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J O H N A S H B E R Y A T H A R V A R D



K A R I N R O F F M A N

Arriving for his junior year at Harvard, John Ashbery and his closest friend, Bob Hunter, moved into what were reputed to be Norman Mailer's old rooms (Dunster House B-43). They placed their desks back to back in the spacious, top-floor suite with a Victrola and a large stack of classical music records between them. Ashbery began writing "Fête Galante," a short story inspired by Watteau's painting (and style) of the same name. Ashbery's bubbly, mischievous piece, which he published in the Harvard *Advocate*, describes a party:

There is so much noise! Two sylph-like young men, one with an accordion, the other with a guitar, hurl themselves at the groups of guests, breaking up conversation, making bad music. . . . Then all the lights go out, all the noise and the music stops. . . . Something makes Lucy's fingers explore, explore, along the balcony rail to where Frank's hand last lay. Very plump and appealing in the moonlight, it seemed. Now she has found it, now they are holding hands. What a lovely sensation.

The *Harvard Crimson* raved that "John Ashbery . . . has turned his ever-competent hand to prose. . . . The result is a dream-like story

of innuendo. . . . None of the machinery shows through the delicate and expertly woven surface.” Soon after, Ashbery earned a “literary associate” position, finally appearing on the *Advocate* masthead for the first time in the Christmas issue. The Signet Society, an exclusive undergraduate art and literary society with its own, yellow building at 46 Dunster Street, also invited him to join. He and another undergraduate friend, the poet Kenneth Koch, who was already a member, “played” and “invented” games over their lunches, finding anagrams, assigning feelings to objects, or debating “Auden’s sexuality and his religious professions.” At the end of December, Ashbery wrote and performed a Henry James parody, “Return of the Screw,” the story of “a Harvard student’s nearly erotic encounter with a Dean Flotcher,” as his Signet Society initiation ritual.

He was also invited to read at the Widener Library Poetry Room by its director, John Sweeney. Since 1945, Ashbery had been a constant presence in the poetry room, listening to its vast collection of poets reading their own work. Sweeney convinced both Harvard poetry professor John Ciardi and local established poet Richard Eberhart to attend. Ashbery’s friends Sandy Gregg, Bob Hunter, and Bubby Zimmerman (who would later be known as Barbara Epstein, one of the founders of the *New York Review of Books*), and Antonio Giarraputo, a Harvard undergraduate poet whom Ashbery had never seen before and never met again, completed the small audience. After reading for thirty minutes, Ashbery ended with “For a European Child,” a dark poem of four stark quatrains he had written the previous summer, which asked whether love could survive in such a violent modern world. The poem attacked those “lovers / [who] Lay on the newsprint,” blindly frolicking over a photograph of some new horror. Bob Hunter was impressed by its line “a famine knowing no appetite,” which he interpreted as an indictment of modern man suffering “from a deficit of true love and self-respect.” At the end of the reading, Giarraputo asked Ashbery why the subject of the poems was “only love or death.” He answered that these were “very important subjects,” a response that Hunter found flippant because Ashbery declined to elaborate.

Ashbery had too much to say about both subjects. Not long after the semester began, he spotted a new classmate at the *Advocate*

offices, Fred Amory, “who looked just like the Arrow Collar shirt man.” He felt immediately attracted to this extremely tall, “clean-cut” returning G.I., with an open, intelligent, handsome face. Very soon he discovered he also “liked his mind.” They quickly became friends, often meeting for dinner and talking late into the night about art, literature, and themselves. They had similar interests in poetry, especially “paradoxes and oxymorons.” Their developing relationship seemed so completely romantic to Ashbery that he pushed for more, but Amory said no. When Ashbery mentioned that he had heard rumors about Amory’s involvement with an older boy during his high school years at Groton, Amory angrily denied them and stopped speaking to Ashbery. Despite the breach, Ashbery asked him for comments on his new poem, “My Friends,” and they started talking again a few weeks later. Amory liked the short poem but objected to its descriptive lines “Lucky Alphonse, the shy homosexual / Draws on his gloves in a room full of ferns,” Ashbery’s first direct allusion to homosexuality in a poem. Amory felt that the reference to a threesome, a “lucky Pierre,” was unnecessary. He added, “Homosexuals are already discriminated against so you shouldn’t make a class of them. You shouldn’t do that,” a comment Ashbery found touching but confusing. He wanted to believe that Amory’s defense of homosexuals meant that he was gay, but their relationship remained intense but platonic.

All spring, Ashbery remained preoccupied with thoughts of Amory. Every time the already intimate relationship seemed on the verge of turning physical, Amory withdrew. Ashbery would not see him for several days, and then they would run into each other at the *Advocate* offices or at a campus concert, start talking, and the cycle would repeat. As his emotions churned, he wrote “Why We Forget Dreams.” He had begun the new poem in the company of his close friend from Radcliffe, Bussy Zimmerman, as they walked together along Commonwealth Avenue on a late winter’s night. She looked up at him (he was six feet tall and she was five-foot-two), and sighed deeply, saying, “It is the spring semester.” She loved him, which he knew, though she had never explicitly told him, and they would never be together, which she knew, though he had never explicitly told her. They remained respectfully silent with each other about their feelings and their secrets, neither ever mentioning his homosexuality or her with-

ered arm. In her warm, melancholy voice, she communicated to Ashbery a sense of time passing and all the promise and loss that their platonic friendship made her feel. Her commonplace words conveyed a question he felt too, and he posed it in this new poem: “Who can make his sorrow or his happiness last, / Or make of their changing a beautiful thing?”

Ashbery began to keep a new diary after seeing Fred Amory for the first time in “a while.” They talked and then “got something to eat and he came back here,” spending a wonderful evening that reignited all of Ashbery’s former feelings. He wrote cautiously about his desires in a plain spiral notebook, substituting the symbol “< >” for Amory’s name in case anyone found it. Although he tried to take his mind off Amory by dating Walter Scott, an older man from New York City whom he had met in a Boston bar, he could not make himself fall in love with someone else. One afternoon in May, Ashbery and Zimmerman accompanied Kenneth Koch and his girlfriend on an outing to Revere Beach and its amusement park. The day reinforced his fondness for Zimmerman – “How I like her!” – and his sense of loneliness, for “it was like in E. M. Forster when everyone starts out on a gay picnic and it all turns out wrong.” A thick fog encased the sun by the time they reached the beach. All the rides except “dodgems” (bumper cars) were closed. The food was expensive and inedible, and the only affordable attraction was to make a record, but “you can hear nothing except [Bussy’s] giggle, which I am glad to have perpetuated on wax.” The hardest part was to be on a double date, when “Ken. and Nan. were in love, and Bussy and I aren’t.”

Ashbery listened to classical music intensively. He spent hours alphabetizing his record collection and creating an index card catalogue. He felt increasingly anxious about final exams and a lack of summer plans: “Wish I knew what I was going to do.” He was certain only that he did not want to go home to work on the Ashbery Farm in Sodus, New York, and that “I *don’t* want to be in Boston this summer!” He studied for his “Metaphysical Poetry” exam, his favorite course all year, reading Herbert and Donne while listening to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. He searched for new records and sold some old clothes to buy Stravinsky’s *L’Histoire du soldat* and *Octet for Winds* and Ravel’s Piano Concerto in G Major “in a wonderful new recording by Bernstein.” He wanted to

find “Walton’s Sinfonia Concertante (piano and orch.) – this is an impressive piece of music, rather grim, I feel.” He went alone to hear the Boston Symphony. Finally, he concocted a plan to accompany his friend Sandy Gregg home to Scarsdale, then to New York City to visit Walter Scott, find a job, and secure an apartment for the summer.

Relieved, he reread his play *Everyman* for the first time since September. The *Advocate* published “Song from a Play” (three stanzas pulled from *Everyman*) in its commencement issue and awarded it an “honorable mention” in its annual poetry competition (Kenneth Koch’s poems won top prize). Encouraged, Ashbery added new material to the play for the first time in a year, pleased when Koch liked it. He had recently started reading a translation of André Gide’s first novel, *The Counterfeiters* (1925), a story about a gay artist in Paris; its depiction of contemporary men irked him and motivated him to improve his own new work. After finally ending the long, aimless, and anxious period of exams, he arrived in New York City. He was very excited to be there, but ran out of money before finding either an apartment or a job. When he asked his parents to wire him some more money, they sent only enough for a train ticket home. Stretching out his last few hours before rushing to the station, he and Sandy Gregg visited “the Museum of Modern Art . . . an exhibit of Bonnard which left me rather lukewarm.”

As soon as he arrived in Sodus, he felt irritable and bored. His diary entries grew shorter: “I did nothing today.” He slept late, dodged farm chores, and listened repeatedly to Berg’s haunting Violin Concerto and Poulenc’s Sonata for Trumpet, French Horn, and Trombone, though his father complained that the latter recording “sound[ed] like the Pultneyville fireman’s band rehearsing.” Ashbery visited his closest childhood friend, Carol Rupert, who was engaged to be married and energetically planning a busy, bright, domestic future in Rochester, and he left her as soon as possible to wander slowly around the city. Home again, he started reading C. K. Scott Moncrieff’s translation of Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*. He had begun reading Proust once before, but had not gotten far. This time, though, he found that the work’s contemplative and winding rhythms fit his meandering thoughts. Every day he listened to Berg and read a little more

Proust, writing in his journal that “I savor him, reading very slowly. It is all so beautiful – but I don’t remember hearing anyone say that – people just say he is morbid.”

His former schoolmate John Anson invited him for dinner. For the first time in five years, he saw his favorite English teacher from Sodus High School, Miss Klumpp, who had just become engaged to John Anson’s older brother, Frank. Hearing that her former student would be at the Anson home, she brought him the handwritten spiral notebook of poems that he had submitted for her feedback in January 1944. In the intervening nearly five years, Ashbery had completely forgotten the notebook existed. At home later that night, he read through his old poems and was shocked by how poor they were: “My old poems are quite embarrassing.” The spiral notebook was filled with the kind of concise, imagist poems he was writing in the spring of 1943, just when he started to dedicate himself to poetry. They demonstrated to Ashbery the poetic strides he had made in the years since then, but they also highlighted how far he still probably was from writing the kinds of poems he imagined. His month of diary entries only exacerbated this feeling, for all he saw was “a lot of junk I have recorded!” He had always felt frustrated by the kinds of ordinary, unimportant details that he put into a diary. He wanted to write about what he thought each day, not only what he did, but he could not capture those fleeting, crucial impressions.

He had been thinking about this subject while reading poetry all year. In his final essay for Douglas Bush’s course “Metaphysical Poets: From Donne to Marvell,” for which he earned his first “A” since 1945, he analyzed Marvell’s “The Mower to the Glow-Worms,” finding in the poem a description of great poetry:

The poem owes its impact . . . to the insignificant glow-worms, who remain with us after we have forgotten the point of it all, only remembering that it has left us in that magical, suggestive land where all great poems take place. . . . In all great poets, we are released from the things of the world to find a new significance in the world of the imagination, though the separation from “things” is never complete, and the higher meaning of the poem will invariably have its roots in them.

The things we use and do in our daily life always have meaning, yet poetry ultimately emerges from the way a poet imagines a separation from these things. At the same time, the fact that these things of the world (objects, relationships, activities) are understood by the poet adds to the intimacy of his experience of leaving them behind. Great poetry necessarily includes a residue of things but exists in the world of imagination. In writing the essay, Ashbery started to think about how to make his poems' subject – “the point of it all” – less central. This idea was the beginning of a deeper response to the question (or criticism) his classmate had posed about the subject of Ashbery's poems at the end of his first reading.

Just as studying Marvell helped him to see “new significance in the world of the imagination,” reading Proust enabled him to view his ordinary experience through a wider lens. He reread his diary, trying to learn how to enact the creative jump he understood Proust making: “Perhaps I should try to copy down my thoughts, if I could make something beautiful of them, as Proust does.” He was also learning about poetry by listening to Berg's Violin Concerto:

Berg's Violin Concerto – this is on the phonograph now. . . . It was written as a requiem for Manon Gropius, a young girl. First she dances, then death steps in and chases her around. Near the end a Bach chorale (unfamiliar to me) is presented (atonally – a strange effect but very beautiful). During the rest of the piece the violin elaborates on this in a slow tempo – this part is stunning! It is really a heavenly piece – in feeling as well as subject like “Sonnets to Orpheus.”

He heard Berg's inclusion of a quotation from Bach's eighteenth-century church music as the musical equivalent of what he was trying to do poetically. The piece reminded him, “in feeling” and “subject,” of Rilke's rendering of the story of Orpheus, the poet-singer who twice loses his great love, Eurydice, and sings of the loss from the deepest grief. Ashbery's later poem, “Syringa,” matter-of-factly describes Orpheus as someone who “liked the glad personal quality / Of the things beneath the sky.” The moment Eurydice vanishes, Orpheus begins to understand these “things” differently, as imbued with feeling he had not realized they had. Yet the speaker explains that Eurydice was always going to disappear: “She would have even if he hadn't turned around,”

because Eurydice is the past, which always disappears. Berg's brief invocation of Bach is a version of Orpheus's grasping and losing Eurydice, for the memory of that phrase resonates through and illuminates what remains.

Ashbery spent two days in bed with a summer flu. He had very little energy: "I don't feel well – my joints ache, and I'm very tired." He slept on and off with odd, fitful dreams that left him feeling strangely dreamlike even while awake, though this produced "rather a pleasant sensation." Afterward, he read more of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* and listened, "vastly impressed," to T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* on the radio. The next day, still dizzy, he lingered in bed. Late in the afternoon he took up a sheet of loose-leaf and started writing. That night, he considered what he had done: "I wrote a poem (in sestina form) which I'm quite pleased with. Title – The Painter" (June 17). The sestina, a thirty-nine-line Italian form made up of six six-line stanzas and one three-line conclusion, called an envoi, used an elaborate system of end-word repetition. Ashbery had never tried to write his own sestina before, but he admired sestinas by Dante and Petrarch and especially loved two twentieth-century examples that he knew well, Auden's "Paysage Moralisé," and Elizabeth Bishop's "A Miracle for Breakfast." In his first longhand draft of his new poem, he kept a running list of numbers between 1 and 6 down the side of the page to work out accurately the pattern of end-words as he composed each new stanza.

Within its formal, repetitive structure, "The Painter" powerfully reimagines Ashbery's recent thoughts. He narrates his own artistic frustrations as a version of the Orpheus myth. A young artist chases after an idea and fails to capture it. This idea, like Eurydice, is always disappearing before one can grasp it. For many years Ashbery had tried but failed to capture the essence of experience in a poem. "The Painter" was his first poem to elevate the artist's inability to capture "subject" and "feeling" as his most important experience. The poem succeeded in communicating this essential, even haunting failure in the relationship between his life and art that he had never been able to say before:

Sitting between the sea and the buildings
 He enjoyed painting the sea's portrait.
 But just as children imagine a prayer

Is merely silence, he expected his subject
 To rush up the sand, and, seizing a brush,
 Plaster its own portrait on the canvas.

So there was never any paint on his canvas
 Until the people who lived in the buildings
 Put him to work: "Try using the brush
 As a means to an end. Select, for a portrait,
 Something less angry and large, and more subject
 To a painter's moods, or, perhaps, to a prayer."

How could he explain to them his prayer
 That nature, not art, might usurp the canvas?
 He chose his wife for a new subject,
 Making her vast, like ruined buildings,
 As if, forgetting itself, the portrait
 Had expressed itself without a brush.

Slightly encouraged, he dipped his brush
 In the sea, murmuring a heartfelt prayer:
 "My soul, when I paint this next portrait
 Let it be you who wrecks the canvas."
 The news spread like wildfire through the buildings:
 He had gone back to the sea for his subject.

Imagine a painter crucified by his subject!
 Too exhausted even to lift his brush,
 He provoked some artists leaning from the buildings
 To malicious mirth: "We haven't a prayer
 Now, of putting ourselves on canvas,
 Or getting the sea to sit for a portrait!"

Others declared it a self-portrait.
 Finally all indications of a subject
 Began to fade, leaving the canvas
 Perfectly white. He put down the brush.
 At once a howl, that was also a prayer,
 Arose from the overcrowded buildings.

They tossed him, the portrait, from the tallest of the buildings;
 And the sea devoured the canvas and the brush
 As though his subject had decided to remain a prayer.

[manuscript poems quoted throughout]

“The Painter” describes the difficulty of creating something beautiful from the things that surrounded him as a child, for it originated in his familiar and beloved view of Lake Ontario. Ashbery wrote the earliest kernel of the poem in an entry in his 1943 diary: “It was windy and the lake was bright blue flecked with white. It was a scene that came to me almost the same thing a few weeks ago. I shall paint it some time.” This poem was the earliest he wrote that he included in his first volume, *Some Trees* (1956).

Over Ashbery’s strong objections, his parents arranged for him to attend secretarial school in Rochester, and his writing slowed “to a mere trickle.” They installed him in the home of elderly friends in Rochester, who woke him up each morning by seven-thirty so he would arrive on time at Monroe High, “a gloomy building” full of students who had flunked a course in high school. From “8:30 to 12:30 I take typing and shorthand; in the afternoons I sort of wander around, trying to cultivate a sunstroke.” If his summer activities had a soundtrack, Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* would have been playing as he scrambled to keep separate his various identities – as a responsible college student, poet, and gay man: “I am at present leading a triple life which threatens to split at the seams any day.” He ate dinner with his hosts and then “as soon as night falls, I don an enigmatic, eternal expression and issue forth into languorous, perfumed dusk. Rochester is *mad*.” Because of his late nights cruising for men at bars and clubs, early mornings were increasingly difficult to manage, but “the general effect of all this is complete unreality; I barely perceive at all.”

He resolved to recover in time for his senior year, but as soon as he arrived at Harvard, he ran into Fred Amory and immediately felt overpowered by his attraction once again. He spent evenings in the company of Bob Hunter, Sandy Gregg, Les Brown, and Bubsy Zimmerman for beers at Cronin’s, one of the “chief pleasures” of college, but he thought about Amory even there. To distract himself, he and Hunter began making collages in their dorm room. Fascinated by Max Ernst’s spatially disorienting images, which he had studied in Frederick Deknatel’s “Modern Art” course, Ashbery especially liked *Garden Airplane Trap* (1935) and works from *Les Malheurs des Immortals* (1922) by Max Ernst and Paul Eluard, which he borrowed from Widener. Two years earlier, he had made a miniature collage of a kitten in a nightie and a cap as a joke for

Bob Hunter. In September, Ashbery created two bigger and more sophisticated pieces, including *Seaport*, from images he cut out of a recent issue of *Vogue*, and *Late for School*, which told a disturbing story of a schoolboy attacked and replaced by a vulture, from illustrations in a German schoolbook he picked up at the Cambridge foreign-language bookstore Schoenhof's. Since Ashbery and Hunter were also taking Harry Levin's popular lecture class "Proust, Joyce, Mann" together, they began a semester-long ritual of reading Proust at the same time, usually in adjoining chairs in the Dunster House library. For the second time in six months, Ashbery carefully read all two thousand pages of Proust's novel.

Ashbery asked Fred Amory, who had recently become a literary associate for the *Advocate*, to collaborate on a new collage for the November 1948 cover. Over several weeks of late-night work, they created an image of a Greek figure spouting vases (shaped like penises) from her toga, watching them fall into a copy of Hans Holbein's *Anne Cresacre*, a painting Ashbery had once copied from the reproduction hanging in his parents' living room. One late evening, while working on the piece and talking about himself, Amory said to Ashbery, "I guess I haven't let the bear out yet," which Ashbery interpreted as an overture to intimacy. When Amory fell silent again, Ashbery asked him what he meant, but he would not say more. When Ashbery pushed, Amory grew angry. During this period of close collaboration with the object of his desire, Ashbery wrote several new poem drafts. Each illuminated feelings of longing and frustration. "Three A.M." begins with a command: "Don't say it," and suggests later that the speaker is "fully aware / Why you are being punished." "Poem About Autumn" compares a quickening feeling that accompanies a change of seasons to a similar sensation in love, since "in change is a kind of happiness / That is not created by us." At the end of the previous summer, after thinking about what kinds of information belonged in a poem versus a diary entry, Ashbery wrote a poem, "From a Diary," in which the speaker complains that "Poets found out long ago / Love is a rose, a hatband, or a flute." Poets employ "love's own borrowed voice" as poorly as diarists fill up their pages with superfluous facts. Ashbery searched for a more original language to express precisely his experience of loving Amory.

In the middle of October, Ashbery found an unexpected model

for a new kind of love poetry. He had first read Marianne Moore's poetry at the age of fifteen in Louis Untermeyer's *Modern American Poetry; Modern British Poetry: A Critical Anthology*, which printed five poems ("A Talisman," "That Harp You Play So Well," "To a Steam Roller," "England," and "The Fish"). In 1944, after Ashbery purchased Moore's *Selected Poems* (1935) at the Gotham Book Mart despite his very limited funds, he brought it back to Deerfield to read, but found its poems "mysterious" and too "difficult." At Harvard's Poetry Room, Ashbery listened repeatedly to the school's one recording of Moore (from her visit in 1941), but again the poems "intrigued" but escaped him. In the fall, Harry Levin announced that Moore would visit Harvard to give the prestigious Morris Gray reading on December 9, 1948. Ashbery's sense of anticipation was greater than for any other reading he had attended. He had just discovered a new Moore poem, "Efforts of Affection," in *The Nation*, and copied it onto a small sheet of blue paper. Three days later, he composed "The Statues." While the title recalls John Berryman's "The Statue," which Ashbery had admired recently after reading Berryman's *Poems* (1942), Ashbery's new poem was much more directly influenced by Moore, especially in its opening question:

What shall we do? Sincerity
Demands constant attention
But is threatened by an intervention

He sent a copy to Kenneth Koch, admitting "a certain resemblance to Marianne Moore," and then he announced seriously that "I have discovered Miss Moore." It had taken him "a long time to like [her poems] . . . to fall in love with them."

His revelatory feeling emerged after reading the most recent issue of the *Quarterly Review of Literature*, which was devoted entirely to a discussion of Moore's work. Ashbery especially liked Wallace Stevens's essay on the "potency" of her poetry. Stevens praised Moore for her imagination, which had enabled her to create "a reality adequate to the profound necessities of life today" without "speak[ing] directly of the subject of the poem by name." Her poems rejected "unsubstantial . . . facts of the world about us" and created "some communion with the objects which are apprehended by thought and not by sense." For Ashbery, these com-

ments provided him very nearly with a blueprint for how to read a Moore poem more astutely. They also explained to him how he might shift the weight between subject and emotion in his own poems. He copied her new poem, “By Disposition of Angels,” printed for the first time in the *Quarterly Review*, into his letter to Koch:

Messengers much like ourselves? Explain it.
 Steadfastness the darkness makes explicit?
 Something heard most clearly when not near it?
 Above particularities,
 these unparticularities praise cannot violate.
 One has seen, in such steadiness never deflected,
 how by darkness a star is perfected.

Star that does not ask me if I see it?
 Fir that would not wish me to uproot it?
 Speech that does not ask me if I hear it?
 Mysteries expound mysteries.
 Steadier than steady, star dazzling me, live and elate,
 no need to say, how like some we have known; too like her,
 too like him, and a-quiver forever.

Ashbery loved the way Moore’s poem gracefully enacts a relationship between the “particular” and “unparticular.” Stars are things beyond human comprehension, yet they reflect back to humans a reminder of time, light, silence, and speech. Through that humbling experience of remembering a sense of the mystery of things, one becomes connected again to one’s own humanity.

Three weeks later, during the brisk, dark evening of 16 November 1948, Ashbery sat at his dorm room desk and composed “Some Trees,” his concise love lyric. Bob Hunter could hear him writing steadily in pencil at his desk for an hour. There was silence and then the scraping of a chair. Ashbery handed Hunter a single sheet of paper: “I just finished a poem. Do you want to read it?”

These are amazing: each
 Joining a neighbor, as if speech
 Were a still performance.
 Arranging quite by chance

To meet as far, this morning,
 From the world as agreeing
 With it, you and I
 Are suddenly what the trees try

To tell us we are;
 That their merely being here
 Means something, a sign
 That we may touch, can love, explain.

What joy not to have invented
 This comeliness! It is what we wanted:
 Silence about to be filled with noises,
 Canvas on which emerges

A gathering of smiles, a winter morning.
 Season of puzzling light and fading
 Your days put on such reticence,
 Our errors seem their own defense.

Filled with intimacy and mystery, the brief and beautiful lyric illuminated how the scale of one's experience of the world becomes exaggerated through love. Everything means something. Signs fill one with joy, puzzlingly so. Everything – light, dark, trees, smiles, explanations – becomes imbued with a delicate and trembling sense of special meaning. Trees had weight as both symbol and image for Ashbery from childhood; the word *tree* conjured his cherished childhood summers at his grandparents' Pultneyville house on Lake Ontario, building sandcastles, climbing willow branches, playing Robin Hood with his boyish and fragile brother, his lovely playmate Mary Wellington, and loyal Carol Rupert. The poem managed to access these resonances by making the lovers seem like things, so small and grounded, and the trees seem like ideas, so "amazing" and tall. It was one kind of intimacy in the face of another older and greater one, and the oddly distorted mirror image of lovers gave both pairs additional dignity.

Ashbery had expressed his current experience of love without including any specific details about his life. He had achieved this milestone, in part, by studying Moore's approach and adapting it:

Speech that does not ask me if I hear it? [Moore]
 as if speech / Were a still performance. [Ashbery]

Something heard most clearly when not near it? [Moore]
 Silence about to be filled with noises [Ashbery]

One has seen, in such steadiness never deflected, [Moore]
 That their merely being here / Means something, [Ashbery]

By putting his own sense of rhythm and line length directly in dialogue with Moore's language, as though they shared a secret, he had created something new. The melancholy poem finally expressed the combination of experience and transcendence he had been attempting to communicate for many years.

Shortly after the *Advocate* published "Some Trees," the poet Richard Wilbur stopped Ashbery on Bow Street to compliment him on it. Fred Amory, however, stayed silent; if he knew the poem was about him, he did not acknowledge it. Just after they submitted their collage, he disappeared, even avoiding the *Advocate* offices. Ashbery's parents arrived for their first visit to Harvard, which provided a pleasant distraction. They brought news from Deerfield, having stopped by to visit the headmaster, Frank Boyden, on their way. Ashbery's father, Chet, who had been studying the New England photographs of Samuel Chamberlain, was eager to see Concord. His parents took Ashbery, Sandy Gregg, Bob Hunter, and Bussy Zimmerman, whom they were meeting for the first time, out for lunch at the famous Wayside Inn. Ashbery was relieved that his father seemed less hostile, even cheerful, toward him on this visit.

After they left, there was still no word from Amory. A week later, Ashbery and Bob Hunter attended Moore's reading together. Unlike other readings held in huge auditoriums, for this one Moore was introduced by F. O. Matthiessen in Sever Hall, a regular classroom, and the audience was small. Moore loomed so large poetically that Ashbery was shocked to see a tiny, sixty-one-year-old woman in "a frumpy old suit and white collar." She spoke of her admiration for the boxer Joe Louis, read for less than twenty minutes, and then sat down again. Ashbery had hoped to see Amory in the audience, but he did not appear.

By early February, Ashbery felt so depressed he could not con-



*Busy Zimmerman,
John Ashbery, Bob
Hunter, and Sandy
Gregg in Concord, fall
1948 (photo: Chester
Ashbery)*

centrate. James Munn, his Old Testament course professor, was “compassionate” when Ashbery “nearly flunked my Old Testament final exam. I was supposed to write an essay and couldn’t.” Munn asked him, “Are you by any chance in love? You have not done very well but just do the best you can.” On 7 February, the first day of spring classes, Ashbery saw Amory by chance while standing in line for tickets to an all-Stravinsky concert at Sanders Theatre. They decided to go together. This incident brightened Ashbery’s mood for the next few days. The concert with Stravinsky conducting the Boston Symphony was “wonderful,” as were their conversations afterward until Amory suddenly became furious. He snapped at Ashbery for being too “importunate” and declared that he did not want to see him again.

Ashbery’s depression worsened. He moved to a nearby single (H-41) because Bob Hunter was graduating early and living off campus. Ashbery’s evenings felt strange and lonely without Hunter, who was busy with a job in the newly opened Lamont Library and excited about arranging plans to teach overseas and travel. Ashbery stayed in his dorm room alone and hardly got out of bed. He ignored his classes and read Keats’s “great poem, ‘Isabella, or The Pot of Basil’” in his room. Forcing himself at least to attend his “Twentieth-Century American Poetry” course taught by Matthiessen, Ashbery appreciated the professor’s “very conscientious and insightful” teaching. Still, the course did not change his opinions: “(Something there is that doesn’t love Robert Frost),” he noted to himself one afternoon during Matthiessen’s enthusiastic lecture. He wrote papers on three of his four favorite modernists, analyzing Stevens’s wordless sounds in “Chocorua to Its Neighbor”

and creating an imagined anthology of Auden's and Moore's poetry. Matthiessen liked Ashbery's Stevens essay but felt his student was "more squarely on the mark in dealing with Miss Moore" than with Auden. This criticism was disheartening because, after recently changing topics from a study of Henry James's novels, Ashbery was struggling to write his senior thesis on Auden's poetry.

Because of his depression, he had already procrastinated too long. His thesis was due on 15 March, but by the end of February he had written nothing except a new poem, "The Egoist," which described "the artist" alone, still, thinking as he "stands in his wintry studio." Ashbery stayed in bed or sat at his desk staring out his dorm window onto the frozen Charles River. He was stuck, staring at his utterly bleak "wintry" view. He heard that Bussy Zimmerman had already turned in her eighty-page thesis, *Edward Taylor and the Puritan Mind*, to her adviser, Perry Miller. Ashbery had been reading and listening to Auden's works with increasing intensity for six years, yet he still could not start writing. He had spent the past year debating Auden's poetry and plays in detail with Kenneth Koch and others at the *Advocate*, but he did not want to write the paper. He had even become friendly with Auden. At an *Advocate* event the previous April, they had chatted awhile and then Auden had invited Ashbery to walk with him back to his hotel suite. After accompanying him as far as his room, however, Ashbery demurred. Despite his boundless admiration for the man as a poet, he "could not go to bed with him" and returned to his dorm room, where he described the almost-sexual encounter to Hunter.

Now, the deadline loomed. He lay in bed, skipping class and reading nothing but Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes." He finally emerged from his room only to inform Professor B. J. Whiting, the chair of the senior thesis committee and the "strange little man" who had taught the year-long Chaucer course Ashbery took as a junior, that he had decided not to write a thesis.

Professor Whiting talked Ashbery into beginning the essay. Because Whiting treated the issue as an entirely administrative problem – how to get his student to fulfill a commitment – he helped to free Ashbery from the unconscious psychological dilemma that plagued him. Instead of having difficulty writing

about a gay artist (and near love interest), he summed up Auden's career trajectory, dwelling on just a few poems. Once Ashbery started, he did not stop writing for four feverish days. When he forgot he was writing a thesis and just described what he liked most about Auden's poetry as a fellow poet, he even enjoyed himself a little. He still loved Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror* most because of its "beauty which we prize more highly than his ideas, worthy as they are." "Beauty," Ashbery explained, arose from "mystery, the unconscious quality that is an element of all great poetry." He saw in Auden's work something he had admired in Dante's: "the artist seeking truth . . . [which] by its very lucidity and penetration achieves the unconscious which we find in the greatest poetry – our view of the poet himself, the unsatisfied voyager." On the evening of the fourth day, Ashbery traveled to a remote part of South Boston to have his essay quickly typed. Since all the good typists had been already secured by more organized students, he booked a second-rate, slow, error-prone typist, but he managed to submit the paper on time.

Unburdened, he began to leave his room. A few weeks later, he went alone to the Mandrake Book Store to see the opening of an exhibition of watercolors. The artist, Edward Gorey, the tall, idiosyncratic writer and artist whom everyone called Ted, was an acquaintance from the *Advocate*. In the crowded room, Ashbery "heard someone with a voice that sounded like his own." That flat, nasal voice "expressed a preference for Poulenc over Wagner, for *Sécheresses* over *Tristan*," brash statements given a Harvard music faculty that considered such ideas foolish. Ashbery heard "what seemed like" his own voice speaking his own thought. Even more powerfully, he heard someone sharing his particular penchant for saying exactly the opposite of prevailing opinion, regardless of the precise truth of the comment. He turned around and was surprised to discover Frank O'Hara, whom he already knew as a talented *Advocate* writer and Ted Gorey's roommate. Since enthusiastically championing O'Hara's short play, *O the Danger of Daily Living*, the first *Advocate* submission by "Francis O'Hara (class of 1950)," which was published in the March 1948 issue, Ashbery had avoided contact with the writer. He thought O'Hara, who had a bent nose and a "pugnacious" expression while walking, looked rather tough and mean. At the party, however, they began to talk.

Several weeks after meeting O'Hara, Ashbery wrote to Bob Hunter about this life-changing new friendship: "I made many good friends as the term began to end, the greatest of these being Frank O'Hara. . . . O'Hara I suspect of being my identical twin; I saw much of him the last few weeks, spending most of my time in Eliot visiting with him and attendant spirits." O'Hara was twenty-three and Ashbery twenty-one, but because O'Hara had served in the navy, Ashbery was a senior and O'Hara still a junior. Although O'Hara had grown up in Grafton, near Boston, they shared a voice, an accent, and many interests. O'Hara, trained as a pianist, played Debussy and Poulenc for Ashbery and then his own composition, "a three-second sonata." Impressed, Ashbery wrote a piano work as a present for O'Hara titled "Op. 1 No. 1." Unlike Ashbery's romantic crushes, which heightened his senses and made the real world seem stranger and more mysterious, this new friendship clarified and sharpened a world he already knew. (Shortly after meeting O'Hara, and locked out of his dorm room late one night, Ashbery knocked on Fred Amory's door. It was the first time they had seen each other in a long time, but Amory was very kind and let him sleep in an empty bed.)

Almost every afternoon for the final three weeks at Harvard, Ashbery and O'Hara "lay on the grass" in the sun by the banks of the Charles River. In O'Hara, Ashbery had found a brother more like him in sensibility and sound than the one he had lost. O'Hara, though, was also freer and more candid than Ashbery in both his life and art. Bussy Zimmerman had remarked during sophomore year that Ashbery's poetry was sometimes too serious; she even suggested that his phrase "I sense the fatal chill," a line she had read in his poem "The Perfect Orange" published in the *Advocate*, was melodramatic. Although he admired her "refreshing views of music and literature," he had not taken her advice to change it. After spending time with O'Hara, though, he understood her comment much better.

Because he had been elected class poet (after running unopposed), Ashbery had to deliver the class poem at graduation. Throughout May, he tried but failed to write a new work for the occasion. Finally, he gave up and chose one of his old poems, "A Sermon: *Amos: 8:11-14*," which he had written in Sodus the summer between his freshman and sophomore years, when he was thinking about the relationship between religion and modern life.

He felt that the poem was “possibly the only one” he had ever written that felt prophetic and had a sense of a grand, public occasion. It contained added symbolic value because it was his first poem published in the *Advocate*. Henry Lawrence, who became ill, was sorry to miss seeing his grandson deliver the class poem: “When I recall the little poem you wrote when you were eight years old I must say I was pleased then, but did not foresee that it would lead to the present distinction.” Ashbery’s grandmother Addie, his parents, Chet and Helen, and his aunt Janet were in the audience as he spoke:

In this land travel light
 And lightly: keep rude hands from sight
 Nor with speech design fidelities.
 Break vows as fagots: ignore
 Promises, prayers, lusting before the door,
 Nor press the sinning Tartar to his knees.

Move as water: soon gone,
 Lightly girdling the dry stone.
 Touch nothing long: involve
 Nothing ever. Your fate and history
 Meet in geometry
 And in radiant law dissolve.

I explain: imagine
 A young man or fair virgin
 At dark, at sea’s edge wading.
 And now drawn in a strange light
 Into the sea. Nearing night
 Locks tongue, ties eye. Fading

From shore line the swimmer
 Forms with his ocean brother
 A complex unity: sea immolates
 Matter in distance, and he or she
 Buries desire in motion. And does not see
 Where, at far left, oars raised, a small boat waits.

My people, what is intended
 Let the cool martyr, whose distant head
 Now seems a swimming dog’s, explore,

Sustained in a vast disinterest.
 But learn that distances are kindest,
 Not the correct sun striking the shore.

The poem had the rhythm of a public prayer, offering wisdom to graduates, advice it never seemed to have contained so directly before. The end of the poem encouraged the reader to travel widely and to explore without worrying about being correct. He had written the poem at an earlier time in his life when he was trying to find the right path for himself as a man and a poet, but it felt prophetic in a new way as he graduated, left Cambridge, and embarked on a new odyssey.

In a lighthearted mood, he drove home with his parents. His friendship with Frank O'Hara and the coterie of young artists who fluttered around him – “attendant spirits,” as he called them, alluding to Titania and her attendant spirits in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – harkened back to his childhood experience with Shakespeare and poetry. Then, his first poem came to him instinctively, not burdened by any expectations about what it meant for poetry to be modern or good. He felt a similar sort of giddy mood about poetry when he talked about it with Frank O'Hara. Anything was possible. Everything was possible. Even the “green world” of the Ashbery farm in late June did not oppress him this time because he was going to leave it before the chores of “churry” season started. He began writing “The Calendar” with these thoughts of the past and future:

Spring tempts me back to green areas
 From which I had strayed, and I allow my mind
 Again the luxury of attempting too little, of hearing
 My words go uncared for in the rejoicing wind.

The poem has a dreamlike summer fancy. After celebrating the Fourth of July holiday at home, he took this buoyant feeling with him to New York City despite his family's objections. His father was “anti-New York,” and particularly unenthusiastic about his son's potentially expensive plan to move there, but Ashbery was determined to live in the city as he had long wished and finally to begin his life as an artist.