home while I can. The light keeps on separating the world like a table knife: it sweeps across what I see and suggests what I do not. The imaginary comes to me with as much force as the real, the remembered with as much force as the immediate.

What does it mean to keep one's 'eyes at home'? Living by the eye, the organ of sight is itself an object as well as the means of scrutiny, and *City* initiates a movement between the visionary imagination of place and the somatic imagination of physical states, both of which are trying to evolve ways to cope with what Michael O'Neill calls Fisher's 'sense that knowledge of shared reality is likely to be individual and private',¹⁹ and, conversely, the sense that as John Wilkinson says, 'our nature is my greatest privacy, and this is the sustaining and silly paradox, that the most idiosyncratic and inadmissible is the most deeply shared'.²⁰ In this context, the concern with the impact of light on the eye, no less than the resort to static visual memory, focuses attention on the situatedness of the speaker and the extent to which he is 'subjected' to the world (a point well

¹⁹ Michael O'Neill, "'Exhibiting Unpreparedness": Self, World, and Poetry', in *The Thing About Roy Fisher*, pp. 209-230 (p. 210).

²⁰ John Wilkinson, 'Cadence', *Reality Studios*, 9 (1987), pp. 81-85 (p. 82). I would like to thank Ken Edwards for making this article available to me.

caught by Eric Mottram in his description of the 'large industrial and suburban environment pressing into [the] body').²¹ In its portrayal of the bodily act of seeing, it also throws into sharp relief the speaker's alienation from his own body which has made the eye seem external, disembodied, in danger of 'leaving home'.

The Ship's Orchestra represents an intensification of this enduring predicament. Robert Sheppard notes 'the vision of a dislocated body that haunts the work',²² and the ship's departure engenders a series of bodily departures or disembodiments: 'the elbow gone, winging'; 'the dessicated hair, yes, distinctly loose'; 'a petrified, pitted arse'; piano keys 'filled with the pulp of teeth'; and so on, throughout the work, which is itself a dislocated vision, an 'additive' composition²³ which uses Picasso's painting *Three Musicians* as a 'starter'²⁴ from which the idea of the orchestra develops. The very phrase 'and so on' is present throughout as 'etc.', suggesting the speaker's inadequate control over the absurdist proliferation of objects, body parts, and indeed, language itself. His anxiety before this multiplicity and his desperate wish to believe in a unity behind it recall the speaker in *City*, but the ship does not even offer the temporary stability of a fixed urban location, as he recognises in a key passage:

At any rate the ship is a unity and does one thing; it proceeds on its cruise.
Not only does it have a structural and purposive unity; it has a music

²¹ Mottram, 'Roy Fisher's Work', *Stand*, p. 14.

²² Robert Sheppard, "'Making Forms with Remarks": The Prose', in *The Thing About Roy Fisher*, pp. 128-148 (p. 135).

²³ Fisher, *Interviews Through Time*, p. 58.

²⁴ Fisher, *Interviews Through Time*, p. 52.

which proceeds with it, sounds within it and makes signals of the good life. In among the musicians is the tough glass bubble of the music. Reasoning, now. The musicians don't play. No bubble. The ship is not a unity. It is not white. It is grey, indigo, brown. [...] it is a random assembly of buildings which, though important-looking, have no proper streets between them [...] The ship does not proceed on its cruise, but opens and closes itself while remaining in one spot.

The musicians cannot provide the unity lacking in the ship, and the pianist's attempt to figure a 'single instrument' on which they could play produces only a tyre which, having been the scene of a birth in a car dump, now becomes one more disembodied part, an 'invisible sphincter in the sky somewhere, with a fivefold answer to our touches'. The invocation of the encircling and imprisoning tyre which links the refuse of the dump to the people similarly discarded can therefore be seen as a kind of acceptance of defeat, an attempt to find pleasure in a predicament. In this context, the irony of the ship is clear: this mechanism of the tourist industry, which purports to offer escape from care and from work, is just as confining and is fully integrated into the system of control which manages the movement and habitation of the populace.

Stylistically, this dislocated vision is made up of prose paragraphs which can be viewed both as cubist fragments of one 'unified' perception and as a linear series of narrative moments, and the difficulty of reading the work may lie in the uneasy co-existence of these options: the unavailability in writing of art's immediacy makes a prose work as extended as *The Ship's Orchestra* prone to inertia. This is curiously apposite, since as we have seen, inertia is one of the major themes of the piece, and its presence at a formal as well as a thematic level

is confirmed in Fisher's account of a later work, 'Cultures': 'I'm reduced to this graphic radial composition at last by my love of inertia and suspicion of all forms of continuous rhetoric'.²⁵ 'Love of inertia' ironises Fisher's understanding of the culture of escape. One parallel for this formalisation of inertia is with the Beckett of *Comment C'Est*, and there are echoes of Beckett, most obviously in the paragraph beginning 'Potential fracture of the pipes', where the speaker imagines an attempt at demolition which ends with its protagonist immersed in growing amounts of rubble, blindly hammering at buried pipes. But Fisher's work is never as syntactically fractured as *Comment C'Est*, and although fragments of memory periodically interrupt the linear time of the narrative, for example when the speaker recalls a nameless woman with whom he was once involved, the identities composed and decomposed in *The Ship's Orchestra* are more recognisable - this is, after all, 'a ship off a movie, a ship out of children's illustrations, a ship out of other people's poems', a ship, then, that has been seen, unlike the provincial urban landscape of *City* or the stylised landscapes of Beckett's late work. Recognition would then be one of the desired effects, the goal of a 'perceptual field' in its 'fight for survival', as Fisher describes it.²⁶

However, the deformations which make recognition difficult or impossible are threaded through the work: for example, the hallucinatory figure of 'that walking white suit with a big orange on it for a head; the white yellowed a little, as if through some sort of commerce with urine'. In *City*, the trace of

²⁵ Quoted in Mottram, 'Roy Fisher's Work', *Stand*, p. 18.

urine marks the human modification of a given industrial landscape of brick and thus has a positive value, summed up in an earlier poem, 'Linear', as 'the erosion that makes the world': here, however, it is more conventionally abject, a stain on the social identity of a figure already made ridiculous by having an orange for a head: these deformities mark the figure out for punishment, and the pianist attempts to crucify him in a later passage, effecting decapitation in the process; but later the white suit is seen going into the ship's washroom with what is dimly perceived to be a bandaged head; still later, the pianist glimpses 'the white suit, yellowed, crouched on a stool by the basin while the nurse and the sick-berth attendant were taking the bandages from the head'. Then, the head is revealed to be 'discernibly a human head, bald, with one big eye looking at me.' Was the orange nothing more than layers of bandage, discolored by bodily emission (sweat, blood) like the suit? In the final paragraph of the piece, the bassist, Dougal, who was earlier told to 'avoid the washroom' by the pianist, also seems to have wounds to be dressed, and in this context, the 'billows of orange smoke [...] going past' at the work's close prefigure the musician's own transformation into an involuntarily leaking, disfigured victim. One is reminded of the fate of Gus, one of the hired killers in Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, published two years before Fisher began to write *The Ship's Orchestra* in late 1962:²⁷ partially undressed, like Dougal, Gus becomes the victim he and the other killer, Ben,

²⁶ Fisher, *Interviews Through Time*, p. 58.

²⁷ *The Birthday Party*, *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter* were first published by Methuen & Co. 1960, according to the acknowledgements in Harold Pinter, *Plays: One* (London: Faber and Faber,

have been waiting for.²⁸

There are wider parallels between Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, and *The Ship's Orchestra* (which is the closest the poet comes to the mysterious parables of the Theatre of the Absurd, and thus occupies in his oeuvre the place that *Pataxanadu*, also comprised of prose work, has in Middleton's oeuvre) and *Interiors With Various Figures*, which dates from the same period.²⁹ Gus and Ben await instructions from a literally higher authority (they are in a basement room) as to the identity of their next target, and the play is taken up with their wait, the exploration of their relationship to each other and to their labour, and the opacity and absurdity of even the most ordinary language they use, for example in their argument as to whether 'light the kettle' or 'light the gas' forms the correct usage. Their dependence on instruction is made ridiculous by the intervention of the dumb waiter, which delivers orders for ever more exotic food which they desperately attempt to fill with whatever scraps of food they have. Ultimately, Gus's role reversal is the logical conclusion of Ben's growing antagonism to his questions, which threaten the stability and accepted order that the two men must follow: Ben's willingness simply to perform a given function without hesitation ensures, equally logically, that he will be the instrument of Gus's downfall - save that the stark nature of the reversal leaves both men

1991). Slade, in 'Roy Fisher: A Bibliography', *The Thing About Roy Fisher*, p. 325, gives the dates of composition for *The Ship's Orchestra* as 23rd November 1962 - 1st October 1963.

²⁸ See Pinter, 'The Dumb Waiter', *Plays: One*, pp. 111-149 (149).

²⁹ 'Experimenting' was written on the 26th August 1962; other parts of the sequence then followed in the period 1963 to 1964, finishing with 'The Billiard Table' on 24-24 October of that year (Slade, 'Roy Fisher: A Bibliography', *The Thing About Roy Fisher*, pp. 325-326).

staring at each other, immobile and uncertain, at the end.

Fisher's preoccupation with figures, interiors and monologues in *The Ship's Orchestra* and *Interiors With Various Figures* invites comparisons with theatre in any case, but the thematic concern with difficulties of communication, enclosure, abrupt violence, power relations and waiting is strongly reminiscent of Pinter. In *The Ship's Orchestra*, there is an obsession with naming, most notably in relation to musical instruments ('tusk, axe, box together joined'), but also as part of the musicians' wider relation to their environment: 'O captain. Is it the captain? O first officer. Is it the first officer? Etc.' In 'Experimenting', the dialogue between the male and female figures is marked by the woman's growing unease and her sense of vulnerability in an alien environment, which begin to affect her language use in a thoroughly absurdist way:

She shuts her eyes big and mutters:

'And when the moon with horror -

And when the moon with horror -

And when the moon with horror -'

So I say 'Comes blundering blind up the side tonight'.

She: 'We hear it bump and scrape'.

I: 'We hear it giggle'. Looks at me,

'And when the moon with horror,' she says.

'Experimenting' is the only 'interior' to present direct dialogue, but in all the interiors there is an abundance of *I* and *you*, of 'empirical selves', and like Ben and Gus in *The Dumb Waiter* or the musicians in *The Ship's Orchestra*, they are ill at ease in or incongruous with their settings - 'she knows I don't *live* here' insists the speaker in 'Experimenting', but this does not help the woman 'scared' by the

two walls and the 'blue gulf' 'beyond the backyard'. Robert Sheppard points to the 'pervasive' air of claustrophobia throughout the sequence: is this the source of the peculiar power of interiors to alter what passes through them, as in 'The Small Room' ('a transformation at his door')? In 'The Wrestler', 'whisky is a fluid / squeezed out of damp ropes, wrung out of short sweaty / hair'; in 'The Arrival', the speaker accuses 'you might expect the faint smell of gas in here to have materialised into something like me'; and in 'The Billiard Table' 'a mess of sheets' becomes 'abandoned grave-clothes' and then the process begins to reproduce itself as, in quick succession, the grave-clothes are envisioned as 'the actual corpse, the patient dead under the anaesthetic, / A third part playing gooseberry, a pure stooge, the ghost of a paper bag'.

Overseeing this process throughout the sequence is the surveying figure of the light-bulb which, like an element in a Cubist painting, sometimes merges with the figures, so that in 'Experimenting', the woman's fingers are 'white like unlit electric bulbs', while 'The Lampshade', 'globed' and likened to 'white wax', becomes 'the moist globe in her hair'. In 'The Wrestler', the bulb becomes menacing and oppressive: 'the colours in his eyes have run together, and he stares up at the / unlit bulb that keeps constant distance from him as / he floats backwards to the ice'. The overriding sense is that the figures find themselves placed in these interiors as passive victims of an external force, and this is voiced in 'The Billiard Table':

Have you ever felt

We've just been issued with each other
 Like regulation lockers
 And left to get on with it?

Nobody would expect
 We'd fetch up in a place like this,
 Making unscheduled things like what's on the table.

The 'unscheduled things' are, as it were, by-products of unexplained situations, like the meal thrown together by the killers in *The Dumb Waiter* or the elaborate systems of disposal dreamed up by the pianist in *The Ship's Orchestra* which make clear once again the link between alienated activity and systems of political control:

Further details of solvent tanks, sludge filtering and caking, moulding of cake into casing of fissile explosive device, recording of distribution of post-explosive material, public opinion poll, suspension of communications for necessary periods, change of languages, etc.

The almost imperceptible and yet sudden change in the frame of reference draws attention to the sinister nature of the impersonal, administrative register which can accommodate both frames, and this understanding of the violence of public language is one more point of comparison with Pinter, in this case with *The Caretaker*:

No strings attached, open and above board, untarnished record; twenty per cent interest, fifty per cent deposit; down payments, back payments, family allowances, bonus schemes, remission of term for good behaviour, six months lease, yearly examination of the relevant archives, tea laid on, disposal of shares, benefit extension, compensation on cessation, comprehensive indemnity against Riot, Civil Commotion, Labour Disturbances, Storm, Tempest, Thunderbolt, Larceny or Cattle all subject to

a daily check and double check.³⁰

Both writers emerged from urban working-class environments (in Pinter's case, the East End of London), both began writing violently surreal works, and both then carried the preoccupations of their early work over into writing which was more grounded in empirical, everyday situations, Pinter with plays like *The Caretaker* and Fisher with a series of poems, beginning with 'After Working', which are marked by a concern with everyday temporality and its relation to work. We must leave the comparison at that point as the subject of another study, in order to concentrate on this series of poems, but it will already be clear that the poetry of the domestic surreal and the Theatre of the Absurd are closely related cultural developments in the post-war development of avant-garde traditions.

The Ship's Orchestra and *Interiors With Various Figures* explore anxieties about shared reality and private experience by creating a theatre of surreal bodies and claustrophobic interiors: with 'After Working', Fisher began to move back into a public space of parks and streets, and with a renewed emphasis on the speaker mobile, to varying degrees, within that space. The experience of time in the series of poems which begins with 'After Working' is related to the activity of work: it is as if breaking from work affords a particular kind of perception, like that of O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*, situated and composed in 'the

³⁰ Pinter, *Plays: Two* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 34.

noisy splintered glare of a Manhattan noon'.³¹ Indeed, the opening of 'After Working' is as close as Fisher gets to the intimate conversational tone of the New York poet - 'I like being tired, / to go downhill from waking / late in the day / when the clay hours / have mostly crossed the town' recalls for example O'Hara's 'Muy Bien (F. Y. S. C.)': 'I like to make changes in plans / as long as the cook / doesn't get upset'. 'Downhill from waking / late in the day' may reveal the poet to be a late sleeper taking pleasure in the end of the working day of others, as in 'For Realism' (where the speaker observes 'a shift coming off about nine'), but it may also indicate a perception of work as another form of sleep, a habitual action performed in a state of inattention, so that the similarity in sound between 'waking' and 'working' is exploited as a pun. 'Clay hours' might evoke mutability, or the sun's light passing from east to west across the roofs and walls of the city: Break from work is associated in these poems with a further initiation of perception which is light hitting stone, so that while the first part of the poem details the poet's leisurely walk 'downhill', the second part, where a more surreal downward motion is experienced, is 'signalled' by the brightening of 'the far buildings [...] pulled into light, / sharp edges and transient, / painful to see'. Berger and Luckmann's concept of 'spheres of reality' helps us to understand what is enacted in 'After Working':

My consciousness, then, is capable of moving through different spheres of reality. Put differently, I am conscious of the world as consisting of

³¹ From a blurb written for the back jacket of *Lunch Poems*, quoted in Susan Rosenbaum, 'Frank O'Hara, *Flâneur* of New York', in *The scene of my selves*, pp. 143-173 (148).

multiple realities. As I move from one reality to another, I experience the transition as a kind of shock. This shock is to be understood as caused by the shift in attentiveness that the transition entails. Waking up from a dream illustrates this shift most simply.³²

The title of the poem announces a departure from one such 'sphere of reality', that of work, which is then complicated by the pun on 'waking' in the second line. For Berger and Luckmann, waking is associated above all with the consciousness of everyday life: 'I experience everyday life in the state of being wide-awake. This wide-awake state of existing in and apprehending the reality of everyday life is taken by me to be normal and self-evident, that is, it constitutes my natural attitude'.³³ What we see in 'After Working' is the instability of this 'state of being wide-awake' and the poem's ability to suspend the shock of transition between different spheres: in this context, the preposition 'from' in the line 'from waking' is ambiguous since, rather than being seen as initiating a state ('being wide-awake') it may alternatively mark its end, as the title does for the state of working. As we move downward, 'downhill' and then 'squat[ting] by the reeds' and then 'fall[ing] away', we move literally down a slope, alongside a reservoir, and 'into the half light of a night garage', but we also move from 'waking' to a place where 'thoughts [...] get lost' and thence to the oneiric state of the poem's end. Berger and Luckmann talk of dreaming as a 'marginal state [...] in not being included in the reality of everyday existence in

³² Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971; repr. 1975), p. 35.

³³ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 35.

society'.³⁴ Marginal states are experienced 'as provinces of meaning detached from everyday life, and endowed with a peculiar reality of their own.' These provinces represent

the most acute threat to taken-for-granted, routinized existence in society. If one conceives of the latter as the 'daylight side' of human life, then the marginal situations constitute a 'night side' that keeps lurking ominously on the periphery of everyday consciousness [...] The thought keeps suggesting itself [...] that, perhaps, the bright reality of everyday life is but an illusion, to be swallowed up at any moment by the howling nightmares of the other, the night-side reality.³⁵

In Fisher's poem, however, the 'night side' of the garage is a refuge rather than a nightmare, although it poses no less of a threat to the 'daylight side' of the working routine: the threat is wielded by the poet, and made powerful by the withholding of any discursive frame or 'awakening' which might return us safely to the daylight, and so the lyric itself appeals to the status of being marginal, a 'province of meaning'. The pun is, of course, wholly incidental, but nonetheless startlingly apt, the unseen and the 'provincial' having been so ambiguously associated in Fisher's vocabulary since *City*, as the second epigraph to this chapter indicates. This reinforces what in my earlier reading of the poem I took to be the politically subversive connotation of the 'site of uncanny experience'.

As I have noted, 'For Realism' too is occasioned by the end of a working day, and the distinctly yet unobtrusively unreal transformations that occur in this liminal period echo Fisher's earlier explorations of alienated labour:

³⁴ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 114.

For 'realism':
 the sight of Lucas's
 lamp factory on a summer night;
 a shift coming off about nine,
 pale light, dispersing,
 runnels of people chased,
 by pavements drying off
 quickly after them,
 away among the wrinkled brown houses
 where there are cracks for them to go.

The paratactic syntax of these opening lines may invite us to assimilate their details to a scene 'described in a relatively straightforward language',³⁶ yet the often-noted quotation marks placed around the word 'realism' dedicate the poem to a disclosure of the discrete signals which could just as well point to a very different understanding of the observed event: parataxis undoes the links necessary to the naturalisation of those signals and, in so doing, suggests that realism is an effect 'for' which the 'sight' of a scene is given over. The workers subsumed as a 'shift' can be seen to be the 'pale light' which disperses, transformed by their labour into an echo of the glow of Lucas's lamps: as the workers disperse they become fluid 'runnels [...] chased, / by pavements drying off', the comma not quite dispelling the image of the pavements as a force impelling the workers onward, and thus ironically prefiguring their further dispersal by civic design into new housing developments. The pallor of their light is matched by their evanescence as fluid, for the pavements dry off 'quickly

³⁵ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 116.

³⁶ Robinson, 'Introduction', *The Thing About Roy Fisher*, p. 9.

after them': again, this ironises the imminent disappearance of their trace in the redeveloped city, and initiates the metaphor in which the workers' lives become 'silver filth' at the poem's close. The city's ageing vulnerability is made oddly abject and somatic by evocation of 'the wrinkled brown houses' which will clearly provide refuge for the workers only in the short term.

By this point, then, we are already so steeped in metaphor that any conventional notion of realism is unthinkable. The poem questions the possibility of a secure vantage point which such conventions would assume, splicing its situation of the observer 'at the corner of Farm and Wheeler Streets' with a return to the 'pale light' which now affords an upward gaze at 'the blind window walls / of a hall of engines' which are themselves lit only by the reflection of the sky and thus given provisional definition in relation to the speaker standing below. We have already seen how significant such vertical orientations are to the structure of feeling of the lyric in 'After Working', and here again, in the delayed continuation of the sentence begun 'sometimes, at the corner', we are directed downward to 'what concentrates down in the warm hollow', which is the limited radius of vital activity determined by the temporal and spatial operations of urban design and commerce: 'the foodshops open late, and people / going about constantly, but not far'. This community then comes to centre around the 'man in a blue suit' urinating against a wall: 'women step, talking, over the stream, / and when the men going by call out he answers'. Once again 'the erosion that makes the world' in 'Linear' is registered, this time

renewing the trace of the 'runnels of people' and anticipating 'silver filth'.

We now move abruptly upward from the community of the hollow toward the 'new precinct', sardonically abstracted as 'dignity' which would be 'above' the communally sanctioned scene of public urination both morally and geographically. As the 'flats on the ridge get the last light', we move from perception of the here and now to the apprehension of the planned future, and when we look back 'down Wheeler Street' the sense is that this is becoming a landscape of the past: 'the lamps / already gone', the streets are again fluid with 'lake stretches of silver' violently 'gashed out' of fading traces figured as 'after-images of brickwork'. At the poem's close, those traces are celebrated, but their fading is nonetheless acknowledged to have been inevitable, for the 'silver filth' runs in 'drains': this saves the poem from sentimentality, reminding us that the slum is only provisionally preferable to the 'graphed'³⁷ reductions offered by 'conscience'.

'Realism' and 'conscience' are reified as agents competing to make an identity through rival processes of 'building' and 'recording': that 'conscience' is 'late' allows the time of day at which the 'last light' hits the ridge to evoke the belated nature of civic care, and if 'realism' is accorded the last word it is nonetheless also a 'late' activity both in the sense that it must respond to the operations of 'conscience' almost as a rearguard action and because, somewhat paradoxically, it is concerned with what is barely real since it will soon cease to

³⁷ Fisher, *Interviews Through Time*, p. 59.

exist. And while I have characterised it as an 'agent' there is also something passive about 'realism' in the poem: to record, after all, is to allow an impression to be formed on the recording surface, and if we return to the interrupted sentence which begins 'sometimes, at the corner of Farm and Wheeler Streets' we can see that 'what concentrates down in the warm hollow' 'presses in' to the 'standing' figure: we need to reverse the elements in this phrase to get past its sleight of hand to the figure of the observer who is constituted by the 'life' pressing into him at the same time as he reconstitutes that life as 'realism'. That the observer's activity has been so abstracted points to his alienation from the world he makes from his perceptions.

In some sense then, the understanding of realism in the poem is elegiac: Fisher commemorates not only a community in its passing but also the means of commemoration, a strategy that can no longer be adopted without at least 'honest doubt'³⁸ especially as it is not only the ambivalently delineated 'realism' which records, but also the governing authority, and so the seeing poet and the civic planner compete not only for the present image of the city but also for its past. The elegiac aspect of Fisher's treatment of realism recalls Richard Sheppard's observation, quoted in my introduction, that many experimental writers remained attached to realism even as they saw that its project was 'becoming impossible'.³⁹ 'The Memorial Fountain' makes some of these concerns more explicit, and in the process it highlights concerns more widely apparent in

³⁸ Fisher, *Interviews Through Time*, p. 104.

Fisher's poetry concerning monuments and forms of memory.

'The Memorial Fountain' playfully adopts a distinctly modernist lineation, an ironised form of mimesis, perhaps, in honour of the cascading motion of its object of focus which 'plays / through summer dusk in gaunt shadows, / black constructions / against a late clear sky': once more, it is 'late' in the day, and the light defines 'black constructions' which are played, as marionettes are played, against a background. In a chiasmic reversal of *City*, where Fisher feared becoming a 'cemetery of performance', here the fountain is the performance of memorial. The poem resists the stillness of monument, transforming the column by describing its falling motion, which is really the rippling of the reflected image of the column in the water. As in 'After Working', this transformation in falling occurs unobtrusively, the emphasis being on the motion rather than the object:

water in the basin
 where the column falls
 shaking,
 rapid and wild,
 in cross-waves, in back-waves,
 the light glinting and blue

Water, like light, becomes a source of transformed vision, and as in the earlier poem, the vertical movement from high (the 'late clear sky') to low ('water in the basin') performs a transition from threat to refuge, from the menace of 'black constructions' to the dynamic celebration of falling water. In contrast to 'After

³⁹ Sheppard, *Modernism - Dada - Postmodernism*, p. 103.

Working' however, 'The Memorial Fountain' moves back upward, with exclamatory force, to the 'Harsh / skyline!' This implies that the poem is more concerned with the relationship between these opposites, and correspondingly less interested in replacing one with the other. The visual to-and-fro motion of the lines could be seen as a correlative to this dual focus.

Against the horizon of the 'harsh / skyline', different kinds of urban construction, the 'black constructions' of memorial and the 'far-off scaffolding' of the building works, are aligned in perspective to reveal the city as a monument without dedication, 'an indecipherable script',⁴⁰ as Fisher once described Birmingham. Thus, 'The Memorial Fountain' harks back to the prose landscapes of *City*: 'the white flanked towers, the stillborn monuments' loom there like the mysterious statues of de Chirico's paintings. The description of 'the gigantic ghost of stone' which was formerly a railway station is the occasion of an ironic comment on the legacy of the city's industrial forefathers, whose inheritors 'are too frightened of it to pull it down'. It is also removed from its original context, like the 'black marble statue' which sits in a back garden, 'clearly not in its proper place'. In this way, the reshaping of the city becomes analogous with the surreal technique of juxtaposition, and it is this insistence on the simultaneously present shaping imaginations of poet and authority which informs Fisher's work after *City*, most clearly in the last lines of 'Seven Attempted Moves':

⁴⁰ Fisher, *Interviews Through Time*, p. 62.

Confinement,
 shortness of breath.
 Only a state of mind.
 And
 Statues of it built everywhere.

Peter Robinson points out that Fisher was later to remark in interview 'I know my wind is very short',⁴¹ suggesting that the state of mind was simply Fisher's own projection as he approached writer's block in the late 1960s. Yet Simon Jarvis, in an essay explicitly concerned with Fisher's block, allows us to see that even that which might be thought to be a set of private symptoms is intimately related to a condition which is felt socially and politically:

The point here is not that our built world does not reflect our human feelings [...] It is rather that this built world all too accurately reflects human feelings, indeed that it reflects nothing else, offering statues of a 'state of mind' [...] the very squares themselves, or rather the built clumps which have replaced them, [are] also cult images.⁴²

Here, Jarvis is concerned to refute Donald Davie's view of Fisher as an advocate of social democracy's 'hobbit-world of reduced expectations'.⁴³ This is not quite fair to Davie, who recognised that in 'Seven Attempted Moves' 'the speaker [...] is less than enthusiastic about social democracy as it has evolved in Britain since 1945', but Jarvis convinces more than Davie in his interpretation of that lack of enthusiasm, which originates not in disappointment at an unfulfilled project but

⁴¹ Fisher, *Interviews Through Time*, p. 74.

⁴² Simon Jarvis, 'A Burning Monochrome: Fisher's Block', *The Thing About Roy Fisher*, pp. 173-192 (p. 178).

scepticism about the project itself. The need to make public space is created by the prior organisation of land as private property: a memorial in a park likewise asks us to share in passive contemplation of a national past constructed so that we can belong to it belatedly. In practice, such contemplation may be rare, and in 'The Memorial Fountain' what is observed instead is the continuance of a private, sealed-off, alienated urban 'state of mind' in the theatre of public togetherness:

This scene:
 people on the public seats
 embedded in it, darkening
 intelligences of what's visible;
 private, given over, all of them -

Many scenes.

Still sombre.

The people in the park are 'embedded' in the scene: they become the monument's inlay, shadows of statuary, and the 'sombre mood' that prevails is the sign of that shadowy quality. Things have become doubles of themselves: they have been represented. 'Respectful sepia' captures this perfectly, exemplifying the ability of media to distance us from things both spatially and temporally: the smudged brown casts its own shadow over the scene, and simultaneously signifies a particular era of the development of film, so that the scene is dated even before we register its details.

⁴³ Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972; repr.

With such blocks already in place between the scene and its participants, there is no need for the additional embellishments of writerly 'atmosphere'. The writer's activity is already 'temper', and attention to detail brings it out in photo-negative, oxymoronic 'garish twilight'. The process of production made visible in the closing lines of 'For Realism' is likewise the culminating realisation of 'The Memorial Fountain' as Fisher steps back from his role, like a Brechtian actor, to undercut it as 'Romantic notion'.

The comparison is justified, for while Christopher Middleton's poetic of eccentric feeling casts the poet in the role of shaman in poems like 'Holy Cow' and 'Idiocy of Rural Life', Fisher has said that his 'heroes are people like Schweik and Brecht, heroes who are committed to strange pragmatic reactions to circumstances even against their own interests'.⁴⁴ This helps to articulate the limits to which an orthodox Marxist understanding of alienation is relevant to Fisher's poetic. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels view alienation as a condition brought about in the course of class struggle:

Just because individuals seek *only* their particular interest, i.e., that not coinciding with their communal interest (for the "general good" is the illusory form of communal life), the latter will be imposed on them as an interest "alien" to them, and "independent" of them, as in its turn a particular, peculiar "general interest"; or they must meet face to face in this antagonism, as in democracy.⁴⁵

As I have shown in my reading of 'For Realism' and 'The Memorial Fountain',

1979), pp. 171-172.

⁴⁴ Fisher, *Interviews Through Time*, p. 60.

Fisher's poetry displays a similar attitude towards received notions of the "general good": however, he identifies Schweik, fictional creation of the Czech anarchist Jaroslav Hasek, as being 'committed to strange pragmatic reactions' against his own interest, rather than seeking his 'particular interest'. A letter on the anarchism of Bakunin written by Engels helps to explain the difference between Marxist and anarchist positions on this matter. Engels characterised Bakunin's tactic in opposition to the state as '*complete abstention from all politics* [Author's italics]'⁴⁶ and declared:

the mass of the workers will never allow themselves to be persuaded that the public affairs of their countries are not also their own affairs; they are naturally *politically-minded*, and whoever tries to make them believe that they should leave politics alone will in the end be left in the lurch.⁴⁷

Thus, while 'public affairs' may on the one hand be 'the illusory form of communal life', it is nonetheless insisted that the 'mass' regard them as 'their own affairs' in the interests of class struggle. It is this kind of contradiction which results in the poetry of public protest, and it was Fisher's reluctance as a poet to participate in his society in that way which was the occasion of his remark about Brecht and Schweik:

As a poet I'm an image-maker, and I wouldn't sloganise a mass of really quite scattered or branching or complicated reactions to social matters; I wouldn't want to sloganise them into an image [...] the poems obviously are sceptical in all sorts of ways. They're sceptical formulations of life,

⁴⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, ed. by Feuer (Aylesbury: Fontana / Collins, 1984), p. 296.

⁴⁶ Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, p. 481.

⁴⁷ Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, p. 482.

systemisations; the poems are anarchic. The poems represent, if you like, an anarchic response to – not so much social issues, things which come out of society and which stand out and can be put in newspapers – but to the whole rubble, the whole mass of tiny interfaced circumstances that carry you along, make the present in which you exist.⁴⁸

'Sceptical formulations' are then the issue of a pragmatic decision not to pursue interests which have become divided and reified. To 'take a stand' in these circumstances is to endorse the public ground on which such stands are obliged to be staged, as well as to accept a public language equally compromised and inadequate. Living by the eye involves images which are more pragmatic and less recuperable for a public transmission. Fisher, like O'Hara's Zhivago, is 'passively withdrawn from action which his conscience cannot sanction'. Mention of 'the whole rubble' recalls the presence of detritus throughout Fisher's work: the assemblage of tree and the 'composite monster' of the crowd in *City*; the car dump and the demolished pipes in *The Ship's Orchestra*; the 'silver filth' of 'For Realism'. Rubble is the unassimilable element in modern life, and therefore exactly what cannot be taken up as a slogan in the interests of either a falsely constituted collective or an equally illusory heroic individual will: it is defective, and intersects therefore with the eccentric, whose alienation is as much a personal debility as an economic condition.

Fisher's characterisations of the eccentric frequently centre around notions of the 'stupid' and the defective. The observer in *City* believes 'that I have

⁴⁸ Fisher, *Interviews Through Time*, p. 60. It is a signal irony in this context that one of the first people to recognise this aspect of Fisher's writing was the foremost protest poet in Britain, Adrian Mitchell, as Fisher relates in *Interviews Through Time*, p. 81.

inadvertently been looking through another's eyes and have seen what I cannot receive'. In 'Seven Attempted Moves', the scene is characterised by 'confinement, / shortness of breath'. In 'Report on August' and 'Studies', the poet is seen as ill or disabled. 'In The Wall' introduces the figure of the charlatan who later appears in *A Furnace*: 'The name / is Charlatan. A trodden place, / a city: the feet have been // everywhere'. The charlatan and the city merge, and in the later poem there is a synthesis of *City's* imperfect receiver of vision and the flâneur of 'In The Wall': 'grown man / without right learning; by nobody / guided to the places; not knowing / what might speak; having eased awkwardly / into the way of being called.' John Kerrigan rightly points to the 'self-defining' role of this passage, describing the poet as 'dissident, heterodox, somewhat autodidactic'.⁴⁹ It also suggests something of the improvisatory, occasional and peripatetic nature of the sequences that Fisher has continued to produce since the early 1970s, and it is in these sequences that the agency of the eccentric has been worked out with increasing confidence. One important instance of this occurs in 'Diversions' when Fisher remarks 'all my life I've been left-handed'. The notion that he might be expected to have been right-handed at some point makes sense when we learn that the poet was caned at school in an attempt to correct his left-handedness, and Fisher himself has suggested a causal relation between the sinistral and oppositional writing practice, or 'using a pen "against

⁴⁹ Kerrigan, 'Roy Fisher on Location', *The Thing About Roy Fisher*, p. 37.

the grain”⁵⁰ This connects Fisher directly to Walter Benjamin, whose criticism drew on anarchism, Marxism and Surrealism in a dissident and heterodox fashion, and who declared in *One Way Street* that ‘these are days when no-one should rely unduly on his “competence”. Strength lies in improvisation. All the decisive blows are struck left-handed.’⁵¹ Describing Benjamin’s idea of the melancholic personality, Susan Sontag says that ‘slowness is one characteristic of the melancholic temperament. Blundering is another, from noticing too many possibilities, from not noticing one’s lack of practical sense’.⁵² In an illuminating essay on Fisher’s left-handedness, John Lucas writes:

Fisher [...] remarks that critics of his work have begun to elucidate and gloss ‘things which I’ve blundered into, habits I’ve blundered into, areas of material ... when I say blundered, I’m not criticising myself – I intended ‘to “blunder”, I wasn’t doing anything else...’ To ‘Blunder’ the *Oxford English Dictionary* says: ‘Move blindly; flounder, stumble.’ To blunder is to behave in an unpremeditated way; blundering is gauche behaviour. We are back at left-handedness.⁵³

Benjamin too describes this stand-off between the ‘intention’ to blunder and the ‘unpremeditated’, improvisatory outcome, as in *Berlin Chronicle*:

Not to find one’s way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance – nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city – as one loses oneself in a forest – that calls for quite a different schooling.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Quoted in John Lucas, ‘The Work of a Left-Handed Man’, in *The Thing About Roy Fisher*, pp. 86-105 (p. 88).

⁵¹ Benjamin, *One Way Street*, p. 49.

⁵² Introduction to *One Way Street*, p. 11.

⁵³ John Lucas, ‘The Work of a Left-Handed Man’, *The Thing About Roy Fisher*, p. 94.

⁵⁴ Benjamin, *One Way Street*, p. 298.

Fisher's poems can be seen as strategies for 'losing' a self in a city, but their constant and obsessive return to remembered and observed sites is also the constitution of a situated and damaged subject which has nowhere else to go, which is indeed in love with inertia. Fisher's awareness of the fatalism this entails may be seen to lie behind 'Wonders of Obligation', seen by various critics as a turning point towards a more candid stance, and which we might see as an attempt to strike the 'decisive blows' demanded by Benjamin's radical poetic.⁵⁵

In a recent interview, Fisher described the change:

Whereas in the 1950s I seemed to have no choice but to approach the world's revelations via a persona I can only call, in the kindest way, stupid, here I was interested in remaining sharply conscious throughout [...] I wanted to exercise a perception that felt itself to be in better shape: maybe a little less self-enclosed, for one thing, a little more companionable.⁵⁶

Perhaps it is that spirit of companionship that prompts the opening line's assumption of the first person plural, so rare in Fisher's writing: 'We know that hereabouts / comes into being / the malted-milk brickwork / on its journey past the sun'. If so, it is nevertheless defiant, since what is 'known' is clearly subjective, and much of the poem continues to circle around familiar landscapes. What has changed is the framework within which they are seen. In contrast to the child's-eye-view of the air-raids offered in *City*, we have something close to the poetry of protest, with the poet as witness: 'I saw / the mass graves dug /

⁵⁵ See for example Kerrigan, 'Roy Fisher on Location', *The Thing About Roy Fisher*, and Andrew Crozier, 'Signs of Identity: Roy Fisher's *A Furnace*', *PN Review*, 83 (1992), 25-32

the size of workhouse wards / into the clay'. With confidence comes a new anger, the clear and unambiguous comparison of what *A Furnace* would later term 'the government's wars' and the notorious Victorian form of social provision. That kind of intervention, which denies privacy and dignity, is seen as identical with the use of the school toilet as bomb shelter, and here the collision of the 'self-enclosed' and an imposed companionship confronts the reader:

Suddenly to go
 to the school jakes with the rest
 in a rush by the clock.
 What had been strange and inward
 become nothing, a piss-pallor
 with gabble. Already they were lost,
 taught unguessed silliness,
 to squirt and squeal there.
 What was wrong? Suddenly
 to distrust your own class
 and be demoralised
 as any public-school boy.

The imperative is then to develop ways of preserving what is 'strange and inward' which allow for the renewal of trust in a community, and the ground for that endeavour is writing:

The things we make up out of language
 turn into common property.
 To feel responsible
 I put my poor footprint back in.

⁵⁶ 'They Are All Gone into the World: Roy Fisher in conversation with Peter Robinson', in

Ultimately this represents Fisher's recourse to a post-romantic poetic, as the movements towards heightened speech throughout the poem indicate (the reference to Coleridge near the poem's end provides confirmation), but those movements continue to be complicated by an awareness of the self as divided and private:

The brook
 nearest home, no more than a mile,
 ran straight out into the light
 from under the cemetery;
 and there the caddis-flies would case
 themselves in wondrous grit.

I'm obsessed
 with cambered tarmacs, concretes,
 the washings of rain.

What happens in Fisher's later poetry is therefore a reconfiguration of the concerns of his earlier domestic surrealist work within a more recognisably 'native', British Romantic tradition, culminating in the explorations of inheritance and ancestry in *A Furnace*, which is properly the subject of another study. Already, in 'Wonders of Obligation', the access granted to sovereign personal memory shows the tendency towards precisely the ideology of monument Fisher's earlier poetry questions. As I hope to have shown, his writing frequently involves a competition between the poet's shaping imagination and that of the authority, or of Margaret Thatcher specifically, as in the first epigraph to this chapter. In the end, this imagination, if too reliant on

memory, risks a static understanding of the city which is cannot adequately address the flux of everyday life. John Kerrigan warns that 'in the information-flux and cyborg knowledge-state of advanced capitalism, it can be doubted how far any single or collective "human mind makes the world"',⁵⁷ and cites John Wilkinson's *The Interior Planets* as an example of how poets might have begun to develop strategies to deal with this risk.⁵⁸ Wilkinson himself (writing under the Pessoaan pseudonym of Bernardo Soares), in a review of a reading by Fisher during the Cambridge Conference of Contemporary Poetry, comments more sardonically:

I have heard Roy Fisher read 'The Handsworth Liberties' every seven years, a time suspended like a hospital back-ward, only the poet's marks of ageing to tally - these poems are a 1950s three-piece suite neither replaced nor re-covered since the downpayment was made. Fisher still introduces them by glossing Handsworth as a 'shabby suburb' of Birmingham; Handsworth where Soho Road has been the 'front line' of black, inner-city Birmingham for decades now, since The Handsworth Liberties was succeeded by the classic British reggae of Handsworth Revolution.⁵⁹

The impatient tone here is perhaps open to the allegation of posture: nonetheless, the criticism must be felt keenly, if we are to maintain claims about Fisher's ambition. The evocation of the 'three-piece suite' is sharp, since that image of dilapidated furniture on credit functions in fact as a good figure for

⁵⁷ Kerrigan, 'Roy Fisher on Location', *The Thing About Roy Fisher*, p. 27.

⁵⁸ *The Interior Planets* is collected in John Wilkinson, *Flung Clear: Poems in Six Books* (Brighton: Parataxis, 1994)

⁵⁹ Bernardo Soares, 'An Excursion to the Cambridge Conference of Contemporary Poetry', at <http://jacketmagazine.com/04/cccp.html> accessed on Sunday 10th November, 2002, at 17:30. The editor of *Jacket*, John Tranter, confirmed to me in conversation that Wilkinson wrote this piece.

Fisher's eccentric 'rubble'. A tinge of the sepia to which Fisher refers in 'The Memorial Fountain' might be seen as the inevitable interest to pay on the use of a situated subject, with all the imperfections of perspective implied by that compromised position, and in this context the contemporary resonance of Fisher's phrase 'embedded in the scene' are hard to avoid as I situate my own act of reading at this time.

It is perhaps enough that Fisher's poetry makes these dilemmas so tangible. The movement from the domestic surrealism of Fisher's earlier work towards the problematically direct address of 'Wonders of Obligation' articulates a series of possibilities and problems which are themselves 'inherited' by later poets. Living by the eye involves the negotiation of images offered both by the empirical observer and the hallucinating or dreaming 'mind's eye', and as John Matthias observed in remarks quoted in the introduction to this chapter, Fisher's achievement is to make us question which is the more real, not in order to dispel the real itself but rather to widen it. The anxieties involved in such negotiations reveal the extent and the limits of the domestic surreal.

Chapter IV

'ACTIVE STRUCTURES OF ECCENTRIC FEELING': THE POETRY
OF CHRISTOPHER MIDDLETON

I mean to talk to you about poems as active structures of eccentric feeling, presenting truths of imagination. I shall also be suggesting that poems, to be stark, radical and relevant, should be other than descriptive, should not be ego-fascinated verbal tokens of this or that actual object or felt thought, but should be constructional in ways which enact the root life of imagination and intelligent feeling.¹

Perhaps only in the realm of the domestic surreal could the words 'eccentric' and 'relevant' appear complementary as they do in the passage above. The notions of deviation and pertinence are, however, suitably incongruous for a poetics described by a near oxymoron, and their rapprochement, or reconciliation, stands as a key motivation in the work of a poet who seeks to draw on avant-garde tradition from a position inside academia. Of all the poets considered in this thesis, none has done more to frame their own work in criticism and in sections of notes appended to individual collections than Christopher Middleton, and only Roy Fisher has had as sustained a professional involvement in the university system. While O'Hara presents a kind of archive of the avant-garde and the city of New York in his poetry, professing disdain for criticism and manifesto-writing, Middleton's work maintains a blurred boundary between poetry and criticism whereby his academic concern to intervene in literary history on behalf of the Dadaists, for example, intersects not

¹ Middleton, *Bolshevism In Art and other expository writings* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1978), p. 214.

only with his translation of Dadaist works in the poetic archive that is *Faint Harps and Silver Voices: Selected Translations* (which Middleton himself describes as 'a museum'), but also and more uneasily with his own poetry in its dialectical play of the disjunctive and the discursive, the central and the eccentric, 'introversion and extraversion' [sic].

The latter pairing, Middleton's own, appears in the talk from which my opening quotation is taken, and derives from ideas of poetic language developed by Paul Valéry and T. S. Eliot. It is particularly significant that Middleton should appeal to Eliot since his example as poet-critic has clearly been influential on Middleton as it was on his near-contemporary, Donald Davie. Davie and Middleton make an interesting pair for a variety of reasons: although they are both clearly associated with Michael Schmidt's Carcanet Press and *PN Review*, in other respects they may seem to have little in common. One, a Northern English, grammar-school educated English lecturer and self-described 'petty bourgeois', 'dissenter'² and conservative, author of the closest thing to a manifesto that was ever produced by a member of The Movement:³ the other, a member of the 'educated English upper-middle class' raised near Cambridge, familiar with and sympathetic to the ideas of Marx and Walter Benjamin, described in critical

² Donald Davie, *Trying to Explain* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986), pp. 35-36.

³ Davie himself remarked 'I like to think that if the group of us had ever cohered enough to subscribe to a common manifesto, it might have been *Purity of Diction in English Verse*.' Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 197. Elsewhere in this chapter I use the 1992 edition of this book (reference in note 7) because it is the most recent, but I regard the Postscript of 1966 as an important document in its own right and will refer to it at various points throughout this chapter. Where I refer to the 1967 edition, it will be marked in footnotes as *Purity of Diction i*).

accounts as a Neo - or Retro - Modernist.⁴ From such empirical evidence one could almost discern opposite trajectories, with Davie coming from one cultural margin to the centre, and Middleton proceeding in the opposite direction to the territory so often described as marginal in poetic histories - that of postwar Modernism and the avant-garde. Confirmation of such a narrative might come from Middleton's first two volumes of poetry, subsequently disowned, which show clear signs of the high rhetoric commonly associated with the New Apocalypse.⁵ However, complications arise when we consider that both poets are strongly involved in the modernist heritage of Eliot and Pound: both spent considerable periods of time teaching in America, far from the class and cultural structures (or, indeed, strictures) of British life;⁶ both have displayed a pronounced interest in other European poetic traditions;⁷ and most importantly, both have returned to a set of key issues including the very notion of a cultural centre, as well as the nature of poetic language. A closer examination of their contrasting attitudes towards a common heritage will contribute greatly to an understanding of either poet, and moreover to our understanding of the period of transition between modernist and postmodernist poetics to which their work belongs. In the first part of this chapter, I would like to discuss the ways in

⁴ See Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940*, pp. 164-170, and Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism*, pp. 127-132 and 151-169.

⁵ The volumes in question are *Poems* (1944) and *Nocturne in Eden: Poems* (1945), both published in London by The Fortune Press.

⁶ Davie taught at Stanford University, CA, and Vanderbilt University, TN, between 1968 and 1988: Middleton taught at the University of Texas in Austin from 1966 until his retirement in 1998.

⁷ Middleton's debt to European poetic tradition will be discussed later in this chapter. Davie's sense of the importance of Russian poetry is discussed in *Trying to Explain*, pp. 36-39.

which such a comparative reading may help us to understand Middleton's notion of poetry as presenting 'active structures of eccentric feeling'.

In *Purity of Diction*, Davie identifies the decline of an audience of reliable 'taste and judgement' with the uprooting of established communities that occurred 'as England transformed itself into an industrial state'.⁸ For Davie, such an audience represents the guarantor of a literature which expresses order, equilibrium, and civility, and so a decline in that audience is the sign of a more general decline in societal order:

The centre fell apart. In architecture and furnishing, as in literature, the people with the money to command the best began to command something else; and taste and judgement no longer went with power and wealth.⁹

The terms of Davie's argument here closely resemble those of Eliot in his essay 'What is a Classic?':

What we find, in a period of classic prose, is not a mere common convention of writing, like the common style of newspaper leader writers, but a community of taste [...] The age in which we find a common style will be an age when society has achieved a moment of order and stability, of equilibrium and harmony; as the age which manifests the greatest extremes of individual style will be an age of immaturity or an age of senility.¹⁰

Significantly, for Eliot 'extremes of individual style' are partly the product of eccentricity, either because there is 'no generally accepted standard - if, indeed, that can be called eccentric when there is no centre', or 'because originality

⁸ Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse and Articulate Energy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 21.

⁹ Davie, *Purity of Diction*, p. 22.

comes to be more valued than correctness.' Looking back 14 years after the first publication of *Purity of Diction*, Davie noted the signs of such eccentricity in popular culture:

It was at some time quite late in [the 1950s] that John Wain objected to the pervasive "lack of style" in English life; and I remember privately but readily endorsing his irritation. Yet in 1966 "style" - in clothes, in behaviour, in haircuts, in the theatre, in pop-music - is one thing that the self-regarding Britain of Carnaby Street is not short of. If I were now writing *Purity of Diction in English Verse* I should need to take greater pains than I did in 1952, to distinguish the literary styles I was analyzing from what passes for style in the hectic circles that invent or exploit or tamely follow the dictates of the "with it". I could not now take it for granted so much as I did then, that the only elegance worth bothering with, in life or in art, is that which is heartfelt.¹¹

This seems a recognisably *modernist* stance. As mentioned in my introduction, Andreas Huyssen has called for a renewed understanding of the distinction between modernism of this kind and what he calls the 'historical avantgarde', which he identifies with Berlin Dada and early French surrealism among other movements:

My point of departure [...] is that despite its ultimate and perhaps inevitable failure, the historical avantgarde aimed at developing an alternative relationship between high art and mass culture and thus should be distinguished from modernism, which for the most part insisted on the inherent hostility between high and low.¹²

Huyssen stresses that the boundaries between modernism and the avantgarde

¹⁰ T.S. Eliot, *On Poets and Poetry* (London: Faber, 1957; repr. 1971), p. 57.

¹¹ Davie, *Purity of Diction* i), pp. 201-202.

¹² Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), viii.

remained fluid, and that after its initial flourishing, the latter was eventually absorbed by the former, leading to the indiscriminate use of both terms in critical literature from the 1960s onwards. One of the questions to be addressed in this chapter is whether Middleton's stance can be seen as an engagement with that of the 'historical avantgarde' whose manifestation in Dada he wrote about extensively in *Bolshevism in Art*, or if he exemplifies rather the tendency of the avantgarde to blend into or be absorbed by modernism.

The answer is unclear. Middleton displays a typical modernist disdain for popular culture when he refers to 'plastics and apathy' in 'Reflections on a Viking Prow' (to which we will return), and yet his non-pejorative understanding of the word 'eccentricity' places him at odds with Davie and Eliot. Furthermore, in his use of the terms 'introversion' and 'extraversion', also in 'Notes On Some Poems', he makes no less important a departure from Eliot's thinking. In that piece, Middleton quotes these lines from Eliot's 'The Music of Poetry':

At some periods, the task is to explore the musical possibilities of an established convention of the relation of the idiom of verse to that of speech; at other periods, the task is to catch up with the changes in colloquial speech, which are fundamental changes in thought and sensibility.¹³

Middleton remarks: 'the formulation is most interesting. But a single period or

¹³ Eliot, *On Poets and Poetry*, p. 35.

one poet can produce deviant poems as well as colloquial ones'.¹⁴ In his essay, Eliot makes a distinction between differences of style that relate to the poet's 'personal constitution' and those which relate to the historical period in which the poet finds him or herself. Middleton could be accused of ignoring this distinction in asserting that one poet can produce deviant and colloquial poems, but a more sympathetic reading might have it that Middleton accords more significance to matters of 'personal constitution', or even that he understands the relation between history and personal constitution differently. Later in 'Notes On Some Poems', Middleton seems to demonstrate that he is aware of departing from Eliot's argument:

It may be that the historical cycles described by Eliot are epitomized in the mental history of any poet whose abyssal life is shaped by successive phases of introversion and extraversion.¹⁵

Eliot's poet is a product of his or her own era (leaving aside the quite different issue of poetic tradition); Middleton's poet, in contrast, internalises the legacy of successive eras in a newly psychological periodicity, so that the *œuvre* will show signs of 'established convention' and 'changes in thought and sensibility' alternately. Middleton does not indicate whether this is a condition specific to our own era, and indeed he does not go so far as to extend it equally to all poets; he suggests rather that it is the province of certain among them, the speaker himself presumably representing one such case. One cannot easily assimilate

¹⁴ Middleton, *Bolshevism in Art*, p. 215.

this to the postmodern sense of the past which results in the ironic parody of historical styles,¹⁶ since history is experienced in Middleton's formulation as an almost oppressive force in the production of consciousness rather than as an object to be regarded critically. Poetry thus becomes the site of a tension or struggle, one which Middleton dramatises in the later essay 'For Márton, Erwin, and Miklos':

A poem is now, more or less, a contest with the opaque, conducted in silence, until the human combatant screams out in agony before being crushed ('and later reinvents a language')¹⁷. My language here is too melodramatic. But I mean to distinguish between suave poetry which has been pushed to the margins, and exigent poetry, hard-bitten poetry, which goes to the limits of the conceivable and thus relocates the centre.¹⁸

Centre and margin are thus seen to be interpenetrating or interdependent realities, but ultimately the struggle is concerned with making one useful to the other in some way: here, the centre depends on expeditions to 'the limits of the conceivable' for its rejuvenation. Elsewhere, in his 'Introduction' to *Bolshevism in Art*, written in 1975, a year earlier than 'For Márton', Middleton had accorded the poet as shaman special access to 'that "centre" in which what we call soul and world are felt to be magically homogenous',¹⁹ a centre, then, which is prior to the realm of the social and which is located outside history. If this begins to

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See Linda Hutcheon's discussion of this in *A Poetics Of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988; repr. 1992), pp. 22-36.

¹⁷ Here, Middleton alludes to a phrase of Ponge's, quoted earlier in the same essay: 'Hope therefore lies in a poetry through which the world so invades the spirit of man that he becomes speechless, and later reinvents a language.'

¹⁸ Middleton, *The Pursuit of the Kingfisher*, p. 48.

sound like some of the more hyperbolic proclamations of the Beat poets, Middleton is quick to underline his opposition to 'the ill-founded "groupy" notion that "primal experience" can be directly expressed in the usual hackneyed phrases'. There is something much quieter and more locally focused in Middleton's poetry, a kind of emphasis we associate with Williams. For example, in an early poem called 'Hermit Pot', the shining rim of a pot seen in transit becomes the ordering principle of the cosmos:

Passing on down -
 it was only the rim shone.
 Returning,
 it was not there.
 Who would have taken thought
 of this pot
 at that precise moment
 as the middle of the enigma of the world.

The speaker here places himself at the margins of his own perception: it is not 'I' who have 'taken thought', and the perception remains unattributed, though it is not itself in doubt, as the absence of a question mark perhaps indicates. Yet only the speaker has access to 'that precise moment': the present participles 'passing' and 'returning' could only refer to him. Thus, the centring of the world's enigma on the pot can only occur through the speaker's willed absence, and the contest of distance and immediacy is caught in those parallel markers of deixis, 'this pot / at that precise moment'. As the shaman gains access to a centre where his soul is no longer distinct from the world, so the poet seeks access to a present

¹⁹ Middleton, *Bolshevism in Art*, p. 13.

'enigma' by means of impersonality. The unmarked question 'who would have taken thought...' could be seen as an attempt to extend that access to the reader while acknowledging the inevitable failure of such a gesture.

In contrast, Linda Hutcheon has spoken of the 'ex-centric' in postmodern art, the deviating tendency which depends on a 'fiction of order and unity' for its energy.²⁰ To recognise an inverse relation of centre and margin here is not to propose a simplistic demarcation of modernist and postmodernist approaches: it is, however, useful in helping to understand the civic and political aspect of Middleton's project, especially in its shamanic incarnation, which will perhaps not translate easily into accepted postmodernist terms. It is interesting too, in this regard, to note the dismissal of 'suave' poetry: is this Middleton's term for Davie's 'urbane diction', a style contrived to bring civic order to bear on a society feared lost to such intentions? In the foreword to *Articulate Energy*, Davie himself appears to acknowledge the inevitable marginalisation of this will to authority:

Some of the most careful readers of *Articulate Energy* have fastened upon those pages where I speak of a tacit compact or contract between writer and reader, and have suggested, more or less gently, that this was a graceful delusion of the mid-1950s when some of us dreamed of reconstituting a literary world like that of the eighteenth century, when author and reader alike agreed about what experiences should be brought into the public domain, what others should remain covert [...] I never knew anyone at that time who laboured under that delusion. Instead there were certain writers who agreed with themselves to write *as if* such contracts existed between writer and reader, although they knew that they didn't exist, and couldn't. This is a quite different matter: a deliberate stratagem,

²⁰ Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, pp. 57-73

undertaken so as to will into being conditions which ought to exist, but don't. And for those of us who have survived as writers from the 1950s into the 1970s it is still the only honourable stratagem that we can practise – to act *as if* the writer and his readers were still the civilized people that they may have ceased to be.²¹

Middleton, finally, can be shown to share in this sense of despondency, but the disparity between contemporary life and civilisation is not defiantly ignored, but rather intensified and recorded as dissonance in poems like 'Five Psalms of Common Man':

Whisky whipping g-string Jaguar megaton
sometimes a 'purely rational human being'

it's me they tell of yonder sea devoid of amber
it's me they tell of column and haunting song

The decline of the civilized coincides with the rise of mass culture and its contents, as it were, and the fear of the 1950s intellectual or poet in the face of this development is inevitably shaped by the still recent memory of the Nazi régime in Germany. Middleton makes this link explicit in the third section of 'Five Psalms' when he juxtaposes W. N. P. Barbellion's nauseated vision of a heap of bus tickets with the trial of Adolf Eichmann. It is telling that in the verses quoted above, the trivial commodified details of consumer identity are juxtaposed with images of antiquity, which remains the horizon against which all attempts at shared culture will be judged. Davie again helps us to understand this:

²¹ Davie, *Purity of Diction*, pp. 185-186.

Until only a hundred and fifty years ago, Latin and to a less extent Greek were still international literary languages, in that all but a very few of the serious literary works in all the languages of Europe were written with Latin and Greek models in mind, employing a common vocabulary of Latin and Greek mythology and symbolism [...] This international language still survives indeed, though it is spoken and understood only by a calamitously depleted number. It fell out of general use ('general' I mean among even the numerically tiny minority that at any given time cares for the arts) at precisely the time when the gramophone and colour photography were being invented.²²

For Davie, Pound's *Cantos* create a poetic language which is 'literally international' in contrast to the 'self-confessedly *provincial* utterance' which otherwise characterises the 'English poetic scene'. The link between the provincial and the popular as degraded versions of shared culture is made when Davie regretfully casts Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin, his friends and colleagues in the Movement, as 'cultural teddy-boys' in a discussion of the contemporary English rejection of 'tradition'.²³ Thus, the importance of Pound's multi-lingual borrowing and his appeals to antiquity is as an example of what Davie elsewhere called a 'rearguard action'²⁴ in defence of civilisation.

However, in the fifth section of 'Five Psalms', Middleton rejects rearguard action to restore order as well as antagonism towards order in a stanza of deliberately restricted lexis which suggests a weariness with historical cycles as well as a sense of the absurdity of language as a way of addressing those cycles:

²² Davie, 'The Poet in the Imaginary Museum (1)', July 1957, *The Poet in the Imaginary Museum: essays of two decades*, ed. by Barry Alpert (Manchester: Carcanet, 1977), 45-50 (pp. 46-47).

²³ Davie, *The Poet in the Imaginary Museum*, p. 48.

²⁴ Davie, *Trying To Explain*, p. 32.

Order imagined against fear is not order.
 Saith man. Fear imagined against order
 only negates or does not negate existing order.
 Out of a rumbling of hollows an order is born
 to negate another existing order of fear.

Middleton's answer, such as it is, is to confront 'brute life' with a shaping instinct:

The orders revolve as improvisations against fear,
 changed images of chaos. Without fear, nothing.
 Let me, saith man, take another look at the sea again.
 And in his ear begin the rumblings of keels again.

There is here an acknowledgement, clear even in the syntactic parallels line after line, that this proposed action is no advance, but rather a renewed attempt to address the same problems, and this notion of a timeless task is repeated sixteen years later in 'Reflections on a Viking Prow' in the same maritime terms, as Middleton proposes his interpretation of the carvings on a Viking ship:

The ship was protected and guided by marine protoforms carved – into symbols – out of the wood whose axe-edge shape cut through the salty matter of the sea. The symbols worked a magical substitution. The substitute, as symbol, participates communicatively in the brute life, sea, from which it is extracted [...] Thinking about artifice of this kind – the prow system is not isolated, nor need we lose sight of social implications for ourselves – one comes to have doubts about poems which conform to the scripts of subjective expression; doubts also about anecdotal or confessional poems, poems that catalogue impressions additively, and so forth.²⁵

This is an impressive translation of the 'rumblings' of a prow: what impresses

further is the ease with which Middleton connects this relation of 'artifact and environment' to that which he perceives in the work of those he calls 'the artificer poets' of the modern tradition. These poets are seen to possess a 'sense of dwelling along a particular time/space axis' with the result that we associate them with places that become worlds in their work. Middleton's further elaboration of this idea resonates strongly with the relation of poet and place that we have identified as forming part of the domestic surreal:

[The artificer poets] all wrestle, respectfully, with arbitrariness. Their cities, landscapes, and rooms are not photographically literal. Never frontal reportage about apparent localities, their writings are formal creations which enshrine and radiate poetic space. A particular time/space axis, as 'world of appearance', may be recognized, certainly, in the words and the imagination words embody. But that embodiment includes a crucial moment of change. Nothing is neutral any more, all is transvalued and animated by the rhythms of a unique formal vision grounded in a unique sensibility.²⁶

The same might have been said of any of the poets of the domestic surreal, and John Ash seems to echo Middleton's description of the way places are taken beyond 'a particular time/space axis' when he describes Fisher's *City* as 'no longer a city temporally and spatially fixed'.²⁷ The tension between the everyday experience of time and place and the temporal and spatial mutations wrought by 'formal vision' are also registered in John Ashbery's 'The One Thing That Can Save America', and this poem is of particular interest to us since it casts

²⁵ Middleton, *The Pursuit of the Kingfisher*, p. 83.

²⁶ Middleton, *The Pursuit of the Kingfisher*, p. 84.

the problem in terms of a 'centre' and an 'elsewhere': 'Are place names central?' Ashbery asks, offering a swift, panoramic, 'centralised' view over the 'Places of known civic pride, of civil obscurity' before deciding that 'these are connected to my version of America / But the juice is elsewhere.'²⁸ The poem reaches out towards a timeless 'truth' whose time, paradoxically, 'has still / Not arrived': Ashbery refuses to resolve fully the opposition of 'private turns of event' and 'exemplary' fate, concentrating instead on the 'mostly limited / Steps that can be taken against danger' in the ambiguously delimited space of everyday life in 'Our country, in fenced areas, in cool shady streets'. The danger is not specified: it may refer to private or public 'turns of event', but Ashbery's concern here as elsewhere is to chart the movements of consciousness in relation to its objects rather than to address one specific object or another. It is evidence of Middleton's differing attitude to the 'central' that his poetry contains more stark juxtapositions of events and objects while maintaining awareness of a 'particular time/space axis'. Although this aspect of his poetic can be seen to develop throughout Middleton's career, I consider that it finds its apotheosis in *The Lonely Suppers of W. V. Balloon* (1975) written in the period when the poet was formulating many of his critical ideas about writing²⁹: Ashbery's 'The One Thing That Can Save America' was published during this time also (in *Self-Portrait in a*

²⁷ Ash, 'A Classic Post-Modernist', p. 46. Since 'Reflections on a Viking Prow' and 'A Classic Post-Modernist' both appeared in 1979, it is possible that Ash had read Middleton's article, but I have been unable to verify this.

²⁸ I give a fuller reading of this poem in Chapter One.

Convex Mirror, 1975) and any writing which addressed 'danger' during this time had as its inevitable backdrop America's withdrawal from Vietnam as well as the Watergate scandal, no less for Middleton the self-described 'Englishman in Texas' than for Ashbery, the native of New York State. I will now offer a reading of Middleton's poetry of the 1970s in the light of these considerations.

The poems in *The Lonely Suppers of W. V. Balloon* display a powerful concern with place, and indeed the collection opens with six poems concerning 'southern French and Spanish regions', as Middleton points out in the *Notes* at the end of the book. The poet's endeavour is not to build up a composite picture of one place as Roy Fisher or Frank O'Hara do, but rather to assert the particularity of one or another place, and at the same time to reveal through the structuring of the diverse details of each place the development in the poem of what Middleton would later call 'poetic space'³⁰. This may be seen as a development of the concern in the earlier 'Hermit Pot' to penetrate the 'enigma of the world' in all its local manifestations, and a number of poems in *The Lonely Suppers* continue the discourse on objects initiated in that piece. 'In Balthazar's Village' concedes the eccentricity of this poetic project even as it suggests the vastness of its scope:

odd as it is to care
 anyhow for things
 their mass & contour

²⁹ Essays written during this period include the introduction to *Bolshevism in Art* (1974-1975), 'For Márton, Erwin, and Miklos' (1976), 'The Pursuit of the Kingfisher: Writing as Expression' (1976), and 'Reflections on a Viking Prow' (1978-1979).

³⁰ See Middleton's *Notes to Carminalenia*.

& all beginnings

These lines are deceptive, seeming to shrug off what they celebrate. To end a poem with 'all beginnings' may be seen as an invitation to complete the project of constructing poetic space in the act of reading, as if that space could only be gestured towards in writing, though it cannot reasonably be sought outside writing, except in the sense that we are invited to read the spaces created by the visual arrangement of lines on the page as gulfs or silences.³¹ What is being referred to is at once the product of artifice (artifact, writing, typography) and a putative original state (environment, pre-verbal experience). In the introduction to *Bolshevism in Art*, Middleton insists that 'the poetic reality is, after all, a reality of first things, of the fresh roots of mind, the well-being of earth, the springtime of our suffering and passionate species'.³² The mood of defiant celebration is more extensively explored in 'Idiocy of Rural Life'. In contrast to 'In Balthazar's Village', here we begin with the beginning, but once more primacy is accorded to perception and the 'things' to be found in a rural domestic environment:

Where
begin: often it is
the disposition of objects
on a table:

³¹ In fact, even here there is a tension between artifice and the access given to pre-verbal experience by poetic language, since the indentations in the poem, while at first sight spontaneously, extemporaneously gestural, are in fact regular patterns replicated from stanza to stanza. In this aspect, 'In Balthazar's Village' recalls an earlier poem by Middleton, 'Three Microzoic Nonsonnets', where a recurring pattern of indentations combines with the metonymic use of 'hands' and 'feet' to suggest a debt to Reverdy's typographical style. However, what comes close to decoration in that poem is harnessed in 'In Balthazar's Village' to a more powerful statement of poetics.

³² Middleton, *Bolshevism in Art*, p. 17.

tall tin coffeepot,
blue saucepan, a membrane
of milk in it

The poem proceeds to structure its perceptions as alternative encounters with 'rural life' using what Altieri might call an "'or'" rhetoric³³ to suspend narrative time in order to achieve what in 'Notes on Some Poems' Middleton calls the 'optics of Cubism'. Like the simultaneist poems of Apollinaire, 'Idiocy of Rural Life' is constructed of overheard or reported speech ('Or: 'what a gulch, / Texas ...'), evocations of remembered place ('That / motel: fake pine panels'), historical dates ('epochs like 1215, / 1634, 1933'), literary references ('palm leaves of Cumae') and mythic or magical imagery, in this case Middleton's favoured figure of the 'antlered dancer' who so often acts as a sign for the ancient incarnation of the poet-shaman, as for example in 'Holy Cow', wherein the modern poet's manufactured leather shoes are ironically suggested to be the contemporary manifestation of the shaman's antlers,³⁴ which were worn in hope of a rather more magical union of man and beast:

Should I wear my shoes because
their masks and antlers,
fantastic forms invented
to contradict your moo, sprang into space
not without hope of wringing
from your bloody udder
drop by drop the pure milk.

³³ See my discussion of Altieri's reading of O'Hara's 'The Day Lady Died' in Chapter Two.

³⁴ In the quotation that follows, the third person plural possessive refers to the shamen.

In 'Idiocy of Rural Life' the shaman, like the other images, is less easy to locate temporally or spatially: An unknown voice 'in a deep cavern' manifests the shaman's 'rigmazole'. There are various deictic markers of presence ('this / antlered dancer'; 'look, / a glittering web, spun by his dance measure') but the dangers to which the poet responds are not the darkly magical ones that elicit the shaman's dance: 'my people have chosen // Dull demons'. These are the demons of imperial, colonial and totalitarian power and resultant conflicts:

first iron, then dynamite, painful
transformations, the peanut
gouged out of Africa, epochs like 1215,
1634, 1933

(Himalayan
tigers, what
new deceit, fanned by your breath, cooks
in the pot of spleen and okra)

Poetic space allows immense temporal compression, collapsing history into a swift accumulation of iconic objects and dates which acquire a similarly luminous significance: thus we have instruments of expansion (iron, dynamite), appropriated commodities (peanuts), and the allusions to shifts in international power relations such as the dates of the Magna Carta, the defeat of Sweden in the Thirty Years War and the rise of Hitler, and also the apostrophe to 'Himalayan tigers' which presumably refers to the conflict between India and Pakistan in the early 1970s over Bangladesh as well as the continuing controversy over Kashmir.

Why invoke these dates and objects in a poem entitled 'Idiocy of Rural Life' if it is not part of a concerted poetic effort to draw together the central and the marginal? After all, the title of the poem, towards which an ironic yet defiantly celebratory attitude is struck, comes from the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*:

The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life.³⁵

Middleton's shamanic poet resists this view of urbanisation as necessary progress, asserting the continued ability of rural, eccentric vision to confront contemporary life: the necessity of such a confrontation, meanwhile, would be something in the *Manifesto* with which Middleton could agree, and undoubtedly informs his sense of the role of the 'artificer poet', as we have seen. One is reminded of a more secular but nonetheless relevant description of the rôle of the 'historical materialist' in Benjamin's often-cited essay 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian':

The historical materialist understands that the abstract mode in which cultural history presents its material is an illusion, established by false consciousness. He approaches this abstraction with reserve. He would be justified in this reserve by the mere inspection of the actual past: whatever he surveys in art and science has a descent that cannot be contemplated without horror. It owes its existence not just to the efforts of the great geniuses who fashioned it, but also in greater or lesser degree to the anonymous drudgery of their contemporaries. There is no cultural document that is not at the same time a record of barbarism. No history of

³⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, ed. by Lewis S. Feuer (Aylesbury: Fontana / Collins, 1984), p. 53.

culture has yet done justice to this fundamental fact, or can well hope to do so.³⁶

Middleton's poetry of this period reads like a concerted struggle to confront barbarism, and to do so in lyrical poetry as a way of privileging that form of writing over the 'abstract mode' of historiography (over that of historical materialism also, it must be said): in this context, the distortions of space and time in the poem are mimetic strategies, ways of exploring the impossibility of abstracting oneself from a historical and political situation which allows no distanced perspective. Thus, in 'Nine Biplanes', even memory is impinged on and altered by current events, so that the remembered image of planes flying over Britain in wartime becomes confused with images of bombing raids on Vietnam and Spain (during the Civil War). In 'Mérindol Interior 1970', a famous photographic image of Vietnamese children wounded by napalm interrupts the 'interior' monologue: 'Naked children racing a sunburst of petrol'. In 'Autobiography' Middleton writes 'my uncertainty is the soul of the weapons system', referring to the way in which the nuclear threat has destabilised our sense of futurity, our hope for those who come after us: 'They say my daughters they say my son / At my age you'll not find any air to breathe'. The dislocation, parataxis and fragmentariness of the poems can also be seen as an anti-literary strategy, opposing the heroic 'efforts of the great geniuses' by refusing to make well-made art works according to traditional aesthetic standards. It is worth

³⁶ Benjamin, *One Way Street*, pp. 359-360.

noting the part of Benjamin's argument which is less often quoted, that admits of no ready solution, no easy way of doing justice to that 'fundamental fact' of barbarism. The sacral element of Middleton's poetry strives for what in 'The Rise of Primitivism' he once called 'a balanced visionary optics of time, with psychological and historical tensions mastered without violence, without their doing violence to one another', but like Benjamin, Middleton was hardly optimistic of success: 'Heavy, indeed, are the odds against any eventual realization, in social terms, of [...] the new sensibility outlined here'.³⁷ The ambition of Middleton's lyric is evident in the conclusion to 'Idiocy of Rural Life':

Or: the right verbs
 here, and here, might relate
 the things; then let these eyes
 reap the sacred
 space
 between them

However, the very fact that this needs to be stated within the poem is an admission that it is not immediately possible, that the sacred space may be composed of nothing other than the 'associative chains and non-communicating viewpoints' into which the 'order of the cosmos' has 'crumbled', according to the quotation from Deleuze which Middleton uses in his *Notes* as an indication of how the collection fits together. There is this constant tension between structure and order in Middleton's poetry: the poems, and their arrangement in

³⁷ Middleton, *Bolshevism in Art*, p. 37.

collections, communicate structure even as the absence of an authorising, legitimating order is asserted. In a letter to his publisher, Michael Schmidt, concerning incomprehending reviews of *The Lonely Suppers*, Middleton complained that '[reviewers] always expect some sort of "resolution," not suspecting that there is such a thing as a poetics of non-resolution.'"³⁸ This helps to explain Middleton's idea of poetry as a struggle to 'relocate the centre': a poetics of non-resolution would be that which takes as its starting point 'the absence of any [...] generally accepted cosmic system of values',³⁹ so that the process of developing an alternative ordering principle for the poem necessarily becomes part of the poem itself, in recognition of the contingent aspect of composition. We might recall here Middleton's description of 'archaic Greek figures' in the introduction to *Bolshevism in Art*: 'these figures do not 'duplicate' what they represent. They are realities, *sui generis*'.⁴⁰ There is also and more conclusively the statement Middleton made on these matters to his friend and correspondent Michael Harlow:

I would now go on to think of poetry as a MODEL of a certain kind of order, transparent, pure structure (thus absurd, or impossible), as a model which may be a semiotic system sui generis, however finely it may mimic or otherwise impinge on a recognizable world.⁴¹

One of the most influential formulations of this eccentric poetic in the surrealist

³⁸ Manchester, John Rylands Library, Carcanet Archive, Accession 1, Box 24, Middleton to Michael Schmidt, Austin, August 20th 1975.

³⁹ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980; repr. 1987), p. 402.

⁴⁰ Middleton, *Bolshevism in Art*, p. 15.

tradition (a formulation which was also claimed by Esslin for the tradition of the Absurd) came from Alfred Jarry:

Pataphysics will be above all the science of the particular, although it is said that there is no science except that of the general. It will be the study of the laws governing exceptions and will explain the universe supplementary to this one; or less ambitiously will describe a universe that one can see and that perhaps one must see in the place of the traditional one, the laws that one has supposed to have been discovered about the traditional universe being correlations of exceptions also, although more frequent, in any case accidental facts which, reduced to unexceptional exceptions, do not even have the attraction of singularity.

DEFINITION: *Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically accords to lineaments the properties of objects described by their virtuality.*⁴²

Jarry's doctrine set the tone for many of the later experiments of the avant-garde: that the scientific word 'experiment' should itself be so prevalent in descriptions of modern art is one example of this. Art, no less than science, sets itself tasks in pursuit of the unknown, and eccentric art at once claims the centrality of modern science and the esoteric nature of much that has been lost to or suppressed by the Enlightenment project, so that for example Jarry casts pataphysics as a science but writes quite consciously in the tradition of magic and folklore which informs Rabelais's *Gargantua* and the alchemy extolled by Baudelaire⁴³,

⁴¹ JRL, Carcanet Archive, Acc. 1, B. 24, Middleton to Michael Harlow, Austin, 22/11/73.

⁴² Alfred Jarry, *Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll, pataphysicien*, ed. by Noël Arnaud and Henri Bordillon (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1980), pp. 31-32, my translation. Although the earliest complete manuscript has been established as dating from the Spring of 1898, the first edition only appeared posthumously, in 1911, published by éditions Fasquelle.

⁴³ In his introduction to Rabelais's *Gargantua*, Pierre Michel discusses the co-existence of real and imagined locations, giants and men, in the novel: 'This mixture of experience and dream, of real and unreal, which sometimes surprises today's readers, did not astonish Rabelais's contemporaries. The cult of reason had not yet banished fairies; magicians, giants and monsters

providing 'solutions' which are as 'imaginary' as the universe in which their problems, or 'exceptions', occur. There can be no resolution of this dual allegiance, and the poetry which results is accordingly that of 'non-resolution', absurdity, incongruity, dissonance.

A number of poems in *Nonsequences* point towards imaginary universes which appear at once immediately present and strangely inaccessible, real and supernatural. 'The monsters' gives a vivid description of the traces left by monsters whose movements through rooms, halls and corridors seem, if chaotic, at least not disruptive to the public spaces they occupy: 'bodies, bearable to themselves, chairing it / down the airy corridors, a / mutual shoving, a sedate / crush, happy, crashing the stillness, / bored'. The description could just as easily be of schoolchildren, but references to their 'bulk' and 'shaggy / stomachs' maintain their monstrosity, although their strange hunger for music, in the context of the explosion of popular music in the 1960s when the poem was written, must give pause for thought. A collective and presumably human complicity in the monsters' acquisition of music is made at once physical and political through the allusion to *Julius Caesar* and the use of 'play' to mean musical performance as well as ceding advantage to an opponent, so that 'instruments' may at once refer to musical instruments and instruments of power:

from the popular imagination'. François Rabelais, *Gargantua*, ed. by Pierre Michel (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1965), p. 13.

A time is coming for the monsters.
 They begged their helpings of it,
 the music, and we lent them
 our ears, played into
 their hands our instruments.

Again, that their 'time is coming' may help to give the monsters a childlike air, and the sense of music as a civic threat calls to mind the story of the Pied Piper of Hamlyn, to which we will return later in this chapter. Yet the poem remains in the realm of the fabulous, its references beyond any clear determination, and whether or not we wish to speculate on the possibility that this poem, published in 1965, expresses, or even critically explores high culture's fear that the 'time is coming' for a 'monstrous' popular youth culture (which is predominantly defined through music) the meaning is unfixed, and the emphasis is placed on the concrete relations between 'us' and 'monsters'. If, however, the poem does express an uneasy intimation of the presence of a threatening future, it is interesting that a similarly fabulous poem later in the same collection should conversely be concerned with the latent and supernatural power of the past. 'The ancestors' depicts a kind of debilitating heredity whereby an awareness of the presence of ancestors leads to the diminution of 'we' the descendants:

When they come, we begin to go;
 it's the ancestors,
 they walk into the warm rooms,

 eye our women and food, hear out
 the good words. Then for words
 and rooms we no more exist

As in 'The monsters', these strange beings occupy domestic interiors rather than some suitably demarcated magical dimension, and they are no stereotypical ghosts of a repressed past: 'How do they come? They make no / parade of moans and winds; / they borrow no fears, none.' Once again, although this time shifting from a plural to first person singular address for a moment, the speaker acknowledges a certain complicity with the ancestors, suggesting that it is through an act of will, or 'bloody love', that the descendants enable their ancestors to 'march [them] out [...] from one / to the next lost place.' The speaker's attitude is at once conspiratorial, pitying and despairing as he tells how the ancestors are kept ignorant of his complicity: 'I tell myself this is a thing / they'd far better not know, / who have lost the knack, // and only accuse'. These poems are fabulous intuitions of a universe caught somewhere between individual agency and determinism, and this tension underlies the instability of their reference: they seem to offer allegorical readings even as they slip beyond definite contexts, remaining, as it were, 'non-resolute'. They operate, however, in an unmarked, mainly domestic space which, like Roy Fisher's *City*, cannot yet admit names. Although Middleton had already experimented with more specific treatments of place in lyric form, culminating in the final poem in *Nonsequences*, 'An Englishman in Texas', a more inventive 'solution' to the problem of addressing a universe of particulars came in extended prose form, thus recalling Fisher's *The Ship's Orchestra*.

When Middleton describes the imaginary place whose name forms the

title of his most explicitly Jarryesque book, *Pataxanadu*, it is the 'goal for broken, dislocated, or frustrated journeys.' At the same time, there is a scientific, civic sense of purpose or use, and so the pieces of 'experimental' prose that make up the book often cast themselves as absurdist parables, at once didactic and playful. 'The Pocket Elephants' is a Cold War parable which plays on the idea of an attempt to use revolution to invert economic relations: 'We have destroyed an economic system based on the creation of needs. We have created a new system. What is the essence of this new system? Our new system is one which fosters the need to create.' Ultimately, this new system remains bound by the terms of the old, and so it gradually becomes an equivalent of the consumer society it was intended to replace, marked by the absurd proliferation of the objects of a created need, namely the pocket elephants⁴⁴. A similar narrative impetus lies behind 'Manuscript in a Lead Casket', a satire on the tourist industry which relates the story of the first professional tourist, J. Heilbut, whose activities result in the creation of Tourist City, a city full of replicas of famous sites gathered together in an area so conveniently small that it can be traversed on foot 'inside seventy-five minutes, if you do not stop to admire anything.' The sudden and bizarre growth of the city and its products is related by a speaker who finally reveals himself to be J. Heilbut, horrified at the 'nightmare' that the city has become and poised to destroy it with dynamite. The didactic impulse of the book reaches its apotheosis in a faux academic discourse on short prose in which

⁴⁴ As Esslin points out, the proliferation of objects is one of the major characteristics of Ionesco's

Middleton gives his definition of the form as well as its lineage⁴⁵. Other pieces, however, are less inclined to self-explanation. 'The Person' gives a matter-of-fact account of the inexplicable murder of an anonymous pedestrian by a crowd on the street. 'Honoured Sirs' takes the form of a letter from a perplexed inhabitant of a small town which receives an annual visit from 25 fishermen. The cause of the speaker's perplexity is that there are no longer any rivers or lakes in or around the town (although the speaker has discovered that once there was 'a labyrinth of waterways'), so that the fishermen's visit remains unexplained. In the closing line, the speaker appeals to the recipients of the letter for help in understanding the situation, naming them as members of the 'Chomsky Narodny Bureau of Information'. The use of the name of a prominent American linguist and anarchist, especially in association with the term 'Narodny', Russian for 'people' and also the name of a nineteenth century libertarian agrarian movement in Russia, cannot be regarded as coincidence, although the immediate relevance of these facts to the enigma is obscure. The reader must provide his or her own 'imaginary solution' to the 'frustrated journey' of the fishermen.

What brings both strands together, didactic and playful, is the formal logic of the prose form in which they are woven, the valorisation of 'pure structures' which obey their own laws: thus the society of pocket elephant

absurdist drama. (See *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 150)

⁴⁵ Although this piece is exemplary of one of the book's main tendencies, it should be acknowledged that it was actually written after Michael Schmidt asked for an 'epilogue' in order to assist readers in comprehending Middleton's project. Schmidt's request was initially met with some misgivings, as Middleton's letter, dated 19/6/74, Austin, testifies. (JRL, Carcanet Archive, Acc. 1, B. 24).

manufacturers develops in enumerated stages which appear as a logical progression but which are in fact moments in a purely narrative causality with only a tangential relation to the Marxist economic theory of need to which the piece alludes. In a similar way, the enigma of the fishermen is really the formal elaboration of a riddle without a solution, the deliberate and surreal action of placing an object on a plane where it appears incongruous: thus, a group of fishermen in an arid landscape. From such simple beginnings, whole universes of incongruity are built up as if to exemplify the self-sufficiency, the arbitrary nature of systems of reference which are really only 'correlations of exceptions', in Jarry's terms. This absurd causality is most viscerally enacted in the five texts named 'Pataxanadu', each of which subjects an original text by another author, all relating to journeys, to variations on Raymond Queneau's S + 7 technique. Queneau, himself a member of the *Collège de Pataphysique* assembled in Jarry's memory, invented the S + 7 technique for the OuLiPo,⁴⁶ an organisation of writers and mathematicians devoted to the development of new constraints for the production of texts, founded by Queneau himself and François LeLionnais. In his 'Preface to *Pataxanadu*', Middleton describes this technique succinctly: 'most of the main parts of speech in the text chosen [...] are replaced by the same parts of speech, but by different words, found at a mathematically regulated remove either backwards or forwards in the biggest available dictionary'. The very titles of the texts serve to show the results of this procedure: 'Pataxanadu 1',

⁴⁶ *Ouvroir de la Littérature POtentielle*, or *Laboratory of Potential Literature*. Harry Mathews, who

for example, is entitled 'How Sir Landlouse Follicled a Boxer into a Castaway Where He Found a Dayblind Knee, and How He After Was Repulsed of a Dame to Hector Her Brood'. What remains of the originals is the syntax which bound the substantives together, but any trace of the semantic unity created by those substantives has been replaced by a wildly various lexis which juxtaposes codes of meaning in unpredictable ways and which often recalls the nonsense poetry of Edward Lear. The results are texts which (re)habilitate rare, even esoteric words (oghamic, decumbence) and contain a plurality of narrative possibilities which are never resolved: Part 1, for example, has a tale of theological struggle lurking within it, concerning a 'black boxer secularizing' and a 'brood that is sophisticatedly worshipped'.

These are journeys, then, which have been dislocated at a fundamental linguistic level, and yet even here Middleton's sense of purpose is undiminished, for according to the 'Preface' this 'lexical derangement allows glimpses into a transrational domain inherent in language itself - *za'um*, in the phraseology of the Russian futurist poets,' while the wider practice of the science of imaginary solutions 'disclose[s] the play of certain inscrutable laws'. Avant-garde predecessors are invoked both as innovators of technique and legitimating authorities - 'la grande permission', as Michaux called the Surrealists in an interview with John Ashbery⁴⁷. In this way, Middleton casts his work as part of the ongoing endeavour of avant-garde artists to uncover repressed elements of

edited the magazine *Locus Solus* with John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch and James

reality, an endeavour which must continually rediscover its grounds for validation in the artistic process itself, so that Middleton's prefaces and notes to collections become equivalent to the metapoetic commentaries of some of the poems themselves.

Pataxanadu is Middleton's most radical book because that process of validation is pushed to its limit, concentrated in the preface and barely visible in the impassively nonsensical poems. Elsewhere, as in the poems from *The Lonely Suppers* that I discussed earlier in this chapter, the poems themselves are more taken up with the idea of their use: 'bush, table, / oblong, what can they mean?', as the poet asks in 'Idiocy of Rural Life (Variant 2)'. Sometimes this extends to the point where the poem becomes a discourse on the process of its own making, so that in 'Difficulties of a revisionist', Middleton begins: 'All day fighting for a poem. Fighting against what?' In a wry conclusion, it is suggested that just as the activity of making has leaked into the poem itself, so the poem has leaked into everyday life, with adverse results: 'up the road in the rain someone stopping a car asks / the way to the next estate. I find myself / giving instructions that will get him lost.' 'The Prose of Walking Back to China' is at once Middleton's most extended foray into the poem that recounts its making, and a tribute to one of Middleton's ancestors in the artificer-poet tradition, Apollinaire, whose 'Le musicien de Saint-Merry'⁴⁸ haunts the text. Briefly, this long poem begins with the poet's failed attempt to 'saluer les êtres que je ne

Schuyler, is also a member and has employed OuLiPo techniques in his novels and poetry.

connais pas [greet the beings whom I do not know]⁴⁹, and proceeds to relate the story of a mysterious flautist 'sans yeux sans nez et sans oreilles [without eyes without a nose without ears]' who entices the women of Saint-Merry to follow him into an abandoned house where they disappear. According to Timothy Mathews, in the opening part of the poem 'the hope of internalising the world is flooded in a crowd of unreciprocated gestures passing by, re-emphasising the desire to find a place in the language of the present.'⁵⁰ Philippe Renaud draws attention to the similarity between the *musicien* and the Pied Piper, and also to the use of simultaneist effects throughout the poem to create interference in its narrative continuity⁵¹. Like Mathews, Renaud ultimately suggests that the poem uses the disruptions of a discontinuous present to 'briser les vitres de la vie intérieure [break the windows of interior life]⁵². In Chapter Two, I discuss the relevance of this approach to lyric temporality to O'Hara's urban walk-poems, and specifically 'All That Gas', which, as Donald Allen's note to the poem makes clear, Middleton had read by the time it was published in *Texas Quarterly* in the spring of 1962. When Middleton then writes an urban walk-poem set in Paris, it is possible to see it as an acknowledgement both of his direct contemporary, O'Hara⁵³, and of the influence they had in common. Furthermore, in his essay

⁴⁷ Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, p. 398.

⁴⁸ Apollinaire, *Caligrammes* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1925; repr. 1996), pp. 48-52.

⁴⁹ Apollinaire, *Caligrammes*, p. 48.

⁵⁰ Timothy Mathews, *Reading Apollinaire: theories of poetic language* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p. 151.

⁵¹ Philippe Renaud, *Lecture d'Apollinaire* (Lausanne: Éditions L'Age d'Homme, 1969), pp. 280-286.

⁵² Renaud, p. 285.

⁵³ O'Hara and Middleton were both born in 1926.

'For Márton, Erwin and Miklos', Middleton names 'Le musicien' as an exemplar of the 'exigent poetry' which 'relocates the centre':

This exigent poetry tends to have archipelagic structures [...] It is a poetry balanced over gulfs of silence, a poetry of surprises, of enigmas, scrutiny followed by vertiginous distance, a poetry of broken uncertain surfaces, of foregrounded hinterlands. Prototypes early in the century [included] some of the 1911-13 poems by Apollinaire ('Le musicien de Saint-Merry').⁵⁴

However, it must be said that 'The Prose of Walking Back to China' is the exaltant other of Apollinaire's melancholy, disjunct work. Where the speaker of 'Le musicien' is passive and excluded, in this poem it is the speaker's walk that gathers up the materials of the poem:

The poem began when I walked out,
Early, discovering forty minutes to go
Before the traffic would raise its roar.
It was nothing at all but the motion
Of walking, nothing at all
But the sight of a fish head in a heap
Of trash in a pail, a flower, an egg shell,
Until I began to compose it in my head.

More confidently than in 'Hermit Pot', the speaker can suggest the power of a poetic 'motion' to centre the world's enigma in unexpected places: a fish head, 'colour photos' discovered in a cardboard box by 'an amazed man', or 'a mouldy lemon'. Middleton, too, wishes to 'greet the beings' that he does not know, and manages to compliment an old lady in the street, though a waiter whom he remembers does not recognise him. This incident initiates a passage where the

'language of the present' seems to resist the speaker, posing a threat to the poem in progress:

The trash truck whines as it grinds
 Rot to powder; the poem
 Attacked by fleets of random objects
 Had no purity or perspective whatever.
 Ninety tomorrow Marc Chagall declares
 You are nothing if you have
 Materialist ideas.

The 'trash' in which the poem could be found at its beginning is ground down: there is a tone of disquiet, amplified by Chagall's contemptuous dismissal of materialism, and the threat that represents is immediately registered in a passage that recalls Benjamin's comments on 'barbarism':

Again I scan the print, see: Nuclear reactors,
 Negotiations, a charge of treason,
 Crucial support, failed to progress,
 Emigrate to Israel, why do the words
 Come in the plodding rhythm of the poem
 If the poem isn't?

But as the walk reaches its mid-point among gardens, a tentative lyricism emerges:

The sprinkler's long horizontal bar
 Rotating flung the water up in a fan,
 So that it fell
 Far across the grass and over the wavering
 Fronds (at least I thought
 These were 'fronds')

⁵⁴ Middleton, *The Pursuit of the Kingfisher*, p. 48.

The speaker cannot wholly abandon himself to a heightened poetic language, casting doubt on the suitability of the word 'fronds'. Nevertheless, it is sensed that the poet may be in the presence of what David Cauter described as 'the red-hot moment of pre-verbal experience' in a passage quoted by Middleton in his 'Introduction' to *Bolshevism in Art*: 'this might be / A thing to watch, like the poem / You can't write, ever'. It is a nice irony that this artificer poet should find the scene and the poem transformed by the action of a sprinkler, and to compound this Middleton uses capitalisation to lend a Romantic air to this modern urban nature poem:

the sun [...] had risen
 Above the long green wave
 Of Indistinguishable Trees, in the dust
 My boots were settling among
 Delicate prints of the feet of birds
 [...] The blackbird
 is listening for a Worm, he
 Can place it by a slight
 Shift of his head, and I was listening
 For the poem, but heard, placeable nowhere,
 Pure low Bach notes on a flute

Instead of the poem, music emerges, 'placeable nowhere', like the disappeared musician, and is reintegrated into the poetic space which, irrigated by the sprinkler and with the 'long green wave' of trees as its backdrop, achieves a new, subtly synaesthetic form (blending visual and audible) of contrasting wave and wing:

The flute
 Undulates, the dove's flight
 Undulates, descending spray
 Fans out like nervous wings from shoulder blades
 And floats to earth as the flute again
 Soars upward.

Again, heightened speech is brought down to earth, and more abruptly than the spray, this time by a dog crossing the street. Following the flute across the city, the poet is impeded by 'the traffic's roar' and the indifference of another unknown being who, like the 'old lady', the schoolgirls, the waiter, the 'capless man', and even the blackbird and the dog before her, is engaged in everyday activity:

[...] on she went
 With the ironing. Could she be
 A scalded grandchild of one of those women
 The musician took through a secret door
 In Saint-Merry? Not for bewitching as
 Her grandma had been?

Whereas in 'Le musicien' the 'here and now' of everyday life is experienced as fragmented and inaccessible, in Middleton's poem the emphasis lies on the re-ordering of the present to which *others* are denied access because they are 'not for bewitching', not capable of moving beyond their alienated activities towards the magical state of union between 'soul' and 'world'. That state remains the ultimate goal of Middleton's walk, as Ian Gregson identifies when he links 'The Prose of Walking Back to China' with 'Anasphere: Le Torse Antique', where

Chinese shamanic motifs act as epigraphs: 'China [is] the original country of shamanic song, and the metaphoric object of the "walk"'.⁵⁵ Gregson considers that in both poems, the journey is as frustrated as those of *Pataxanadu*, 'but is nonetheless fruitful because it discloses significance even through its dislocation.'⁵⁶ 'Not the moon is seen but fingers pointing', as Middleton puts it. The process of making the poem is then the motion by which perception is situated, made particular, and at the same time points beyond itself, as to the moon:

Perspective makes a space intelligible,
 But you only find the place to stand
 By moving as you may, for luck, so nothing,
 Nothing in the voice
 Guides the poem but a wave
 Continually broken,
 And restored in a time to be perceived,
 As the flute is perceived, at origin,
 Before creation.

However, one must ask whether 'The Prose of Walking Back to China' can be said to be dislocated. Certainly, a dislocation is asserted – that of the wave, continually broken. But, like the world's enigma in 'Hermit Pot' or, even more pertinently, 'all beginnings' in 'In Balthazar's Village', this dislocation is indicated, not enacted. The poem itself, however much it locates a wholeness beyond its reach, still makes smooth transitions between everyday reality and momentous speech, and employs a discursive language capable of measuring its

⁵⁵ Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism*, p. 163.

own worth and identifying its own principles. Eccentricity retains the need for a centre, as Middleton is himself aware as he concludes 'Notes on Some Poems':

I realize that my work so far is short not only of what phrase-making philistines call commitment, but also of something much more wonderful: the social promise of art. What is this? It isn't a message, isn't escape. It is the hope, detectable in solicitude about detail and structure, that pleasure should one day supersede work as the main activity of our species. Of pleasure, up and down the scale from simple to transcendent, poems often do speak, and of the thwartings of such pleasures too. Their kind of speaking can make opposites meet: pleasure and pain, love and death. A poem which accomplishes this conjunction or coincidence projects a Utopia of the mind, but only to the extent that the pleasure comes out on top.⁵⁷

The crux of the problem is the relation of this pleasure to a legitimating and, crucially, limiting principle of order: the centre of the eccentric structure. Derrida insists that 'le centre ferme aussi le jeu qu'il ouvre et rend possible [the centre also closes that play which it opens and makes possible]'⁵⁸, and what we see in Middleton's discursive framing and metacommentary is the almost obsessive delineation of the limits at which that play of eccentricity is closed down, so that pleasure does not in fact 'come out on top' but is always brought back to work. As Derrida admits, it is impossible to conceive of a structure without an organising centre, but this does not detract from but rather underlines the problematic nature of an eccentric poetic which is, as the above quotation shows, committed to a libertarian politics. Middleton continues:

Perhaps this substance called pleasure has to do with what we call 'ideas of

⁵⁶ Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism*, p. 162.

⁵⁷ Middleton, *Bolshevism in Art*, p. 223.

⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), p. 409.

order' – and there can be so many doubts about those ideas. What is this sense of order that a good poem gives us, even a poem of terror?⁵⁹

In the absence of a definitive answer to this question, Middleton's poetry has continued to move uneasily between 'introversion' and 'extraversion', and the variousness of the formal means brought to bear on this fundamental struggle remain his lasting contribution to the poetry of the domestic surreal.

⁵⁹ Middleton, *Bolshevism in Art*, pp. 223-224.

Chapter V

'WRITING IN A BORDER ZONE': THE POETRY OF JOHN ASH

John Ash: ... perhaps these prose poems are your way of addressing yourself to the horrors of modern history?

Harry Mathews: Well, there's the twentieth-century genocide in Turkish Armenia. In another sense Armenia becomes an imaginary country, but one that's located in the past rather than somewhere else on the globe. The impulses that the idea of this place triggered or let loose, and which feel like memories, but which I want to call intuitions, amount to what my reality may be. What else have I got? What can I call my own but what is between, in a kind of gray zone? It's what I might have dreamed or what I wished I'd dreamed. It's a realm of exploration.

JA: Writing in a border zone?

HM: Exactly, and that's true of what "you" do, when you invent imaginary cities and realms in your poems. You said the other night before reading a prose poem that a British critic had complained that you didn't address yourself to the problems of contemporary British people, but it's obvious that the imaginary place you're writing about in that poem is also Mrs. Thatcher's England. And perhaps, in the same way, Armenia is Manhattan. Why not?¹

The border zone is an intriguing and suggestive figure for the understanding of space and time which informs John Ash's poetry. To situate the activity of writing in such a zone suggests a desire to remain mobile in the space of transition rather than fixed in one or another place or epoch separated by this 'border'. This space would be 'a realm of exploration', as Mathews says, a place defined in movement, where even the temporarily resolved image of an 'imaginary city' gives way to intimations of native territory. This exploratory approach affects the form of the writing itself, as Mathews's comments on his

¹ John Ash, interview with Harry Mathews, accessed at http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/pages/interviews/interview_mathews_ash.html on Thursday August 22nd, 2002.

own *Armenian Papers* help to illustrate:

They can be called fictions; but they differ from novelistic fictions by being at the outset no more than notions of imaginary directions to follow. Their writing meant exploring the uncharted terrain they pointed to more than constructing a full-fledged fictional setting, which in any case, and in so far as it exists, is never more than implied.²

Ash's poetry, too, gestures towards 'directions to follow'; however, as I shall demonstrate, the pressures which leave them uncharted, or partially charted, are differently registered in the work of the English poet. Mathews edited the review *Locus Solus* with Ashbery, Kenneth Koch and James Schuyler, and shares in the New York School aesthetic which also produced Ashbery's 'The Instruction Manual'. In Chapter One, I argued that this poem betrays an impatience with a certain kind of poetic scheme, and that it therefore marks a departure towards a new kind of writing which proves more durable than the departure described in the poem. Ash takes up an aspect of the poem which might initially appear peripheral, the politics of tourism, and creates a zone where 'The Instruction Manual' finds its place alongside poems by Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud and others, on the temporal border between nineteenth and twentieth century as well as modern and postmodern versions of travel and imperial decay.

Ash's poetry is also eclectic in its locations, drawing all into an indeterminate space which seeks to get beyond a narrowly defined model of

² Harry Mathews, *A Mid-Season Sky: Poems 1954-1991* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992), pp. 9-10.

eclecticism as postmodern market availability in order to register a historical interest in the cohabitation of cultures which draws partly on Levi-Strauss's meditations among the ruins of Taxila, as I shall demonstrate. This does not preclude but rather amplify an interest in specific locales, and Fisher's Birmingham, as well as Middleton's idea of the 'poet-artificers', provide Ash with exemplars for this paradox: the Birmingham of *City* is, in his words, 'no longer [...] temporally and spatially fixed'.³ However, the notion of 'permission' which we find in Ashbery's work, and which helps to explain this wish to evade temporal and spatial fixity, is made to confront pressures and determinations which threaten to override it. It is this internal tension or opposition which becomes the most difficult and disputed border in Ash's work.

Between 1971 and 1975, Ash was research assistant to Louis Turner of the Royal Institute of International Affairs.⁴ The issue of this work was the publication in 1975 of *The Golden Hordes: International Tourism and the Pleasure Periphery*, for which Ash received credit as co-author.⁵ This book can be seen to inform much of Ash's writing, and is sometimes even incorporated into the poems directly, and therefore we must take full account of it if we are to appreciate the political, cultural and historical dimension to Ash's *œuvre*. The book is concerned with the rise of the international tourist industry, and provocatively contrasts tourists with Genghis Khan's Tatar empire, the original

³ Ash, 'A Classic Post-Modernist', p. 46.

⁴ This information was obtained from a Curriculum Vitae collected in JRL, Carcanet Archive, Acc. 3, B. 315.

'golden horde': however, whereas 'barbarians' were nomadic, without a currency, and threatened settled urban Europe, now it is the inhabitants of those settlements who use their monetary affluence to get to the edge of the industrial world to create 'a newly dependent, social and geographical realm: The Pleasure Periphery'.⁶ The 'Pleasure Periphery' is, I would suggest, the ur-border zone, not only because it exists in a space between the industrial and the developing world but also because, temporally, it represents the furthest extent of artifice within the industrial world: it is no coincidence that at one point the authors refer to 'tourism's avant garde', but rather gives voice to their insistence that in a capitalist society, innovation is driven by the needs of the market.⁷

These Pleasure Peripheries are never static, possessing a dynamism of their own, which depends on the extension of the range of planes, and the increase of leisure and affluence in general. The pioneer tourists are ever moving outward looking for new destinations which have not yet been swamped by mass tourism.⁸

The Pleasure Periphery thus exists perpetually on the border between realised and potential market value, and I intend to demonstrate that this bears directly on the way in which Ash's poems unfold.

The Golden Hordes is set out in four sections dealing with the 'History', 'Culture' and 'Politics' of tourism, before finishing with a consideration of the 'Alternatives'. Ash and Turner explicitly link the history of tourism and the

⁵ John Ash and Louis Turner, *The Golden Hordes: International Tourism and the Pleasure Periphery* (London: Constable 1975).

⁶ Ash and Turner, *The Golden Hordes*, p. 11.

⁷ Ash and Turner, *The Golden Hordes*, p. 85.

history of the city: it is their contention that tourism requires 'both large, claustrophobic cities and the means to escape from them' and so their 'pre-history' of modern tourism finds its point of origin in the development of 'the Hellenistic urban system' in the wake of Alexander's conquests in the fourth century BC.⁹ Subsequent developments are linked to shifts in cultural and economic power:

The wealthy and educated, of states whose position of dominance in the world is comparatively new, visit countries that have passed their peak of prestige and creativity but are still venerated for historic and cultural reasons. Thus Romans visited Greece and the eastern Mediterranean; the English, from the sixteenth century onwards, visited Italy; and in this century Americans 'do' Europe.¹⁰

These successive shifts in power are documented through the customs of travel they initiate. In the second section, the authors examine the effects of such customs on the cultures of visited countries, revealing a paradoxical situation whereby the living culture of a country is often ignored or destroyed by tourism even as that industry works to protect the monuments and relics of the past which would otherwise fall into neglect. Italy is offered as the supreme example of a country where tourism helps to counteract native indifference to a disintegrating heritage, leading to a surreal observation typical of the book, which combines neo-Marxist analysis with anecdotal humour: 'Italy must be the only country in the world where churches are adorned with public notices

⁸ Ash and Turner, *The Golden Hordes*, p. 12.

⁹ Ash and Turner, *The Golden Hordes*, p. 20.

reading: DANGER! FALLING ANGELS'.¹¹ Nevertheless, the authors repeatedly draw attention to Roland Barthes's analysis of travel guides wherein the critic warns:

To select only monuments suppresses at one stroke the reality of the land and that of its people, it accounts for nothing of the present, that is, nothing historical, and as a consequence, the monuments themselves become undecipherable, therefore senseless.¹²

In 'Politics', the authors argue that tourism creates instability in the countries it colonises even as it helps to maintain stability at home in the industrial world. Thus, the holiday helps to motivate the work force to greater production by allowing a ritualised period of relaxation which must be paid for with work time, while concealing inequalities in wealth and opportunity by putting an ever greater geographical distance between rich and poor: 'it is exceptionally difficult for someone who can just afford a holiday in Atlantic City to imagine what the inner sanctums of St Moritz are really like'.¹³ Meanwhile however, that very disparity is made immediately obvious to the lower classes of countries like Brazil and Spain, while the wealth created by tourism and the consumer society it represents are held to corrupt the ruling élite. Ash and Turner go so far as to suggest a 'symbiosis' between tourism and dictatorships whereby the tourist industry's need for stability and order so as to guarantee physical safety for tourists and financial safety for its investments results in its

¹⁰ Ash and Turner, *The Golden Hordes*, p. 29.

¹¹ Ash and Turner, *The Golden Hordes*, p. 135.

increased willingness to trade with, for example, 'the "Orderly" régimes of Spain and Portugal'.¹⁴

In 'Alternatives', the authors turn to the phenomenon of 'drifter-tourism', an ostensibly new custom of travel initiated by 'hippies' and 'beatniks', most typically to be observed in Asia.¹⁵ This new trend is found in fact to be the latest manifestation of a Romantic reaction against rationalism and progress, and contemporary 'drifter' texts like Kerouac's *On the Road* are related to antecedents in bohemian Paris such as the work and life of Rimbaud and Laforgue. Ash and Turner are at once aware of the shortcomings of the latest incarnation of the bohemian movement, particularly its mystification of the foreign, while maintaining its 'radical potential' to express repressed elements of Western social order and to reawaken Third World élites to 'the creative potential of indigenous culture'.¹⁶ Even so, drifter tourism eventually comes to replicate ordinary tourism as the industry realises its profitability and begins to provide chartered, established routines to cater for the demands of a 'youth market'. The lack of any developed critical language is seen to doom the 'counter-culture' to repeat the mistakes of conventional tourism by encouraging escape into fantasy instead of radical change.

Looking to the future in their conclusion, the authors consider the possibility that unpredictable 'system-breaks' will alter trends in tourism, but

¹² Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 76.

¹³ Ash and Turner, *The Golden Hordes*, p. 182.

¹⁴ Ash and Turner, *The Golden Hordes*, p. 185.

¹⁵ Ash and Turner, *The Golden Hordes*, p. 257.

even the energy crisis in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur war is suspected to be only a temporary obstacle in the path of the industrial growth of tourism. Instead, tourism will continue to entrench the polarities of the global market:

[Tourists] cannot, or will not, see any causal link between the wealth of their class and the prevailing poverty of the countries they visit. For them the division of the world is complete and ineradicable; the wealth of the developed nations justified by virtue of their superior energy and organisation and made possible by their progressive innovations in technology and commerce. The 'backwardness' of the underdeveloped nations is not the result of poverty, but their poverty is a result of their *innate* 'backwardness'.¹⁷

Enumerating a series of 'barriers' reinforced by tourism, 'between modern and antique, urban and pastoral, mechanical and natural', Ash and Turner finish by declaring the inescapable paradox that 'the pursuit of the exotic and diverse ends in uniformity'.¹⁸ This conclusion informs the argument which is developed in Ash's subsequent poetic work from *Casino* onward. Indeed, *The Golden Hordes* operates as a matrix for the images we find in Ash's poetry, and a reading of the poems which takes this book into account will tell us much about the sustained project of Ash's poetry.

Casino initiates this project, and displays the multiply allusive tendency which comes to characterise Ash's diction also. The first line is exemplary: 'In those days we came to the coast in winter -'. In his notes to *Casino*, Ash attributes the opening lines to Peter Quennell's *Baudelaire and the Symbolists*, but

¹⁶ Ash and Turner, *The Golden Hordes*, p. 275.

¹⁷ Ash and Turner, *The Golden Hordes*, p. 291.

the first line also captures the historical situation of the Riviera as a resort which originally became popular at a time when winter, rather than summer, was the high season of tourism, as Ash and Turner had illustrated.¹⁹ Furthermore, the line recalls another in the opening passage of Eliot's *The Waste Land*: 'I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter'.²⁰ Thus, within a single line, we can grasp concerns with historical information, cultural trends and a network of literary sources which have their own implications for the poem. Since Ash calls *Casino* 'a kind of homage to Symbolism and the Decadence', the significance of Quennell's book is self-explanatory. The use of historical fact as image points to Ash's interest in the way that events and trends become available to us as spectacle or as nostalgia: I will discuss this further later in this chapter. Finally, the allusion to Eliot is in itself multiply significant: it functions partly, perhaps, as a wry acknowledgement of the shadow cast over any attempt at a long poem after *The Waste Land*, at least by an English poet; but it also allows readers to form certain expectations based on the precedent of that poem, for *Casino* too is a long sequence into which lyrics of varying length have been assembled, and it deploys various persona from Bohemia and the European aristocracy within a spatial conceit in order to build a composite impression which is also a kind of critical diagnosis of an epoch, although Ash's use of the word 'homage' indicates a much lesser degree of pessimism than we associate with Eliot's poem, while

¹⁸ Ash and Turner, *The Golden Hordes*, p. 292.

¹⁹ Ash and Turner, *The Golden Hordes*, p. 60.

²⁰ T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909 - 1962* (London: Faber, 1974), p. 63.

the casino could be viewed as a bathetic response to the grand perspective of the 'waste land' as theatre for the dramas of Western decadence. *Casino* treats predominantly of an era which is already past, so that it is not prey to the same anxieties as *The Waste Land*, but it also results from an attitude which allows Ash to declare in a later poem, 'Without Being Evening', that 'the idea of The End is utterly discredited': the high apocalyptic tone which mourns the fallen state of humanity is not to be found here or elsewhere in Ash's work, and instead more localised use of the elegiac is made, as in the closing image of the poem, the 'lighted boats lying very low in the water' as they bear the corpses of gambling suicides out to sea. These boats act as the direct antithesis of the 'big sailing ships' which appear at the beginning of the poem, so that if we use the terms provided by *The Golden Hordes*, *Casino* is framed by the technology that provides the means to escape (the sailing ships) and the prevailing economic and social conditions which make that escape both desirable and impossible, symbolised by the boats bearing the bodies of debtors. This grateful counterpoint of imagery reveals the poem as a 'homage to Symbolism' and demonstrates that the art of the period is implicated not only on a thematic level but also on that of poetic language. We will examine this aspect of Ash's writing further when we come to his other long poem, *Epitaph for the Greeks in India*.

Elsewhere there are more direct uses of *The Golden Hordes*, as in 'Scherzo One', which concerns the earthquake which struck the Riviera in 1881. Ash and Turner note that 'those who thought this might be divine judgement of Rivieran

dissipation must have been disappointed that the earthquake's ravages showed no sign of 'moral choice', for although sedate Menton was badly hit, Monte Carlo was virtually unscathed, its 'cupidity and bad taste' inviolate'.²¹ '*Scherzo One*' borrows this paradox:

Thanksbe the casino has survived the shock -
 Cupidity inviolate -
 And the Lord said 'Upon this rock...'
 At Menton the tombstones of consumptives
 Are wildly thrown about -

God's moral sense is much in doubt.

Here, Ash's allusive technique weaves together his own prose with an ironic reference to the Gospel according to St. Matthew ('upon this rock I will build my church', Matthew 16. 18), using the rhymed free verse of wit and observation that Eliot adapted to English from the poems of Laforgue, who indeed is the subject of the next poem in the sequence, '*Portraits Two*'. In '*Interlude One*' meanwhile, polemical attacks on the casino of Monte Carlo by Sabine Baring Gould and John Addington Symonds, which had been quoted in *The Golden Hordes*, are transformed into refrains which contrast the opulence of Monte Carlo with the demise of its customers:

The green tables keep the gardens green
 The violins in tune
 Armida's castle burns by the shore

What are these other boats

²¹ Ash and Turner, *The Golden Hordes*, p. 68.

Without lights with muffled oars
 The weighted cases lowered silently
 Over the side Who are the dead?

The green tables keep the gardens green

In all these examples, there is an evident desire to mingle historical critique with literary pastiche, and only in the latter stages of the poem is there any intervening authorial voice to provide critical distance: the emphasis is not on disruption or alienation effects but rather on barely perceptible shifts between different periods of time and place. Thus, the Riviera of the *fin de siècle* gives way in the latter stages of the poem to the Lebanon, as Ash's notes make clear:

With the FINALE we arrive in the 20th century. We also land on the coast of Lebanon and enter the Casino du Liban. The ensuing cabaret scene may seem the most fantastic part of the poem; it is in fact the most realistic, being a fairly literal account of the floor show at the Casino du Liban as I saw it in 1970.

As an outpost of the Pleasure Periphery, the casino is emblematic of the blurring of boundaries between real and artificial, reaching its high point in the excess of the floor show. In the FINALE, Ash juxtaposes the occasions of cabaret and funeral to maintain the contrast between luxury and cost, but their pairing also suggests a cyclical temporal pattern of celebration and death which overshadows historical change and calls progress into question. This negative image of carnival involves a rapid acquisition and accumulation of diverse cultural detail into performance, replicated in the poem by the breathless, paratactic rendering of those details:

The cabaret subsumes all geographies
and all mythologies

it is a spectacle that consumes memory
and erodes the night

offering us instead
masochistic and hallucinatory
masques and operettas sonatas
conga drums and rags
women with white hair whit faces black lips
every kind of simulated frenzy
furs manacles whips -

With its 'Belle Epoque', its 'astronauts' and its 'Tribal Scene', the floor-show is
thus a microcosm of culture in a market economy as described by Lyotard:

Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and "retro" clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games [...] this realism of the "anything goes" is in fact that of money; in the absence of aesthetic criteria, it remains possible and useful to assess the value of works of art according to the profits they yield. Such realism accommodates all tendencies, just as capital accommodates all "needs," providing that the tendencies and needs have purchasing power.²²

The dancers embody this 'realism of the "anything goes"':

Now everyone gasps at the descent
Of gold Adonises and nymphs
On spangled half-moons from ceiling
Currency made flesh!

This image resonates with that of 'cupidity inviolate' to give a sense of the way

in which bodies become sites of exchange, and thus the casino can be seen as the counterpart to Fisher's boat in *The Ship's Orchestra*, the 'boom' to Fisher's 'bust', as it were: for while Fisher focuses on the mutations and mutilations of labour alienation, Ash provocatively emphasises the seductive manipulations of exchange, and while Fisher's prose work is concerned with inertia, Ash explores mobility, both temporally (reaching back to the *fin de siècle* and then forward into the contemporary period) and spatially (in the dance of the floor-show), a striking paradox given that the casino is a fixed locus while the ship cruises on the sea.

In the closing part of the poem, however, the theatrical space of the casino is dismantled to reveal a narrative of personal loss:

We suddenly remember the one
 who died in Canada towards the end of winter
 so far away so cold
 why we do not understand –
 and a huge door slams shut

a black sound without an echo

In the original edition of the book this is forewarned by the dedication 'to the memory of Andrew Tuffin who died unnecessarily in Toronto in February 1973', but when Ash came to collect *Casino* and *The Bed* with new work in his Carcanet collection of 1984, *The Branching Stairs*, he omitted both the dedication and the explanatory paragraph in the Notes:

²² Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 76.

Andrew Tuffin, to whom this poem is dedicated, was a close friend and a promising poet who, for reasons which remain obscure, shot himself at the age of 27. Nothing that he wrote seems to have survived. In some way his pale, ironic, Pierrot's figure hovers behind my versions of Laforgue, Baudelaire and others. I think CASINO is a poem he would have enjoyed: he was extremely fond of purples and mauves. In facial expression and posture he sometimes resembled [sic] the young Buster Keaton.²³

This underlines the fact that Ash's poetry makes serious play with location and period, and complicates our reading of the image of the gambling suicides which ends the poem. It may be that such complications point to the reason for the suppression of the dedication in the later edition of the poem: in a review of an edition of Trakl's poems, Ash declares his distaste for 'morbid psychology',²⁴ and yet the modulation of the first person plural narrative voice from a chorus of the casino's entourage ('we would think of L. / whom each of us loves dearly') to the voice of a lyric subject unable or unwilling to declare itself singular ('the spectacle is over for us [...] we are *outside*') is intriguing psychologically because it suggests that not all illusions have been revealed at the poem's close. The instability of the 'we' is a feature of Ash's poetry to which we will return: in *Casino* it seems to be not yet fully realised within the poem.

If *Casino* is a negative image of the eclectic, *Epitaph for the Greeks in India* can be seen as a response, written in search of a genuine model of heterodoxy to offer as a positive source of value. In *The Golden Hordes*, Ash and Turner quote Lévi-Strauss on what they term 'the melancholy and "irresoluble" paradox of

²³ John Ash, *Casino* (London: Oasis, 1978), p. 11.

²⁴ John Ash, Review of *Georg Trakl: A Profile*, ed. F. Graziano, *PN Review* 41, 11:3 (1984), p. 65

anthropology':

The less one culture communicates with another, the less likely they are to be corrupted, one by the other; but on the other hand, the less likely it is, in such conditions, that the respective emissaries of these cultures will be able to seize the richness and significance of their diversity.²⁵

The significance of Greco-Indian culture for Ash lies in the extreme confrontation of diverse cultures that it represents, and in his notes to *Epitaph for the Greeks in India*, Ash pays tribute to Lévi-Strauss's 'profound meditation on the ruins of the Greco-Indian city of Taxila' in *Tristes Tropiques*. At one point in that work, Lévi-Strauss describes the monument which he considers best characterises the city:

It is the altar 'of the two-headed eagle', on the plinth of which we see three porticos sculpted in bas-relief: one with a pediment, in the Greco-Roman style, the other bell-shaped in the Bengali manner; the third according to the archaic Buddhist style of the great doors of Bharhut.²⁶

In addition to these three traditions, the Zoroastrians of Persia, the Parthians, Scythians and imperial Islam are all represented in Taxila. The chance discovery of an ancient Greek coin leads Lévi-Strauss to question 'what would the West be today had the attempt at union between the Mediterranean world and India endured?'²⁷

Epitaph for the Greeks in India juxtaposes the remnants of that attempted union with the accumulated detritus of subsequent colonial adventures and the

²⁵ Ash and Turner, *The Golden Hordes*, p. 131.

²⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1955), p. 428.

²⁷ Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, p. 429.

contemporary scene of Cold War unrest (there are references to 'political prisoners', 'armed bands in the hills', and 'Soviet weaponry'): as in *Casino*, epic ambition is interspersed with lyrical concerns, although here the 'we' is more consistently identified with two lovers travelling through modern-day India. The distribution of lines of verse and prose across pages which remain largely blank draws attention to the use of juxtaposition as an attempt to participate in the process of cultural cross-fertilisation which the text valorises. If this suggests Eliotic 'fragments [...] shored against my ruins',²⁸ it must be said that the text in fact shares with *Casino* a network of references to French poetry, as Ash acknowledges in his notes. The 'porticoes soaked in light' from 'Submarine Orchestration' in *Casino* and 'A portico a sunset' in *Epitaph for the Greeks in India* have their origin in Baudelaire's 'La Vie Antérieure': 'J'ai longtemps habité sous de vastes portiques / Que les soleils marins teignaient de mille feux' (For a long time I have lived under vast porticoes / dyed with a thousand fires by marine suns).²⁹ In *Epitaph for the Greeks in India*, Ash also uses two whole lines, untranslated, from the sonnet 'Correspondances', 'Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies, / Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens' (Having the expansion of infinite things, / Like amber, musk, benzoin and incense),³⁰ and two separate fragments, again untranslated, from Mallarmé's 'Brise marine', 'Steamer, balançant ta mâture' (Steamer, swaying with your masts), and 'Je sens que des

²⁸ Eliot, *Collected Poems*, p. 79.

²⁹ Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes*, p. 96.

³⁰ Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes*, p. 8.

oiseaux sont ivres' (I sense that birds are intoxicated).³¹

Once more, *The Golden Hordes* can help us to understand the significance of these borrowings. Discussing the influence of nineteenth century bohemian culture on contemporary American subcultures, Ash and Turner remark that 'for the Romantics, the Symbolists, the beats, and the hippies, travelling is always seen, ideally, as a means of recovering something lost'.³² When Ash incorporates fragments of that tradition into his own work, they articulate a longing which can then be interrogated, as when Ash echoes the 'forêts de symboles' of 'Correspondances':³³

A forest of symbols! We expected
 An absolute strangeness
 But each landscape we encounter
 Is a friend or a lover whose trust we betrayed.
 We dream that we are here
 And in this new order each object carries
 A message, is too bright,
 Too full and clear,
 Recalling our oppression as children
 Translating sentences from animals and plants

The lesson of *The Golden Hordes* is once more in evidence, that the pursuit of the exotic, or here 'absolute strangeness', breeds familiarity instead. Since the excursion is inevitably situated within the economy of modern travel, there is no experience which does not bear that mark of that economy, as is emphasised later in the poem when the speaker admits that 'Everywhere the world offers us

³¹ Mallarmé, *Poésies*, p. 40.

³² Ash and Turner, *The Golden Hordes*, p. 264.

our own image'. Thus the uneasy lyricism of self-confrontation exemplified here struggles to reconcile revelations of personal history with access to the historical past:

So ... this is a long way from anywhere, and we have been invited to observe a ceremony that occurs only once in twenty years. But what can it mean to us, even though performed by exquisite children with wings attached to their elbows? The crowd around us yells and weeps but the sacredness of the mime seems to reside in its obscurity.

This confrontation between modernity (the tourists) and prehistory (the cyclical time of sacred ceremony and its audience) is precisely the subject of Baudelaire's *correspondances*, as Walter Benjamin demonstrated in linking the motif of the sacral 'piliers' (pillars) which appear in 'Correspondances' and 'La Vie Antérieure' to an experience of time organised according to festival:

What Baudelaire meant by *correspondances* may be described as an experience which seeks to establish itself in crisis-proof form. This is possible only within the realm of the ritual [...] The *correspondances* are the data of remembrance - not historical data, but data of prehistory. What makes festive days great and significant is the encounter with an earlier life.³⁴

The lovers travelling through India in Ash's poem experience a complex disorientation arising from the awareness of intersecting temporal frames: those of private life, the historical moment and the cyclical time of ritual. If the *correspondances* offer the possibility of access to 'an earlier life', the irony of the

³³ Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes*, p. 8.

³⁴ Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, pp. 140-141.

act of quoting from Baudelaire or Mallarmé within the poem is that the lines which were originally conceived to offer that access are now themselves tokens of memory which bear the stamp of their nineteenth-century origin. Likewise, when the speaker of the poem speculates that 'the sacredness of the mime seems to reside in its obscurity', it is a post-Symbolist understanding of the performance which valorises the difficulty of the encounter. The speaker longs for an end to such historically determined desires:

How do you escape 'meaning',-
 Stop building blank houses with five windows
 And a central door, absurd chimneys
 Lollipops for trees? Isn't
 The sun strong enough? Aren't
 The wave-caps white enough? The palms
 And bank-notes a violent green?...

The desire for unmediated experience of the landscape is wryly undercut by the violent green of the 'bank notes'. In *Casino*, currency was made flesh, but in *Epitaph for the Greeks in India* it is language whose current value is debated. The distribution of the lines across the page seems to suggest a will to keep them separate, as if a relation of exchange between them could be resisted by the white space of the page, but in fact it only exposes that relation. If one were to apply the Marxist terms which Ash's own critical work invites, one could say that to refuse exchange is undialectical: it is not to have overcome it (such a claim would in itself be historically unviable), but instead to have attempted to withdraw from the process and thus to have affirmed it in negative terms. The

final part of the poem, where Ash adapts an anecdote from Lévi-Strauss,³⁵ seems both to confirm the withdrawal and to signal the speaker's awareness of its futility, the tone of the last line being both defiant and sentimental:

*Something gleaming at my feet made me stop: it was a small silver coin loosened
by the recent rains and bearing the Greek inscription,*

MENANDR BASILEUS SÔTEROS...

*Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies,
Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens,*

The barb may be found and we will not barter it

'The barb' refers to the lines by Li Ho quoted earlier in the poem, in which the poet discovers an arrowhead in circumstances similar to those of Lévi-Strauss finding the coin. The quotation from 'Correspondances' leaves us in no doubt as to the proposed value of the coin and the arrowhead as points of access to a replenished experience, but the poem ends before the travellers reach 'the rectilinear city' of Taxila: we may choose to read the incompleteness of the poem as a tragic recognition of the unrecoverable nature of the experience for which it yearns, or we may see it as a sign of hope. Ash's shorter works are frequently poised between these two attitudes. Neither *Casino* nor *Epitaph for the Greeks in India* have received any attention in critical accounts of Ash's poetry: in according them an extended reading here I have sought to illustrate how, taken together, they reveal preoccupations which are carried over from Ash's early

³⁵ The original can be found in Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, pp. 428-429.

model of lyrical expression is deemed insufficient, 'for a song is too obvious, sticking like a motto / and neither your life nor mine resembles one': fidelity to that 'life' will resist the monumentalising urge of statuary to which O'Hara alerts us, 'but the longing stays with us -', and so there is an insistent return to the desire to depart toward 'another land', in this case the improvised architecture of the 'blue-shuttered towns'. The idea of lyric returns as an urge which can be recognised and critically commented on within the poem itself:

And a song is the engine
that builds this different climate, taking from both spring and autumn
buds, leaves, and fruit but avoiding
absolutes; its disorder is so strangely calm
that soon each phenomenon encountered
seems an obedient medium, answering your desires
even when unknown

The poem proceeds from the knowledge that it cannot straightforwardly be that song: the lyric impulse will be one competing agency in the making of the poem, building a 'different climate' which corresponds to what Christopher Middleton called 'the social promise of art [...] that pleasure should one day supersede work as the main activity of our species'. I will return to this idea presently.

The 'song' in 'The Rain' is similar to the 'realism' of Roy Fisher's 'For Realism', since its role can be reflected on in the writing of the poem, but it is different in being utopian rather than a critical recording of and response to existing conditions. Ash's distinct approach to history, informed by his reading of Lévi-Strauss, is formulated in the next part of 'The Rain':

We have to love the past
 it is our invention. Perhaps, after all
 forgiveness is the proper attitude
 and we should not abolish history but make a space in it
 that will contain both the philosophies
 of eighteenth-century boudoirs and the Kingdom of Meroe,
 the Empire of Songhoi ...

This eclectic history extends the song's 'different climate' temporally, and thus asserts the epic power of the imagination to develop narratives of cultural understanding. The paradox of Ash's notion of history in this closing movement of the poem recalls his formulation 'improvisatory architecture' in conversation with John Ashbery,³⁶ in that case to describe the elder poet's approach. Here it is apt to describe the way in which Ash simultaneously exhorts the pragmatic elaboration of a cultural narrative which is an 'invention' in which 'space' can be made for heterodox phenomena, while insisting on a kind of inevitability or historical process according to which the unreal 'creatures and places that do not exist [...] are necessary' and provoke 'fresh sentiments, lithe figures / for the alcoves prepared long in advance'. This reconciliation of chance and design, or 'improvisatory architecture', is the unrealised promise of the poem, and thus brings us back to Middleton.

In my discussion of *The Golden Hordes*, I suggested that the Pleasure Periphery represented a border zone between realised and potential market value, 'spoiled' and 'unspoiled' location. The different climates or utopias of

³⁶ Ash, 'John Ashbery in conversation with John Ash', 34.

Ash's poems push at the same boundary, seeking a place of unmediated experience but being obliged to acknowledge their own status as mediation between social reality and social promise. However, in Ash and Turner's analysis, tourism sponsors social conservatism, whereas utopian poetry claims radical potential. This paradox appears intermittently as a theme in Ash's poetry, and is the explicit subject of 'The Ruins, with Phrases from the Official Guide', which is dedicated to Middleton, and 'The Ungrateful Citizens', which is an overt parody of Ashbery's 'The Instruction Manual'. The argument of these poems is strikingly similar: in both, we are presented with the portrait of a city which at first seems idyllic, but which on closer inspection proves to be corrupted in some way. In 'The Ruins, with Phrases from the Official Guide', the speaker speculates that the eponymous ruins might have been designed to instruct us 'only / that all cities are mortal', but ends by warning that 'a doubt remains: // a city is not an axiom'. Urban decay is seen not as a *memento mori* safely contained within civic design, but instead as the inevitable, uncontrolled and threatening corollary of the very elegance the tourist seeks to praise, aided by the 'Official Guide'. It is a kind of repressed content rather than a self-evident principle, and there is a tacit acknowledgement here that any utopian alternative must remain incomplete, since closed design risks the latent violence and corruption of an imposed will. Ash's poem thus responds to Middleton's 'Manuscript in a Lead Casket', where the inventor of 'Tourist City' (which is itself a hallucination of some future stage of the Pleasure Periphery) is driven to

destroy his creation in a futile attempt to regain control. The suggestion of a dominating and repressive civic authority also recalls Ash and Turner's claim that the tourist industry's need for stability resulted in a readiness to deal with "'Orderly" régimes'.³⁷ That claim drew on Barthes's critique of the *Blue Guide* in *Mythologies*, where he denounces the 'latent support given by the *Guide* to Franco'; we must conclude that it is this *Guide* which provides Ash with the model for his 'Official Guide'.

In 'The Ungrateful Citizens', the debt to Barthes is made more plain. Imagining Naples, to which he has never travelled, the speaker embarks on a breathless yet extended eulogy of the city, once more overshadowed by menace in the closing stages of the poem, as the picturesque inhabitants 'crowd the quays and the airport lounges, / and exhibit the horrible condition of their skin, the rags they are forced to wear'. Turning on the speaker, they insist: 'No, we cannot be the amorous ballet the tourist requires for a backdrop'. This image, referred to at various points throughout *The Golden Hordes*, is taken directly from Barthes's work on *The Blue Guide*:

The ethnic reality of Spain is [...] reduced to a vast classical ballet, a nice neat commedia dell'arte, whose improbable typology serves to mask the real spectacle of conditions, classes and professions.³⁸

Ash's poetry is thoroughly imbued with the irony which sees a 'real spectacle' being 'masked'. It is the interplay between 'improbable typology' and 'real

³⁷ Ash and Turner, *The Golden Hordes*, p. 185.

spectacle' which has perhaps most infuriated British critics of his work, and Douglas Dunn's review of *Casino* would seem to be the particular example to which Harry Mathews refers in the interview which begins this chapter: 'reading *Casino*, we might want to ask "Where do the people of Britain live?" "What do they do?" "How do they go about their lives?" Ash presumably knows about these questions and disregarding them is one way of answering them'.³⁹

According to this kind of criticism, 'play' is always and irrefutably an avoidance of, rather than an engagement with, worldly concerns. Reviewing *The Branching Stairs*, John Lucas summarises: '[Ash's] kind of gaiety can be fun, but after a while you begin to long for the real'.⁴⁰ Even the more sympathetic remarks of Ian Gregson reveal the same culturally determined prejudice when he paraphrases Ash's epigraph from Reverdy in *The Goodbyes* to characterise Ash and Ashbery as 'walk[ing] elegantly by the side of the emptiness'.⁴¹ This misprision casts Reverdy as some kind of stereotypical dandy, playfully deferring existential crisis, when even a cursory reading of the poem from which the original quotation was taken would reveal something very different, even before the poet's lifelong struggle with religious doubt, or his thoroughly undandyish austerity, were taken into account. The misreading may simply have originated in Gregson's mistranslation of the phrase 'être en jeu', which would seem to be the referent for the 'playfulness' he finds in the passage, given

³⁸ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 75.

³⁹ Douglas Dunn, Review of *Casino*, *Palantir*, 12 (July 1979), pp. 47-48 (p. 48).

⁴⁰ John Lucas, 'Self-contained', *New Statesman*, 8 February 1985, p. 32.

⁴¹ Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism*, p. 224.

the sense of 'jeu' as 'game': in fact, the line translates as 'All of life is at stake', which, while still 'playful', obviously carries much more menacing connotations.⁴² As for the line 'Nous passons à côté du vide élégamment', in the context of the whole poem the stance adopted here is undermined by a nameless inner force: 'quelque chose en nous fait tout trembler / Et le monde n'existe plus'. Andrew Rothwell sees this passage as exemplifying Reverdy's understanding of writing as 'a gamble involving the poet's very self-definition [...] without this commitment and the corresponding threat of disaster there could be no poetic vitality'.⁴³ The phrase 'être en jeu' resonates strongly with this sense of calculated risk, and the stakes are as high as Rothwell implies: 'Galeries' opposes the oblivion 'derrière l'univers (behind the universe)' through which one sees oneself as a 'silhouette qui danse (a silhouette dancing)' with the world of appearance, the gallery, where the series of portraits cannot retrieve anything of their subjects for the viewer, who remains of all the faces in the room 'le plus tranquille', the most secure in definition. The 'regard levé vers les étoiles' at the poem's end enacts the recognition of a relationship between self and cosmos which lies beyond the reach of conventional mimesis. Thus, a distinction is made between the contingencies which are ineluctable products of play (the sudden revelation of the silhouette behind the universe) and the empirical contingencies of naturalism and narrative - 'period detail', or

⁴² Reverdy, *Main d'œuvre, 1913 - 1949* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1971; repr. 2000), p. 126.

⁴³ Andrew Rothwell, *Textual Spaces: The Poetry of Pierre Reverdy* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B. V., 1989), p. 76.

portraiture.

In this understanding, narrow conceptions of the 'real' which refuse play thereby lack access to the full and vital extent of being which is bound up in its own ontologically prior form of play, to which artistic play is linked in a manner reminiscent of Coleridge's primary and secondary imagination. This illustrates the seriousness of play in a foreign poetic which is often derided and rarely understood, but also indicates how the epigraph taken from 'Galleries' fits with the quotations from Auden which begin the two previous sections of *The Goodbyes*. Taken together, these frames offer a typically understated argument about artifice and artistic purpose which will help us to understand the cultural imperatives which link writing and travel in Ash's poetic, and thereby to counter persistent allegations of wilful fantasy. I do not mean to suggest that Ash is never as frivolous as his critics imply, but only that this attitude is deployed in the service of an argument where the stakes are much higher, as it were. I admit that the terms of that argument are not easily related to those of Reverdy's poetry, where a deliberately restricted lexis and recurrent metaphors present stark confrontations between self and world. Auden is a more obvious stylistic presence, and the deliberately overblown rhetoric of Caliban's speech to the audience in *The Sea and the Mirror* complements the kind of self-conscious performance of Ash's poetic diction:

Into that world of freedom without anxiety, sincerity without loss of vigour, feeling that loosens rather than ties the tongue we are not, we reiterate, so blinded by presumption to our proper status and interest as to expect or even wish at any time

to enter, far less to dwell there. (Ash's italics)

Here, Caliban mimics the audience who depend on a strictly demarcated zone of fantasy which is the province of Art, in contrast to their everyday world. But those who wish to transcend the quotidian more permanently through the grace of Ariel are also mocked:

All the voluntary movements are possible – crawling through flues and old sewers, sauntering past shop-fronts, tip-toeing through quicksand and mined areas, running through derelict factories and across empty plains, jumping over brooks, diving into pools or swimming along between banks of roses, pulling at manholes or pushing at revolving doors, clinging to rotten balustrades, sucking at straws or wounds; all the modes of transport, letters, oxcarts, canoes, hansom cabs, trains, trolleys, cars, aeroplanes, balloons are available, but any sense of direction, any knowledge of where on earth one has come from or where on earth one is going to is completely absent. (Ash's italics)

'Those who insist on refusing the responsibility of their subjectivity get a world in which they are imprisoned rather than free', remark Lucy S. McDiarmid and John McDiarmid in their patient elucidation of the passage from which this is taken.⁴⁴ Ash selects this as his first epigraph, and the passage on the 'world of freedom without anxiety' as his second, in reverse order to their sequence in Caliban's speech. The McDiarmids' metaphor of imprisonment in a groundless scepticism may recall to us the 'stifling cell of the poem-as-play', and it is possible to see Ash's selection as merely strategic, an attempt to ward off such criticism in advance by advertising the author's awareness of the issue. Yet the McDiarmids' concluding remarks on *The Sea and the Mirror* suggest a more subtle

and far-ranging significance of Auden for Ash's work:

In his "commentary" on *The Tempest*, Auden is grappling not with Shakespeare but with the idea of the artist's "unique importance." Although this is an idea which Auden associates with Romanticism, and with writers such as Tennyson and Rimbaud, it is really his own bogeyman, the escapism and solipsism he is exorcising in *The Orators*, *The Age of Anxiety*, and "City Without Walls." *The Sea and the Mirror* is subtler than those works because each character asserts his own disenchantment.⁴⁵

This begins to get at the tensions which underly Ash's poetic, particularly in as far as it indicates an English literary tradition less neatly fenced off from its continental counterpart. What these passages share with the quotation from Reverdy is a desire to unmask spectacle: they differ, however, in their understanding of the nature of that spectacle, and therefore what might be achieved by resisting it. The two poets also have contrasting notions of how the spectacle is confronted in writing. Auden's poetry of observation has its legacy in a postwar anti-Modernist line exemplified by the work of Philip Larkin, where the 'unique importance' of the artist is replaced by what Donald Davie characterises as 'lowered sights and patiently diminished expectations',⁴⁶ most famously captured in the image of the persona in 'Church Going' who removes his cycle-clips 'in awkward reverence'. Larkin operates a realism of the disenchanted observer, critical of and yet knowingly identifying with the 'cut-

⁴⁴ Lucy S. McDiarmid and John McDiarmid, 'Artifice and Self-Consciousness in *The Sea and the Mirror*', in *W. H. Auden*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), pp. 69-90 (p. 82).

⁴⁵ Lucy S. McDiarmid and John McDiarmid, 'Artifice and Self-Consciousness in *The Sea and the Mirror*', p. 90.

⁴⁶ Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972; repr. 1979), p. 71.

price crowd',⁴⁷ or the women pushed 'to the side of their own lives'.⁴⁸ Ash explores and ironises this position: in 'Salon Pieces' the speaker contemplates 'the "beautiful sorrows" / cultivated in the idleness of a lost age' before concluding that 'yes, the world is simple / and very far from our lives'. In 'The Rain', a telling correlation is identified between 'disenchanted' and disempowered observation: 'not that it happened so far away I didn't hear about it / just far enough for my feelings in the matter to be redundant'.⁴⁹

The quotation from Reverdy functions in *The Goodbyes* as a counter for a wholly different tradition of writing which offers what in 'Accompaniment to a Film Scene' Ash calls 'a "sense of reality" that deepens / when realism is abandoned'. The dream imagery which the disenchanted observer wishes to exorcise is here the means of getting beyond social reality understood as a spectacle. Thus, in a typically allusive passage in 'The Grapefruit Segments: A Book of Preludes', Ash appeals to the poetic example of Rimbaud and Ashbery as he addresses contemporary culture:

The search for the place and the formula has begun again, in earnest,
but paradox and elision rule our every gesture in that direction
(Accustom yourself to this confusion, -
it is your climate: the music too loud, the lights

⁴⁷ Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Marvell / Faber and Faber, 1988; repr. 1990), p. 136.

⁴⁸ Larkin, *Collected Poems*, p. 121.

⁴⁹ Interestingly, both John Ashbery and Philip Larkin single out Caliban's speech to the audience for special praise – in his Harvard University senior thesis, Ashbery calls it 'probably the most brilliant writing Auden has ever done' (quoted in David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, p. 133). In 'What's Become of Wystan?', Larkin spares it from his general criticism of postwar Auden as one of the 'intermittent successes' of his American years (*Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* [London: Faber and Faber, 1983], p. 126).

blinding or stygian, the hour
 too late) ... and even when speech is
 nearly redundant, - as may be the case at this moment -
 we like to retain certain clichés, for the sake
 of their beautiful transparency

Here, the 'confusion' of an oddly oppressive hedonism where the music is 'too loud' is matched by the linguistic confusion where the redundancy of cliché and the more fundamental redundancy of disempowered protest meet: Ash is identifying a kind of political disaffection and seeking to counter it with the 'search for the place and the formula' announced by Rimbaud in 'Vagabonds'.⁵⁰ Ash and Turner had seen this phrase as emblematic of Rimbaud's 'philosophy of the road',⁵¹ but in subordinating the search to processes of 'paradox and elision' Ash is clearly claiming it for the domestic surreal rather than the Beat travel writing of Kerouac: paradox and elision are equivalent to Ashbery's 'logic of strange position' (putting in) and 'deprivation' (leaving out) respectively. In this poem, as in 'The Future Including the Past', contemporary forms of pleasure are subject to the cycle of prosperity and slump:

The violins scream like 'Society Women' jumping from the hotel in flames!
 ...
 Your world has ended ... *again*. ... And that smile
 so carefully judged to deflect all criticism
 is the true sign that you are lost like the idea of a just society ...

In 'The Future Including the Past', an unnamed but identifiable male voice

⁵⁰ See Rimbaud, *Poésies / Une Saison En Enfer / Illuminations*, p. 174: 'moi pressé de trouver le lieu et la formule.'

mourns for a nostalgic picture of England which recalls Larkin's 'Going, Going' among other representations:

My civilisation has ended,
and I liked it so much: people were kind to animals
and, every weekend, remembered to take
to aged parents, bunches of link and pale blue flowers;
all houses were *cottages* or *villas*,
and somehow had an air of looking
happily out to sea, even when there was no sea,-

Post-imperial anxieties are wittily implicated in this picture: 'now it is ended, / and *someone* must be to blame, some American, I should think...'. Ash's critical verdict on the dominant figure of postwar English poetry recalls Neil Corcoran's observation that 'in Philip Larkin 'the idea of the nation is given an allegiance fundamentally at odds with the disenchanting scepticism manifest in relation to almost all other sources of potential value'.⁵² Ash's alternative source of value, as I have argued, lies in an imaginative re-ordering of our relation to history and to the promise of a future where pleasure is liberated from capitalist economy, and both 'The Grapefruit Segments' and 'The Future Including the Past' (whose very title is so instructive) offer visions of social promise which involve a dynamic movement in antithesis to the monuments of nostalgia: 'it was as if all the old problems of friction and inertia had been solved' the speaker says in the latter poem as he moves 'imperceptibly' towards a utopian city where 'each new arrival experiences / a feeling like love or sexual attraction, but also / unlike and

⁵¹ Ash and Turner, *The Golden Hordes*, p. 265.

new, accompanied by a dazzling calm'. In 'The Grapefruit Segments', the speaker announces that 'it is / a kind of *movement* we want above all else' in contrast to the imprisoning 'small frame' of an acquisitive social 'reality' where "'loving" and "possession"' are bound up: in the city glimpsed at the poem's close, love is instead a spur to creativity. The danger that utopian vision might collapse into an escapism as sterile as nostalgia is hinted at when the 'place of continual springtime' which is the poem's image of an alternative is said to be 'inlaid with a nostalgia that somehow seems to come / from a point far in the future'. The last lines carry an awareness of the insufficiency of a liberty deferred: 'the idea was to be ... / was (only) to live in hope.'

Ash's utopian city builds on the surreal aspect of contemporary urban forms, most clearly perhaps in 'Early Views of Manchester and Paris: Third View', which inhabits the 'pan-European city of modern art' imagined in the work of Roy Fisher and Frank O'Hara and which brings the industrial English city of Ash's birth together with the pre-war global art capital in a border zone which owes its hallucinatory and eclectic architecture to Rimbaud's 'Alchimie du Verbe' in *Une Saison en Enfer*, as is firmly evident if in reading Ash's evocation of 'a dome from a mosque in North Africa' we recall the French poet's description of his visionary method: 'I accustomed myself to straightforward hallucination: very sincerely, I saw a mosque in place of a factory, a drumming school built by

⁵² Corcoran, *English Poetry since 1940*, p. 92.

angels, carts on the sky's roads, a room at the bottom of a lake'.⁵³ That room appears elsewhere in Ash's poetry, for example in the 'First Prose for Roy Fisher' and the Birmingham poet's critical vision helps to determine Ash's relation to the civic powers which shape Victorian Manchester:

So the space remains unoccupied but for the slow accumulation, in colourless layers, of puzzled speculation concerning forbears who required such a gulf between a dim, blue ceiling and the conduct of their business.

In a review of Ian McMillan, Frank Kuppner, Roy Fisher and Peter Didsbury, Ash makes a direct connection between the location of Didsbury, Kuppner and McMillan in the industrial north of Britain, whether English or Scottish, and their use of surreal imagery:

When you have little to lose, when you feel that political and social structures no longer serve your interests or those of your class, it becomes logical to turn your attention to the development of intuitive, irrational faculties that have no immediate or obvious social function. So you write songs and poems - not just as escape, but in order to oppose an unsatisfactory reality with an imaginative order that is richer, wilder, funnier, and freer.⁵⁴

These are not the remarks of a writer engaged simply in disregarding contemporary conditions, as Douglas Dunn alleges: however, they bear the mark of an anxiety at the possibility of such an allegation. The poem 'Forgetting' is both a response to this anxiety and a rewriting of Ashbery's own apology, 'The

⁵³ Rimbaud, *Poésies / Une Saison En Enfer / Illuminations*, p. 141.

⁵⁴ Ash, Review of Ian McMillan, *Selected Poems*, Frank Kuppner, *The Intelligent Observation of Naked Women*, Roy Fisher, *A Furnace*, Peter Didsbury, *A Classical Farm*, *Voice Literary Supplement*, November 1987, pp. 18-20, (p. 20).

One Thing That Can Save America'. Where the elder poet talks of the 'mostly limited steps / That can be taken against danger' in the suburban refuge of smalltown America, Ash playfully suggests that such border areas between city and countryside are the source of his marginal perspective: 'I lived in suburbs so long, / I may never get over it'. In a rare moment of confession strongly reminiscent of 'The One Thing', Ash appeals for poetic permission:

I know I mix the present with the past,
but that's how I like it:
there is no other way to go on.

Personal idiosyncrasy is unavoidable, and Rimbaud's image of the submerged room is deployed as an example, playfully transposed here from an urban to a suburban context: 'The bungalows drift off indifferently / and sink in the reservoir'. To paraphrase Harry Mathews, the imaginary place becomes Mrs Thatcher's England:

The unprofitable sunsets are shut down.

Once, under that signature of light,
we lived in the dream of a past that never existed [...]
Now a strong leader has come amongst us,
and, in consequence, we know nothing.

The future is a locked factory gate.

This bleak future and the past of nostalgia are folded back into a vision of 'the pear tree break[ing] into flames' and so the poem ends on an unresolved note of crisis. This is the paradox of a verbalised voicelessness that also appears in Ian

McMillan's work of the same period, and ultimately both poets were to abandon the domestic surreal, in Ash's case for a poetry of history modelled on Cavafy which characterises his later volumes. The prospect of the locked factory gate entailed a shift in literary production just as in the wider economy, and for Ash, it was at this border that the domestic surreal came to rest.

Chapter VI

WORD AND PLACE: THE POETRY OF PETER DIDSBURY

To what shall the mind turn for that with which to rehabilitate our thought and our lives? To the word, a meaning hardly distinguishable from that of place, in whose great virtuous and at present little realised potency we hereby manifest our belief. - William Carlos Williams

I recommend the reader to examine carefully the face that is drawn on the shell of the crab. - August Strindberg

These were the two epigraphs to *The Butchers of Hull*, Peter Didsbury's first collection. Two more collections were to start in the same fashion, thus confirming that this was a deliberate strategy helping to shape and frame the books. I intend to explore each set of epigraphs more fully, but to begin with I would like to suggest a way in which the initial pair remain richly suggestive for all Didsbury's subsequent work. In 'The Black Mountain Poets', Donald Davie offered Williams's statement as exemplar for an American poetics of place taken up in the work of Ed Dorn and Charles Olson, but insisted that 'the crucialness of a grasp on *locality*, the imaginative richness for poetry of a sense of *place* - this is no novel perception'.¹ Indeed it is not, but the passage quoted has a potentially different emphasis if we take Williams seriously when he claims that 'word' and 'place' are 'hardly distinguishable', for this is not to put one at the service of the other (place at the service of the word, in Davie's formulation), but to exploit the coincidence of both in order to 'rehabilitate our thought and our

¹ Davie, 'The Black Mountain Poets', *The Poet in the Imaginary Museum*, p. 180.

lives'. Turning to the quotation from Strindberg we might find ourselves doubly perplexed, firstly by the lack of an immediate relation between these words and what has gone before, and secondly by the enigmatic qualities of the pronouncement. Where Williams exults in the possibility of a restored feeling, Strindberg seems to warn us of artifice and illusion, since the crab's face is 'drawn' on its shell. Such a startling juxtaposition was, in retrospect, the ideal preparation for reading this poet's work, as the final sentence of the prose poem 'A White Wine for Max Ernst' confirms:

The association of two or more apparently alien elements on a plane alien to both is the most potent ignition of poetry.

Although it is offered in tribute to the Surrealist painter, this phrase in fact removes the poetic flesh from the bones of Lautréamont's famous image, 'as beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table'.² What it helps to illuminate in the framing of the collection is a play of the congruous and the incongruous, coincidence and delay, accord and discord: for while word and place may achieve a kind of harmony, the crab's face offers an absurd reflection of the reader's own, and as Martin Esslin observes, "'absurd" originally means "out of harmony", in a musical context'.³ Didsbury's work is concerned with custom and ritual aspects of everyday life whereby a kind of harmony is sought, but it also features subjects who find

² Lautréamont, *Ceuvres Complètes* (Paris: Corti, 1953), p. 327.

³ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 23.

themselves somehow displaced and dispossessed, obliged to situate themselves and to recover a sense of the familiar from receding frames of perspective ranging from the local to the cosmic. However, the strange is not seen simply as a threat in antithesis to the established world of custom: instead, custom actually arises from the workings of artifice, which then becomes a source of renewal and pleasure. Following Middleton and Ashbery, Didsbury inhabits eccentric perspective to relocate the centre, finding common ground in idiosyncrasy. The work of Roy Fisher helps Didsbury to argue that inhabited landscapes are not unproblematically shared but must be reclaimed imaginatively.

Agnes Heller writes:

It is primarily in species-essential objectivation 'in itself' (i.e. in implements and things, in systems of habit and custom, and in language) that human culture accumulates: their continuity is identical with the continuity of social life, and from them we can read off the average degree of development which a given social integration has attained at any given time.⁴

Thus, in custom word and place find their closest identification, since word use will locate the subject within a culture and thus a place, just as that place and culture will determine our expectations of the subject's language use. In Didsbury's poetry, however, a heterogeneity of custom disrupts the 'continuity of social life'. In 'The Seventh of April', a prose poem in the form of a journal entry, the speaker describes lighting a candle in an earthenware dish. The candle is 'the kind you put on birthday cakes', but we are not told if this is an

⁴ Agnes Heller, *Everyday Life*, trans. by G. L. Campbell (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 123.

actual birthday, and the air is one of foreboding rather than joy, despite the protestation 'hardly frightened at all today'. The last lines admit the poem's preoccupations:

Basho went his own way right up to the end. He said that *every* poem was a death poem and he didn't need to write a special one.

This approving comment on Basho's defiance towards occasions deemed 'special' would rather seem to undermine the speaker's own observance: time passes whether it is celebrated in successive birthdays or not. However, the quotidian form of the journal, where dates are simply headings for entries, combines with the somewhat casual nature of the ceremony, which makes use of a candle found in a drawer and a dish bought some time before in a gardening shop, to give an air of habit rather than exception: the poem is prosaic rather than momentous. Such a solitary, makeshift ceremony insists that death is faced alone and as a constantly present condition of life, thus subverting the communal ritual of the birthday party.

Ceremony may become routine, but routine can also become sacral, and everyday objects can be consecrated in an eccentric culture. Thus in 'The Jar', the speaker refers to the 'in-trays' of the divinity to which his prayers are addressed. Heller notes that prayer 'usually takes place before or towards an object which is symbolic',⁵ but Didsbury's poem suggests that any domestic thing may serve the purpose:

This month, my prayers have all gone down
 through that jar on the hearth, whose green glass wall
 collects intransigent air, and tells tales
 of the life of the Buddha.

The speaker's everyday environment shapes his spiritual practice, in which prayers go 'down' rather than up, and the object is chosen at whim and on an impermanent basis, for 'this month'. Resignation before mortality is once more the premise on which this practice is based: 'I am promised my death, and the rest will / take care of itself'. Archaic phrasing and the vernacular combine in a diction so accommodating it inevitably recalls Ashbery, moving from momentous speech to conversation in a way that is only partly bathetic:

Although I grieve that the discursive mode
 is lost to me behind swords of conjoined fire
 I take the roads that open to other music.
 The anguish of a single human soul
 may flow into the world's receptacles,
 jars, boots, boats, words, hollow logs and
 emptied bottles of mineral water,
 and therefore I invoke them all for my
 Ode to Broken Thoughts.

The 'emptied bottles of mineral water' are expertly deployed as a flat note following the list of simple though potentially dignified 'receptacles', but the reverence for the commonplace is genuine, and recalls Didsbury's approving quotation of 'As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat' in a review of Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*:

⁵ Heller, *Everyday Life*, p. 124.

And a sigh heaves from all the small things on earth.
 The books, the papers, the old garters and union-suit buttons
 Kept in a white cardboard box somewhere, and all the lower
 Versions of cities flattened under the equalising night.

For Didsbury, there is in this passage 'an animism that leaves pathetic fallacy entirely out of the question',⁶ and his own poetry draws on a current of domestic animism detectable also in Fisher's 'polytheism without gods' in *City* and more widely in Middleton's *œuvre*. In a passage from 'Reflections on a Viking Prow' which recalls Heller's concern with 'social integration', Middleton writes:

Things do gather the rays of feeling with which we – in our indelibly animistic afterthoughts – pretend to penetrate them, and they reply to those rays with presence. Briefly, even when things retain their trans-linguistic purity in silence, they are essential to our social and private coherences; and our artifacts do encode those coherences in peculiarly transparent ciphers.

In Middleton's 'Hermit Pot', the eponymous pot is posited as 'the middle of the enigma of the world', and Didsbury's 'The Jar' and an earlier poem, 'Two Urns' are similarly in search of receptacles for their 'indelibly animistic afterthoughts': the ability of containers to hold enigmatic as well as mundane content is the cause of celebration in these poems. In 'Two Urns', the eminently Keatsian vessels may be real or they may be shaped in the poet's imagination from sand deposits after a wind-storm, 'maybe from the coast of Africa', but like Middleton's pot they 'retain their trans-linguistic purity in silence', 'breathing

⁶ Peter Didsbury, Review of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, p. 64.

quietly / beneath the wall of the shed' in the garden which, as David Wheatley remarks, is the scene of many of Didsbury's poems.⁷ We will return to this point in a moment, but for now it is important to note that the urns are charged with a kind of presence which makes for continuity between the local, with its odour of 'woodsmoke', and the cosmic, with its 'white fire':

By day they swell until they speak like drums
 and at midnight I can bend my ear to them
 or watch from the doorway the stars to which they call,
 pulling their hard coats closer about them,
 swallowing white fire,
 working their round mouths on Sun and Moon
 or the flight of birds, woodsmoke, silence,
 the tracks of this or that slow planet.

Didsbury's poems often seem to be written in search of correspondences between different frames of reference, and preeminently between the local and the universal. The two urns are situated in 'this specific garden', and that 'specific' makes a distinction which is not further articulated: what it seems to alert us to is the fine balance between a sense of the particular location and knowledge of the poetic archetype of the garden. Like the speaker of McMillan's 'This Century's Favourites' sitting in 'the backyard / of popular song', the narrator is aware of the paradox of a private experience which is common to people of a certain culture. This is the subject of 'Back of the House', where the 'English garden' groans under the weight of its accumulated culture: 'There is

⁷ David Wheatley, 'Eikon Basilike: the poetry of Peter Didsbury', accessed at <http://www.cprw.com/Members/Wheatley/Didsbury.htm> on Friday April 11th, 2003, 5.11 pm.

too much to photograph here'. The decay of empire is deftly suggested by the colonial subject who leaves his image behind him:

A fan of green depends from twigs like vines
 but the punkah wallah has gone to stand
 in the shade, where you cannot pick him out,
 and grins at the print he left behind,
 which moves its arm in air, and grins at *him*.

James Clifford, the postcolonialist critic, remarks:

The critique of colonialism in the postwar period - an undermining of the West's ability to represent other societies - has been reinforced by an important process of theorizing about the limits of representation itself.⁸

In Chapter Four I argued that Christopher Middleton seeks to confront the record of barbarism in culture, using the lyric as alternative to the abstractions of critique. We can see Didsbury's poem also as offering an alternative to the abstractions of Clifford's postcolonial criticism. The literary canon and the imperial project of England are combined in the surreal scenery of this garden:

Look around you. That large bird was running away
 from a poem by Keats, and it failed.
 A pile of brushwood makes flagrant promises
 to Andrew Marvell, and the boulevards are ringed by bombs.

What advantage can the rejection of abstract critique bring? One answer might be that we may thereby gain a finer sense of our continued involvement in the

⁸ James Clifford, *Writing Culture - the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), p. 10.

object of criticism: we still walk in the garden 'that continued to grow, / commensurate with our stature'. Although the emancipated colonial subject can grin looking back at his own image, our own ability to vacate the decaying territory of Empire is more in doubt. At the poem's close, the speaker doubles himself as did the 'punkah wallah', but his reference to that paradigm of the defunct imperial project, Byzantium, acknowledges the inescapable maze of cultural significations, and the leave he takes of the garden is an attempt at avoidance rather than a successful transcendence of its determinations:

When I walk off down the hot brick lane
 I know I leave myself behind
 in the coloured window, in the Byzantine
 back of the house. I watch us still examining
 the blasted elm, that rocks to your fingers
 and threatens to fall. It would lie across
 half the garden. I estimate its height
 and step that far away, before I go.

The critic Patrick Wright's account of his impressions of England on return from a long stay in Canada help to show how well Didsbury's poem captures the contradictions of a country simultaneously fighting literal decay (in the form of Dutch elm disease) and seeking to promote cultural permanence with the heritage industry:

I remember reading Tom Nairn's essay on 'The English Literary Intelligentsia' shortly after my return and being especially struck by the following remark which Nairn quotes in passing from Bernard Bergonzi: 'As a cultural phenomenon the country has all the pathos and unreality of an Indian reservation, full of busily cultivated and exhibited native crafts and customs' [...] the England of his description was certainly recognisable

as the country to which I had returned. Here indeed was Akenfield: here was Watership Down. I remember being impressed by the ritualised and highly mannered style of silent interaction which formed the behavioural norm on a commuter train which I took from Paddington station in the first year of Thatcher's Britain (a green landscape full of dead elms). I recall visiting Fonthill in Wiltshire and finding that the artificial green world built by William Beckford in the late eighteenth century was being carefully re-established (if only in an old stable court) by Bernard Nevill, the designer of Liberty's fabrics who appears to have moved from the evocative (and doubtless also lucrative) world of reanimated William Morris patterns to become the custodian of English exotica in the more tangible form of culturally resonant real estate.⁹

'Back of the House' does present its garden as a spectacle, and in a wider sense Didsbury is alert to the issue of the manufacture of 'culturally resonant real estate', as we shall see, but his poems are rarely rational satires in the manner of Bergonzi's portrait: the 'pathos and unreality' of these scenes are felt and inhabited without the detachment that satirical observation requires.

Nor are the national past and its literary heritage confined to the taxonomy of museum culture, even if the continuities of conservative poetry are denied to them. In Larkin, the English literary tradition persists as a subdued presence at the level of meter and rhyme which is made to contrast with the quotidian landscapes evoked in poems like 'Church Going' and 'The Whitsun Weddings'. In Didsbury's poetry however, figures from literary history turn up as vivid and undeniable presences, strange ghosts and even past lives, as in 'A Winter's Fancy': 'I look out of my window / and perceive I am Laurence Sterne.' In 'The Guitar', Coleridge sleeps on a train 'with his back towards the engine',

⁹ Patrick Wright, *On Living In An Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London:

'dreaming of the advent of the railways', while Aeolus plays 'a margin of the river Humber' as an electric guitar. Responding to Coleridge's idea, quoted in the epigraph, that all of nature might be 'organic Harps diversely framed, / That tremble into thought', the poem insists that technology also is one of the sources of what in 'The Jar' is referred to as 'other music'. The advent of the railways signals a new era of technological development as well as the profound alteration of the English landscape, but the fact that agricultural society had already moulded this landscape and its horizon is also pointed out in the poem:

The sky is like an entry in The Oxford English Dictionary.
The earliest reference for it is 1764,
in Randall's *Semi-Virgilian Husbandry*.

This particular coincidence of word and place suggests that Didsbury's knowledge of etymology and philology, no less than his profession of archaeologist,¹⁰ contribute to his understanding of the need to recover meanings and places buried under layers of sediment, like implements whose use is opaque to us. However, 'The Guitar''s ending, which has Aeolus abandon his guitar to threaten the inhabitants of the carriage, suggests that there is a latent potential to places, words and objects which we cannot hope to realise fully, a kind of sublime which is no less terrible for being funny:

The god puts his face right up to the window

Verso, 1985), pp. 1-2.

¹⁰ The biography which accompanies *That Old-Time Religion* informs us that Didsbury 'works as an archaeologist for Humberside County Council'.

and shakes his horrid locks at them.
 They stare at the cattle grazing in his fields.
 They note the herbaceous stubble
 which makes frightful his visage of mud.

Do these cattle and that 'herbaceous stubble' mark the return of a repressed pastoral to the industrial landscape? The design and modification of the English countryside and its 'culturally resonant real-estate' is indeed the predominant theme of *The Classical Farm*, as announced in its two epigraphs:

...which is a most parkely ground and Romancy pleasant place: heretofore all horrid and woody... - John Aubrey

... the richness and extent of Yorkshire quite charmed me. Oh! what quarries for working in Gothic! - Horace Walpole

John Aubrey (1626-1697) wrote a study of British antiquities, *Monumenta Britannica*, as well as *The Natural History of Wiltshire* where the phrase above can be found, and was the first person to realise that the ruins near Avebury were the remains of a prehistoric temple. Walpole (1717-1797), also an antiquarian, was the leading figure in the Gothic revival of which his own home, Strawberry Hill, became the most prominent example. The two died one hundred years apart, and their remarks make for an interesting historical contrast of aesthetic positions with regard to the landscape of the country estate: Aubrey celebrates 'parkely' order and the clearing of woodland, while Walpole rejoices in the uncanny, unruly qualities of an untamed landscape. This opposition might also be perceived in 'The Guitar', where the organised, planned landscape of the

railways is withheld from Coleridge by the speaker, casting himself as the person from Porlock, thus allowing the uncanny scene with Aeolus.

At this point it will also be clear that Roy Fisher's exploration of the competing imaginations working to shape the world must have some bearing on this work, and indeed 'The Pierhead', also collected in *The Classical Farm*, is the poem of Didsbury's which is most clearly formally indebted to Fisher, its shape recalling the mixed verse and prose sections of *City*. The verse part which begins the poem describes a dredger at the fork of the Hull and the Humber, while the prose reveals the observer's vantage point on the pierhead itself. The first prose paragraph most recalls Fisher in its portrayal of the man-made landscape as an alien extension of the body and its focus on light and brickwork. The last line of the verse is the first half of the sentence then completed in prose, recalling the cinematic technique whereby a voiceover continues into a different shot where the speaker is revealed:

You can stand in it and gaze

at the last few teeth in a truly civic dentition, spaced along the bank. No radiance like here. Compounded of bricks and water by the afternoon, it walks through doorways and helps to polish handrails and counters, scour wooden floors.

If 'The Guitar' playfully situates itself at the inception of the industrial era, 'The Pierhead' is located firmly within the contemporary situation of decline, and bears witness to the dismantling of the pier, which becomes an aperture on that latent potential of place which it, and the poem, cannot contain:

The empty cross-section at the fluvial end used to fill with the side of the ship, the paddle reversing in its semi-circular house. Now it's just a frame to isolate some river with, an occasion to note the anguish of fast waters, and to guess at the speed and volume of their flow.

The observer gazing down into anguish is thus contrasted with the civic employee above, 'on the roof of the covered pier', who cuts through girders with a 'relaxed and critical' demeanour, but art is no less complicit in the economy as a result, as was noted in the previous paragraph: 'the name of the goddess of arts and trades is written on a board, painted in the livery of one of the old railway companies'.

Fisher's impact can be felt more widely in Didsbury's treatment of his native city, Hull, where he still lives. Like Ian McMillan, Didsbury follows Fisher in placing great emphasis on observation of the everyday. In the interview from which I quote at the start of Chapter Seven, McMillan explains in passing that his reliance on public transport, as a non-driver, offers him extended opportunities for 'watching'. Didsbury's poem 'Upstairs' makes a similar point from the vantage of the double decker bus:

A motor owner,
 you do not usually
 travel this high.
 You say you are surprised
 by what lies behind walls,
 by allotments for example,
 and their networks of decay.
 Your surprise surprises me.
 You should learn to look
 elsewhere in cities.

Behind that main street yesterday
 there were swans,
 on the newly cleared drain.

The use of the traditional poetic image of the swans seems like a missed opportunity here, after the more intriguing 'networks of decay' among the allotments. In *The Classical Farm*, allotments are one of the key domestic spaces in which the poems find their instructive 'elsewhere', as are hearths and farms. We may view these as concentric orbits of cultural space, extending outward from the hearth, traditional symbol, indeed metonym of the home, to the allotment as the circumscribed municipal equivalent of the outermost ring of the farm. In the title poem of the collection, Didsbury takes an epigraph from Horace's *Odes* III.18 which translates as 'the old altar [or hearth] smokes with many fragrances'. Horace's poem seeks the protection of Faunus for the poet's flock on the occasion of a country festival in the god's honour, but the discontinuity of social life I have sought to demonstrate elsewhere in Didsbury's poetry is once more in evidence in 'The Classical Farm', where the speaker follows a private ritual while children set fire to their school and old men burn 'brittle stalks' in bonfires on their allotments. The poem celebrates the coincidence of different customs involving fire and parodies Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *The Waste Land* by tracing the persistence of classical types in a contemporary landscape: the school becomes Plato's Academy, the old men 'translate [...] Horace in their sheds' and the speaker's own ritual is cast as a Roman sacrifice:

The fertile grid behind me now includes
 the altar, hearth, or small Vesuvius
 of a cone I build and let the school ignite.
 I am learning to know these fires, and have laid,
 with funnel on top and a flue in its base to inspire,
 my factory of ash for fattening small landscapes,
 a working model of its great Platonic master.

Where classical fragments in *The Waste Land* imply a lost wholeness, here the burning of the Academy helps to fertilise the 'grid' of allotments where the old men 'come by wisdom'. The penultimate line alludes to Horace's *Satire* II.6, where the poet addresses Mercury: 'Make my herd grow fat, and everything else I lay claim to / Except my brains'.¹¹ Horace's poem celebrates the virtues of the farm in contrast to the intrigue and corruption of the city ('Social-climbing can't get me down here'),¹² and Didsbury's mischievous poem seems to promote an anarchic turning away from municipal duty as represented by the Academy, but as the poet recognises in 'Back of the House', no private space offers escape, but instead implicates the subject in a network of responsibilities and forms of identity. Like the garden, the hearth becomes a sustaining paradox for Didsbury's poetry, which we will now examine further in 'By the Fire' and 'Mappa Mundi'.

'By the Fire' finds the speaker 'dozing by a quiet fire / on a December afternoon'. The poem is concerned with modest comforts, and yet there is a

¹¹ Smith Palmer Bovie, *The Satires and Epistles of Horace* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 138.

¹² Bovie, *The Satires and Epistles of Horace*, p. 139.

wish to assert communal sanction for its private pleasures. Seeking 'the cure of [his] soul', the speaker hears a tune come 'floating in' and this is the cue for a digression on the subject of word choice which comes to validate the poem:

Float is a good word.
 It's vernacular,
 just as the tune is charitable.
 We go back a long way. We are old,
 and need not listen to anything less.

The speaker reflects on the value of the word spontaneously chosen and found, in retrospect, to be particularly pertinent. There is a kind of surprise at the donation of sense made by a common turn of phrase the sense of which is being rediscovered in the process of writing, and this is perhaps what makes the connection between the 'vernacular' and the 'charitable': the word comes to mind as the tune comes from outside into the domestic space. The speaker goes on to assert a long-standing commonality with this language and music which resembles the claim in another poem, 'Old Farms', that 'we come from the oldest farms of all'. There is something peculiar about the use of the word 'old' by the speakers of 'Old Farms' and 'By the Fire': these are not poems of old age, nor do they offer a straightforward object of focus for memorial. Rather, oldness in these poems is a quality which suggests temporal frames beyond the quotidian, bestowing on the speaker a singularity which contrasts with the ordinary surroundings in which the poems take place. Thus too, in 'The Classical Farm', the old men of the allotments 'are clearly to be reckoned in millennia'. The

imaginative act may cause the artist to feel old literally before their time, which would be a function of the deific nature of the Coleridgean creator:

In writing a poem one is exemplifying in however small a measure, the creative processes and hunger at the heart of the universe [...] I believe I'm engaged in tasks and duties and pleasures which are nothing if not ancient.¹³

This notion of 'creative process' is shared by Romanticism and Surrealism, as 'By the Fire' helps to demonstrate. The element of chance occasioned by the overheard tune is strongly reminiscent of some lines Didsbury has remarked upon in Ashbery's 'As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat':

Distillations and [...] expectancy inform the whole of Ashbery's work. A car horn sounds in the street and he wonders if 'the great, formal affair' is at last beginning.¹⁴

Thus the domestic space of both Ashbery's and Didsbury's poems is conducive to the same sense of interconnection as the Surrealist city which is, as Benjamin puts it, 'a "little universe"':

That is to say, in the larger one, the cosmos, things look no different. There, too, are crossroads where ghostly signals flash from the traffic, and inconceivable analogies and connections between events are the order of the day.¹⁵

This surreal notion of space and the city complicates the anthropological and

¹³ Sean O'Brien, *The Deregulated Muse* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998), p. 143.

¹⁴ Didsbury, *Review of Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, p. 64.

¹⁵ Benjamin, *One Way Street*, p. 231.

geographical aspects of Didsbury's sense of place, disrupting any simple sense of what is native by telescoping outward towards the cosmic. Thus Didsbury's treatment of a specific place marks him also as an 'artificer poet' in the terms provided by Middleton in 'Reflections on a Viking Prow': 'we experience these places [of the artificer poets] as *world*, as *cosmos*, once we have experienced them in these forms of words'. In Chapter Four I argued that Middleton's preoccupation with the significance of place in writing was particularly evident in the mid-nineteen-seventies when his collection *The Lonely Suppers of W. V. Balloon*, his essay 'Reflections on a Viking Prow', and Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (wherein one finds 'As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat') were all published. I also argued that this interest in place could not but be affected by the political instability of America as the Vietnam war drew to a close. When we come to 'Mappa Mundi' in a moment, the transitions between local, national and cosmic spheres in that poem will offer us the opportunity to discuss more fully the relative importance of each kind of identity for Didsbury's 'hearth' poems and for the domestic surreal in general.

'By the Fire' also displays a quiet awareness of the material changes which affect traditional sources of identity, for as the speaker returns to the subject of the fire, it is the 'hiss of gas' which he hears: the home is linked to a network of national supply. The memory of a coal fire 'in a grate that was torn out years ago' mingles with the real warmth of the gas fire to send the speaker to comfortable sleep, marking an accord between past and present which matches

the coincidence of word use and vernacular history earlier in the poem. The implicit recognition of the material making and remaking of the domestic space recalls that series of poems by Fisher which I discussed in Chapter Three, and which explores work and rest, focusing on the manufacturing of inhabited space, whether through slum clearance or the erection of a memorial fountain. To read 'By the Fire', a poem where the speaker sleeps at a time when children can be at school (the recorder tune issues from a playground) knowing that the piece was published in the early nineteen-eighties inevitably prompts the question as to whether that speaker is unemployed: he is not absent from work due to sickness, at least, since it is the cure of his soul rather than his body which he seeks, sheltering beneath his old coat. This unresolved question affects our perception of the space of the hearth, making it a potential place of confinement as much as shelter. Beneath the appearance of contentment there is unease, but it is understated, barely perceptible, and this reticence in itself suggests a disconnection from the community and a need for private solace in the absence of effective protest.

The appearance of the coal fire in the absent grate 'doesn't even seem strange' to the speaker of 'By the Fire', but in 'Mappa Mundi', as in Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight', the stranger in the hearth foretells the arrival of visitors. In contrast with 'By the Fire', the hearth in 'Mappa Mundi' is a secure connection between the mysterious men of a past society. The attenuated power of the hearth in a contemporary setting is implied by the poem's seemingly reverential

regard for this network of 'great houses' where the fires burn with 'logs of poplar's yellow wood, the splintered larch' and the tables are likewise of wood 'cut out from the local forest years ago'. A more intimate relationship with the immediate environment is offered by this sustainable fuel than in a society heated by gas fires. Responding to a question about this poem in an e-mail to me, Didsbury remarks:

I've just looked at the poem again and noticed the movement in and out of the domestic space, of which the hearth is the literal 'focus'.¹⁶

Focus in Latin means 'fireplace', a meaning which may or may not lie behind Davie's use of the word in his essay on Sauer also, but in 'Mappa Mundi' it is one of a number of etymological puns. The poem begins and ends with the men's tables, 'piled high with simple food and books', and on which they spread maps. Map is derived from the Latin *mappa*, meaning tablecloth: 'mappa mundi' literally means 'sheet of the world'. Surely it is this sense which lies behind Didsbury's description of 'an erudite table, / a table spread with the things of the world'. This table, like the hearth, is at once a domestic feature and a portal through which the world can be envisioned:

Tables, shifted nearer
to the blaze, supported the elbows of men
who watched themselves in dreams, in the gases
vapours and *language* of the hearth, for they
etymologised, and watched for others too.

The hearth speaks to the men through tongues of flame, which they know how to translate into *linguae*. These remote figures are observed 'brooding idly and alone / upon required action' following 'the urgent message from the capital' which, it transpires, concerns the territorial divisions of Europe ('there was all of Europe / to decide'). In his book *Nationalism*, Peter Alter traces the birth of the European movement towards sovereign nation-states to the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and offers a clue to the identity of the men in 'Mappa Mundi':

The 'national awakening' of European peoples which began in the early nineteenth century was a collective process in which the role of the 'awakeners' was crucial. Since then, every nation has done its utmost to praise the deeds and merits of the philologists, poets, historians and politicians who substantiated, and in most cases successfully asserted the nation's claim to independence and self-determination. In the words of the philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher, alongside the founders and 'purifiers of religions', these 'makers and recreators of states' were 'great men', individuals powerful enough to have wrought the shape of history.¹⁷

Might the etymologising and cartographic talents of these men reveal them as the 'makers' of early nineteenth century Europe? The most prominent intertext for 'Mappa Mundi', 'Frost at Midnight', was composed in 1798, which could support this dating of the poem's scene. In that poem, Coleridge celebrates his remoteness from the world's events, 'all the numberless goings-on of life, / Inaudible as dreams!' and sees the fire on the grate as a 'companionable form', an aid to reflection. Didsbury draws closer to this mood in 'By the Fire'. In

¹⁶ Date: Sun, 17 Aug 2003 20:59:19, From: "P.Didsbury", To: mp25@st-andrews.ac.uk.

'Mappa Mundi' however, drowsiness before a fire leads to dreams which may illuminate the men to themselves or presage them of the arrival of another of their number, bespeaking a culture which still embraces superstition:

A conflagration which all men scanned
to know their mind or find their visitors:
still many hours away, for example, a grandee in furs
alights from his carriage at a crossroad in the hills
and knows he is regarded, as he bends
to fill the carcass of a fowl with snow,
as well as who regards him.

Once more the domestic space is seen as a microcosm where the artificer makes connections with wider spheres of activity and event. Yet there is an ambivalence to the treatment of these men in the poem which is hinted in that play on 'regard' as observation and social estimation. The fine detail of the portrait of these men at once conveys the particularity of a world we do not share and also its somewhat grotesque nature: at the beginning of the poem, some of the men have returned from 'spreading lant from casks upon the fields', lant being 'stale urine used for various industrial purposes' (*OED*). There is a humour to the way they are shown 'pushing cheese and almanacks aside / to unroll the hasty map', and a more menacing tone underlying the description of fields that lie 'supine in communion clothes / waiting for the word'. Respect for learning and culture is tempered by a critical attitude towards the patriarchy these grandees represent, and the violence of their territorial deliberations is

¹⁷ Peter Alter, *Nationalism*, 2nd edn (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), p. 42.

finely caught in the way that the host's table, in the final line, is said to have been 'cut out from the local forest years ago'. While the wood fire represents a more direct relationship between the hearth and home, the action of cutting out, in the context of a table spread with a map, suggests that the remoteness of this grand culture, with its magical air, its superstitions and its domestic stability, is the result of the cleaving action of the men themselves: the diminution of this mystical oligarchy is in proportion to the rise of the nation states which they oversaw.

The highly literary surface of 'Mappa Mundi' invites us to enquire further as to its points of reference, and yet it remains indeterminate: it invites comparison with those fabulous poems of Middleton's *Nonsequences* which I discussed in Chapter Four, explorations of domestic interiors populated by unnamed beings who are at once magical and intimate with reality and history. But 'Mappa Mundi' has a further referential reach by virtue of its historical detail, and makes complex self-reflexive observations about the parallel and sometimes interconnected activities of poem - and place-making. In this poem, national identities have their origin in deliberations at once local and metaphysical. The 'makers' have a civically endorsed authority to create Europe, but Didsbury shows himself critical of this patriarchal model of interaction between local and national spheres, and such a role is long lost to poetry in any case. However, the importance of dream is carried over from the civilisation of the 'makers' to the contemporary poet. 'The Drainage', from *The Butchers of Hull*,

presents a kind of nightmare about place-making which offers an interesting antithesis to 'Mappa Mundi'. Its nameless protagonist wakes to find the world 'changed' and emerges onto an unfamiliar landscape which nevertheless appears to be known to him:

Sluices. Ditches. Drains. Frozen mud and leafcake. Dykes.
He found he knew the names of them all.

This nameless man is strangely compelled to undertake a journey under the sign of Orion, the Hunter, which takes the place of the sun in the sky. Along the way, he must clothe himself in a coat made of the animals of the field, the birds in the trees and the fish in the streams. Twice we are told that 'he had the bounds of a large parish to go', but the poem ends with his journey unfinished, as he continues to clothe himself in 'the creatures of the bankside'. As in 'Mappa Mundi', we are presented with a 'maker' who is called upon for a task which delineates a territory, in this case a parish rather than a continent, and despite this Christian demarcation the two poems also have pagan references in common. The journey in 'The Drainage', though, is solitary and barbaric, and recalls perhaps the wanderings of Cain: Sean O'Brien calls it a 'poem of damnation'.¹⁸ It describes a kind of disinheritance, an alienation from the established properties described in 'Mappa Mundi'.

Taken together, the two poems represent extremes of power and deprivation, public authority and private, existential uncertainty. In the dream

landscapes of Didsbury's poetry, the incoherence of social and individual realms to one another is the source of the absurd incongruities which variously delight and terrify. The poet's idiosyncratic 'making' process issues in objects which can be shared:

Today there's no common ground that everyone assents to in anything [...] The more you are true to the eccentricity of yourself the more you will find people understanding it.¹⁹

The epigraphs to *That Old-Time Religion* should be read in this light also:

Things we make up out of language turn into common property – Roy Fisher

Still, individual culture is also something – Arthur Hugh Clough

These poems cannot constitute the community which is otherwise found to be lacking, but they can embody the tensions which make it currently impossible, and celebrate the pleasures of 'individual culture' in the process. They do this by placing the activity of 'making' in the foreground. Middleton's 'Edward Lear in February' provides Didsbury with a comically absurd model for this:

Since last September I've been trying to describe
two moonstone hills,
and an ochre mountain, by candlelight, behind.

[...]

Someone began playing a gong outside, once.

¹⁸ O'Brien, *The Deregulated Muse*, p. 143.

¹⁹ Jules Smith, 'Peter Didsbury Interviewed', *The Reater*, 2 (2000), pp. 183-195, (p. 187).

I liked that, it helped; but in a flash
 neighbours were pelting him with their slippers and things,
 bits of coke and old railway timetables.

I have come unstuck in this cellar. Help.

There is an unpublished poem by Didsbury called 'Christopher Middleton in September', but the impact of Middleton's poem is felt many times in the published work also. For example, 'On the Green Phone' and 'A Letter to an Editor' are both poems on writer's block which describe the pieces their author claims he cannot write, and at a tonal level there are many remarks throughout the poems which refer to problems in their making which sound very much like Middleton's Lear:

I think I am moving toward some kind of expressionism,
 or else 'why else are we here?'
 ('The Flowers of Finland')

The problem is how to address yourself
 ('Saying Goodbye')

There's a blend of arrogance and compassion
 I've long been trying to put my finger on.
 ('By the Fire')

Certain proper names are forbidden to me now
 for I will not have them do my work for me.
 ('The Smart Chair')

'The Flowers of Finland' and 'Saying Goodbye' also muse on the relationship between British and American literature. The irascible self-addressing poet of 'Saying Goodbye' 'give[s] up English English / to go for strolls in refined

American parks, just long enough / to hate them all for being so damnably insolent', while in more receptive mood, the speaker of 'The Flowers of Finland' points us towards the New York School:

Mainly it's the language interests me.
 Wherever you go you find it stares out at you
 from a similar nest of sticks.
 And they are white ones,
 and verse epistles from gifted New Yorkers
 are sorely needed to elucidate why.

In his review of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, Didsbury quotes 'The One Thing That Can Save America' and answers the question Ashbery poses therein:

Where then are the private turns of event
 Destined to boom later like golden chimes
 Released over a city from a highest tower?
 The quirky things that happen to me, and I tell you,
 And you instantly know what I mean?
 What remote orchard reached by winding roads
 Hides them? Where are these roots?

Somewhere deep in the language itself, presumably.

This idea may have provoked Didsbury's reflection on his own 'roots' in 'The Flowers of Finland'. That poem celebrates the capacity for invention in language, which is playfully cast as lying here and elsewhere, in poems like 'The Pub Yard at Skidby' ('to get those pagan discs and clusters right [...] has taken him a year - and all his knowledge, / and all his lies') and 'The Northlands' ('it was from here the first time round / that the lies *really* began'). The closing verse paragraph of 'The Flowers of Finland' has something of the violent surreal

wit of O'Hara's 'Poem (The eager note on my door said "Call me)', which takes similar delight in extravagant untruths:

Funny, I thought, that the lights are on this late
and the hall door open; still up at this hour, a
champion jai-alai player like himself? Oh fie!
for shame! What a host, so zealous! And he was

there in the hall, flat on a sheet of blood that
ran down the stairs. I did appreciate it.

('Poem [The eager note on my door said "Call me]')

Much pleasure in the squareness of rooms
and the smallness and depth of windows.
Pleasure in walls.
After my head hit the windscreen
I thought of Auden's words
that without a cement of blood they would not safely stand.

('The Flowers of Finland')

The poem concludes that 'telling the truth about the world / mightn't be the best way / of getting some things down', echoing Ashbery's 'Ode to Bill':

I vowed to write more. What is writing?
Well, in my case, it's getting down on paper
Not thoughts, exactly, but ideas, maybe:
Ideas about thoughts. Thoughts is too grand a word.
Ideas is better, though not precisely what I mean.
Someday I'll explain. Not today though.

Wishing the poems to be self-validating, these poets nonetheless find themselves protesting the validity of invention within the works themselves, with varying degrees of urgency. Ultimately, Didsbury embraces the contradiction. The

closing part of 'The Seventeenth of June' exemplifies this attitude, and serves as the most fitting conclusion to this account of his work:

I hoped that when the evening finally came, as it has,
I might find some words about English coastal parishes,
each with its beacon, spire, gallows,
ragstone tower or en-hillocked elm as landfall,
to be battered towards by crumster, cog and barque
through stillicidous arras or wrist-wraithing bone-racking sea-roke.
And here they are.
I wasn't quite sure what I wanted them for at the time
but now, in this silence, I bless their superfluity,
welling over the rounded rim of a day
of huge balneation, spargefaction wide,
the workings of grace made both pertinent and strange,
its conduits quick with all the sanctions of water.

Chapter VII

A BARNSLEY OF THE MIND: IAN MCMILLAN AND THE
SURREALISM OF THE EVERYDAY

I've never found things mundane, I've always found them bizarre. Elizabeth Bishop, the American poet, wrote a line about the 'always more successful surrealism of everyday life'. Bizarre things happen to me continuously - I don't know why [...] There are practical reasons, partly the fact that I don't drive so I'm always on the train or on the bus. I'm always watching. I'm also a big one for making little, daft connections between things. It isn't self-consciously surrealistic but it does end up being a kind of surrealism.¹

It is a paradox that Ian McMillan is at his least surreal in those poems where the word 'surreal' actually occurs. Poems like 'The Story So Far' from *Now It Can Be Told*, or 'The Twelve Surrealist Days of Christmas' from *I Found This Shirt* are simply poetic sketches on the heritage of surrealist imagery:

On the sixth day of christmas my surrealist true love gave to me
six geese a-playing huge flutes made of cheese

Wallace Stevens once commented that 'the essential fault of surrealism is that it invents without discovering. To make a clam play an accordion is to invent not to discover'.² The more successful surrealism to which McMillan alludes in the interview quoted above, and which he connects to both a mobile watchfulness and a logic of association, is notably more concerned with discovery than invention, due to its engagement with everyday life.

¹ 'The Moebius Interview with Ian McMillan', *The Moebius*, undated, issue 3, 18 - 25 (p. 18).

² Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, ed Milton Bates (Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), p. 203.

As with Fisher, McMillan's stance has changed considerably over the years, while the places under scrutiny, Darfield and the surrounding West Riding of Yorkshire, remain the same. To read chronologically from *The Changing Problem*, McMillan's first collection with Carcanet, to the most recent *Perfect Catch*, is to witness a series of shifts in balance between relative artistic autonomy and a kind of commitment increasingly informed by notions of public voice: yet the domestic and the unreal remain inextricably linked. It is not just the hesitation between a utilitarian, determinate and communicative approach to language and an exploration of its indeterminate moments, but also the leakage between the two that makes this poetry so distinctive. It should also be pointed out, however, that while easily discernible changes can be made out in McMillan's poetry, his lack of interest in a consistently applied poetics has resulted in a very various oeuvre where joke poems and fairly conventional lyrics sit alongside the more bizarre, disjunct pieces with which this essay is mainly concerned. It is not my intention to 'cover' McMillan's work in a comprehensive manner, and the discussion of such a richly funny body of work within the boundaries set by academic convention poses its own problems. In writing about the 'surrealism of everyday life' I am attempting to outline what I believe to be one of the most enduring and original aspects of McMillan's work, but it is by no means the poetry's only aspect.

The Changing Problem announces McMillan's preoccupation with landscape: it also initiates a series of confrontations between land and sea which

extends beyond the volume³ and which exemplifies the kind of mediation between identity and otherness which is the focus of this thesis, in that an inland domestic setting is made strange by marine imagery. The very first poem in this first collection, 'Screenplay', playfully sets the agenda in an epistolary style that recalls W. S. Graham, especially as the speaker defines his position in terms of literary genre:

I know you say that I'm a crewman
but that's only when I'm in here;
what about when I'm pastoral,
walking in the fields, sniffing soil?

The you, the other in this dialogue, has insisted that the landscape is submerged, but the speaker concludes defiantly 'No, I'm sorry, I think I'm above water.' The humour of over-stating the obvious may owe something to Monty Python, and particularly the 'Dead Parrot' sketch: McMillan has acknowledged the group as an early influence.⁴ The technique is also employed in a later poem, 'Loose', from *Now It Can Be Told*, when the speaker nervously declares that 'Men are not seahorses.' But the joke conceals the transformation that has already taken place, for the denial in both cases is so prolonged that it conjures up a negative vision, whether of a submerged rural landscape or an abundance of seahorses. Without

³ I am thinking of 'The er Barnsley Seascapes' (*Dad, the Donkey's on Fire*) which will be discussed later in this essay.

⁴ 'As a teenager, I was influenced by Captain Beefheart, Frank Zappa, Monty Python's Flying Circus and a mixture of the poems we were doing at school: Ted Hughes, Dylan Thomas, R S Thomas.' Ian McMillan, 'why I'm a writer' [lower case sic.] downloaded from www.openingline.co.uk.

wishing to labour the point (a constant risk in writing about humour) the denial is self-defeating and speaks of a scepticism about external reality, however parodically expressed, which issues in a co-existence of 'real' and 'imagined' locations.

Four pages later, the collection's title poem chooses a different tactic, that of talking about the bizarre as though it were commonplace, to attain the same state of co-existence. 'It is a long passage from Falla / by Wester Yardhouses to the great / inland Lanarkshire sea' we are authoritatively informed. The reference to the Borders town of Falla remains unexplained, and the immediate relocation to Lanarkshire is the first of the poem's disorientations, followed by that of the 'inland sea.' There follows the story of the speaker's father being awarded a prize for an essay on the League of Nations who, it will be remembered, redrew the map of Europe after the First World War and who could thus be seen as one more force of disorientation, a 'changing problem.' Next we learn that the father's father helped to bring 'talking films' to Lanark, and in a way that we shall come to find customary with McMillan's poems, what has seemed a thoroughly disjointed collection of images begins to fold back on itself to form an argument. This folding process brings us back to the inland sea, which 'has a shore called / Africa in popular mythology' which exemplifies McMillan's technique of simultaneously making something fictive and legitimating it by a claimed collective knowledge: I shall return to this point

later, but as far as this poem is concerned the presence of Africa on the shore of the Lanarkshire sea brings the imagined continent closer in physical terms while it becomes more remote because not open to verification. It is an Africa of the mind, conjured by the synaesthetic shapes laced by drums: the pattern is then reversed: 'Sounds / form out of the rushing fish, diving.' The sounds seem to form both from the visual image and the onomatopoeic 'rushing' so that the sentence describes its own process. A photograph of the speaker's father on a ship is 'flown home to people who / emerge from cinemas blinking in the bright / evening of a place they have understood.' That perfect tense gives the sense of a kind of understanding which has been completed and which is being replaced by a notion of place as fictive: the cinema and the photographs bring the sea inland, and the title suggests an ambivalence about this change which perhaps extends to the transformative processes of the poem itself. The imagination can work on materials to liberate them from their customary meanings and it can elicit interaction between distinct realities, but this inevitably involves a power relation and raises the question: whose mind determines the understanding of place and by what method?

Concerns about the autonomy of the imagination and its relation to lived space are already detectable early in McMillan's work, and this partly explains the importance of Roy Fisher, who remarked of *City* that it was about a place 'which has already turned into a city of the mind.'⁵ In Chapter Three, I discuss

⁵ Fisher, *Interviews Through Time*, p. 56.

how Fisher's poems often deal with the ways in which authority and power are made manifest in spatial terms, and the consequences that has for the visual imagination of the inhabitants of that space. McMillan approaches these issues tentatively in *The Changing Problem*, preferring to concentrate on the unreal ambience of altered landscapes. For example, 'The Sea Slides Down to the Land's Edge' tells of a seaside village threatened by other shaping intents, sea and land having comically exchanged places again in the title:

This village has been fired from a ship's cannon
and the range was wrong. The houses
are clinging to the cliffs like plants.

[...]

This tower has been dropped from a zeppelin
to frighten the people. Over the years
it has almost, though not quite, taken root.

These two stanzas frame an eccentric anecdote about watching 'films of famous lecturers' who turn out to be Dracula and Frankenstein. Monsters figure regularly in McMillan's poems and their rôle will be further discussed, but with regard to this poem, one notes the Gothic pattern they impose, which is then picked up in the description of the tower and which makes the title seem more sinisterly unnatural. There is an air of the snapshot about the poem: its images collect but remain somehow still, content to suggest patterns rather than impose arguments.

This tendency can be seen throughout *The Changing Problem*, particularly

in poems like 'Carrying A Huge Stone' which uses the technique of syntactical equivalence to lift its perceptions into a *réalité poétique*: "Blood sometimes hangs like ropes in churches" [...] Ropes hang in churches like the awkward phrase; / walls hang from ceilings [...] My body hangs from my face, and a thought / swings from my hands like a pub-sign [...] lifting the camera from the neck [...] this sky which falls slowly / from a small humming aircraft [...] Choir robes hang' The landscape of the poem is made sacramental by these parallels, and this points to a further element of the distinctive poetic reality of the collection. Reverdy's *réalité poétique* was born out of his metaphysical and religious concerns: in *The Changing Problem* too a transcendental urge can be perceived, and the poet's activities as a church bell-ringer are made paradigmatic of his poetic activity on the back cover of the Carcanet edition, where we are told that

The 'Changing' in the title refers to the art of bell-ringing, something of an addiction for this poet [...] 'Ringing the changes' on imagery is a skill he has developed - a kind of wit, at times baleful, at times hilarious.

Yet the church is never a forceful presence in McMillan's work after *The Changing Problem*, with the exception of the parody of the catechism 'From the Section Dealing with the Loss of Grace' in *Now It Can Be Told*, and the landscape of the poems is rarely again cause for spiritual contemplation: for as the full effect of Thatcherite government began to be felt in the North of England, and as the miners fought and lost the long strike of 1984, there were changes of a more desperate nature requiring the poet's attention.

'Just notes really. / Nothing like real writing.' Thus begins McMillan's poem on the 1987 election, 'TITLE (Northumberland June 11th/12th 1987),' but with the second line placed upside down on the page. This marked the culmination of McMillan's long-standing poetic process of accumulation, which produced the poetic snapshots of *The Changing Problem* and then the more disjointed reportage of *Now It Can Be Told, How the Hornpipe Failed* and *Dad, the Donkey's on Fire*. His avowed interest in 'found stuff'⁶ is in keeping with the Dada and Surrealist use of found objects, particularly in the work of Kurt Schwitters mentioned by McMillan in an article on 'TITLE' in *Joe Soap's Canoe*.⁷ To insert a found object in an artistic environment is to attempt a disruption of our sense of the object's purpose, and to focus attention on its material and imaginative properties rather than its function. It is also obviously an act of antagonism towards the tradition of the 'well-made' art work, emerging from the 'anti-literary' attitude Ashbery found in O'Hara's poetry and which McMillan articulates in 'Jesus Died from Eating Curtains':

I am concerned about the
state of Poetry, hear?
I'm concerned about its
lack of ambition, about how
you don't often see the word
galoot or the word galosh

⁶ 'I'm [...] very keen on found stuff, and I was over the moon when I found out [...] that [Roy Fisher's] poem '107 poems' was in fact a load of discarded phrases stuck together.' Ian McMillan, 'Poets I go back to...', p. 22.

⁷ McMillan, *Joe Soap's Canoe*, 14 (1991), unnumbered.

in poems. I'm concerned
 about the shape of poems,
 and I'm concerned that
 poems often sound like
 poems. Oh, galoot
 galosh, galosh, galoot.

The suspicion of 'poems [that] sound like poems' recalls O'Hara's 'Personism: A Manifesto', where the poet claimed 'I don't even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff'. In Chapter Two, I argued that this attitude is motivated by distrust of the desire to write poetry from a vantage deemed 'above' the everyday, and for McMillan also the 'anti-literary' stance means that found objects are a way of embracing what would normally be distanced in writing by measure and perspective. The title 'Jesus Died from Eating Curtains' was itself a kind of found item, a phrase uttered by McMillan's daughter,⁸ and this reveals another important aspect of McMillan's poetry and his surreal aesthetic, for like Breton's group he opens poetry to the language of children: 'TITLE', too, incorporates the voices of his family, as do 'Landing Practice' (*Selected Poems*), 'Realism (Nothing is Ever Finished)' (*Dad, the Donkey's on Fire*) and 'Communication' (*I Found This Shirt*). There is thus a celebratory element to some of the uses of found material, and yet even as McMillan plays with the comically incongruous details, their assemblage becomes somehow manic and desperate: 'galoot, galosh' repeats like the speech of a character from a play by Ionesco, gradually descending into

⁸ 'Jesus Died from Eating Curtains' [...] was a phrase that was in my notebook for months after my little girl said it to me when she came home from school, and then it just found itself on top of this poem.' Ian McMillan, *Selected Poems*, cassette, Smith/Doorstop. 1991.

meaninglessness. Reading 'TITLE' on the recorded version of *Selected Poems*, McMillan 'performs' the upside down parts of the text, shouting 'Ding!' to mark where they start and 'Dong!' where they finish, and this seemingly comic device also recalls Absurd theatre in its deformation of the speaking voice, most poignantly as the poem finishes with the word 'te / rror?', where 'rror?' is inverted: the final 'Dong!' sounds strangled and muffled, as if spoken through tears.

This despair marks McMillan's work from 1983's *Now It Can Be Told* to *Dad, the Donkey's on Fire* in 1994. It is tragically ironic that McMillan's most determinedly socially committed work gives voice to a community by miming the decline into incoherence of the voice of a speech community through the use of found material and also more generally through broken and fragmented imagery and syntax, and he acknowledges this irony in the darkly comic 'Dad, the Donkey's on Fire' which offers its own parodic view of voicelessness. 'Responses to Industrialisation' is an early example of McMillan's poetry of the absurd and disjunct, from *Now It Can Be Told*, and defiantly situates its disjointedness in the context of Barnsley's last great poetic son, Donald Davie. Davie's manifesto for Augustan diction, *Purity of diction in English verse*, had some of McMillan's hostility to 'poems [that] sound like / poems' but chose to return to an urbane and prosaic syntax rather than the 'disjunct' mode favoured by the modernists, articulating the Movement sensibility of public consensus

that had so dramatically collapsed by the time of the industrial disputes amid which McMillan was working:

Was it not curious that
 whichever side of the doorway you stood
 you could always see the interior of the cottage?

Yes, it was (mighty) curious.

Purity of diction is one thing, but

it brings us to now, to the time
 when I am toasting my Collected Essays
 before a sometimes flickering,
 sometimes roaring, grandchild.

The doorway is a typical image of disorientation in space (see also the inland sea of 'The Changing Problem,' and 'Tankersley Tunnel': 'I / am inside and out the window. // Paradoxical bastard.') but perhaps it also reveals an impatience with the insular domestic lyric (of which Davie was himself a fierce critic, it must be said) and its inability to address the industrial landscape outside the cottage. Davie felt this problem keenly, but his ambivalence to realism was of a different order to that of Fisher or McMillan: a classical urge to decorum seems to have made cultural documentation distasteful to him, so that in 'Wombwell On Strike'⁹ an address to Horace allows only an incompletely suppressed 'note of alarm' in the closing image of 'large policemen grappl[ing] / the large men my sons have become'. The cosy if ridiculous domesticity of the toasting by the fire in 'Responses to Industrialisation' becomes startlingly brutal with the final and

unexpected punchline, using the comma not only as a score for darkly comic timing, but also to reinforce the brokenness of the piece, a trick McMillan makes use of again in 'The Female Drummer': 'In a secondary, tertiary / landscape like this / there is little, else'.

The 'flickering, [...] roaring, grandchild' roars with anger as well as fire as the community is destroyed, so that the rage destroys its voice, and this perfectly encapsulates the powerfully and paradoxically articulate incoherence that makes McMillan's work such a devastating document of the period, and explains why the poetry of this period in his oeuvre, like the poetry of Roy Fisher, cannot be recuperated in the interests of a social democratic poetry of reduced ambition such as that advocated by Davie,¹⁰ for the inadequacy of that model has become part of the problem confronted by both poets. In 'Form without Implicit Moral', a panoramic depiction of an industrial landscape reminiscent of Fisher's 'For Realism' concludes with an open confession of linguistic loss:

White smoke
begins to climb from a chimney,
and the sun holds itself out
from behind a cloud onto Keppel's
Column,
tall on a rise behind the half-built streets.
The only word I can think of
to describe the scene
is "outfit",
and that is the wrong word,
is completely the wrong word.

⁹ Donald Davie, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990), pp 447 - 448.

¹⁰ Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*.

Like Fisher, McMillan contemplates incomplete housing developments and wants to record the scene, but where 'For Realism' identifies a contest between different shaping instincts, here there is only the helpless and marginalised observer, grasping perhaps towards a denunciation of the gangsterism of civic politics with that word 'outift', but unable to make it cohere. This is in sharp contrast to the deft formulation 'silver filth' at the climax of Fisher's poem.

'Form without Implicit Moral' is part of an ongoing attempt to write through 'For Realism' in a series of self-reflexive poems written during the period between 1983 and 1994: other examples are 'Against Realism' where a woman holds up a plum in a writing workshop as 'a poem about a plum' (thus also referring to William Carlos Williams' 'This Is Just To Say' and the dictum 'no ideas but in things'),¹¹ and 'Realism (Nothing is Ever Finished)' in which McMillan's comically inept attempts to describe night ('Night is really / a box of spent matches. // No light, you see') are juxtaposed with his children's bedtime demands for wallpaper. What we regard as background or scene-setting becomes inexplicably fascinating to children, who will ignore 'expensive presents' in favour of everyday objects, which lose their familiarity under this alien regard: 'Daddy, I want / a drink of wallpaper.' In its own deadpan manner, the poem quietly refuses the idea of realism as a way of 'finishing' with or 'covering' reality, disallowing any resolution to the conflict between the adult

¹¹ Williams, *Collected Poems I: 1909-1939* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), p. 372.

voice of description and the child's voice of imagination. It extends Fisher's original testing of the limits of realism to the point of unreality, and suggests that an improvisatory approach to readily available material (wallpaper) may be more productive than the documentary mode.

This is also the argument behind 'Just the Facts, Just the' where the speaker thinks of his daughter ill in hospital and describes her 'little cardboard cries' before pulling back and remonstrating with himself, as if this synaesthetic image were an unacceptable liberty: 'Cardboard cries? Pull together yourself, / Just the facts, just the', cutting off in mid-sentence, already conscious that the 'facts' are only present on the same level as the imaginary in language, so that a too zealous adherence to facts would result only in silence. Later, the speaker sees 'a couple making love / in a ditch, caught in the light of the / car lights, looking like a brightly / coloured bird or a brightly coloured / animal.' The simile is allowed to slip out, a spontaneous resistance to the self-imposed rigour of realism, and the speaker admits defeat:

Yes, I guess
you are right.
Any facts
will do.

Another risk of the representational enterprise is addressed in two very different poems, 'Action' and 'From An Evening With The Model Of "The Venus and the Shaving Brushes"', which deal with the appropriation of other lives for

the sake of art. 'Action' ponders the difficult distinction between acting as a voice for speechless subjects, in this case two children huddled in front of a closed school doorway, and the risk of thereby suppressing the subjects' real voices. This is a theme to which McMillan shall return in his later books, but this poem seems to overreach itself in its final exhortation to 'use their lives / save their lives / win', as if it is trying to convince itself and failing. 'From An Evening...' imagines meeting the model from a surrealist painting: the surreal transformations of the painting are taken to have been realised in life as well as in the painting, so that the model coughs up shaving brushes and is too afraid to go into a bathroom. "'I am in someone else's image' she laments, 'and that is the worst thing of all.'" It is surely significant that McMillan should have chosen a surrealist painting to make this comment: it shows a willingness to acknowledge that surrealism, no less than realism, must be accountable for its depiction of the human and cannot take for granted its autonomy. The model's altered and exploited body can be viewed as an example of labour alienation, so that surrealism's mode of production is revealed as capitalist in some way.

Labour alienation has left its traces throughout McMillan's work. The very disjointedness of the imagery could be seen as paradigmatic of a divided labour: in 'Two Miners Pass in Opposite Directions at Daybreak' McMillan 'Read[s] *noting* for *nothing* / later in the broke text', which is broke both in the vernacular sense of penniless, like the striking miners, and fragmented. The upside down lines in 'TITLE' are also 'broke' text, irreconcilable to the normal

movement of the poem. There is also McMillan's habit of imposing an alien word group on a conventional sentence structure, with varying results: we have already noted the example of the grandchild in 'Responses to Industrialisation', but Kevan Johnson has pointed out another example which once more implicates the avant-garde in capitalist production, 'Modernism: The Umbrella Girl Forgets What She Is Talking About'.¹² In this poem, the list of labours recounted by the umbrella girl is made strange by the use of a specialist vocabulary which remains unexplained:

I gitted, mainly. Summer afternoons I gitted,
until they put me on the ferrules
or the pinning in.

It is thus suggested that modernism's playful removal of normal reference mimics the absurd disparity between the words used to describe labour and the end product of that labour, and the increasing sense of purposelessness of the labourers: we are told at the start of the poem that the girl is 'talking about umbrellas' but the monologue gradually disintegrates and the pronoun shift suggests that it may not even be the voice of the girl that concludes 'We are talking about eels,' as if the lifting of the activity into the space of the poem necessarily obliterates the original voice. The poem is marvellously double-edged, criticising modernism but using modernist techniques, so that we are aware of two possible readings of the poem, one playful and one baleful.

¹² Kevan Johnson, 'Between pit and Pat', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1995, p. 27.

Another aspect of alienation in the poems has been identified by Ian Gregson: discussing 'The Tennis Ball Factory Poems', Gregson suggests that McMillan shares the conviction of Ruskin and Marx 'that industrial and post-industrial society has [sic.] broken the human in pieces.'¹³ In the seventh and last section of the poem, McMillan writes:

The telephone rings at five o'clock in the morning.
 No one in the canteen
 moves. We have lost our bastard hands.

'Bastard' is frequently employed as a swearing adjective in Yorkshire vernacular, as McMillan's short story 'Just Like Ours Except for the Ducks' attests, but it seems particularly apt here, suggesting one more deformed relation. Again, the disjointedness is everywhere apparent in this poem: the line-break between 'canteen' and 'moves' enacts the difficulty of moving.

Images of the body recur elsewhere, always somehow broken or deformed. 'From An Evening...' is once more relevant here, as are 'The Sea Slides Down to the Land's Edge' and 'The Monster's Last Letters to his Children' which both deal with the effects of art on the human body in the age of capitalist production through the image of Frankenstein's monster, who was famously assembled from human parts. 'The Sea Slides Down to the Sea's Edge' describes

¹³ Ian Gregson, review of *Dad, the Donkey's on Fire*, *London Magazine* 5/6 (1995), pp. 121-123 (p. 122).

a village which was 'shelled, or almost, by the Germans in the First World War'¹⁴ and the tower 'dropped from a zeppelin / to frighten the people' is used to parallel the monstrous excesses of the 'Great War' with the monsters of the Gothic age, Dracula and Frankenstein, who appear in the poem as 'famous lecturers':

Frankenstein informs us of very little
 unless it is a message about being more careful
 with other peoples' brains and bodies.

The relationship between these different acts of terror is kept indeterminate, but the dry humour of the supposed didactic 'message' implies that the drive to production of the Industrial Age may have resulted directly in both the monsters and the War and their differing degrees of recklessness with 'other people's brains and bodies.'

'The Monster's Last Letters to his Children' is a more extended, more fantastical treatment of the Frankenstein theme. The monster's lyric urge, as well as his desire to communicate to his children, are frustrated by the more and more brutal interventions of Frankenstein, who beats him but also oppresses him more subtly through art, like McMillan's model of the bad artist in 'Action', speaking for him in a love poem:

He's got me covered. Listen:
 "Love poem. Her eyes

¹⁴ *Selected Poems*, cassette.

were like three crows in a cornfield
 and when she spoke it was like
 three crows in a cornfield.
 She undressed, and three crows
 squatted in a cornfield."

He's bound me hand and foot,
 the Doctor Frankenstein,
 stitched me to myself.

The monster's feelings are 'covered' by the poem which imposes the Gothic crows uniformly where intimate and particular details might once have been, dictating and circumscribing what the monster can see. Against this, the speaker is attempting to use poetry as a humanising alternative, insisting that he is 'not a monster but a poetry' yet the tortures he is subjected to eventually 'break' him:

Last night
 they deprived me of my head
 for sixty five days

and tied a starving prisoner
 across my stomach
 so that I could not dream.

The absurd and seemingly motiveless violence of the poem, and its anti-authoritarian undercurrent, recall the late plays of Harold Pinter and their critique of reigns of terror. The monster myth receives a final treatment in 'A Yorkshire Frankenstein', a prose piece from *I Found This Shirt*, which tells the story of Frank, a redundant miner who plans to defraud the DSS by using a monster made in his image, made from parts of his deceased uncle and his dog, to collect his cheques while he does casual work. This comment on the

dehumanising effect of redundancy, while enjoyably grotesque, exemplifies the retreat of McMillan's later work from obliquity towards a poetry of clear statement which lacks the richness and complexity of his previous books. I shall return to this point later in the essay.

Elsewhere, McMillan's treatment of the body relies less on fantasy and is more intimately linked to familiar landscapes. As noted previously, 'Two Miners Pass in Opposite Directions at Daybreak' enacts fracture at a formal level with the play on 'nothing / noting'. The images assemble and repeat as if malfunctioning: 'the first cars / are going nowhere by the dark window // [...] Four fifty and the first light / is going by the window.' Language ('the broke text') and the body are intertwined in the poem to capture the mutilated speechlessness of the two miners who are barely present in the poem:

If the land had legs
they would be broken legs.
A bulb fills itself
by the dark wardrobe

mirror.
[...]

The language strained,
sprains, snapped, broke.
The men spoke. Did not speak.

The pared down vocabulary insistently links 'broke text', 'broken legs' and the language whose fractures are described as injuries to a body. Later in the poem, a malfunctioning repetition has it that 'If the land / had legs they would be

running / running', cancelling out or failing to recognise the earlier assertion of their brokenness and creating the further paradox of a landscape trying to escape the situation being lived out on it. The poem accumulates contradictions ('The men spoke. Did not speak,' 'I am nothing everything you say'), and one remembers Mrs. Thatcher's sobriquet TINA (There Is No Alternative). Where no alternative is admitted, contradictions will abound without resolution, so that a government may close its country's pits and continue to fuel the majority of its power stations with (now imported) coal while a destroyed community looks on, its collective mouth opening and shutting without sound.

A later poem, 'Henry's Skeleton, George's Leg', begins more playfully but gradually reveals a similarly menacing bodily view of post-industrial society. Henry and George are 'Head Teachers' at an annual conference in the old 'big house' of the Authority, which faces 'away from the pit.' This split between mind (authority) and body (pit village) has the surreal consequence of a fetishism of disembodied parts: the Heads bring trophies to the conference which seem to comment on its hidden relation to the community: the skeleton 'stares ahead as they discuss the National Curriculum.' George's leg is dressed in a fishnet stocking one year and a purple tracksuit the next, and these items reappear incongruously in the sexual life of the villager who has silently cleaned away plates at the conference. The husband's stolen tracksuit is grimly compared to the 'men in suits' who decide school closures from London, the capital that has turned its back on the body of the country, and the final lines of

the poem hint tersely at a sado-masochistic relation between head and body, authority and community, husband and wife:

My husband tugs on his boots and I look over the motorway
to where the pit used to be. I try to shield my breasts
from the noise of the boots.

My nipples will soon be very sore.

'Mining Town' organises itself around the idea of the pit village as a slackening face: the speaker's son's face 'loses definition' in sleep, while a neighbour's late wife's face is barely recalled, and a similar sense of loss through the distortions of memory is represented by a visit to the Yorkshire Mining Museum, a pit recuperated as a National Heritage site: the visitors thus experience what Patrick Wright would describe as the ahistoricist and alienated relation of British subjects to their own history as it becomes 'culturally resonant real estate', and the poem extends this to a problematic relation to the body. The speaker's father proudly tells how as a boxer he 'never went for the face' and this attitude of respect for the body is made to seem itself foreign and 'hard / to imagine,' a relic of the past like the pit face.

'The er Barnsley Seascapes' combines the themes of heritage and the body sundered by an alien authority. Like several poems from *The Changing Problem*, it relocates an inland spot to the seaside, but here the disorientation is more keenly felt. The post-industrial landscape is being remade for tourists, who record YTS scheme workers swearing on 'Japanese tape recorders' and can

watch videos with titles such as 'Barnsley is Basingstoke!' and 'Barnsley is Japan 2!' But the fate of the local inhabitants is more strange, for after the sale of British Coal's tied housing they are forced to live in heads: 'Great big / severed heads.' In an image reminiscent of Dalì, the speaker stands in the eyes of the head, collects his tears and burns them: not just labour, but all human activity has been transformed by the changes to this landscape. Recalling the land's running legs in 'Two Miners Pass in Opposite Directions at Daybreak', the 'South Yorkshire / Coastal Mining Settlements' escape from their original locations and 'slither around the countryside.' The text is repeatedly broken by the word 'er', formally enacting the breakdown of language and body by introducing hesitation and inarticulacy to the 'poem' so that it no longer sounds like a poem.

Gregson is right to see McMillan's body imagery as evidence of an industrial / post-industrial process of dehumanisation: but in the repeated identification of buildings and landscapes with body parts, we may also uncover the signs of a deeper relation felt between body and place and the interpenetration of their realities. Places are affected by human processes just as much as the body, and with as much effect on the people for whom they represent an everyday physical window on experience. The surreal, nightmarish transformations experienced by body and place in these poems therefore can therefore be seen to relate to Fisher's *The Ship's Orchestra*, in which the musician (whose labour is never required) dreams of an instrument that is 'our common

body'. For McMillan too, an appeal to the space of the body is as an appeal to everyday landscape: it is a dream of a communally experienced location, however alienated and surreal, which is realisable on the formal plane of language as it becomes poetry. This links the later 'bodily' poems to 'Carrying A Huge Stone' where the experience of the landscape and people is given formal unity by the image of 'hanging' which originates in blood 'hanging' from the body. The strange place we enter in McMillan's poems, then, is 'not a monster, but a poetry.'

The idea of poem as a communal experience is clearly important to McMillan: it motivates his work in schools and colleges, and the writing workshops he has organised for the Workers' Educational Association,¹⁵ and I would like to suggest that his work can be read as incorporating different collectivising strategies, as it were, which include the use of body imagery that I have already discussed. Earlier in this essay I referred to McMillan's 'technique of simultaneously making something fictive and legitimating it by a claimed collective knowledge': that is, that in describing something in a poem McMillan will often bracket the object by placing it in the context of popular culture, folk song or famous literature. This is a way of refusing the autonomous status of the lyric to situate it within a wider field of cultural practice and social interaction

¹⁵ In a letter to Michael Schmidt dated 26/10/81, (John Rylands Library, Carcanet archive, Acc 3, Box 70, In Letters - McMillan, Ian) McMillan writes that he is negotiating with the W.E.A. to run 8 Creative Writing workshops in Rotherham area. In an article for *Poetry Review* five years later, he tells a story about handing out poems by Ted Hughes to a hostile audience at a W. E. A. workshop near Rotherham ('Seven Views of Poetry in England,' *Poetry Review*, 1/2 (1986) 6-7 (p. 6).)

which acts as a kind of commitment in the poet's early work.

In 'This Century's Favourites', for instance, McMillan proclaims 'Here is the backyard / of popular song; persons speeding down the outlook / of my limited horizon, while a toad sits under / a car quietly, in the half-black, apprehensive.' The lyric as solitary contemplation is parodied by the bizarre appearance of the toad, and the songs on the radio coincide with the nightshift and the toad in the street so that the poet is one more object among objects and activities, like Frank O'Hara walking down the street in Manhattan. The poem is thus opened up and beyond the lyric subject to a kind of textuality involving elements of popular culture.

Folk song is referred to in 'The Female Drummer', one of McMillan's most oblique elegies for the mining industry, which deals with the folk lyric of the same title. The song tells the story of a Yorkshire girl who ran away to London to join the army, disguised as a drummer boy.¹⁶ The poem describes the destructive effects of subservience to authority: the refrain 'a maiden all the while', taken from the original song, reminds of the human subject still present beneath these deceptively inhuman disguises:

I hung myself beneath a horse
and scraped my uncovered head
along the road's noise.

To think of the narrow topcoat

¹⁶ See <http://www.informatik.uni-hamburg.de/~zierke/steeleye.span/songs/femaledrummer.html> for song lyrics.

of a failing religion
and a maiden all the while.

To think of the deflating lungs
of a crushed belief
and a maiden all the while.

The fragments of the original song serve to situate the poem within the wider and traditionally more anonymous textual sphere of folk art, while the opacity of reference points to the decline and disappearance of the communities who kept such songs in circulation.

Other poems examine different aspects of collective knowledge: 'Barge Journey' is one of many poems to satirise regional identity,¹⁷ although beneath the humour lurks a serious point about people being defined by their work. We are told of 'the old Yorkshire legend / about the man who strolled through a rhubarb-forcing shed / and came out wearing a green hat', and then 'the old Yorkshire legend / about the man who put his head in a horsetrough / and came up with his hair full of horses' and finally 'the old Yorkshire legend / about the man who got on a barge / and was later left in the water, / while the barge walked through the streets / to a house full of men, women and barges'.

In 'The Crazy Horse Interview' the distorting and multiplying nicknames of Crazy Horse become the wind as 'a mad horse with a thousand names' which in turn produces 'a new wind-myth' shared by the workers on the building site.

¹⁷ Other examples include 'Under Difficult' (*How the Hornpipe Failed*) and 'The Meaning of Life (A Yorkshire Dialect Rhapsody)' (*Selected Poems*).

This is the best of several poems McMillan has written celebrating the shared experience of work, other examples being 'High Noon' (*Unselected Poems*) and 'Song for Roof Building (Collected in South Yorkshire Light Industry Park, Barnsley)' (*Dad, the Donkey's on Fire*). McMillan's concern not to appropriate the voices of the various inhabitants of the North who appear in his poems resulted finally in 'Street Girls' (*Perfect Catch*) which actually incorporates material written by a group of prostitutes from Doncaster in the course of a project organised by Doncaster Community Arts, which was eventually made into a film. This long dramatic poem is also about a shared experience of work, though it is far from celebratory. It represents the kind of artistic commitment McMillan has sought in his last two books, which owes much to the ideas of James Kelman as expounded in *Some Recent Attacks: Essays Cultural & Political*¹⁸, which McMillan reviewed in *Dog* magazine.¹⁹ Kelman writes:

For some artists in other parts of the world, being committed to a political cause often requires they stop working at what they do best, their art; [...] there are many instances of this, artists forced into exile and devoting themselves to the liberation of their country. They become organisers, activists, soldiers, with little or no time left for their own art.²⁰

Obviously these are intended to represent extreme cases, and yet I would argue that McMillan has abandoned what he does best in favour of a kind of

¹⁸ James Kelman, *Some Recent Attacks, Essays Cultural & Political* (Stirling: AK Press, 1992), particularly 'The Importance of Glasgow in My Work', pp. 78-84.

¹⁹ Ian McMillan, *Dog*, 3 (undated) 55-56.

²⁰ *Some Recent Attacks*, p. 79.

commitment similar to that which Kelman describes, and which replaces the collectivising strategies of his earlier and better poems. *I Found This Shirt* and *Perfect Catch* mix poems, plays, prose narratives and collaborations between McMillan and various musicians and artists. It is as if McMillan's wish to minimise the autonomous space of the lyric were gradually resulting in its disappearance from his books, so that rather than accommodating different genres within verse form as in his previous work, those genres were replacing the poems. What poetic work remains seems simplistic and light compared to *Now It Can Be Told* or *Dad, the Donkey's on Fire*. 'Tuesdays and Wednesdays' (*I Found This Shirt*), for example, seems close to doggerel:

Everyone's artistic in a personal way

Art's what makes us human and our song
Sings from the morning to the close of the day.

In the introduction to this chapter I stated that I did not wish to 'cover' McMillan's work, and the poet's own understanding of the dangers of 'covering' have been discussed in the course of this essay. For this reason, and because *I Found This Shirt* and *Perfect Catch* mark the abandonment of the strategies that made McMillan's earlier work successfully 'surreal', I consider that these books mainly fall outside the scope of this study.

What emerges from the best of McMillan's poetry, however, is a unique approach to the imaginative experience of place which exemplifies the trend I have sought to illustrate in this study. Roy Fisher once began a poem by saying

'If I didn't dislike / mentioning works of art' and McMillan's poetry displays a similar ambivalence to the 'cultivated' sensibility, as any reading of 'Jesus Died From Eating Curtains' cannot fail to discover, yet his work represents a long and sustained engagement with the work of other writers: this engagement at the level of language is inextricably linked to an engagement with place, so that Peter Didsbury's approving reference to William Carlos Williams's comment on the rehabilitation of 'our thought and our lives' by 'the word, a meaning hardly distinguishable from that of place' is eminently applicable here. In this poetry, the surrealism of everyday life becomes a way of discovering 'what makes us human' while at the same time providing a powerful warning about the forces working to the contrary aim. 'Oh galoot galosh, galosh galoot.'

CONCLUSION

Art is "art for art's sake" inasmuch as the aesthetic form reveals tabooed and repressed dimensions of reality: aspects of liberation. The poetry of Mallarmé is an extreme example; his poems conjure up modes of perception, imagination, gestures – a feast of sensuousness which shatters everyday experience and anticipates a different reality principle.¹

The Surrealist's Paris, too, is a "little universe". That is to say, in the larger one, the cosmos, things look no different. There, too, inconceivable analogies and connections between events are the order of the day. It is the region from which the lyric poetry of Surrealism reports. And this must be noted if only to counter the obligatory misunderstanding of *l'art pour l'art*. For art's sake was scarcely ever to be taken literally; it was almost always a flag under which sailed a cargo that could not be declared because it still lacked a name.²

Accounts of British postmodernism by Kennedy and Gregson presume that reality is only addressed in art by realists: the poets of the domestic surreal protest against this. It is often the most surreal elements of this work which most clearly register the impact of contemporary life: the disembodied parts in Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath*, the irreducible noise of O'Hara's 'All That Gas', the mutating bodies of Fisher's *The Ship's Orchestra*, and the physical and linguistic breakdown in McMillan's 'The er Barnsley Seascapes' are all evidence of a traumatic reaction to modernity and its effects, but they are also indebted to the visionary poetics of Rimbaud and his successors. Avant-garde Paris helps O'Hara to construct his city of modern art, while the Symbolist tradition offers Ash the means to explore the desire for escape exploited by the modern tourist

¹ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 19.

industry. The free juxtaposition of elements in Surrealism informs Didsbury's sense of the incongruities encountered in everyday landscapes, while Jarry's pataphysics helps Middleton to construct a 'little universe'. If this poetry is difficult or remote, it is not for reasons of 'élitist hauteur':³ if it were, issues of shared experience would not figure so insistently. Moreover, Middleton's eccentricity and Fisher's 'blundering' can hardly be seen as evidence of élitist heroism. Rather, for these writers, art is the clearest window on the opaque. The 'impenetrable', the 'tabooed and repressed dimensions of reality', the nameless 'cargo', are not understood to be eternally and transhistorically beyond our understanding, so that poetry's difficulty is a necessary response in a continual process. If everyday life appears simple in comparison, it is only through exclusion of those same difficulties. At this point, art's autonomy from life provides a kind of critical distance whereby this exclusion can at least become evident. What is routinely dismissed as idiosyncratic or irrational has its lowly status by virtue of the 'the means-ends rationality of the bourgeois everyday'.⁴ The 'dialectical optic' is the means by which Benjamin seeks to reveal the interdependence of the impenetrable and the everyday. Unreality is made real, while reality becomes unreal. To discover one in the other, then, is to perceive, however dimly, the possibility of a 'different reality principle', as Marcuse says.

Richard Sheppard's formulation of experimental writing as a 'dialectical response' to modernity allows for the possibility that a superficially rebarbative

² Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street*, 231.

and unfamiliar work may be more engaged with contemporary reality than one which depicts the surface detail of modern life. Sheppard also suggests that realism, Symbolism and experiment were not mutually exclusive in the early stages of modernism, while Bürger theorises the current possibility for a 'nonorganic work' which combines realist and avant-garde elements. For Bürger, the 'post avant-garde phase' in which contemporary writing is situated involves a return to the category of the autonomous art work which was established during the period of Aestheticism or 'art for art's sake'. This return helps to explain why the work of Benjamin and Marcuse is so illuminating in relation to the domestic surreal, since for Benjamin in particular, Aestheticism and the avant-garde represent a continuum, however problematic, which we may then rediscover in work of the 'post avant-garde phase'. The poets of the domestic surreal trace in their work an imaginative tradition which also reaches back not only to Surrealism and Dada but further towards art for art's sake, to Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud and Jarry. For Ash, this historical reach is necessary in order to combat a contemporary anti-modernist orthodoxy which is itself retrograde:

If international modernism is still strongly resisted in England it is because we lack the experience of Symbolism, which everywhere else was decisive. And without Symbolism there shall be no surrealism; without Decadence there shall be no modernism.⁵

³ Sheppard, *Modernism - Dada - Postmodernism*, p. 102.

⁴ Bürger, *Theory of the avant-garde*, p. 49.

⁵ Ash, 'A Classic Post-Modernist', pp. 44-45.

As Ashbery's contrast of Eliot and Reverdy demonstrates, the poets of the domestic surreal are well aware of an English-language modernist heritage. What was lacking in Anglo-American literary culture was not modernism in its more narrow meaning, but a full sense of the avant-garde, and according to Marjorie Perloff, Eliot himself is partly responsible for this. Perloff dates the disappearance of the European avant-garde from the Anglo-American literary map to the period when Eliot became editor of the *Criterion*:

It is interesting to consider what is not included in the *Criterion's* first year of publication: no Dada, no Surrealism, no discussion of the visual arts, no Gertrude Stein or William Carlos Williams, no Picasso or Picabia. Indeed, 1922, the year of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, and Duchamp's *Large Glass*, becomes the year (at best) of Paul Valéry and Virginia Woolf, and at worst of Stefan Zweig and Charles Whibley. The contrast to the earlier *Egoist* (1914-17), whose editor Dora Marsden deferred (at least at the beginning) to Pound, is telling. *The Egoist* contained the serialization of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* and Pound's own *Gaudier Brzeska*, poems by H.D., William Carlos Williams, and D. H. Lawrence, an essay by Remy de Gourmont on Lautréamont and another essay on Pratella and Futurist Music [...] Between the demise of the *Egoist* and the birth of the *Criterion*, five years passed. The new journal gives little hint that there had been, on both sides of the Channel and in Dada New York, a vibrant Utopian avant-garde.⁶

In calling for a Symbolist or Decadent phase to precede the development of 'international modernism' in British poetry, Ash seeks to import what he regards as a cargo lacking a British name. The experimental tradition is invoked by the poets of the domestic surreal, often within the poetry itself, as I have demonstrated: O'Hara names Reverdy, Apollinaire, Picasso and many others in

⁶ Marjorie Perloff, *21st Century Modernism: the "New" Poetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 34.

his poetry, while Middleton's alternative reality is named *Pataxanadu*, and Ash populates *Casino* with the artists of Symbolism and Decadence. Lacking experimental precedents in their own language, these poets attempt to establish the conditions for reception in the very act of writing.

Yet to Ash, these artistic movements do not represent an evasion of life: nor can engagement with this imaginative tradition be understood simply as a flight into some form of literary history independent of the laws of development which govern political and economic history. For Benjamin, these were already 'obligatory misunderstandings' of art for art's sake, and as the reaction to Ash's work in particular demonstrates, such misunderstandings continue to occur. However, in this thesis, I have sought to demonstrate that for the poets of the domestic surreal, the experimental tradition and the contemporary historical moment are inextricably linked. But this is not to claim that the domestic surreal is a stage in the history of writing: I do not claim that these writers represent a new Aestheticism, or a new avant-garde. Theirs is one of many responses to a contemporary moment whose very definition continues to be the subject of great dispute. We need more emphasis on the heterogeneity of response to that moment, and we also need to establish firmer links with avant-garde and modernism studies if we are to continue to refer to a 'post avant-garde' or 'postmodern' phase. Then, in the words of Rimbaud, we may 'show the untold riches'.

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