

Paweł Marcinkiewicz

## John Ashbery's *Quick Question* and Its Forms of Inventiveness

Perhaps the most conspicuous feature of John Ashbery's recent poetry is its inventiveness: each of his volumes published in the last decade seems to surpass the scope of his earlier books, subtly redefining generic boundaries and undoing formal constrictions. As a result, each Ashbery collection evokes for the reader a feeling of a new and distinct poetic voice. This is visible already in *Your Name Here* (2000), introducing snippy lyrics ("This Room," "Avenue Mozart," or "Stanzas Before Time"), so different from the vast landscapes of Ashbery's preceding collection, *Girls on the Run* (1999). The later volumes, *As Umbrellas Follow Rain* (2001) and *Chinese Whispers* (2002), while still experimenting with the form of the short lyric, hit a more humorous note, which bears a striking resemblance to the nineteenth-century English nonsense poet, Edward Lear.<sup>1</sup> *Where Shall I Wander* (2005) exercises a seemingly more accessible lyricism, but the volume also features several longer prose poems, such as "Coma Bernices," "From China to Peru," or the eponymous "Where Shall I Wander," whose novelty consists in a peculiar time perspective, where the future is seen retroactively as a form of the past. Finally, *A Worldly Country* (2007) and *Planisphere* (2009) seem to formulate their most significant meanings on the level of language units, including trite expressions and clichés, which work similarly to the Wittgensteinian linguistic paradigms, expressing a collective experience rooted in the cultural and social spheres. Such poems as "Attabled with the Spinning Years" and "He Who Loves and Runs Away" do not employ traditional tropes, but they demonstrate how people actually use language in reference to certain problems, for example the global financial crisis of 2008.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Several critics have recently linked the pitch of Ashbery's late poems with Lear. For example, Stephen Burt makes an interesting observation: "Ashbery quotes Lear repeatedly... Like Lear, [he] tries to make his most formally intricate poems feel like games, or like jokes" (5).

2 For more detail see my book-length study of Ashbery's poetry, '*Colored Alphabets' Flutter*': *John Ashbery and the Twentieth-Century American Avant-Gardes* (217–241).

*Quick Question*—Ashbery’s latest collection published in December 2012—offers the reader a wide spectrum of styles and tones, merging realistic poetics, indirectly pursuing its social agendas (“Quick Question,” “This Economy”), with the dream-like poetics of Delmore Schwartz and Randall Jarrell (“In Dreams I Kiss Your Hand, Madame,” “Homeless Heart”). Many poems use the typical Ashberian close-knit linguistic space, whose final aim is to propel words to high semantic speeds and collide them. The book’s dedication to Jane Freilicher is an important interpretative clue. The renowned painter and Ashbery’s lifelong friend, Freilicher illustrated the poet’s debut collection, the twenty-eight-page pamphlet *Turandot and Other Poems*, published by the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in 1953. Jane Freilicher was arguably the most important influence in Ashbery’s early period, both as a friend and an artist. *Reported Sightings*, a collection of the poet’s art criticism, features a penetrating essay about Freilicher, where he seems to be adverting to his own artistic strategies. Ashbery calls Freilicher’s realism “tentative” in the sense that her canvases contrast suave facture with worked-over passages that unblushingly reveal the effort behind their making (242). Moreover, different objects in her paintings are presented with different degrees of verisimilitude, in a congeries of inconsistent painterly conventions, creating a compilation of seeing perspectives. The outcome is “rumpled realism,” proving that “the real is not only what one sees but also a result of how one sees it—inattentively, inaccurately perhaps, but nevertheless that is how it is coming through to us” (242). Similarly, the composite style of Ashbery’s most recent poems does not simply present the world, but it gives a concise history of contemporary poetry, with no implication that one way of writing is better than another.

At first glance, *Quick Question* seems to continue the mode of writing introduced in *A Worldly Country* and *Planisphere*. In the contemporary American vernacular, the elegantly concise alliteration “quick question” is a close relative of “stupid question” or “rhetorical question.” “Quick question” itself can be an extensive tirade, and it often requires a long answer. As a title of a poetry collection, “quick question” creates a very complex set of relations between the author of the text and the reader. Most importantly, it is not clear whether the quick question is addressed to the author or to the reader. On the one hand, “quick question” implies that the author timidly asks his audience for a brief moment of attention; on the other, the illocution might intimate that the author requires of his audience an answer that is due to him. Additionally, “quick question” has a broader cultural resonance, alluding to talk-show journalism or wild consumerism. The fact that we are living increasingly in a “quick question” culture with a minimal attention span for the Other severely limits our understanding of arts and literature, whose major value is based, as Derek Attridge puts it, on “hold[ing] out the possibility of a repeated encounter with alterity” (28).

As it were, the very title of Ashbery's collection—colloquial and casual as any Wittgensteinian language game—provokes serious queries about the role of poetry and artistic creativity. If a work of art is just a quick question, can it be original and significant? Furthermore, can it be a humanizing event that broadens the reader's mind, enlarges his or her sympathies, and undermines ideological assumptions? Ashbery's book seems to clear out these doubts. The prevailing form of *Quick Question* is still that of a brief lyric (only two poems—"A Voice from Fireplace" and "False Report"—extend onto three pages), which dominates in the poet's late phase, but poetic substance is significantly different in its rendering and tone from *Planisphere* or *A Worldly Country*. What Roger Gilbert defines as the Ashberian "gaiety of language"<sup>3</sup>—which includes ludic playfulness based on overloaded cadences of camp, with clownish idioms and caricatured metaphors—gives way to, as Les Kay puts it, "flickers... of religiosity," bringing out the timbre of "suffering and sacrifice" (par. 5). In a word, *Quick Question* is not the kind of a vintage Ashbery book that such critics as Harold Bloom or Marjorie Perloff championed half a century ago, but the volume speaks in a vitally new voice, which baffles new readers, old fans, and critics.

First, *Quick Question*'s novelty consists in the volume's structure: differently than in several of Ashbery's earlier collections, which take their titles from their final texts—*Where Shall I Wander*, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* or *A Wave*—the eponymous poem of the volume is not placed at the end of the book, but it comes right after the opening poem, "Words to That Effect." This may deprive the volume of a sense of direction since the eponymous poem no longer serves as a recapitulation of the book's narrative possibilities and major tropes.<sup>4</sup> It seems that, in *Quick Question*, disorienting the reader is a game plan that helps the poet reevaluate his artistic procedures. Second, the volume's style—although still unmistakably Ashberian in its unstable pronouns, disjunctive syntax, and fuzzy references—has a perceptibly new quality, especially if we compare it to the stylistic profusion of Ashbery's volumes from the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, sparkling with nods to the great poets of the past. For example, "Fantasia," which closes the 1977 *Houseboat Days*, was based on the anonymous sixteenth-century ballad "The Nut Brown Maid"; the 1987 *April Galleons* was based on an intricate

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3 I am referring here to Gilbert's seminal essay "Ludic Eloquence: On John Ashbery's Recent Poetry" (199).

4 According to John Emil Vincent, from *April Galleons* (1987) onward, Ashbery's poetry started to evolve towards a new compositional plan, each project depending more on the unit of the book to produce its final effect (5). This phase ended with *Chinese Whispers* (2002), where the titles of individual poems resist being assembled into a larger design and the title of the whole volume does not work as a banner for a book project (163).

network of literary allusions and tropes—from the eponymous Eliotean “April,” to the biblical “lepers,” who “avoid these eyes, the old eyes of love” in the final poem (*Collected Poems* 885); the 1990 *Flow Chart*’s climax was a double sestina, whose teleutons were borrowed from Swinburne’s “The Complaint of Lisa.” In the above masterpieces, much of Ashbery’s glamor came from the quality of his language—his lyric sleight of hand, splendidly crafted figures of speech, and overall stylistic elegance, which often broke into Wordsworthian sublimity.

*Quick Question* belongs to a different poetic genre. In the last decade, Ashbery significantly reduced the literary dimension of his poems, diluting aestheticizing lyricism in the clatter and chatter of his speakers. The everyday vernacular was always an important ingredient in Ashbery’s poetry, but lately—as James Rother observes—the Ashbery poem is “not only packed to the gills with talk, its gills are stuffed to bursting with all the overbuilt subdivisions of yatter-table talk, shop talk, small talk, talk about talk” (22). Moreover, as if searching for semantic density, Ashbery savors the buddy-like atmosphere of his poems with diverging technical jargons and sociolects—from the journalistic newspeak, through the economic lingo, to the underworld slang. This tendency to record different varieties of language, which is performed with a slightly limited control of the aesthetic superego, could be seen already in *Your Name Here*; however, *Quick Question* is Ashbery’s most daring withdrawal from the traditional literary discourse. If so many of the poet’s recent texts are puzzling for the reader, it is because Ashbery has gradually abandoned the idea of stylistic finesse and formal excellence as the basis of poetic craft, and instead he now conceives of poetry as an endless, self-generating linguistic continuum to be freely entered and sampled.

*Quick Question* consists of sixty-three poems whose imagery seems to be limited to the landscape of the American small town and the street talk of its parochial people. There is a sense of a vague temporal movement onwards in the volume. The starting point is the past of the 1910s and 20s, evoked by a slightly archaic diction (“Dry-eyed from weeping I consent/to the stratagems that brought us here” [“In a Lonely Place,” 21]) and vocabulary (“rascal,” “pince-nez,” “Cuba libre”), and references to the chamber music by Anton Arensky or the opera by Igor Stravinsky, *The Rake’s Progress*, with the libretto by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman. Additionally, the anteriority of the opening poems is stressed by the predominance of the past tense. The middle section of the book faces the present, induced primarily by the titles of the poems, serving as catchwords, including “Absent Agenda,” “This Economy,” and “False Report.” Moreover, the economic jargon elicits politically hot topics, such as the global financial crisis. For example, “Etudes Second Series” makes an emotionally loaded statement in the mode of a rally talk: “Where once lack had been, now/was embarrassment of riches. The riches themselves/were embarrassed for what they had brought us”

(54). Here the speaker assumes the position of a victim, which he tries to impose on the reader by the use of the pronoun “us,” playing the language game of the sensational media. Finally, the poems that conclude Ashbery’s collection—“Postlude and Prequel” and “[Untitled]”—evoke the future, and they contain the strongest transcendental resonances.

It seems that *Quick Question*’s most intriguing meaning is produced by the fusion of its gloomy metaphysical undertones with small-town crudeness. The small town air engulfs the reader already in the opening poem of the volume, “Words to That Effect”:

The drive down was smooth  
 but after we arrived things started to go haywire,  
 first one thing and then another. The days  
 scudded past like tumbleweed, slow then fast,  
 then slow again. The sky was sweet and plain.  
 You remember how still it was then,  
 a season putting its arms into a coat and staying unwrapped  
 for a long, a little time.

It was during the week we talked about deforestation.  
 How sad that everything has to change,  
 yet what a relief, too! Otherwise we’d only have  
 looking forward to look forward to...

We’d walked a little way in our shoes.  
 I was sure you’d remember how it had been  
 the other time, before the messenger came to your door  
 and seemed to want to peer in and size up the place.  
 So each evening became a forbidden morning  
 of thunder and curdled milk, though the invoices  
 got forwarded and birds settled on the periphery. (1-2)

The poem reveals a striking similarity to “Vetiver,” which opened *April Galleons* (“Ages passed slowly, like a load of hay, / As the flowers recited their lines” [*Collected Poems* 811]), providing a typically Ashberian conversational space sustained by a historical reverie. “Vetiver” dealt with a collective loss on the broadest scale, expressing the ambitions of the volume. “Words to That Effect,” conversely, demonstrates the poet’s self-parodying temperament, exposing the hollowness of small-town existence.

The first stanza works as a reminder of the poem’s historiographic potential. As John Shoptaw points out, Ashbery’s early collections often contained poems developing a “psycho-historical argument”: for example, *The Tennis Court Oath* featured “The Suspended Life,” “Our Youth,” “The Lozenges,” and “A Last World,”



all of which expressed doubts about the grounds of historical metanarratives and the necessity of history, echoing Eliot's "Burnt Norton" (70). At first, "Words to That Effect" resumes this mode of writing, starting with the speaker's account of his life in a new place, which presumably has a broader significance for the present. However, this significance is never revealed, and the slightly eerie story, encrusted with gaudy descriptions of nature ("the sky was sweet and plain," "birds settled on the periphery"), gives the reader little purchase on meaning. It remains unclear why it was so "still" then (and why should the addressee remember it?) or what exactly happened when the speaker states that "things started to go haywire, / first one thing then another"? Interestingly, the above expression was coined between 1900 and 1905, about the time when *Quick Question's* poetic pageant begins.

The central part of the stanza is the imagistic metaphor of scudding tumbleweed, representing the passage of time. Obviously, tumbleweed is a pop culture cliché appropriated from the Western film genre, where it emphasized the desolation of a place or character, but it was also used for comic effect to mark the "tumbleweed moment" of awkward silence. And perhaps reaching such a moment is Ashbery's most important goal in the poem: the beginning of the next stanza marks the first of the poem's shifts: the campy "sweetness" of the sky is deflated with the dry matter-of-factness of the statement: "It was during the week we talked about deforestation," which poetically sinks under the burden of its hopelessly technical ultimate word. The next couplet of the fragment seems to mock "Vetiver's" sublimity, jokily admitting the inevitability of human fate: "How sad that everything has to change, / yet what a relief, too!" The comic strain of the stanza culminates in the following pun in the spirit of Edward Lear: "Otherwise we'd only have/ looking forward to look forward to." Thus the serious assumptions promised by the mode of the historical reverie budding in the first stanza are relocated into the sphere of the Ashberian goofiness, where—in Roger Gilbert's parlance—"saying" gets subordinated to "playing," producing a purely decorative tapestry of stylistic permutations, interspersed with poetic "noodling and doodling" (200).

This is where many poems in *Planisphere* stopped, for example "Default Mode," which battered the reader with its anaphora "They were living in America" until its final line, "They were living in America the same old the same old" (*Planisphere* 18); or "FX," which used rhymes and multiplied archaisms to produce an extremely rich sound palette: "O rats the scholar's rags... / illuminate far tracks" (*Planisphere* 30). "Words to That Effect" takes us somewhere else: the last stanza of the poem renounces quippish riffs and describes trivial facts of everyday life, celebrating their banality, but also highlighting their overwhelming character: "We'd walked a little way in our shoes" is perfectly non-poetic, and yet it possesses the eeriness of the dream-ridden landscape, surreal in spirit (who walks without shoes and why walking without shoes is important?), which emerges in the poem's closing

gesture. The final image of the messenger coming to the addressee's door to "peer in and size up the place" has a menacing undertone: either a death messenger or a debt collector changes the addressee's life completely, bringing in the feeling of permanent fear. Although the "invoices" still get "forwarded," daily existence becomes a nightmare, threatened with "thunders." More importantly, "Words to That Effect" does not construe any hermeneutics of the past, but instead it tests various "effects" that the poetic composition has on the reader

Later in the collection, the eccentric juxtaposition of bland provinciality rendered in non-poetic language with pseudo-prophetic profundities becomes *Quick Question's* leading stylistic motif. Colloquial speech markers abound, from Ashbery's favorite OK's ("Oh it's OK, actually" ["The Allegations," 9]), through inversions ("Off you go then" ["A Voice from the Fireplace," 17]), to dialectal contractions ("Somethin' o' that, I says" ["Recent History," 13]). However, the feeling of everydayness is most often produced by conversational ease. "Cross Island" starts inconspicuously, with a question asked to an addressee: "You've probably done this already/and if not, where's the sympathy?" (7). We are in the midst of a conversation, yet unable to recognize the speakers, which is typical of Ashbery, who has always sought to produce poetic density by means of pronouns. Yet the commonplace close-up does not serve as grounds for a desultory leap—like in the poet's previous collections—but instead we are led further into quotidian clumsiness: "[You've probably] scratched the frozen surface one time/too many, pulled away from the mirror/like a tractor-trailer backing up/in a snowstorm" (7). The fragment is unusual in its persistent non-literariness, with the final simile masterfully anchored in provincial life. In the poem's final section, an eschatological overtone dominates: "Like you already said, / finders are keepers only for a time. / Time marches on. Depart Misery" (8). Here—like in many other poems in the volume—the vague profundities of a small-town man express metaphysical fears that are shared by Ashbery's readers. The next poem in the volume, "The Allegations" uses a similar device, trying to produce a poetic effect, as it were, out of nothing: its minutiae of place and time again hint at a life in a distant province, while its pseudo-apocalyptic ending provides the reader with a clumsy leap to the semi-visionary level of the poem:

A really helpful hotel bandit stopped me  
 on the stair, the staff having already fled.  
 The reaction shot was a no-brainer. Try to feel your ear,  
 you'll see. The music continues to unroll  
 in the empty corridor. Why we sold the porch  
 is another ending. We're all at odds here.  
 It'll come true for you in Kansas City, Iowa. (10)

In the final section, the anti-lyric concreteness overwhelms the reader: the narration becomes a list of disparate experiences, with no particular focus, until the culminating point of the final line. Kansas City, Iowa, is a purely imaginary place, yet its name sounds convincing enough to win it the title of the capital of the American backcountry. The fact that the speaker's addressee is going to visit this place gives the poem's ending the aura of an eerie afterworld, which resonates with apocalyptic associations.

The small-town apocalypse lurks in the theme of decay, which—as Les Kay points out—reappears throughout the book (par. 5). The eponymous poem, “Quick Question,” uses Christian imagery to present the fallen state of America's spiritual life: “Some angels / seemed to teeter on the wooden fence. / Were we all they knew? // Or are we part of their mind-cleansing/ritual, necessary and discardable?” (3). “Auburn-Tinted Fences” produces in the reader a similar conviction that the contemporary world is doomed, perceiving life as a struggle with the forces of evil: “No one knows the extent of the forces arrayed against us, / nor how many of them there are. // We are descended from a long line of sages, for whom it is / a point of honor not to know the quantities of things” (45). The speaker's inability to estimate the quantities of things elicits the motif of the so-called Great Recession, which is a part of the present-day American apocalypse. Further in the poem, several details suggest an impoverished and broken existence: “When I think of the / motley we wore sometimes, I get all jizzed up, just for the sake of things” (46).

Similarly, “Iphigenia in Sodus” projects the vistas of social decay and disintegration, with the poem's particulars denoting an abandoned town: “the doors sagged, the window frames/had disappeared a long time ago into the murk/of this age” (97). The immediate extratextual reference is the town near Rochester, NY, where Ashbery was born on his parents' fruit farm and where he spent his childhood. The poem recontextualizes the Eurypidean myth, and the resulting metalepsis becomes a means of transition to Ashbery's biographical (and poetic) youth.<sup>5</sup> According to Harold Bloom, metalepsis is a “representation set against time,” which transforms the “later into the earlier” (103). Accordingly, like Iphigenia, whom Agamemnon ordered to kill as a sacrifice to allow his ships to sail to Troy, the poet's would-be life in a provincial town becomes a sacrifice made

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5 Characteristically, the New York School poets borrowed genres and tropes from high modernism, striving against burnout and repetitiveness pervading poetry in the post-war era. Extending Harold Bloom's metaphor of a post-Enlightenment crisis lyric, we could say that their metaleptic recycling of historical forms was their *clinamen*, which is latecomer's swerving from his poetic fathers.



to allow his later success as a poet in New York. However, the speaker is conscious that the poem is not an extension of the myth, but serves as a projection of his individual experience into the realm of aesthetic values: "Why does that name [Iphigenia in Sodus] sound so familiar? / If I were you I shouldn't worry, or ask. // But— isn't that collusion? / Well, yes, technically it is, // but we are a long way from truth here" (96). Thus the discrepancy between art's "colluding" practices and the truth undermines Ashbery's historiographic aspirations, and the return to the town—and to the language—of the poet's youth takes the form of a depersonalized and ambiguous vision: "Seen now, she pivots frantically / near where we—they—arrive to consult the oracle // making small talk the while, about whose / elections need shortening // ...before chopping them down" (96).

The concoction of psycho-historical divagations and small-town apocalyptic predestination sounds most convincing in "This Economy," which shows the devastating effect that the indifference toward economic facts may have on an individual:

In all my years as a pedestrian  
 serving juice to guests, it never occurred to me  
 thoughtfully to imagine how a radish feels.  
 She merely arrived. Half-turning  
 in the demented twilight, one feels a  
 sour empathy with all that went before.  
 That, needless to say, was how we elaborated  
 ourselves staggering across tracts:  
 Somewhere in America there is a naked person.

Somewhere in America adoring legions blush  
 in the sunset, crimson madder, and madder still.  
 Somewhere in America someone is trying to figure out  
 how to pay for this, bouncing a ball  
 off a wooden strut. Somewhere  
 in America the lonely enchanted eye each other  
 on a bus. It goes down Woodrow Wilson Avenue.  
 Somewhere in America it says you must die, you know too much. (47)

In the hilarious opening of the poem, the speaker presents himself as an employee in a restaurant or a similar service—although "pedestrian serving juice to guests" is rather ambiguous as the name of an occupation—and he blames himself for ignoring the intricate structures of the American economy. To "imagine" how a "radish feels" implies understanding the long line of operations which bring it to the market, involving dozens of people, from the farmer growing the radish, through the shop assistants selling it, to the customer served by a waiter and eating

it at a restaurant table. There is a Whitmanian potential in the poem's opening gesture, manifesting itself in the longing for the clear-cut world of "Song of the Banner at Daybreak," where the speaker celebrates the values of manual labor and capitalist initiative: "I see the farmers working.... I see mechanics working, I see buildings everywhere founded, going up, or finish'd.... I see the stores, depots, of Boston, Baltimore, Charleston, New Orleans.... I see the countless profit, the busy gatherings, earn'd wages" (*The Complete Poems* 313). The Ashbery speaker is not even sure what his occupation is: his career has consisted of "staggering across tracts" and the "sour empathy" he feels with "all that went before" results from the remorse of a person who suddenly realizes he is dispossessed.

"Somewhere in America"—the anaphora, which ends the first section of the poem and recurs four times in the second one—first sounds like a laugh line and only later shows its dismal significance. "Somewhere in America there is a naked person" contains the adversarial rebelliousness of the Beats, and it tries to create a politically responsive poetic space, suggesting a number of senses, from poverty and homelessness to old age and disease. "Somewhere in America adoring legions blush / in the sunset, crimson madder, and madder still" apparently develops in the same mode, but has a more metaphorical meaning, suggesting the collective frenzy of a religious gathering, a political rally, or a rock concert. The name of the lively red color "crimson madder" comes from "madder"—the climbing plant *rubia tinctorum*—and it puns on "madder"—meaning "more mad"—in the phrase "madder still," which yet can refer to the color. Thus the second anaphora brings into the poem semantic density and ambiguity, which problematize the blunt directness of political spiel, emerging from the implied critique of Americanness inherent in "somewhere in America."

The next anaphoric unit brings up economic issues straightforwardly in an incredibly dense utterance, using an image taken from amateur sports, which functions like a cultural cliché: "Somewhere in America someone is trying to figure out / how to pay for this, bouncing a ball / off a wooden strut." Bouncing a ball—usually of a wall—is a fun activity popular among children, but here the phrase produces a surreal effect: a lonely person tries to make major economic decisions while being involved in a childish game. Moreover, there is a sense of powerlessness here: "strut" means a pompous gait or bearing, which is still audible in the phrase "a wooden strut," vaguely suggesting an inability to move or act properly. On top of that, the anaphora recalls the idiom "to bounce some ideas off someone," which means to test someone's opinions on something. In the context of the poem, the phrase suggests a vain effort or useless attempt.

The next anaphora suddenly veers from the poem's major themes into a burst of Frank O'Hara lyricism: "Somewhere / in America the lonely enchanted eye each other / on a bus. It goes down Woodrow Wilson Avenue." The last

sentence—referring to the name of the twenty-eighth President of the United States—expresses a nostalgic longing for the pristine Americanness of the first decades of the twentieth century, with clear-cut moral distinctions and visions of a prosperous future. The poem's closing gesture, "Somewhere in America it says you must die, you know too much," is a combination of a gangster-film black-humor laugh line and a bleak augury divined by a prophet. The brutal finality of the statement contradicts the pastoral aesthetics lurking in the poem: the speaker's voice is disillusioned, because his existence is nearing the limit of "too much." Therein lies the gist of his discontent with American celebratory culture, which the final statement rejects. The "too much" is also signaled by the length of the line, which far exceeds all previous lines, generating a graphic message as if the text were not only meant to be read, but also seen.

Yet the Ashbery poem does not simply make corny propositional claims: like many poems in *Planisphere*, "This Economy" serves as a collective witness to the transformations of American culture, analogous to the Wittgensteinian linguistic paradigm, based on particular idioms or catchphrases and expressing the experience shared by millions of Americans. As Marjorie Perloff reminds us in *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, the language game is not a genre or a particular form of discourse, but a "paradigm," which is a "set of sentences selected from the language we actually use" (60). Furthermore, the social structure involved in a game implies that there is no unique "I," as subjectivity always depends on a historically rooted language. Moreover, such oppositions as signifier/signified are irrelevant because language is not contiguous to anything else and as such has none of the fundamentals that the structuralists would have wished to impose on it. However, "This Economy" is not just a pile-up of linguistic *objets trouvés*, depending solely on the element of chance. On the contrary, like Ashbery's other great poems, it manages to preserve its beauty and integrity exactly by the "logic of strange position,"<sup>6</sup> activating—as David Herd has it—a "heavy opposition between competing poetic languages" (40). On the one hand, the poem uses the everyday vernacular varnished with naturalistic close-ups; on the other, it exhibits the surreal incongruity of a dream-work. Both poetics are combined in a furthered capacity to relate, which—as As David Bergman puts it—helps the poet to "perfect his technique of becoming another" (xvii-xviii).

Here—coming back to the initial statement made in this paper—we touch on the very gist of Ashberian inventiveness. According to Charles Altieri, style deals with "irreducibly concrete differences" that require the reader to adjust his or her

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6 I am quoting here the most celebrated poem from Ashbery's early phase, "La livre est sur la table," closing the poet's debut collection *Some Trees*: "All beauty, resonance, integrity, / Exist by deprivation or logic / Of strange position" (*Collected Poems* 38).

emotional register to accommodate them: “[s]tyle is a matter of life, not only of art, and life is a matter of learning to adapt over time to many things which show how crude our frameworks are” (184). The power of Ashbery’s style is its capacity to elicit in the reader forms of engagement that allow one to take a fresh look at American language and culture. If inventiveness, in Derek Attridge’s terms, is the author-induced opening of the reader’s perception of alterity, then the greatest advantage of Ashbery’s inventiveness is its non-violent character, which becomes clear when we compare *Quick Question* with the far more radical experiments of the post-language poets. Ashbery’s mundane landscapes of provincial America take hold of vast cultural and literary traditions, which enable the reader to safely enter the realm of otherness. This stance has an ethical dimension: the Ashbery poem develops the reader’s appreciation of the canon and—giving a stimulus to co-author its meaning—it serves as a vehicle for individual freedom beyond that canon. Finally, *Quick Question* proves that the most fertile resources of literature are contained in its opposition—in the coarse and contaminated language that we use every day.

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