“That you too were the I”:
Forms of polyphonic communication in John Ashbery’s poetry

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Tarkastelen tutkimuksessani amerikkalaisen John Ashberyn (1927–) runoudessa ilmenevää moniäänisyyttä. Runoutta pidetään yleensä yksiäänisenä puheena, kun taas romaanin ajatellaan erityisesti Mihail Bahtinin vaikutuksesta olevan luonnostaan moniääninen kirjallisuudenlaji. Ashberyn postmoderni runous haastaa tämän käsityksen. Ashbery tunnetaan vakiintuneita runouskäsityksiä vastaan kirjoittavana avantgarde-runoilijana.

Pääasiallisina tutkimuskohteinani ovat Ashberyn pitkä runoelma nimeltä ”Litany” (1979) sekä lyhyiden runojen valikoima *Your Name Here* (2000). Vertailukohtana tarkastelen Ashberyn yhdessä James Schuylerin kanssa kirjoittamaa romaania *A Nest of Ninnies* (1969).

Teoreettisena pohjana on käytetty Ashberyä käsittelevän muun tutkimuksen lisäksi muun muassa jälkistrukturalistisiin teorioihin liittyviä ajatuksia pronominien vaikutuksesta siihen miten lukija muodostaa käsityksen subjektiivisesta läsnäolosta runossa. Ashbery käyttää persoonapronomineja ilman selkeitä viittaussuhteita. Viittaussuhteiden hämärtymisen ja fragmentaarisuuden vuoksi Ashberyn runoja pidetään usein vaikeina, eikä niistä ole helppo löytää yhtä selkeää aihetta. Hajanaisuus on kuitenkin motivoitua, koska juuri se mahdollistaa moniäänisyyden ja avoimen tekstin, joka voi sisältää monia merkityksiä. Kun runossa ei ole yhden puhujan hallitsevaa ääntä, lukijan rooli merkitysten muodostajana nousee keskeiseksi.

”Litany” on selkeästi metatekstuaalinen runo, jossa fiktiivinen taso sekoittuu runouden, taiteen ja kritiikin mahdollisuuksien pohdintaan. Runo hahmottelee uudenlaista, moniäänistä teorian ja runouden rajoja purkavaa kommunikaation muotoa. Toisen persoonan pronominien voidaan runossa usein ajatella puhuttelevan lukijaa.

Your Name Here -kokoelmassa puolestaan toisen persoonan pronominipositiot määrittyvät usein tietyiksi henkilöhahmoiksi runojen maailmassa, ja pronominipositioiden kautta runoissa rakentuu moniäänisiä dialogeja määrittymättömien henkilöhahmojen välille. Näin lukijan huomio suunnataan ensisijaisesti kommunikaation ja arkipäivän kielenkäytön kliseiden sävyihin ja asiayhteyksiin pikemminkin kuin yksittäisten lausumien sisältöön.

A Nest of Ninnies -romaani toimii näennäisestä dialogisuudestaan huolimatta ennen kaikkea yksiäänisesti, sillä romaanin yksiulotteisten henkilöhahmojen esittämiä ajatuksia hallitsee parodioimaan pyrkivä kertojanääni. Ashberyn runojen ja romaanin tarkasteleminen osoittaa, että käsitys runoudesta väistämättä yksiäänisenä ja romaanista moniäänisenä ei ole kaikilta osin ongelmaton. Moniääninen, monimerkityksinen runo voi tarjota toiselle itsenäisen aseman.

Asiasanat: Ashbery, John; kirjallisuus -- Yhdysvallat; lyriikka -- runot -- minä; romaani; postmoderni; avantgarde

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction

> The body is what this is all about and it disperses
> In sheeted fragments, all somewhere around
> But difficult to read correctly since there is
> No common vantage point, no point of view
> Like the "I" in a novel. And in truth
> No one never saw the point of any.
> ('No Way of Knowing', *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*: 56)

In the above passage from the poem 'No Way of Knowing', John Ashbery makes a point which could easily be read as pertaining to most of his poetry: there is no common point of view, no single stance from which all perceptions and feelings emanate. "The body" – a material presence – should be "what this is all about", but any presence there might be in the poem is dispersed in fragments of borrowed speech and manifested through variant personal pronouns with no obvious referents. And just as this blunt statement starts to seem perplexing, even to leave the reader without anything to go by, another claim follows: "And in truth / No one never saw the point of any." There is, in fact, no need for a "common vantage point", the speaker of the poem assures the readers, using a double negative, as if wanting to emphasize this rather questionable, possibly ironic, view. When this passage is read as if it referred to itself as a poem rather than as a general comment referring to a phenomenon that is observable outside the text, the poem appears to deny its own focalization and unity, the possibility of a unified speaker or a clearly identifiable self governing the text, and raises the question of the necessity of such a "vantage point".

Having read the aforequoted excerpt as if it represented an important aspect of much of Ashbery's poetry, I have already made certain assumptions, most importantly that there is, behind these statements too, a *speaker* who utters them. Obviously, we are accustomed to seeing the point for "a common vantage point". The speaker of 'No Way of Knowing' sees novels as a matter of the single observer or self, the *I*, but as far as novels are concerned, they are often understood as being polyphonic and lacking a single voice, especially through Bakhtin's ([1981] 1983; 1984) theory. Poetry, on the other hand, is often regarded as the most subjective of literary genres. We are inclined to conceive of poetry as self-expression, the discourse of a single persona and voice. For his part, Bakhtin ([1981] 1983: 285) sees poetry as "a pure and direct expression of [the poet's] own intention"; it is a literary genre in

which all discourses and meanings are subjugated under a single voice. Ashbery's passage becomes all the more controversial and, perhaps also "difficult to read correctly" as the poem suggests, when we have trouble constructing a definable voice or a self in the whole poem which, like many of Ashbery's poems, does not enable us to reach towards coherence on the level of the whole. Even though the above passage is concerned with metatextuality, it would be difficult to say that metatextuality is what the entire poem is about. Certainly such issues as meaning and communication become difficult from this point of view. Readers may be tempted to conclude that Ashbery's poems are primarily so private that they do not communicate, that they do not present them with any kind of meaning.

One finds, then, that it is, for the most part, impossible to define what an Ashbery poem is ultimately *about*, nor can one paraphrase the 'meaning' of the poem. Depending on individual preferences, this has been regarded as both a blessing and a curse. Ashbery occupies a controversial status in American poetry as an avant-garde writer and a key member of the so-called 'New York School' of poetry. Once he was a part of a marginalized opposition to the dominant poetic mode, and later turned into one of the most respected contemporary American poets, and he has influenced many other writers. Yet, his poetry is often felt to be meaningless.

This study is premised upon the assumption that Ashbery's poems have meaning; they are not mere nonsense and play with language. If readers were not enticed into searching for meaning, the surface difficulties of the texts would lead readers to reject Ashbery's poetry entirely. In Ashbery's poems, the polyphonic speech situation creates a communicative possibility, as the texts challenge the readers to participate in constructing meaning and to become conscious of the construction of the text through the use of shifting speaker positions and uncertain pronominal references. This does not have to mean that there would be coherence of meaning or of subject matter in the texts, or that the poems could not be inconsistent and contradictory. Rather, Ashbery's poetry presents possibilities for multiple meanings which can exist simultaneously, and the structures that enable this situation are what I shall discuss here.

Ashbery's poetry has always been concerned with the possibility of multiple voices and the dispersal of a subjective position. However, because there is in most poems an *I*, his poems may appear subjective or private. Ashbery is often called a

'solipsist', and his texts are repeatedly described as 'meditations' on or around vague subjects. For example Harold Bloom ([1982] 1983: 271-273) maintains that Ashbery's poetry is essentially concerned with "solitude". To some extent, Ashbery's poems could be regarded as ongoing thought processes of an indeterminate speaker, but in various ways, as I will come to show, the poems are full of heterogeneous materials, different discourses and points of views or voices. Tones of parody and unexpected juxtapositions serve to place apparent statements in a questionable light. All in all, there are multiple meanings, polyphony of voices, and the poems also take the reader's position into account. Before introducing the works that I will be concentrating on, I need to consider briefly some of the concepts mentioned thus far.

In attempting to comprehend a "vantage point" for a poem, we find several related concepts: voice and speaker, self, subject and subjectivity, identity and personality. As we read, we try to construct a voice or a speaker that brings together the totality of the text and charges the language with his or her presence and meaning, thereby serving as a point of reference. As Jonathan Culler ([1975] 1985: 165-166) has stated, "orientational" words known as *deictic markers*, for example personal pronouns that do not relate to "an actual situation of utterance" outside the poem, but to a context that the readers imagine, are those elements of a poem that make readers construct a voice for it.

As observed in relation to 'No Way of Knowing', normally upon encountering the pronoun *I* in a poem, one would expect to be able to construct a constant voice that is manifest in the pronoun, but Ashbery's poetry presents a challenge to this expectation. His own, oft-cited account of his use of pronouns that he presented in an interview with the *New York Quarterly* is illuminating:

> The personal pronouns in my work very often seem to be like variables in an equation. "You" can be myself or it can be another person, someone whom I'm addressing, and so can "he" and "she" for that matter and "we;"… we are somehow all aspects of a consciousness giving rise to the poem and the fact of addressing someone, myself or someone else, is what's the important thing at that particular moment rather than the particular person involved. I guess I don't have a very strong sense of my own identity and I find it very easy to move from one person in the sense of a pronoun to another and this again helps to produce a kind of polyphony in my poetry which I again feel is a means toward greater naturalism. (Ashbery in Packard (ed.) 1987: 89-90; my ellipsis)

Ashbery's poems present a constant interplay between vaguely defined and elusive positions mostly manifested only through pronouns. Usually the poems contain the pronoun *I*, which marks a speaker, but a continuous presence or a persona is difficult

to identify on the level of the whole text. Both the *I* and *you* are vague and shifting. 'Person' in Ashbery's poems is manifest only in fragments of different discourses and present only in "the fact of addressing someone". Address is, then, also significant for Ashbery's polyphony.

Ashbery's peculiar and inconsistent use of personal pronouns is an oft-discussed issue. Koethe (1980) discusses it in the context of self and subjectivity, and Malinowska (2000) relates it to the abandonment of a unitary position which allows for an investigation of ontological concerns. Costello (1982), for her part, discusses the pronoun *you* as a strategy to involve and address the reader. Yet, there are no examinations of Ashbery's poetry that would combine these issues for an investigation of the inclusive polyphony of Ashbery's poems. Ignoring that aspect may lead one to treat certain utterances in the texts as assertive affirmations without admitting to their uncertain position and to the variety of possibilities. My study is thus, first of all, concerned with the way Ashbery's poetry uses a fragmented "vantage point" to establish polyphony and to communicate multiple meanings. Secondly, I am interested in how the polyphonic situation may involve the reader into the construction of the text.

As mentioned, the pronoun *I* is frequent in Ashbery, and it easily leads readers to expect to find a single self or a specific persona who would be the speaker of the whole poem, perhaps even the poet himself. Structuralist and poststructuralist theory have of course already shown that the conception of the "self as a conscious subject" that assigns meanings is only a result of particular literary and linguistic conventions (Culler [1975] 1985: 28-29). Elsewhere, Culler (1981: 33) notes that "the 'I' is not something given but comes to exist as that which is addressed by and relates to others". Obviously some poems are more readily amenable for an understanding where the *I* appears as a consistent position throughout the text, as "something given", than Ashbery's poems, which foreground the first-person position as something that is created in the text and in the reading.

For his part, Antony Easthope (1983: 30) has asserted that poetry is normally understood as "the expression of an author", and in this sense poetry relates to and originates from "subjectivity". However, a text that was written by a single author can really contain multiple "selves" (Easthope 1983: 30). This, as Easthope (1983: 31) states in relation to Roland Barthes's (1994: 493) ideas, is because the conception of a

unitary source of utterances or "subjectivity" is only "the effect of a poetic discourse". In other words, subjectivity is caused by language. The subjectivity here has little to do with such notions as the actual poet's personality, or with the author's personal 'voice' as a poetic style that can be separated from other poets' styles. Subjectivity is related to how ideas emanate from a certain perspective or a mind that provides their organization and meaning. Identity and personality, on the other hand, are the property of 'person'. An identity entails characteristics that distinguish the person from all other persons. Personality and identity can be related to 'characters' in a literary text, whereas subjectivity can simply be understood as a "vantage point". In any case, pronominal relations like the centrality of the *I* in a poem encourage readers to perceive poems as the expression of a single speaker or subjectivity.

Due to the fragmentariness and the dispersal of a unified subject, Ashbery's poetry bears a relation to postmodernism. In postmodernist literature, single identities and particular personalities are no longer understood to be central, as Charles Russell observes, because "individual subjects, voices, texts, or codes" always function within "collective discourse" and larger societal structures (Russell 1985: 246-247). Russell (1985: 247) states that in postmodernism "we are found to be constructs of discrete elements of social discourse". The languages and discourses that we use are central rather than individual personality, as the language that a person speaks is finally what defines him/her. As I will come to observe in Chapter Four, formulaic utterances and clichés, which can be understood as common, collective discourse, are often explored in Ashbery's poetry.

In foregrounding the reader's active role and the dispersal of the subject, Ashbery's poetry also parallels the advance of poststructuralist and deconstructionist thought. There is a biographical connection: during his long stays in Paris in between 1955 to 1965, Ashbery became acquainted with some of the editors of the journal *Tel Quel*, to which also such critics as Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault contributed (Cohen 1980: 133). As noted above, poststructuralism relates to understanding the self as a construct. Moreover, in written texts all voices and their origins are dispelled, and the text finds its unitary composition in the reader only (Barthes 1994: 491, 495). The reader is a necessary element in making the texts of someone like Ashbery available for analysis because, as Jonathan Culler (1983: 38) has remarked, in order to be able to discuss Ashbery's poetry, one almost inevitably has to start with "the reader's

difficulties in making sense". For the purposes of this study, I eventually need to move beyond the difficulties of making sense to discussing the reader's role in "making sense", or in constructing meanings.

Nevertheless, while the connection to poststructuralism manifests itself in Ashbery's texts, he has written little about his poetics and is not explicitly a proponent of any literary critical approach. The 'New York School of poets', with which Ashbery has been associated, was also not a 'movement' with a specific agenda. I shall discuss the 'school' in more detail in the second chapter.

As a writer Ashbery has been productive, particularly since the early 1990s: just in the last ten years he has published seven books of poetry. Since the onset of his publishing career in the 1950s, he has published 26 books of poetry altogether to date, one novel, some plays, as well as written art reviews and essays. He has also taught creative writing. Ashbery has won several literary awards, including the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award and the National Book Critics' Circle Award, which all came for a single book, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975). Since then, he has received several other awards and more critical attention. Despite these obvious signs of appreciation, he is sometimes little 'understood', as criticism of unintelligibility and meaninglessness has continued to be common. James Fenton (1985: 10), for one, wrote in a review about the lack of a sustainable aesthetic and "derogation of sense" in Ashbery's *Selected Poems.* The review acknowledges Ashbery's importance as an influential contemporary poet, but still dismisses his poetry as meaningless.

Authorship and the speaker's relation to the poet as the implied author are not ultimately central in my discussion. As far as Ashbery's biographical self is concerned, his poems contain relatively little explicitly biographical material. This, of course, does not prevent one from relating one's reading to biographical matters, and critics have variously done so especially with regard to Ashbery's homosexuality (see for example Shoptaw 1994 and Vincent 2007: 19-22). In my study, biographical details and authorship will be discussed to the extent that they relate to Ashbery's literary historical context, to gain insights into where Ashbery's dispersal of the unified speaking position stands in relation to broader currents in 20th century American poetries. Biographical information used has mostly been drawn from David Herd (2000) and David Lehman (1998). Also, I shall use some of Ashbery's poems to

illustrate the literary historical details of his poetic career, but these readings should not be taken to mean that they are the only possible ones, but rather just one possibility among many. Indeed, my primary method in this study is to analyze the texts themselves and show how the aspects that I am discussing are evident in the structural and discursive features of the texts as well as, as is often the case, as a metatextual theme in the poems.

Several poems from throughout Ashbery's career will, then, be referred to and discussed to illustrate the arguments, but my primary focus is on two of Ashbery's works from different periods. In order to gain an understanding of the various ways the voices and speaker positions in Ashbery's poetry are adapted for communication, I will take for closer investigation 'Litany' (1979), which is a long poem in two columns, and *Your Name Here* (2000), a collection of shorter poems. They represent two somewhat different perspectives to the issues of voice and communication. There are certainly common features to the texts, but the features serve different ends. Consequently the texts are best discussed separately at first.

After establishing the literary historical context of Ashbery's use of voice in Chapter Two, I shall discuss in the third chapter the earlier text 'Litany' concentrating on the personal pronouns in establishing speaker positions and the possibility of communication. The long poem of 65 pages opens the collection *As We Know*. The short poems in the collection will not be discussed. One of the many long poems of which Ashbery is well-known, 'Litany' is a shifting and fragmentary text which stresses the present moment and its relation to the past, and the conditions of representation of these issues from a perspective that calls attention to the construction of the text itself as well as to issues relating to poetry, art and criticism in general. The two column structure already, as a material feature, makes the text appear dialogical. There is, however, more than materiality that creates a situation where multiple voices are present in the text, allowing flexible positions for the *I* and *you*.

On the other hand, communication is not only an end in a poem, but also what the texts primarily explore in the more recent collection *Your Name Here*, which is the focus of the fourth chapter. The collection will be discussed in relation to the narrative and dialogical aspects of the texts that allow for an investigation of

communicational situations as the single voice is decentralized. Special focus is paid to the title poem.

In the final chapter, what has been said in the previous chapters will be brought to the context of the concept of polyphony. The novel *A Nest of Ninnies* (1969), which Ashbery wrote in collaboration with James Schuyler, serves as a point of comparison to illustrate the possibilities of polyphony in poetry as opposed to the novel. This discussion is related to Bakhtin's understanding of how polyphony or a plurality of voices and discourses, which allow for a varied investigation of an idea, is intrinsic to the novel, but not possible in poetry, as poetry requires the poet to subject all other discourses and voices under a single perspective (Bakhtin [1981] 1983: 262-263, 285; 1984: 78-80). As I will come to show, however, Ashbery's work challenges this view because the poems include utterances that are ultimately dialogical and addressed to someone, whereas the novel is ultimately monological (cf. Bakhtin's [1981] 1983: 262; 1984: 251).

Before discussing my key texts, however, in the next chapter I shall have to establish certain basic literary historical conditions and aspects of Ashbery's production in order to understand how his disruption of the single voice and coherence of a poem are related to poetic conventions that have variously been at issue in 20th century American poetry. This will allow me to show the persistence of the convention of the single voice and what is at stake in it, which will provide a ground for the later more specific discussions.

2. Ashbery's use of voice as a postmodern phenomenon: Literary historical conditions

THE TEMPLATE

was always there, its existence seldom
questioned or suspected. The poets of the future
would avoid it, as we had. An imaginary railing
disappeared into the forest. It was here that the old gang
used to gather and swap stories. It
was like the Amazon, but on a much smaller scale.

Afterwards, when some of us swept out into the world
and could make comparisons, the fuss seemed justified.
No two poets ever agreed on anything, and that amused us.
It seemed good, the clotted darkness that came every day.
('The Template', *Where Shall I Wander*: 52)

Ashbery's poem 'The Template' from a recent collection, *Where Shall I Wander* (2005), appears to offer a narrative that illustrates central aspects of his poetic production and the relation of his work to his contemporaries in the latter part of the 20th century. The poem presents a series of statements that are, perhaps, related to what is already given in the title of the text, "the template". However, readers do not receive an explanation for what such a template might be, nor is any there certainty as to whether all the occurrences of the pronoun "it" refer to "the template" or to something else. Herein lies the fundamental 'difficulty' of this poem. Otherwise the text is relatively cohesive, and the poem is somewhat atypical of Ashbery in that it does appear to present a continuous speaker position which is explicit in the pronoun *we*. Nevertheless, one could imagine that even though the meaning of "the template" was somehow given, some details would still remain ambiguous because of the uncertainty of reference.

Let me, then, take the poem that is cited above in its entirety as my guideline to open this chapter which introduces aspects of Ashbery's production as it relates to his contemporaries. For that purpose, I shall designate as "the template" both the dominant poetics at the time when Ashbery began his career and the one feature that clearly is at issue in that dominant poetry: the common conception of poetry as self-expression, as the discourse of a single voice or an *I*. In Ashbery's poetry, this conception is a "template" that is "always there", but also, more importantly, avoided. I hasten to point out that the uncertainty of the reference of the pronoun "it" in the

poem provides possibilities for several readings, also ones that need not be related to Ashbery's own career. Fostering a view here that Ashbery is speaking in his own person about his career as the *only* possible reading would be misguided, because the openness of the poem is precisely what allows for positing a reading such as this. However, since there will be examples of how several meanings and polyphony are manifest in Ashbery's poems later in this study, for the purposes of the present chapter, I shall merely point out the existence of other possibilities, and use this poem as an illustration of literary historical issues, which also does not entail interpreting every detail in the text.

When Ashbery's publishing career began in the 1950s, his poetry was somewhat marginalized. At that era, the prevailing poetic 'template' was the New Critical mode of both studying and writing poetry. This was, indeed, "seldom / questioned or suspected". Even still at the beginning of the 1960s, a poem was widely expected to appear "self-contained, coherent, and unified: that it present, indirectly to be sure, a paradox, oblique truth, or special insight", and in such a poem the speaker had to be someone separate from the author, but still a particular "persona" (Perloff 1996: 107). The separation of the author and the speaker, in particular, is a New Critical principle. Poets such as Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, and Richard Wilbur were renowned practitioners of this style of writing that was connected to Modernism in "economy, wit, irony, impersonality, scrupulous handling of form", but hardly made use of such characteristics as "extreme ellipsis, fragmentation, and discontinuity" (Perkins 1987: 333-334). The expectation of coherence also required consistency from the speaker. Lehman (1998: 332) notes that the academic world encouraged one to "regard a poem as a verbal icon, a taut web of tensions in balance", and Ashbery and his 'peer group', the so-called 'New York School of poets', were not interested in this established mode. Instead, Ashbery's work was characterized by avant-gardism and experimentation from the beginning. This was the atmosphere in which such works as *Some Trees* (1956) and *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) were written, and the early work also established Ashbery's reputation as a 'difficult' poet.

The late 1950s also saw the rise of another mode of poetry which was soon to become academically accepted, one which, as Perkins (1987: 342) notes, took its incentive from the New Critical principle of separating the speaker and the poet. This mode has been termed 'confessional' poetry, which has as its premise the poet's

direct speech and sincerity of emotions. The convention is that the poet is the speaker. The poet becomes, in Breslin's words, "a representative victim" who reflects on his or her self and predominantly negative feelings and experiences, and the reader's role is to empathize and to begin a reflection of his or her own experience (Breslin 1987: 42-43). A confessional poem is, then, meaningful in terms of one person's self, past and present, and the poem ultimately aims at revealing something about this one person.

While confessional poetry was partly a reaction to the New Critical mode of reading, it soon became established, and as Terrell Scott Herring (2002: 415) notes, it "exemplified the irony and paradox structuring the ideal New Critical poem" because the relationship between "public and private" was so clearly an issue. Therefore, confessional poetry provided good material for New Critical study (Herring 2002: 415). The practice was, then, ultimately close to New Criticism, even though a confessional poem might have been more open in terms of structure than earlier New Critical poems. Both of these poetic tendencies emphasize the centrality of the single voice and one identity or person whose presence provides the meaning of the insights or emotions presented in the poem. The relation between the two modes is well exemplified in the case of Robert Lowell, who began writing in the formal terms of the New Critical understanding of poetry, and whose *Life Studies* (1959) is considered to be important for confessional poetry (Perkins 1987: 407, 410). Sylvia Plath and W.D. Snodgrass are also known as practitioners of the confessional mode.

Since the intertwined practices and conventions of New Criticism and confessional poetry presented themselves as rather uninteresting to Ashbery and his friends, this might have been a partial incentive for them, particularly for Ashbery, to reach toward impersonality and to problematize the unitary speaking voice position. In section 2.1., I shall discuss the New York School and its relation to the dominant modes. Robert Lowell is often referred to as the dominant poetic figure of this era, and he serves as my example of the dominant modes in 2.1.2., even though confessional poetry in itself is undoubtedly a vast issue, particularly because the label has been used to group such diverse poets as not just Lowell or Plath, but also for example Allen Ginsberg (see Breslin 1987: 42).

If the "we" in 'The Template' is taken to refer to the New York School of poetry in the 1950s, "[t]he poets of the future", then, could allude to what is

commonly known as the Language poetry 'movement', which emerged in the 1970s. Language poetry has its roots in the deconstructionist and poststructuralist literary theories that were prominent at the time. For example Ron Silliman, Charles Bernstein, David Melnick, Bruce Andrews, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, Carla Harryman, and Barrett Watten are commonly associated with this group. Perloff (1999: 405) states that "the dismissal of 'voice' as the foundational principle of lyric poetry" is probably the most important aspect of Language poetry. Elsewhere, she remarks that with the emergence of Language poetry the Romantic conception of a single subjectivity or a self that governs the poem was a particular element that began to dissolve (Perloff [1985] 1996: x).

Questioning "The Template" that "was always there" is, then, central to the Language poets, as it is to Ashbery. Ashbery has often been regarded as an influence and a precursor of the poetics of the Language poets, particularly because of his book *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) (see for example Nicholls 2000: 157). However, Ashbery himself cannot be understood as belonging to the Language poetry group, because the Language poets are mainly younger poets who are understood as a 'movement' primarily because they write actively about their own poetics and also identify with each other because they recognize similarities in each other's writing and thinking. Ashbery, on the other hand, mostly wishes to emphasize that he personally does not regard himself as a member of the movement (see for example Ashbery's interview in Guernica 2008). Nevertheless, as I will come to observe, his work presents connections to the work of the Language poets also after the initial point of influence, particularly recently. For Ashbery, the time when Language poetry emerges is already a time when, in the words of 'The Template', "the fuss seem[s] justified": what was originally for him and his New York School friends something oppositional and new, had started to become somewhat more commonplace. Ashbery's work had also begun to gain wider interest after the success of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), and he had gone on to write works that received more critical attention than his early poetry.

I shall, then, briefly discuss the Language poets in 2.2.1. in order to illustrate the similarities between their work and Ashbery's. I will draw heavily on the works of Ron Silliman and David Melnick, because their work illustrates the dimensions of the dismantling of the single voice in Language poetry. The juxtaposition of the two

also exemplifies how the Language poets are ultimately a large and heterogeneous group, even though they have often been considered a 'movement'. In this sense, one must be careful with group labels which often arise not only because of similarities in poetic styles, but also, perhaps even primarily, because of friendships and other affiliations, and because of possibly simplifying definitions. As 'The Template' suggests, "no two poets ever agreed on anything". Groups of poets are, however, discussed in this chapter to show how the single voice has variously been a central issue or a problem for many poets writing in the latter part of the 20th century.

The chapter will conclude with some insights into an issue which is common to Ashbery and the Language poets and which, to some extent, separates them for example from confessional poetry: namely metatextuality, or consciousness of poetry as a discourse. Textual self-consciousness is often evident in Ashbery's work, not least in poems like 'The Template', but also less evidently in texts where poetry is not directly mentioned, particularly with the use of poetic 'templates' such as the sestina and the pantoum. The aspect of metatextuality, then, requires some consideration on a general level before I move on to discussing my key texts. To a great extent, metatextuality is a postmodernist practice, just as Ashbery can already in the beginning of his production, as Brian McHale (2000: 562) also asserts, be considered a paradigmatic postmodernist poet. In the next section, then, I shall discuss this early postmodernism and avant-gardism as it was exemplified in the works of Ashbery and his friends, who opposed the dominant modes of poetry in the 1950s and 1960s.

2.1. The beginnings of postmodernist poetry in New York

While discussing the construction of traditions in 20th century American poetry, Marjorie Perloff (1996: 104-107), among others, has stressed the importance of Donald Allen's anthology *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* in establishing the "tradition" of the avant-garde in the 1960s. Allen divided his chosen avant-garde poets into groups, the labels of which are still influential. In Allen's anthology, John Ashbery is presented in the context of a group of "New York poets" (Allen [1960] 1999: xiii). The poets primarily associated with the group include Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch, whom Ashbery befriended at Harvard, and James Schuyler, whom the other three met when they came to New York. Allen ([1960] 1999: xiii) also lists

Edward Field and Barbara Guest as belonging to this group that became known as the 'New York School of poets', but later they were rarely discussed in this context.

Other groups in the anthology include the Black Mountain poets (Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and others), the San Francisco group (Jack Spicer, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, etc.), "The Beat Generation" (Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, etc.), and a number of others whom Allen could not precisely place into a group (Allen [1960] 1999: xii-xiii). Allen's divisions are mostly geographical rather than related to literary styles and, as such, they are often quite "arbitrary"; a point he also admits (Allen [1960] 1999: xiii). Nevertheless, these group labels still hold strong in many a discussion of American poetry of the latter half of the 20th century.

In his introduction, Allen ([1960] 1999: xi) writes that, for him, publishing the work of his groups of poets seemed important, because until then, their work had not been widely known except through poetry readings and only published in small publications. Of course at the time, some of these poets had already published work which was to become more widely read later, though it was not received with much enthusiasm at the time. Allen ([1960] 1999: xi) notes that the poets presented in the anthology renounced the techniques and conventions of the "academic verse" dominant in American poetry at the time. This opposition manifested itself in various ways in the works of the diverse groups, but at least in the case of Ashbery and his friends, one aspect of it was, as I have mentioned, resisting the dominant conception of a poem, and also the voice and personality presented in it, as unified.

Lehman (1998: 333-334) observes that the opposition of "academic" and avant-garde poetry at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s was indeed framed by anthologies. When Allen's anthology introduced the anti-academic variety of poets, "the academic canon of the day" had already been established by a 1957 anthology called *The New Poets of Britain and America* (Lehman 1998: 333-334). The anthology was edited by Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson, and included the work of poets such as Robert Lowell, W.S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich, James Merrill, James Wright, W.D. Snodgrass, Thom Gunn, and Philip Larkin. Of these poets, Lowell, Rich, and Snodgrass, in particular, were also confessional poets.

The group label 'New York School' should here be regarded as important in terms of the opposition these poets presented to the dominant poetic mode. Lehman (1998: 12) suggests that the New York School context from 1948 until 1966 was

important in constructing the careers of the poets. The "spirit of collaboration and the sense of common cause" of these poets has led Lehman (1998: 10) to emphasize their identity as a group, though he acknowledges that Ashbery has often been discussed independently of this context. Ashbery is indeed probably the most well known of these poets today, and his work goes beyond this early affiliation, but the group context is illustrative of the development of a style that favors fragmentation of voice and indeterminacy in constructing multiple meanings rather than the poetics of the single voice as in the dominant mode of the mid-20th century.

2.1.1. The New York School of poetry and new styles of writing

> But you,
> You seem so formal, so serious. You can't read poetry,
> Not the way they taught us back in school.
>
> Returning to the point was always the main thing, then.
> Did we ever leave it? I don't think so. It was our North Pole.
> We skulked and hungered there for years, and now,
> Like dazzled insects skimming the bright airs,
> You are back on the road again,
> ('Never Seek to Tell Thy Love', *A Wave*: 56)

Keeping in mind the position that was established for using 'The Template' for illustrating literary historical issues earlier, the above excerpt from an Ashbery poem from 1984, 'Never Seek to Tell Thy Love', can also be understood as illustrative of the work of the New York School. In its entirety, the poem variously explores for example the issues of being "on the road" or trying to get from one place to another, and presents a complex interplay between the positions of the *I*, *you* and *we*. Consequently, the poem can hardly be assimilated to a unitary literary historical narrative; to do so would be to overlook its variety. Nonetheless, the lines quoted above do remind of the situation in which the 'New York School poets' found themselves in relation to the practices of academically accepted poetry. They felt that poetry could not be read the way it was taught "in school", as mainly established by New Criticism at the time.

The allusion to William Blake's poem in the title adds to the effect of a rejection of traditions and conventions: the poem is titled after a poem one might indeed read in school. It is a poem that would be read for the effects it offers that are conventionally expected of poetry, perhaps for an insight or a subjective revelation. Blake's poem (see *The Poetical Works of William Blake*: 109) offers a piece of advice

to “Never seek to tell thy love” that is ultimately meaningful for the single-voiced speaker himself; it is primarily addressed to himself. To “Never seek to tell thy love” in Ashbery’s poem is, perhaps, not to engage in such subjective, personal reflections as are conventionally expected of poetry. Of course, one should be careful about taking what is presented in the poem as Ashbery’s actual opinion towards Romantic or canonical poetry. As I will come to show in the next chapter, his poetry usually does not offer the reader a sense of certainty that whatever is stated in the text should be taken as the author’s, or even as any fictive persona’s ‘real’ or final opinion or position, but rather there are multiple possibilities. Even the aforequoted poem does not unambiguously present a rejection of canonical poetry. The allusion is simply ‘right there’ in the title. In fact, the gesture of rejection of ‘Never Seek to Tell Thy Love’ would be to reject the poem itself, because the title is not simply Blake’s, but Ashbery’s as well; it also comes to define this poem.

According to Perloff (1997), Ashbery’s poetry typically presents an uncertain stance towards quotations and allusions that are present in the text: “it is usually impossible to identify the citation, and, even when we do, such identification doesn’t necessarily help us to understand the poem”. Even though the allusion ‘Never Seek to Tell Thy Love’ is recognizable, its position in the poem and the attitude of the poem towards the earlier tradition is by no means transparent. Ashbery’s poem is finally ambiguous about what it rejects and what it supports, neither does it present an explanation for who the *we* in the poem are, whether the pronoun refers for example to the New York School, to some other group of people, or perhaps simply to all poets or to all of us. This openness, again, allows for various readings. In itself, the poem is also a somewhat ‘lyric’ meditation, as it ends with the lines

> The gift of invisibility
> Has been granted to all but the gods, so we say such things,
> Filling the road up with colors, faces,
> Tender speeches, until they feed us to the truth.
> (‘Never Seek to Tell Thy Love’, *A Wave*: 56) ‘

In a sense, this is a return “to the point”: the poem ends in final insight which, as the poem suggests, *we* – whoever that is taken to refer to – have not succeeded in leaving completely. But perhaps to offer a lyrical ending that refers to being finally dissolved into truth in a poem that renounces accepted modes of reading as well as seriousness and formality is also to be suspicious of or to ironize the effects that such an ending

might offer. Also in this sense, the poem recalls the position of the New York School. Formality and seriousness were indeed antithetical to their poetry. What their poems had in common was first of all a sense of playful experimentation and the use of irony (Lehman 1998: 4-5). Parody and humor are important techniques in Ashbery's poems throughout his production. Lehman (1998: 27) also affirms that since the New York School poets had a limited interest in what their American contemporaries were writing, they turned to contemporary visual arts and music as well as to French poetry.

The name 'New York School of poets' was invented by the art gallerist John Bernard Myers in relation to the 'New York School of painting', which was associated with Jackson Pollock, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Michael Goldberg, Jane Freilicher, Fairfield Porter, and many others. Myers interacted actively with both groups of artists, and published some of the poets' early texts, including a chapbook by Ashbery, *Turandot and Other Poems* (1953). This was a fairly limited edition, and his first widely circulated book, *Some Trees*, appeared in 1956 after Ashbery won the Yale Younger Poets' Prize. The prize was awarded to him by W.H. Auden who was reportedly not particularly interested in any of the books that were sent for the competition that year, including Ashbery's and O'Hara's, but he chose Ashbery's book because he had to choose one. Auden made a tendentious remark about Ashbery's "calculated oddities" in his original preface to the book (Auden quoted in Lehman 1998: 89). Ashbery's early poetry was thus not received very favorably.

The poets' relation to the art world of New York was one of friendship, influence, and also of collaboration, particularly for Koch and O'Hara. As John Shoptaw (1994: 44-46) remarks, in some poems in the early 1960s, Ashbery used techniques like collage and the "composite traces" that were also used by the Abstract Expressionist painters, and the words of the poem on the page sometimes appeared as if they had been dripped there in the manner of Pollock's paintings. As Herd (2000: 17) suggests, this early affiliation with Abstract Expressionist art may also have lead some critics to view Ashbery's poetry as "incommunicative" in the manner of the work of the painters. Herd's (2000: 17) view is, however, that if a Pollock painting was primarily "incommunicative", Ashbery's poetry is not. I do not wish to overemphasize the connection to Abstract Expressionism. Understanding one art form through another in this way may easily lead to overlooking the aspects that

distinguish them, and what I am mainly concerned with here is, indeed, the way in which Ashbery makes use of what is distinctive of poetry, like the convention of voice and the resources of language to constitute communicative art. This oft-mentioned affiliation is nevertheless worth noting in terms of how it may have been one incentive for the poets to pay attention to the conventions of poetry, but what this amounts to in their work cannot be understood under the same terms as visual art.

Another issue which suggests of an opposition to formality in the work of the New York School is how their work has commonly been associated with the Dadaists and the Surrealists. Collage, which was also a Dadaist writing technique, was important for some of their early texts, like in Ashbery's second book *The Tennis Court Oath*, and this connection, as Perkins (1987: 531) observes, may have lead some critics to see the poets as "merely frivolous, witty demolishers of meaning", and "amusing but not to be taken seriously". Nevertheless, as I will also come to observe, in Ashbery's poetry the experimentation and resistance to unity have a communicational function.

'The New York School' was primarily, as Herd notes, a group of friends who collaborated on writing poems while sitting in the cafés of New York. They were in the habit of inventing rules and constraints within which they would then write a poem (Herd 2000: 61). The attention to rules implies a consciousness of poetic conventions which is also related to metatextuality which was evident not only in Ashbery's texts, but also in Koch's and O'Hara's work.

In 1952, Ashbery and Schuyler also began writing a novel, *A Nest of Ninnies*, as a joint effort. It was finished and then published much later, in 1969. Lehman (1998: 81-82) suggests that this common project enabled them to discard their 'personal' styles so that the novel appears as if it had been written by some kind of an intermediate, "third entity" rather than by the two poets. Such collaboration and merging of styles may also have been beneficial for the emergence of a writing that emphasizes indeterminacy and a multitude of voices rather than solitude and the discourse of a single voice. However, even though *A Nest of Ninnies* is a collaboratively produced novel, it does not so much reject a single voice as play with the possibilities of voice. I shall have more to say of the novel in the final chapter to this thesis when I discuss polyphony in Ashbery's work.

The group context was certainly important for the poets in terms of collaboration and mutual influence: particularly in the early 1950s, it was an encouraging climate for writing 'new' poetry. However, like most names of literary schools or movements, the New York School is not a simple issue. Even in terms of physical location the construction of the group is questionable, as Ashbery himself lived in Paris in 1955-1957 and again from 1958 to 1965, though he still remained in contact with his New York friends; and Koch also spent some time in Paris. O'Hara was the "dominant personality" in the group and his sudden death in an accident in 1966 brought the 'school' period to an end (Lehman 1998: 7-8).

Ashbery himself has said in an interview that he does not consider the New York poets to have constituted an actual school, and that their works were very different from one another (in Guernica 2008). Myers, who named the school, also admits that perhaps they were rather a "coterie", a group of friends who collaborated on writing poems, and found an audience in each other at a time when they were not yet widely accepted (Myers 1969: 7-8). While there are similarities in their work, their differences are especially evident in their relationship to using their own life as material for a poem. In Lehman's (1998: 94) words, "Ashbery is certainly the least autobiographical of modern poets", in which he differs from James Schuyler and particularly from Frank O'Hara. O'Hara often wrote poems which were related to his own everyday activities and contained for example names of people he knew. In this sense, he was speaking in his own persona in the poems, and sometimes he has also been labeled a confessional poet (see Perkins 1987: 343; Kantola 2001: 109). Yet, as Hartman notes, he was not confessional in the sense that for example Robert Lowell was. O'Hara also expressed antagonism towards Lowell's poetry and his attempted sincerity (Hartman 2005: 41).

The poem 'Never Seek to Tell Thy Love', which I quoted at the beginning of this section, spells out the essential concern for the New York School: "Returning to the point was always the main thing, then. / Did we ever leave it?". If the "point" is taken to refer to the single voice, the work of the New York School poets indeed does not leave this "point" completely, even though it does challenge the prevailing conceptions of poetry. The case of O'Hara is representative in this regard. Insofar as a single voice and partly confessional tendencies in his poetry can be linked to Romanticism, as Hartman (2005: 41) suggests that they can be, this also places the

Romantic poem title 'Never Seek to Tell Thy Love' in a different position in a reading where the poem is understood as referring to the New York School. 'Never Seek to Tell Thy Love' becomes a title for an understanding that suggests a rejection specifically of the traditional mode of *reading* poetry and, by implication, of conceiving of what poetry is. What the poem does not unambiguously suggest is a complete rejection of the traditional poetry itself like the Romantic style that is evoked in the title, even though conventional modes of reading are often practiced on canonical poetry. If the poem offers a parodic attitude towards the tradition, this can be understood to some extent as a reappraisal rather than a complete rejection. Next, a brief discussion of O'Hara's relation to confessional poetics will serve to illustrate how Ashbery and his friends, in their different yet partly common ways, opposed the dominant modes of poetry in the 1950s and 1960s.

2.1.2. "Seldom questioned": Against the poetry of the establishment in the 1950s

> Abstraction (in poetry, not in painting) involves personal removal by the poet.… Personism, a movement which I recently founded and which nobody yet knows about, interests me a great deal, being so totally opposed to this kind of abstract removal that it is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry. … It does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it! But to give you a vague idea, one of its minimal aspects is to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself), thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love's life-giving vulgarity, and sustaining the poet's feelings towards the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person. … The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages. In all modesty, I confess that it may be the death of literature as we know it. (O'Hara 1973: 354-355)

Ashbery, Koch, O'Hara and Schuyler did not constitute a school in the sense of having a consciously expressed, unified poetics, even though they wrote against the dominant poetry as practiced by their contemporaries. They did agree on their antagonism towards the poetic climate of the 1950s, and Ashbery has also affirmed this in an interview (in Guernica 2008). He remarks that Kenneth Koch's (1962: 54-60) poem 'Fresh Air', which parodies the academic poetry of what is named as the "Poem Society", was "a kind of manifesto [they] all subscribed to" (Ashbery in Guernica 2008). The one actual 'manifesto' from that time is Frank O'Hara's 'Personism', originally written in 1959. As the excerpt above shows, the text appears to have been written in a rather comic manner with its anticipation of "the death of literature as we know it". Perhaps, then, one should not necessarily read it as a sincere

pronouncement of a poetics that O'Hara would have consistently followed, but in a sense, it is illustrative of both his and, in comparison, Ashbery's work.

In 'Personism', O'Hara tackles the issue of "personal removal" and states that his new "movement" is opposed to an idea which resembles the New Critical understanding of the speaker of a poem, where the poet's person and the speaker are kept separate. However, this idea of the poet's person is not, for him, related to "personality or intimacy". O'Hara's own poems do often appear as if spoken in his own voice. For example a poem called 'Poem' from 1959 describes an event which is seemingly from his own life. This passage is from the middle of the poem:

> last night we went to a movie and came out,
> Ionesco is greater
> than Beckett, Vincent said, that's what I think, blueberry blintzes
> and Khrushchev was probably being carped at
> in Washington, no *politesse*
> Vincent tells me about his mother's trip to Sweden
> Hans tells us
> about his father's life in Sweden, it sounds like Grace Hartigan's
> painting *Sweden*
> so I go home to bed and names drift through my head
> Purgatorio Merchado, Gerhard Schwartz and Gaspar Gonzalez,
> all
> unknown figures of the early morning as I go to work
> (O'Hara: 'Poem', *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*: 267)

'Poem' is concerned with depicting ordinary events and discussions that the speaker has with his friends during a day. The poem refers to "Vincent" which, as Perkins (1987: 535) affirms, was a name that often appeared in O'Hara's poems, because he had a friend called Vincent. The Abstract Expressionist painter Grace Hartigan was also a friend of O'Hara's. These references testify to the relation O'Hara's poems had to his own life, and display his common practice of including his friends in his poems. Obviously such biographical relations need not be taken as final readings, and the reader may not even be aware of O'Hara's friendships but, nevertheless, the named persons Hans and Vincent are central in the speaker's depiction of the course of his day, and the reference to the movie visit and their involvement in the discussion contextualizes them as characters in the poem and as people that are clearly familiar to the speaker, but not necessarily to the reader. According to Perkins (1987: 535), such naming and "direct personal talk" may result in "an effect of alienation".

Some of the other names, even as they refer to people that the reader can recognize, are mentioned fleetingly, without much information attached to them. As

Kantola (2001: 123) notes about ‘Poem’, Khrushchev is presented only in passim, with no implications related to ideology. The absence of a wider thematic context is likewise true of the other recognizable names in the poem. The conversation on Ionesco and Beckett only displays Vincent’s and the speaker’s agreement on which one they prefer, and nothing else. Perkins (1987: 534) also suggests in relation to O’Hara’s ‘Personal Poem’, which presents a very similar conversation about Herman Melville and Henry James, that such discussions are mainly affirmations of the relations between friends. From the reader’s point of view, this might seem somewhat alienating.

Nevertheless, ‘Poem’ presents scenes that are familiar to most people. The details of the events and the participants of the discussions may be unknown to the reader, but one is likely to recognize what it is like going to movies with friends and discussing literature while someone like Khrushchev may be coming to town, as is evident towards the end of the poem:

> New York seems blinding and my tie is blowing up the street
> I wish it would blow off
> though it is cold and somewhat warms my neck
> as the train bears Khrushchev to Pennsylvania Station
> (O’Hara: ‘Poem’: *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*: 268)

The poem’s focus is on the associations that the speaker registers about ordinary events during a day. The juxtaposition of all the events and details mentioned in the text creates a mixture that is at once personal, in that the names place the poem in the sphere of a particular person’s experience at a particular moment in time, but also distinctly impersonal, as the events depicted are recognizable and common. Their particularity is only in the details, in the fact that the poem engages into this name-dropping. The speaker even appears to express some suspicion towards the name-dropping in remarking how “names drift through my head”, then proceeding to present obscure, foreign-sounding names. Perhaps to take naming to such an extreme is also to diminish its particularizing potential.

What Herring (2002: 425) suggests in relation to ‘Personal Poem’ is true of much of O’Hara’s poetry: the “voice is that of impersonal public self-abstraction”, and consequently the poems are not truly confessional, but rather the fleeting experiences and associations can become generalized. O’Hara’s poems do not, indeed, so much contain a personality, as the sensations which are being depicted are

ordinary, and the focus is on the details. The practice of naming and the focus on details that define everyday situations rather than on any deep notions of the self and its history resist creating a sense of a fully defined individual persona that the readers could then empathize with and to recognize patterns of behavior in their own lives in a way that is characteristic of confessional poetry. This becomes evident when O'Hara's poetry is contrasted with a poem from Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*:

> These are the tranquilized *Fifties*,
> and I am forty. Ought I to regret my seedtime?
> I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O.,
> and made my manic statement,
> telling off the state and president, and then
> sat waiting sentence in the bull pen
> beside a Negro boy with curlicues
> of marijuana in his hair.
> (Lowell: 'Memories of West Street and Lepke', *Life Studies*: 85)

Lowell's poem has a continuous voice that describes the speaker moving from reflecting on his conventional current life as an adult to reminiscing his youth and time in prison, interpreting his past to himself, and wondering whether he should regret it. Lowell is also using his own life experiences as material for the poem and in that sense speaking in his own persona. Even if this were not the poet's own experience, but that of a fictitious persona, the events and the speaker's reflection appear very particular. While particularity is evident in O'Hara's 'Poem', the difference to Lowell is in the way the particularities are posited in the text. In Lowell's poem, the discourse that the speaker is engaged in with himself appears as a search for personal insights into his current position in relation to his particular biographical experiences, though the poem is open in the sense that it does not pronounce a final insight clearly. This is rather different from O'Hara's momentary observations and associations, which do not aim toward a discovery of a personal insight of one's life.

Perloff (1978: 192) asserts, while discussing O'Hara's poem 'All That Gas', that in the poem "[t]he role of the 'I' is to *respond* rather than to confess; to observe, to watch, to be attentive to things"; the poem is not concerned with the history or existence of the self like Lowell's. The point of the associations appears to be merely to record a particular moment in time, one which is recognizable and ordinary. Koethe (1980: 98) goes as far as to remark that for O'Hara, the "very notion of a self is delusory", as "[t]he vantage point of O'Hara's voice is always situated in real time,

in fact, at the moment of writing" and the poems do not entail a profound reflection of one's experience.

When O'Hara's 'Poem' is not concerned with interpreting or valuing the life, history, and existence of the self, but with reporting events and associations relating to the common, everyday life which is recognizable to the readers, there is also a sense of inclusiveness: the utterances are directed toward others. As Hartman (2005: 42, 45) remarks, O'Hara's mode differed from Lowell's also in how, in Lowell's writing, a poem was not addressed to an outside audience, but rather presented as something that should be "overheard", which John Stuart Mill saw as typical of poetry. Mill suggested that poetry is an "utterance that is overheard" (quoted in Frye 1957: 249). Indeed, the private reflections of Lowell's poem, for example the speaker's question about whether he should "regret [his] seedtime", are presented as if they were addressed to the speaker himself, because the question is of the type that others will hardly be able to answer it satisfyingly. O'Hara's poems, however, often address a *you*. Also the pronoun *we* in 'Poem' appears to refer to the group of friends in the text, and in this sense the poem exists between those friends, as 'Personism' suggests poems should be "between two persons". Address to friends could suggest that the reader is excluded, but still O'Hara's poetry is offered as an object or a space that exists between the speaker and others. When the poem depicts events that are ordinary and thus can become generalized, also *we* can be understood more inclusively.

While confessional poetry is concerned with experiences of the poet which are staged as representative and the speaker is addressing oneself, O'Hara's texts operate on different terms. The texts are impersonal or, in Herring's (2002: 425) words, turned into "public self-abstraction". 'Personism' thus opposes the Lowell-dominated academically accepted poetry, as it "constructs a camp aesthetic" that leans toward inauthenticity and insincerity (Hartman 2005: 53). O'Hara's writing, in a sense, problematizes both the New Critical separation of the speaker and the poet as well as confessional poetry. In 'Personism' as well as in his poems he drafted a mode of poetry which was concerned with communicating and addressing others rather than with confessional solitude.

Ashbery's poetry tackles issues that are, to some extent, similar to the ones O'Hara's work posits, though the way in which they are manifested obviously

changes over time. Communication and address in Ashbery's later work will be discussed in the following chapters, but a brief comparison between his early work and that of O'Hara and the dominant modes of poetry here will serve to establish the ground for the later discussions.

O'Hara's poems can often be regarded as having a continuous voice, but their impersonality resembles Ashbery's poems. Consider Ashbery's first widely circulated book *Some Trees* (1956), which contains a variety of poems. Some of them appear to have a continuous first-person voice, and the tone is light, focusing on describing ordinary events like in O'Hara's texts. This is the case of 'The Instruction Manual'[1], which opens with the following lines:

> As I sit looking out of a window of the building
> I wish I did not have to write the instruction manual on the uses of a new
> metal.
> ('The Instruction Manual', *The Mooring of Starting Out*: 8).

After this opening, the poem describes the speaker's dream of traveling to Mexico instead of writing the manual. The text also turns towards addressing others, though not directly as *you*, but in imperatives like "Wait" and "Look", and there is a change to the plural toward the end of the poem: "We have heard the music, tasted the drinks, and looked at colored houses" (*The Mooring of Starting Out*: 10). In this inclusiveness, the text is reminiscent of O'Hara's poetry, rather than of the confessional or New Critical modes.

However, *Some Trees* also contains poems that present much more disjunction in the semantic materials and discontinuity in the voice, which places them closer to Ashbery's later work. This is the case of 'The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers', which might be expected to be a childhood memory of the poet, as the title contains Ashbery's initials, and the text opens with a quotation from Boris Pasternak about childhood. Consider the following passages from the first and last sections of the poem:

> 1.
> Darkness falls like a wet sponge
> And Dick gives Genevieve a swift punch
> In the pajamas. "Aroint thee, witch."
> Her tongue from previous ecstasy
> Releases thoughts like little hats.

[1] All subsequent references to poems from *Some Trees*, as well as from Ashbery's next four books, will be to the compilation *The Mooring of Starting Out* (1998), where his first five books were reprinted and published as a single volume.

"He clap'd me first during the eclipse.
Afterwards I noted his manner
Much altered. But he sending
At that time certain handsome jewels
I durst not seem to take offence."

3.

Yet I cannot escape the picture
Of my small self in that bank of flowers:
My head among the blazing phlox
Seemed a pale and gigantic fungus.
…
And only in the light of lost words
Can we imagine our rewards.
('The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers', *The Mooring of Starting Out*: 18-19)

As was noted in the beginning of this chapter, the exemplary poem in the 1950s and 1960s was expected to be a coherent, single-voiced construction which would present a "special insight" (Perloff 1996: 107). Ashbery's poem is not a coherent single-voice text, and the tone is comic, which precludes it from presenting such intimate, 'painful' revelations as are often present in confessional poetry. The title alludes to Andrew Marvell's poem 'The Picture of Little T.C. in a Prospect of Flowers', and as Richard Howard (1980: 31) remarks, the poem "runs through much of the diction of English poetry". One voice in the poem, for example, states "Aroint thee, witch", a line that at least Shakespeare used in Macbeth and King Lear. In a way that is similar to 'Never Seek to Tell Thy Love' and its ambiguous relation to Blake and canonical poetry, such references suggest a consciousness of poetic traditions, which, however, are used for a somewhat parodying effect.

'The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers' opens with an impersonal third person description, and overall the text presents many pronominal positions, which prevent readers from constructing definite images of unified personas. In the first section an *I* is only present within speech marks, which may indicate that this voice is different from the voice at the beginning of the text, perhaps the voice of Genevieve, although this is not directly affirmed in the poem. When the third part of the poem finally presents an *I* that utters a statement that is related to the self without speech marks, the notion is particularly comic, as it turns into a vision of one's head as a "gigantic fungus". In the third part, the voice appears to change after the two impersonal sections, which describe third persons or address a *you* while describing abstract events. The last two lines of the above passage and of the poem can, in a

sense, be understood as presenting a final insight of someone's experience, which is reminiscent of New Critical poetry. However, given the incoherence of the text, the lack of a single voice and the comic tone, the poem does not unambiguously engage the conventions of the dominant mode, but rather parodies them. In the context of a poem that so clearly makes use of old poetic language, various voices and registers, one is also led to suspect that perhaps the final, aphoristic lines are not to be taken as a serious revelation or an insight, but rather as a 'quotation' or an allusion to another, previous source. Nevertheless, the poem contains the possibility that the final lines could be taken as a serious insight.

'The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers' stands in a curious position compared to the dominant idea of a poem at its time of writing. The poem is certainly conscious of traditions in retaining the possibility of the indirect presence of the poet as the *I* who attempts to reach an insight at the end of the poem and in its references to the language of old poetry, but instead of remaining firmly within these traditions, the poem rejects the dominant 1950s idea of a poem as essentially unified and presents an open form of writing.

Ashbery's poems, like O'Hara's, are addressed to, or address, an other, a *you*, even when the speaker's position is not unified, and there is no single 'persona' or voice. This inclusiveness is dominant in Ashbery's later poetry, including the long poem 'Litany', which I shall discuss in the next chapter, but for the moment note that the basis of it lies in the early New York School days. With O'Hara's poetry, the disjunctive, comic works of Kenneth Koch and James Schuyler, and the poets' collaborations, the New York School formed a context for a writing that can be multi-voiced and addressed to another rather than focusing on a single voice.

Ashbery and particularly his New York School friends do not completely reject the first person position, as many of the texts quoted so far in this chapter also show. In this sense, one might sometimes be inclined to think that Ashbery's poems are ultimately amenable to a single voice explanation. However, as will become evident in the following two chapters of this study, paying attention to the disjunctions and shifts in personal pronouns reveals that typically the voice of Ashbery's poems is far from continuous, and the pronoun *I* is only one element among many. In Ashbery's texts, the central problem of the New Critical and

confessional modes of poetry of whether the poet is the speaker is then, in a sense, cast aside, as the unity of the speaker position is questioned.

Breslin (1987: 118) notes that the dominance of confessional poetry started to diminish in the 1970s. The situation was then gradually changing. According to Perloff (1996: 109), by 1982 a definite distinction between 'academic' poetry and the earlier avant-garde had vanished. This was partly related to the emergence, in the 1970s, of a new oppositional mode, the so-called Language poetry. Their work is partly a direct 'response' to academic theories which were then prominent, namely the "poststructuralist critique of authorship and the humanist subject" (Perloff 1999: 406-407). As I have already remarked, one aspect of the Language poets' work is to challenge the idea of a single voice and self much like Ashbery also had been doing, and they were partly influenced by his work. Another issue which Ashbery and the Language poets have in common is self-consciousness about poetic techniques or metatextuality, in which sense the poems also tackle the question of who is speaking, and it is to these issues that I shall turn in the following section.

2.2. "The fuss seemed justified": Later connections and writing styles

I urge the deep prune of the mirror
That stick she carries
The book—a trap

The facts have hinged on my reply

calm

Hat against the sky
Eyes of forest

memory of cars
You buried in the hot avenue: and to all of them, you cannot be and are,
naming me.
('Rain', *The Mooring of Starting Out*, 84-85)

Ashbery's second book, *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), requires some consideration here, as it differs to some extent from the rest of his production, and this book in particular has also been important from the perspective of the Language poets. 'Rain', a poem of a few pages in length, part of which is quoted above, displays the radical disjunction that is present in many texts in the book. Words and phrases stand by themselves; they are separated from logical sentence connections and from the rest of the material in the poem. The focus appears to be on language and on the effects it

creates, rather than on describing the precise experiences of an individual personality or a continuous speaker position. As Barrett Watten (1998: 50-51) also affirms, the poems highlight "the impossibility of statement", a characteristic that is by Watten's showing also evident in the work of the Language poet Clark Coolidge. Some other poems in *The Tennis Court Oath* are closer to Ashbery's later work in that, while still disjunctive and elusive, the texts at least consist of complete sentences.

The segment "you cannot be and are / naming me" in 'Rain' can be read as a metatextual comment on the readers' will to perceive the speaker of a poem as a continuous self. This is a paradox, the poem suggests, as the act of naming is not possible, but the reader attempts naming anyway. As the personal pronouns are not presented in clear contexts which would define them, the reader's attention perhaps turns rather easily towards the one context that is immediately apparent, the poem itself. However, a metatextual reading is not the only possible one, as the lines can be interpreted as a particular fictive event, where the *you* addressed and the "me" are characters in the poem. In this case, the empty pronominal positions would require the readers to fill them in by imagining a context for such an occasion of naming, if they wanted to see the poem as a construction that was somehow finished. In any case, as Ross (1995: 205) notes of the texts of *The Tennis Court Oath*, they "eradicate… the experience of an original work created through autonomous authorial agency". Like the paradox about naming the *I* shows, in the poems of *The Tennis Court Oath* the fundamental nature of a poem and its speaker positions are presented as something constructed and ultimately artificial.

Peter Nicholls (2000: 158) states that *The Tennis Court Oath* "set the pronomial [sic] self adrift in a kaleidoscopic whirl of tones and idioms". He goes on to point out that Ashbery's pronouns are in this book "merely linguistic items rather than distinct positionalities". This book, then, displays in a radical form the pronominal shifts and the challenge to the unitary speaker position, which are indicative of Ashbery's later work. However, disjunction and dismantling of "authorial agency" are not limited to *The Tennis Court Oath,* but present throughout Ashbery's work, even if the effects may be partly different and more directed towards communication rather than radically disjunctive language, as will become clear in the following two chapters.

As noted earlier, *The Tennis Court Oath* used the collage technique widely. Ashbery wrote cut-up poems using as sources texts that were "distracting readers from the reality of their lives", like the pulp fiction novel *Beryl of the Biplane* by William Le Queux (Herd 2000: 82). Andrew Ross (1995: 202-203) suggests that such radical experimentation, conducted in the manner of the "historical avant-garde", was one kind of a response to the commonly perceived need in the 1960s for a poet and anyone else to comment on social issues like "mass culture", which often took the form of critique that was spoken in earnest. The poems of *The Tennis Court Oath*, however, form a space in which "the languages and imagery of popular culture" may clash and become seen from different perspectives through their positions in relation to each other in the text (Ross 1995: 202-203). Such resistance to statement is also not foreign to Ashbery's later poetry, even though the later work may initially appear to contain more direct pronouncements. The early experimentation with collage may also have been a ground for Ashbery's later writing, where sentences often appear as if they had been cut out of another context and then placed in the poem, even though that might not originally have been the case, as I will come to observe later.

The Tennis Court Oath has sometimes been rejected by critics as a point in Ashbery's career where he is merely experimenting while trying to develop a more "mature" style, which Ross (1995: 201) has acknowledged as a common view although not one he personally endorses. In an early review of the book, Mona van Duyn wrote that the "state of continuous expectation, a continuous frustration of expectation" that the poems create does not really even correspond to her understanding of the kinds of effects poetry should offer (van Duyn 1962: 394). While this is also a matter of personal taste, van Duyn's remark shows a reluctance to even consider what this different conception of poetry entails, and testifies to how a certain conception of poetry may prevail in the mind of one person or a group of people. It is, then, easy to understand why in the beginning of his career Ashbery was a marginal poet.

On the other hand, for example Jerome McGann (1987: 627) has put forward the view that Ashbery's style was fully established in his books of the early 1960s and presented itself as an "early exponent of a postmodern sensibility", and that his later work makes use of similar techniques only to a lesser extent. The radical disjunction and experimentation have been regarded as important by many of the

younger Language poets. The relation between Ashbery and the Language poets is not, however, only a simple relation of influence, but their work also overlaps, as they explore similar concerns especially in terms of voice, and these issues shall be considered in the following section.

2.2.1. "The poets of the future": The fragmentation of voice in Ashbery and Language poetry

> Words might be shields--heraldic, protective--or, reading Zukofsky, Ashbery, Duncan with a sephardic eye, the 'pure light' of reference might pass thru a 2-way mirror--word being itself is no less a concealment (seal meant), postures one holds walking 'in public'--a metaphor, then, in *Eclogs*, hustler cruising Champs-Elysées, suppresses signifieds, posits mind's life in body's locus, 'classic' because articulate, thru wch comes the transfer, shock of self… poetry a scene, community a mystic writing pad one opts in our out of: ink flows--new beginning begins *Pcoet*, 1972, whose words are neither speech nor writing, but each within each… poetry precedes the language, makes it
> (Silliman 1978: unpaginated; spelling and emphasis as in the original, my ellipsis)

```
                                        (          "What
                                         is my voice?"

                                         (your voice
                                          you have a dark voice.


brain, discradled, infinite, in love
w/ display-
        case/badness factory
                                not
                                   ever
                    'again' . ill
luck,
    bad
        nature.
```

(Melnick: 'Le Calme', *Eclogs*: 4-5)

The above passages come from texts by Ron Silliman and David Melnick, both of whom have been counted as belonging to the group of experimental 'Language' poets. Much in the same way as the work of Ashbery and his friends in the 1950s and 1960s, the Language poets' work emerged partly as a reaction to widely accepted conventions and understanding of poetry in their time (see for example von Hallberg 1996: 112-114). If Ashbery is often considered difficult, the work of the Language poets is perhaps even more known for the way in which they disrupt conventional logic and sense in their texts. This is not to suggest their texts are 'meaningless' any more than Ashbery's are, but that perhaps at the time when their writing emerges,

even more radical experimentation was needed to challenge conventional positions and understandings of poetry. My focus in this section is only on one aspect of Language poetry, the challenge their work presents to the idea of a unified voice and how that relates to Ashbery, but the centrality of experimentation for their poetics is useful to remember, as one approaches their work.

While the above texts are not the best known texts in the production of the two poets, and while Melnick has not been extremely productive and is therefore not the most prominent of the Language poets, these texts highlight certain fundamental aspects particularly in relation to Ashbery and the use of voice in the work of the Language poets on the whole. Silliman's text appeared in the first issue of the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, edited by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews, which mainly published the poets' theoretical texts and reactions to poetry, and which was part of creating the idea of the Language poets as a group or even a 'movement' in the late 1970s. The movement was initially centered in San Francisco and New York.

In the above passage, Silliman writes about Melnick's books *Eclogs* and *Pcoet*, but his comment on them is not a traditional critical essay, but perhaps something between a literary and a critical reaction, as it plays with language and disrupts conventional expectations of sense. Many of the Language poets have written about their poetics and poetry in general. Some of them also hold positions in universities, like Barrett Watten, who notes in an explicitly academic article that "undoing the oppositions of theory and practice, expository prose and language-centered poetry" has been central for many of the Language poets (Watten 1999: 594). As I will come to discuss, Ashbery has also conflated criticism and poetry in his work, particularly in 'Litany'.

Silliman's text underscores the material features of language, thus bringing a metatextual level to the discussion of Melnick's poems. This is evident in the shortened spellings and in turning "concealment" into "(seal meant)". These features also resist positing the text as a traditional critical text, because such word play is normally not expected of formal writing. Self-consciousness about language is evident elsewhere in Silliman's work and, according to Silliman, language and modes of signification are clearly at issue in Melnick's work. In *Eclogs,* "a metaphor…suppresses signifieds", whereas *Pcoet* contains "words [that] are neither speech nor writing". The poems in the latter book consist of invented words which

only distantly resemble real English words. Silliman states that in Melnick's texts "poetry precedes the language, makes it", language in itself or "word being itself" is central. However, one should not think this leads to dismissing meaning, but rather the experimentation with language in Language poetry, for example the radical dispersal of words or phrases and their separation from clear contexts, is also clearly motivated for constituting a new way of approaching the way meanings are constructed. The references to signifieds and to the opposition of speech and writing in Silliman's text testify to the relation that Language poetry has to deconstructionist thought. Perloff (1999: 412) remarks in a discussion on Language poetry that in general, the idea of voice in a poem entails that writing is secondary and that the text is simply "the outward sign of a spoken self-presence". Generally, the work of the Language poets relates to a challenge to the traditional notions of "voice", "self-presence" and "authenticity" (Perloff 1999: 406). Indeed, Silliman appears to be arguing that Melnick's work deauthorizes precisely the way these issues are conventionally understood.

For Ashbery as well, writing appears in some ways to be primary. The poem 'Rain' which was discussed above is one example of this: when the lines "you cannot be and are, / naming me" are read metatextually, the poem foregrounds the implicit sense of a 'writer' who writes to the readers, or the ultimate nature of the text as a construction. The poem does not, then, simply present an authentic, unified persona or voice expressing and interpreting his private self, because a consistent self cannot be readily identified in the text.

Melnick's poem 'Le Calme' from *Eclogs* (1972) problematizes the idea of voice directly. The poem consists of various materials, such as single words separated from sentence connections as in Ashbery's 'Rain'. The disjunction renders viewing the voice of the poem as unified difficult. Yet, 'Le Calme' is not devoid of meaning, as the poem can be perceived as constituting an account of moving around and observing passers-by in a city which appears to be Paris, as some addresses and phone numbers are also given in the text. The lines "("What / is my voice?"" explicitly place the voice in a questionable position in a speaker's self-reflexive comment. The comment is framed in speech marks and preceded by an opening bracket, which separate it from the utterances surrounding it. The spaces after the bracket perhaps suggest of silence, but also direct the reader's attention to

how the utterances that are posited as ‘voice’ are constructed in the text through graphic representations. The question is countered with the response “(your voice / you have a dark voice”, which may be understood as coming from another speaker, as it directly addresses the comment of the previous sentence. The only way one’s voice can be defined here, then, is by hearing from another person, or from another voice, what it is like.

The problematization of voice in Melnick’s poem is not only metatextual. In the above passage after the lines about voice, the chains of disjointed words do not present any pronominal positions anymore. Juxtaposing for example the words “brain, discradled, infinite, in love” may imply that someone is infinitely in love and one’s brain is therefore “discradled”, but this possibility is distinctly stripped of voice and presence, since there are no pronominal positions or any sign of anyone who would experience this. Shifting between voices obviously presents similarities to Ashbery’s poetry, and Silliman’s comment also recognizes a connection to Ashbery in Melnick’s work. Also Silliman’s own poems often include metatextual comments that are related to the idea of voice in poetry. One should however note that, even though the work of the Language poets questions and suspects the idea of voice, a total rejection of it is hardly possible, as the convention is powerful, in a sense “the template” is “always there”. According to Perloff (1997), the work of the Language poets can be regarded as “a reaction to the ‘tell it like it is’ mode of the seventies’ workshop poem rather than as a rejection of ‘voice’ as such.” This posits their work in a rather similar place as that occupied by the New York poets in the early 1960s in their opposition to confessional poetry.

As noted above in relation to Nicholls’s (2000: 158) discussion, pronominal shifts were central for Ashbery especially in *The Tennis Court Oath*, but even though Ashbery may use disjunctions in a more subdued way in his later work than he did in his second book, polyphony continues to be a fundamental technique. In this sense, when McGann (1987: 627) views Ashbery’s later work as a toning down of the early experiments, I propose rather that Ashbery’s work continues to use techniques that are similar to those of the Language poets for effects that are even more directed toward communication than the early disjunctions.

For the Language poets, avoiding a clear subject position has also been a way of ‘engaging’ political and social issues, or exploring institutionalized forms of

language use (Nicholls 2000: 165-166). Such concerns might appear to be atypical for Ashbery whose poems are often not regarded as being concerned with political issues. This aspect separates Ashbery's work not only from Robert Lowell's but also from other poets presented in *The New American Poetry* such as Allen Ginsberg, whose poetry was clearly political in subject matter (see for example Gilbert 1992: 244). However, Language poetry's relation to political dimensions also differs from Lowell's and Ginsberg's modes. In the Language poets' work, "subverting such 'hegemonic' features of writing as narrative, syntax and reference" serves to provide readers with critical awareness toward other conventional and dominant positions and forms (Gilbert 1992: 254). Moreover, as Ward (2000: 170-172) observes, political issues in Language poetry are primarily tackled through humor and irony, which in Ward's words implies "that we are capable of thinking in contradiction, and hence in alternatives, most certainly including the political". This is, in a sense, a 'new' way of engaging political concerns in a poem, as the poems are not focused on offering clear statements, but rather with different voices and discourses and their connections. Such a concern for political issues is also one of the aspects that motivate the experimentation with language and the disjunctions in their poems. In a similar vein, as I will come to show in section 4.2., Ashbery's poetry may also be regarded as exploring social issues, even though his poems rarely include explicit connections to external political frames of reference as the works of the Language poets sometimes do.

The juxtaposition of Melnick's and Silliman's texts here also exemplifies how the work of the Language poets is in fact heterogeneous despite the group label. In addition to the books that Silliman mentions, Melnick is known for *Men in Aida* (1983), which is a homophonic translation of Homer's *Iliad*, and thus his poetry includes experimentation with sound. Silliman, on the other hand, writes actively about poetic issues and contemporary poetry, and his poetry also often pays attention to poetic conventions and the reader's position in relation to the text. His poetic production consists particularly of *The Alphabet*, which is a single work published in parts in between 1979 and 2004. This project includes for example *Albany*, a prose poem consisting of sentences which are disjunctive in relation to each other. Perloff (1999: 415) has remarked that the speaker of an utterance is never defined in the text, as there is no continuous first-person position. Silliman's disjunctions between

sentences differ from Melnick's dispersed words. Given the individual differences, the use of the label Language poetry to describe such a large group of poets might lead to oversimplification. Still, the Language poets have been more active in discussing their own work and reflecting on what they are doing than the New York School ever was, so they have often been considered a 'movement'.

A comparison between the Language poets and Ashbery is not intended to construct a straightforward hierarchy between them. Ashbery's early style could easily be regarded as a precedent that the Language poets then took and perfected in order to respond to an implicit demand to dismantle subjectivity and the cult of the unified voice, which have traditionally had a strong hold over poetry. However, such an understanding would be to view poetry only in terms of development rather than of nonlinear shifts and changes. The brief discussion offered here focuses on the issue of voice in the Language poets' work insofar as it relates to Ashbery's poetry, but this is far from covering their work on a wider scale. Even though I have emphasized how the work of the New York poets and the Language poets, respectively, is from the beginning posited as avant-garde or as an 'opposition' to prevailing understandings of poetry, this should not be taken to mean that their work can be exhausted by focusing on the opposition and the challenge; that they would be writing only to consciously posit an opposition. Discarding the unified voice is ultimately only one aspect of the poetries of Ashbery and the Language poets, albeit important, related to their unique ways of constituting meanings and of establishing communication.

Nevertheless, undoubtedly polyphonic and disjunctive processes have become more commonplace in the poetry of today than they were in the 1950s. Ashbery's work started to generate wider interest in the 1970s, which was also the time when Language poetry was just emerging. Since they were partly influenced by Ashbery and since the works of the Language poets and Ashbery contain similar aspects, one can, then, suspect that as their work has continued to exist simultaneously, Ashbery and the Language poets have, among others, contributed to changing the face of American poetry from texts that were widely expected to be sincere and to have a unified voice towards openness and disjunction.

For Ashbery, the ambiguity in reference, discarding the unified voice, and polyphony are related to broad issues of communication and a fuller representation of reality as I will come to observe; what it is for the Language poets is a topic for

another study. Before discussing the functions of Ashbery's pronominal positions and polyphony to a greater extent, I shall conclude this chapter by briefly considering a feature that is common to Ashbery and the Language poets, namely metatextual references or consciousness of poetic conventions. This will also allow me to bring together some aspects of Ashbery's production in a general manner before I discuss my key texts in more detail.

2.2.2. 'The templates': Disjunction and attention to literary conventions

One could say, today, in the words of 'The Template', that "the fuss seem[s] justified": "the template" of poetry as self-expression and the discourse of a unified voice is still "there", but now also less "seldom questioned", as it has been challenged for example by Ashbery or the Language poets. Perloff ([1985] 1996: 170, 174-181) remarked already in the 1980s, in the context of a book which includes discussions of both Ashbery and Language poetry, that the centrality of "subjectivity" which has often been taken for granted especially in Romantic and Modernist poetry, was starting to wane at the end of the 20th century.

Nevertheless, while Ashbery's early poetry already presented an alternative to the dominant New Critical and confessional tendencies of the time, this did not have immediate consequences for the dominant poetry. In itself, Ashbery's work did not generate wide interest until after he won the Pulitzer Prize and two other awards for *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* in 1975. Since then he has also received more critical attention, and James Longenbach has even suggested that since Ashbery's writing techniques have become more accepted, the implicit conception of poetry that can be perceived in Ashbery's work may risk becoming as dominant as Robert Lowell's poetry was at his time. For Longenbach, this means that a poem "highlight[s] its own rhetoricity, dismantles the illusion of a poet's subjectivity, revealing the process of unravelling as the true mirror of his or her time" (Longenbach 1997: 120). This is, then, a poem that is not focused on a single voice and that is also conscious of its own construction.

When Ashbery's poetry offers an alternative view to conceptions of poetry as unified and single-voiced, it is part of larger tendencies. That "[t]he perceiving subject is no longer assumed to a coherent, meaning-generating entity" is a wider

postmodern understanding (Hutcheon [1988] 1996: 11). Postmodernist art is also often self-consciously concerned with "the nature, the limits, and the possibilities of the discourse of art" (Hutcheon [1988] 1996: 22). As noted above, in the case of the Language poets problematizing the single voice position is related to poststructuralist and deconstructionist thought and to the relationship between speech and writing, and similar connections can be perceived in Ashbery's work, even though he has not explicitly spoken for these critical approaches like the Language poets have. While Ashbery's work initially precedes such critical tendencies, a large part of it has been written when such critical ideas have either been emerging or prominent.

What originally seemed like radical experimentation and avant-garde, proffered in Allen's anthology *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* indeed as something new, as a "fuss", has been one aspect in a process in which different styles of writing have become more commonplace, or started to seem "justified". In Hank Lazer's (2004) understanding, however, there is no poet now who would dominate in the way that Lowell did. Contemporary poetry is varied, which is evident for example in how, as Lazer (2004) notes, some young contemporary poets have started to examine "renewed ways of engaging sincerity, expressivity, and personal statement". This examination does not have to result in a return to the earlier dominant modes, insofar as it entails, as Lazer affirms that it does, that the younger poets have absorbed the techniques of older experimental poetry, such as consciousness of poetic conventions. Rather, it may be a re-opening. In any case, the ideas of subjectivity and personality are somehow "always there", in Ashbery's poetry as well as in later tendencies of writing, while awareness of the conventions is prominent. Before I turn to discussing how polyphony and awareness of conventions are manifest in 'Litany', a brief, general comment on the dimensions of metapoetic themes in Ashbery's work is in order.

Self-conscious attention to poetic conventions has been common in Ashbery's poetry, not least recently, for as Vincent (2007: 174-175) also observes, several poems in *Where Shall I Wander* contain material that might be spoken by "a poet". This is true for example of 'The Template', but as I observed such readings need not be taken as final. I have presented in this chapter examples of texts which overtly refer to poetry ('The Template' and 'Never Seek to Tell Thy Love') as well as of texts that can be read as containing a metapoetic reference, but which do not

necessarily need to be understood that way (‘Rain’). As discussions of Melnick’s poem ‘Le Calme’ and Ashbery’s ‘Rain’ above show, questioning the single voice position may be evident not just in the construction of poems, but also in subject matter as a metapoetic theme. The address to *you* as, perhaps, the reader is significant in this respect. Breslin (1987: 212) suggests that in paying attention to poetic conventions and forms Ashbery follows the lead of the Abstract Expressionist painters, whose paintings disclose the operations of their own making rather than presenting themselves as essentially “finished artifact[s]”.

Resistance to “finished” poems does not, however, need to imply total absence of forms. Perloff has noted that because Ashbery has sometimes used such “traditional metrical forms as the sestina and the pantoum”, “closed verse” is a conscious decision in his poetry (Perloff 1997; see also Longenbach 1997: 105). For example Ashbery’s first book contained a poem called ‘Pantoum’, and the later ‘Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape’ (*Selected Poems* 105-106) is a sestina about the comic strip character Popeye, which also presents a parodic attitude toward the form. Poetic forms such as the sestina are undoubtedly artificial, as Brian McHale (1987: 29) also notes, and in late 20th century poetry, they will not appear neutral. Using them after they are no longer the norm emphasizes the artificiality and conventionality of poetry as a medium of expression. Poetic forms with strict rules like those that are required of the sestina and the pantoum entail a certain amount of repetition, which places emphasis on certain passages and words. The repetitive structures create unexpected juxtapositions, which are always prominent in Ashbery’s texts. As Perloff (1997) also implies, while the use of a formal structure may posit the poem as “closed verse”, the closure is present in form only, because disjunctions undermine the possibility of understanding the poem as “closed”.

McHale has described the sestina form that Ashbery uses as a “machine”, where “the fictional world has been mechanically generated” and meaning is secondary to the process. Such ‘mechanical generation’ is not, however, as McHale also admits, limited to forms like sestinas, but it is to a certain extent an aspect of all poetry (McHale 1987: 29-30). ‘Templates’, such as the readers’ expectation of a voice or a speaker as coherent, are always present in one way or another, as such or as questionable. Generally, also some of Ashbery’s books present themselves, to some extent, as explorations of forms, which is true for example of *Three Poems* (1972),

where the prose poem form is central, or of *Shadow Train* (1981), a book in which all poems consist of 16 lines, divided in four stanzas. Ashbery's 'formal' poems as well as other texts that call attention to the poem itself as a construction foreground the fact that poetry is writing, an artificial construction. If one assumes that the text points towards a 'reality' that exists in spite of it, such as a subjective persona, metatextuality emphasizes that the text is not a transparent reflection of anything beside it, but always on the verge of revealing itself as mediated expression to the attentive reader.

In the case of Ashbery's early work, the fact that a poem cannot be regarded as 'finished' is then also one of the features that sets Ashbery's poetry apart from the paradigmatic poetry of the 1950s and 1960s, which posits itself as authentic and single-voiced. Consciousness of poetry as a linguistic and textual construction is not significant for example to confessional poetry. In the poetry of Ashbery and the Language poets, on the other hand, the 'templates' are consciously engaged.

As resistance to the single voice and disjunctions have become more common in poetry in general, in Ashbery's later work these issues have been explored in various ways. I observed earlier that *The Tennis Court Oath* is often considered different from the rest of Ashbery's work in its radical disjunction. However, I am inclined to agree with Fred Moramarco (1995: 38) who notes that in the early 1990s, Ashbery's poetry appears to return to exploring the "disjunctive language" that prevailed in his first books. Disjunction is true of many poems for example in such collections as *Hotel Lautréamont* (1992) and *Wakefulness* (1998), or of the recent *Chinese Whispers* (2002). While Ashbery's latest work may not be as collage-like as *The Tennis Court Oath* was, there is certainly more disjunction than for example in the awarded volume *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, which contains many poems that, while not necessarily 'coherent', would still appear to follow more of a narrative and discursive logic than many Ashbery poems before and after. *As We Know* (1979), and its long opening poem 'Litany', are again more disjunctive than *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*.

As this chapter has shown, then, the single voice is a 'template' that has variously been an issue in recent American poetry, either as something that is "seldom / questioned or suspected" or something that is "avoided". With the experimentalism of the 'New York School' and the historically later 'Language

poets', and their consciousness of poetic conventions, the idea of the voice of a poem as unitary may be "questioned" more often in American poetry. This literary historical account of groups of poets and tendencies does not, however, in the least yet account for what is really distinctive about Ashbery's abandonment of the single voice in favor of polyphony. It remains to be shown what renders the polyphony in his poetry into not just an oppositional stance, but a functional way of constituting meanings. In the next chapter, then, I will turn to analyzing 'Litany' in detail to offer an account of Ashbery's use of personal pronouns and fragmentation of voice in constructing a communicative position in this long poem which may initially appear 'difficult' or 'incommunicative'.

3. "*Make you wish you were in it*": Indeterminate voices and poetry as a critical immersion in the present in 'Litany'

For someone like me
The simple things
Like having toast or
Going to church are
Kept in one place.
…
The casual purring of a donkey
Rouses me from my accounts:
What given, what gifts. The air
Stands straight up like a tail.

He spat on the flowers.

Also for someone
Like me the time flows round again
With things I did in it.
I wish to keep my differences
And to retain my kinship
To the rest.
('Litany', *As We Know*: 3-4)

So this must be a hole
Of cloud
Mandate or trap
But haze that casts
The milk of enchantment
…
Matters like these
No one can care about,
"Noone." That is I've said it
Before and no one
Remembers except that elf.

Around us are signposts
Pointing to the past,
The old-fashioned, pointed
Wooden kind. And nothing directs
To the present that is
About to happen.

In Ashbery's oeuvre, 'Litany' (1979), a long poem in two columns, is a clear example of a text that plays with shifting pronominal references. The poem presents a dispersed speaker position and a complex interplay between *I* and *you*, which can be regarded as fictional positions or the speaker and the reader. There is also a variety of undefined third person positions marked by *he* and *she*. Through its complicated structure, the polyphony of voices and possibilities of presence, 'Litany' engages into a varied investigation of the possibilities of subjectivity and representation, and draws attention to itself as a form of criticism that could, as the beginning of the poem already shows, direct the reader's attention towards "*the present that is / About to happen*".

In the 1970s, Ashbery's poetry is generally considered to have continued to a different direction from the early experiments with the first books which constituted an opposition to the dominant mode (McHale 2000: 563). The differences to the early work are evident in how 'Litany' takes the reader's position into consideration more fully. Perloff (1980: 77-78) remarks about *The Tennis Court Oath* that the reader is nearly "excluded" from the poems, as the individual words are prevented from becoming parts of longer utterances. This is not the case anymore in 'Litany', and explicit attention to the reader's position had been prominent in Ashbery's work

already, as Bonnie Costello (1982: 493) asserts, from *Rivers and Mountains* (1966) onwards.

'Litany' is a disjunctive or 'difficult' text: it has no clearly perceivable, linear 'plot', even if some continuities can undoubtedly be found through careful reading. Perloff (1981: 279) suggests that the poem appears to be structured by the principle of "collage", as if segments of the text had been "[cut] up" and rearranged in relation to each other. Individual passages or even longer sequences are possible to understand as trains of thought despite the pronominal indeterminacies, but a larger plot or coherent account of thought is missing.

In its material appearance, 'Litany' is already set to be dialogical as the text is presented in two adjacent columns. The "author's note" states at the beginning that they are "meant to be read as simultaneous but independent monologues" (*As We Know*: 2). The right hand column is always set in italics and the left column in a normal typeface, which emphasizes their separateness. Costello even suggests that the second column of 'Litany' is devoted to the reader's position, and goes on to remark that in 'Litany' *I* and *you* form "a polyphony of writer and reader" (Costello 1982: 493, 495). The reader's position is taken into account in the pronoun *you* and its openness, which allows for metatextual readings. The columns do not simply contain one voice in each, but different, indeterminate positions within them. Due to the lack of a single voice position, the text does not offer a definite statement on the issues it tackles; instead it is fundamentally concerned with multiple possibilities. In this chapter, then, I will discuss how 'Litany' uses pronominal shifts and the lack of a single voice to draft a polyphonic understanding of the present moment. This project is primarily brought about in the poem through its complicated structure and blurring of the sense of who is speaking. Before examining these issues further, a general introduction into the problematics of subjectivity in the poem in the light of the beginning of the text quoted above is necessary to establish the poem's position to subjectivity.

3.1. "For someone like me": Establishing indeterminate presences

'Litany' problematizes from the beginning the role of the *I* as a subjective position. I remarked already in the introduction that "subjectivity" in poetry should be

considered the effect of language (cf. Easthope 1983: 31). Easthope (1983: 40) refers to the ideas of Émile Benveniste on personal pronouns to explain how subjectivity is constructed through pronouns. Benveniste (1966: 251) remarks that "person" can only be attributed to the pronouns *I* and *you* (*je/tu* in his original French), whereas the pronoun *he* does not point towards presence. A name is understood as referring to a certain being, but the pronouns *I* and *you* do not have a stable reference outside the context in which they occur, and therefore several occurrences of the pronoun *I* even within the same text can refer to several different persons (Benveniste 1966: 252-253). The pronouns become referential in relation to reality only when a speaking voice occupies them in an utterance (Benveniste 1966: 254). What this means for poetry is that the sense of person is produced in reading only, and 'Litany' foregrounds this issue.

In the above excerpts from the beginning of the poem, "someone like me" is a generalizing reference that attributes the specific statements following it not only to the speaker, but also to others. The reference attempts to deny the presence of a certain individual. There is a sense of impersonality and indeterminacy, a lack of borders as the individual is reduced to a mere type. A clear mark of presence, the pronoun *I,* does not appear as such until on line 20: the phrases "the time flows round again / With things I did in it" suggest that the specific way an *I* engages in events is significant. Because the poem foregrounds the position of "someone like me", the apparition of the *I* appears to refer more to an undefined linguistic position or to a very generic *I*, who is not a definite individual or persona. What is more important than the personality of the *I* is that the relationship between any individual and time is called into question in these lines. As Keeling (1992: 129) notes, the passage "calls attention to temporal and material limitations". The deictic markers with no referents serve to place the poem at the present moment, and allow it to refer to multiple, undefined contexts. In this way, Ashbery "build[s] into the poem a critique of whatever is to follow" (Keeling 1992: 132). From the beginning, the poem is posited as a self-conscious exploration of the issues of representation and subjectivity.

The right hand column also begins impersonally, and when the *I* is introduced in *"I've said it / Before"*, the sentence context implies that the presence that the *I* refers to would already be known, even though that is hardly the case. The beginning of the right column spells out the poem's concern for the present moment and

understanding one's place in it. The notion about "*Matters like these / No one can care about*" already anticipates the critique about the lack of attention to the present reality that is encountered later in the poem. This notion is already contradictory, as the left column shows that there is "someone like me" who does care about "simple things".

In the left column, there is also a *he* that has no referent and cannot be definitively identified. This third person is not present, and *he* does not assume a voice or a place in the communicative situation. I could assume that *he* refers to the same person as the pronoun *I*, but equally *he* could refer to a separate third person. There is a complex interplay between the two columns. They offer a sense of someone conceiving these issues, but the presence is scattered into different personal pronouns like *I* and *he*, and then gathered together as *us*. The possibility of a single, central personality is denied already in the beginning. The disjunctions in the content of the utterances in the poem also make the presence of a single self suspect, and this becomes clearer as the text proceeds and does not present a coherent narrative.

The position of the *I* in 'Litany' is countered and complicated by the pronoun *you*, which is as evasive as the speaker. There is no way of knowing whether all instances of *you* refer to the same second person throughout, or whether *you* is a way for the speaker to refer to himself, whether it refers to the reader, or to a group of several characters. In any case, *you* is a mark of presence like the pronoun *I*. When *you* can be understood as an address to the readers, it serves to engage them in constructing the text and reflecting on their relationship to its construction. The limits and possibilities of poetry as a discourse are called into question through the shifting and ambiguous personal pronouns. In section 3.1. I shall discuss how the changes in the speaker position and blurring of the positions of *you* and *I* are used to constitute a polyphony.

According to Breslin (1987: 218), Ashbery's poetry resists the "earnestness about 'experience'" that prevailed in most of the poetry up until the 1980s, which partly explains why Ashbery's work became so widely acclaimed at the time. This is also related to the confessional poetry of the 1960s, which was discussed earlier. Confessional poetry diminished in importance after that decade, but the centrality of "earnestness" goes beyond it. A poem like 'Litany', on the other hand, foregrounds the nature of the self as a pronominal position, as a linguistically created starting

point, rather than attempting to posit an illusion of a sincere subjective presence, and forces readers to consider the judgments they make on the basis of the pronouns for example about who is speaking and about the attitudes and tones of an utterance. The experiences and statements that are presented are thus placed not as essentially authentic and 'earnest', but rather as examinations of how such experiences and points of view are expressed.

On the level of thematics and materials, 'Litany' is fragmented and points towards many contexts, as it presents specific occasions like "The casual purring of a donkey / rouses me from my accounts" above. The position of the *I* is further complicated as there are disjunctions and the events that are referred to are presented so elliptically that an understanding of a fully-fledged individual character is difficult to construct. Particular 'personal' experiences, fragments of memories and thoughts in which an *I* and *you* as well as other positions are involved are confounded with a more general, metatextual focus on art and criticism. The poem attempts to draft a "new criticism", as the text itself puts it, which should raise awareness of the present moment and its constituents ('Litany', *As We Know*: 33-34). Polyphony is an important condition in creating this "criticism" which does not aim at making definite statements, but at speculating on possibilities. The metatextual issues are most clearly addressed in the second of the three sections of the poem, and I shall discuss illustrative passages in 3.2.1. to show how the juxtaposition of the two columns and the polyphony are used to create a "criticism". The polyphonic situation is further complicated by the uncertainty of attitudes and tones in the poem, which will be the focus of section 3.2.2.

Finally, I will show how the polyphonic treatment of metatextual issues turns 'Litany' into a text that blurs the boundaries between literature and critical prose, and is not merely playfully disjunctive, but contains a communicative possibility. I do not attempt to produce an all-encompassing, linear reading of the text; instead I shall focus on those aspects that are pertinent to understanding the polyphonic 'criticism' of the poem. Next, an overview of the complicated character of 'Litany' and the various positions it stages will help establish the key points of uncertainty.

3.2. "Whom should I refer you to": The absence of a continuous position

The title 'Litany' refers to a type of prayer at the church, where the public responds to the clergy. As Perloff has pointed out, "the prayer-response form" is evident in the two columns of the text. However, the voices are not structured in the hierarchical relation of the clergyman and the people who would reply and repeat, and actual moments of response are scarce (Perloff 1981: 280, 283). Of the possible meanings of the word 'litany', the more relevant one seems to be the colloquial meaning; a long and perhaps tedious speech or, as the poem itself puts it, "*maybe just / A long list of complaints or someone's / Half-formed notions of what they thought / About something*" ('Litany', *As We Know*: 38). The two columns indeed appear as if *someone*, or many persons but not a certain individual, was voicing his or her concerns and feelings in an unstructured utterance. The text is not simply a 'solipsistic' monologue as it contains various subjectivities and addresses the reader.

As Perloff (1981: 280) also notes, the perspectives of the two columns vary, although in terms of subject matter they are concerned with similar issues. This sense of different points of view is one of the features that make the poem open to multiple meanings. The two column structure brings about a concrete, material level of ordering where utterances are rendered simultaneous by deviating from normal modes of setting up a poem. The utterances in the two columns affect each other as they provide different ways of approaching ideas simultaneously. As Perloff (1981: 282) notes, the physical form of the text presents various "narrative possibilities" which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. 'Litany' can be read in various ways and orders (Perloff 1981: 282). The poem does not require a linear reading; instead, the role of the readers is crucial, as they can construct the text for themselves by choosing in what order to read the text and build their own narrative structure in between the two columns.

In his reading of 'Litany', John Keeling (1992: 127-128) characterizes the two-columned poem as containing two voices which come together to provide alternative views of the ideas they tackle. He states that "[n]either of the columns can simply be identified with the poet, with an independent/parallel voice of experience, or with any single subject position". For the purposes of this study, Keeling's

observation of the lack of a "single subject position" and the alternative views are central notions, as in my understanding there are multiple possibilities of presence and meaning in the text. However, Keeling (1992: 128) proposes, somewhat contradictorily, that both of the columns can be referred to as "Ashbery". While such naming of the speaker is common in readings of poems, perhaps only for reasons of simplicity, for my argument there is not much to be gained by discussing the poem as if it was spoken specifically by "Ashbery", even if such an understanding took into account that there are two viewpoints in the two columns. Certainly I could think that for example a statement such as "*It's sad the way they feel about it—/ Poetry—/ As though it could synchronize our lives /With our feelings about ourselves*" ('Litany', *As We Know*: 35) is Ashbery's authentic 'lamentation', spoken in his own persona as if in a critical essay, but such a reading would reveal little else than what the statement already says and would not take into account its position in the poem.

As far as authorship is concerned, the speaker appears to make his or her stance clear in suddenly stating: "Anyway, I am the author. I want to / Talk to you for a while, teach you / About some things of mine" ('Litany', *As We Know*: 48). These lines address the reader directly and turn his/her attention to the text itself. Since 'Litany' foregrounds issues that are related to poetry and writing in general, the speaker of an utterance can often be regarded as a writer who comments on the construction of the text itself or on poetry in general. However, this is not the only position that claims its authority over the text. Metatextual commentary also emanates from a source that is named as separate from "the author":

> *The narrator*:
> Something you would want here is the
> Inexpressible, rage of form
> Vs. content, to show how the latter,
> The manner, vitiates the thing-in-
> Itself that the poem is actually about
> ('Litany', *As We Know*: 62)

In this passage too, the construction of the poem itself and the reader's position are clearly at issue. Mentioning the author and narrator is one way in which 'Litany' foregrounds its position as primarily a textual construction and as a limited representation of reality.

'Author' and 'narrator' are conventionally conceived of as separate entities: 'author' usually refers to the person who actually wrote the text, whereas a 'narrator'

is a textual construction who provides a point of reference for the structure of the text. There are, then, at least two different positions in 'Litany': the author, whose concern are the "things of mine" that he wants to talk about, and a narrator who is concerned with the relation between form and content. Obviously, a narrator is conventionally the property of a novel, whereas poems are understood as having a speaker or a voice. The speech of the narrator is not presented in speech marks, so there is no way of deciding where this voice stops speaking. The speaker relations become difficult to grasp: one cannot decide definitively which of these positions, authors, narrators, and the occurrences of the pronoun *I,* which claim their positions in overt statements, could be the central speaking voice of the whole poem.

In this study, I deliberately avoid naming the senses of presence which can more generally be referred to as speakers or voices as 'Ashbery' or 'the poet'. Using the author's name to refer to the "presence" in the text is, in any case, as Easthope (1983: 46) also affirms, "misrecognition", as the illusion of presence is created through linguistic means. The difference is not, obviously, a great one: 'Ashbery' or 'the poet' and 'a speaker' would all ultimately refer to the voice readers attempt to discern while reading; a voice which is constructed by the reader in search of a sense of coherence. Thus, when McHale (2000: 577) states in relation to his reading of the autobiographical statements of Ashbery's 'The Skaters' that there is a "problem of determining which *I*'s (if any) belong to the poet and which to various fictional personae", a similar problem exists in relation to 'Litany', only that what I am expecting to find are various fictional personae, of which one could be understood as the focalizer of the text, if such a central position was possible to identify. I am essentially not discussing about which of the utterances in the poem are the poet's own experiences or opinions. The intention is rather to comprehend the nature of fictional subjectivities existing in the world of the poem, a multiplicity of voices which reveal a multiplicity of perspectives, experiences, and ways of structuring what is said. For my purposes the important notion is that there are, indeed, two columns which may create a sense of containing a unified speaker position because of the pronouns, but neither of which comprise a single position.

John Koethe has pointed out about Ashbery's poems in general that there is a "sense of the presence of a unified subject that conceives [them]" which results from the use of different pronouns, but this 'sense of presence' does not need to be

understood as a particular personality (Koethe 1980: 89, 93). He notes that any of the pronouns in the text can refer to the "subject" that is present (Koethe 1980: 89-90). The poems do offer a 'sense of presence', but this does not need to be taken to mean that there is a unitary 'vantage point', much less an individual personality. There is no certainty that all the occurrences of the pronoun *I* in 'Litany' refer to the same 'person'. In order to illustrate this, the various changes and uncertainties in the speaker position necessitate further consideration.

3.2.1. Changes in the speaker position and the role of naming

'Litany' presents several instances where there is a clear change in the speaking position. There are passages framed in speech marks, sometimes without an overt reporting clause. The passages in speech marks are often presented as the speech of a non-human character, such as a goddess, the sun, or a voice belonging to no one in particular, as in "automatic greetings, summonses / From a brazen tongue" ('Litany', *As We Know*: 29). Sometimes reporting clauses are presented without any immediately apparent marks of reported speech. For example a passage in the left column presents such a change that creates ambiguity:

> And the agony
> of looking steadily at something isn't
> Really there at all
> …its charm, no longer
> A diversionary tactic, is something like
> Grace, in the long run, which is what poetry is.
> Musing on these things he turned off the
> Great high street which is like a too-busy
> Harbor
> ('Litany', *As We Know*: 37-38)

The passage presents a reporting clause that refers to the ideas of a third person, but there are no speech marks indicating where the 'musings' of *he* begin, nor is there any clear indication of who *he* is, and who in turn provides this description of the actions of the third person. Sentences about third persons, of course, often come from 'a narrator', but one cannot know whether this voice is the same as the one that explicitly begins to speak as "the narrator" later in the poem. The observation about the relation between poetry and "the agony / Of looking steadily" is framed as the speech of a third person, which may be a position that is different than any presence that is marked by *I* in the poem. In the next stanza in the left column the text turns to

presenting an *I* in a specific context again in the line "I was waiting for a taxi", but the relation of this position to the ones in the previous stanza is unclear ('Litany', *As We Know*: 39). The uncertainty indicates that there is more than one voice present in the text.

The utterance about "the agony / of looking steadily" and its relation to poetry (though it is unclear whether it is "the agony" or, for example, "Grace" "which is what poetry is") clearly gains a different position depending on who utters it. If this statement that appears to be somewhat traditionally lyrical, as it muses on the nature of poetry, came from a single, authentic speaker of the poem whose authority would provide that the utterance is to be taken as a sincere observation, the reader would have little choice but to either accept or reject it as such. But when the utterance is presented as the opinion of a third person, it can be understood as an alternative view that may only be true for any one third person out there. The argument about what poetry is that is posited here is also quickly dispelled, as the poem turns to describing a particular event where the third person "turn[s] off the / Great high street". The statement that is true for one voice can, then, contradict and contrast other points of view about poetry that are presented elsewhere in the text, for example the following idea, which is much more gloomy about art and seeing:

> *And in this way make room for the general public*
> *To crowd around and be enchanted by it too,*
> *And then, hopefully, make some sense of their lives,*
> *Bring order back into the disorderly house*
> *Of their drab existences. If only*
> *They could see a little better what was going on*
> *Then this desirable effect might occur,*
> *But today's artists and writers won't have it,*
> *That is they don't see it that way*
> ('Litany', *As We Know*: 33)

The statements that appear in the poem are, then, offered not as a single idea, but as an essentially polyphonic representation of ideas and various points of view. The vantage point of the poem is constantly slipping away, as the pronouns change and one voice slides into another or replaces another voice. The reader's position is then to reflect on the different possibilities rather than to accept one idea. The situation is further complicated by the juxtaposition of the two columns, but I shall come back to discuss the relations between the two columns in section 3.2. in a different context.

The uncertainty of reference and speaker positions is also related to the relationship between personal pronouns and proper names in 'Litany', where the latter are, contrary to conventions of normal communication, of little importance. Apart from such beings as a goddess, the sun, author and narrator, 'Litany' scarcely names the beings that participate in fictive events or speak in the text with a substantive or a proper name. When actual proper names are encountered, these named positions are still left rather anonymous, as in the lines "you and Sven-Bertil must / At some point have overridden / The barriers real or fancied" ('Litany', *As We Know*: 7). "Sven-Bertil" is only noted in passing and never mentioned again, and one cannot know whether he is later referred to by a pronoun. All references to named people as well as to recognizable places appear unexpectedly, and then disappear as if they had never been mentioned. Fixed, nameable characters and places exist out there somewhere, but in the poem they are merely fleeting presences. As noted in section 2.1.2., in this respect a poem like 'Litany', or many of Ashbery's other poems, differs from the texts of another one of the New York School poets, Frank O'Hara.

For Ashbery, the proper names have very little importance in the text. "Sven-Bertil" is as anonymous or undefined as the pronominal positions in the text. In 'Litany', there are no references to real life figures, but in other poems some public figures like artists are mentioned, as in the widely acclaimed 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', which begins with a reference to Parmigianino's painting by the same name. This, however, is a rare instance in Ashbery's oeuvre, when the proper name and the name of the painting provide a clear point of reference for the poem from the beginning.

Morse's (1995: 17) view is that names indicate "something unique", whereas in Ashbery's work every utterance is distinctly "generic". The poems create an effect of generalization, allowing the poem to be read as if it were about anyone, as the use of the pronouns *you* and *I* suggests that anyone's act of participating is more important than knowing who exactly is involved in the event. Whereas a name normally constitutes characters or 'persons' in a text by naming them definitively and personal pronouns must come afterwards and only refer back to the names, Ashbery reverses this position. In 'Litany', proper names are a deviation from the norm, and if readers must look for a referent, they have to search one for the name as well as for the personal pronoun like *I* or *you*, which only gain definitions from the context in

which they occur. Names do not, then, provide much help in defining a voice. There are few indicators in the text that would clarify who the speaker of a given statement is. The tone of an utterance may also depend on the reader's ability to imagine that a pronoun refers to a certain defined person, even if the text does not provide unambiguous evidence for it. Such imagining might entail fixing the *he* in the passage quoted in the beginning of this section alternately as a poet, as a critic, or as a reader of poetry.

As the beginning of 'Litany' already shows, the poem is concerned with presenting not just an *I*, but "someone like me", as well as *you, we* and various third person positions which are never distinctively defined. There are several subjects or possibilities of presence. The presence of a certain person is assured only in the specific context in which a pronoun occurs. The poem contains multiple voices, and because the force of an utterance depends on who utters it, the reader can only make inferences about an utterance like the one about "the agony / of looking steadily" after a decision about whose voice speaks it has been made.

Even though there is no single self or a dominating voice in 'Litany', but an interplay of multiple presences, 'Litany', like all poems, can be understood as entailing a certain structure which contains within it the pronominal positions and presences that appear in the poem. This is perhaps an implied author or a 'writer' position that holds within it these different voices and positions, but does not merge them into a single self or voice. Even though there is a speaker that introduces himself explicitly as the "author", this is only one textual element among many. A textual position that provides the organization of the text is primarily implicit, even though one may suspect that metatextual utterances originate from such an organizing position. The voice position would also not have to be explicitly connected to the individual utterance of the pronoun *I*, even though statements that contain an *I* obviously have in them *a* speaker's voice which appears as central at the moment of utterance.

Normally, the illusion of a speaking voice that the personal pronoun *I* brings about calls upon the readers to empathize with the speaker and the text (Easthope 1983: 46). Readers can, as Easthope (1983: 43) affirms, "produce the meaning" of the utterance and "take the position of [its] subject", but such a subject position is never fixed in the context of a poem like 'Litany'. The position of the *I* is in a constant state

of flux. As Keeling (1992: 148) briefly notes, 'Litany' "resists any attempt by the reader to create a fixed subject position", and readers are thus required to consider their "arbitrary distinctions". They can, then, question not the just validity of a statement, but also the representative value and the position of the utterances in the text.

An assertion that Jonathan Culler ([1975] 1985: 169) makes of Ashbery's 'They Dream Only of America' is true for 'Litany' and for most of Ashbery's poetry: "the plethora of deictics prevents us from constructing a discursive situation and determining which are its prime constituents", and this offers a "rewarding exploration of one's modes of ordering" the conventional features of a poem. Such an investigation of "modes of ordering" may also lead one to question one's desire for order and coherence, and liberate one to accept a state of flux, or uncertainty.

If readers cannot, then, create a "fixed subject position" for themselves in relation to the *I*, the position of which is always difficult to determine, 'Litany' also provides another way for the readers to be 'included' in the text. This is the direct address to a *you,* which can invite the readers to reflect on their relationship to the textual construction. The use of the pronoun *you* and its relation to the *I* are best discussed in the context of part II of 'Litany', which will also further clarify the way utterances are posited in the text.

3.2.2. The importance of address: Blurring the boundaries between *you* and *I*

The position of the *I* is not determined in 'Litany', and therefore when an unidentified *I* addresses a *you*, the position of the other cannot be determined for the whole text either. Both of these pronouns take different positions in the course of the text, but the relationship between *I* and an elusive other is central. Consider the following passages where a speaker in the left column addresses a *you* who appears to be telling a story or writing a novel, while the right column entails a reflection on criticism:

	What then
	Shall it criticize, in order to dispel
	The quaint illusions that have been deluding us,
…	*The pictures, the trouvailles, the sallies*
Nor yet content with the propinquity	*Swallowed up in the howl? Whose subjects*
Of strangers and admirers, all rapt,	*Are these? Yet all*
In attitudes of fascination at your feet, waiting	*Is by definition subject matter for the new*
For the story to begin.	*Criticism, which is us: to inflect*

All right. Let's see—
How about "The outlook wasn't brilliant
For the Mudville nine that day"? No,
That kind of stuff is too old-hat. Today
More than ever readers are looking for
Something upbeat, to sweep them off their feet
Something candid but also sophisticated
('Litany', *As We Know*: 35)

It is to count our own ribs, as though Narcissus
Were born blind, and still daily
Haunts the mantled pool, and does not know why.

It's sad the way they feel about it—
Poetry—
As though it could synchronize our lives
With our feelings about ourselves,

Characteristically of the second section, the right column discourse on poetry and criticism is juxtaposed with an account of a specific event in the left column, though neither column is exclusively narrative or argumentative. Also the right column involves references to specific events like "This has been a remarkable afternoon" ('Litany', *As We Know*: 31) which precedes the discourse on art. In the above left column passage, the distinction between the speaker and *you* is being redefined. When first addressed, the anonymous *you* is posited as separate from the speaker, someone who will perhaps express different ideas and take a different direction. While the speaker is addressing *you*, he also gradually adopts the other's way of speaking, as he starts looking for a way to begin the story by saying "All right. Let's see—". Here, again, the lack of speech marks makes it possible to read this line as the speech of either one of those presences that were identified as the positions of *you* and *I* in the previous stanza, that is if they are ultimately separate beings. The speaker of this phrase can be the voice that just made a remark on admirers "at your feet", or the person who is about to tell a story.

The identity of the speaker is again questionable after the sentence about the Mudville nine which is the first line of an old baseball poem by Ernest Thayer called 'Casey at the Bat: A Ballad of the Republic Sung in the Year 1888'. The rejection of this line may come from the same voice who suggested it or from another voice. The distinction between *I* and *you* becomes blurred in these lines. The renouncement of the baseball poem – which is primarily a popular text – as too "old-hat" highlights the notion on the readers' wish to have "[s]omething… sophisticated". On the other hand, a poem that describes a baseball match in a light manner could also be considered to be "[s]omething upbeat". The position of the allusion remains unclear, particularly because the reader cannot know "*[w]hose subjects / Are these?*", or in other words the reader does not know who is making these pronouncements, from whose position the baseball poem should be regarded as "too old-hat" and for whom "*[t]he quaint*

illusions" are illusions that should be dispelled. What this suggests is, first of all, that there is no single authoritative voice who would affirm what the readers of today really want to read.

There is also the possibility that the address to a *you* is a way for the speaker of these utterances to address himself. As Roland Barthes ([1975] 1977: 168) has observed, calling oneself *you* can indicate a separation of "the fabricator, the producer of writing, from the subject of the work (the Author)". In the immediate context of this passage, *you* is indeed posited as someone who writes, and if by *you* the speaker refers to himself, this position can be understood as a metatextual position, someone who perhaps also comments on the construction of the present text as he or she wonders how to begin a text. The speaker would, then, be engaged in a reflection with him/herself about writing.

As the train of thought in the left column advances, however, the *you* is presented as someone separate from the speaker who is writing a novel:

> Whom
> Should I refer you to, if I am not
> To be of you? But you
> Will continue in your own way, will finish
> Your novel, and have a life
> Full of happy, active surprises
> …
> Anyway, as
> I said, I like you this way, understood
> If under-appreciated, and finally
> My features come to rest, locked
> In the gold-filled chain of your expressions,
> The one I was always setting out to be—
> Remember? And now it is so.
> ('Litany', *As We Know*: 36-37)

The uncertain relationship of *you* and *I* is troubling the speaker, and he is looking to be "of you", wishing that the two of them were not separate after all. If the *you* and *I* are here regarded as fictive characters, this can be understood as describing the end of a relationship, or again, the beginning of one as the features of the *I* become one with the other's "expressions". The other is elusive for the speaker, here as in many other passages in 'Litany'. This longing to become one with another, to be the other, is again placed in a questionable light in the next stanza: "Yet—whether it wasn't all just a little, / Well, silly" ('Litany', *As We Know*: 37).

The above passage can also be understood as a metatextual comment: the speaker of the poem, ultimately a purely textual creature, is created by the reader, and

his "features" are finally defined in the reader's mind. *You* could also be understood as referring to the reader, in which case the passage may describe a situation where the reader could actually 'write' the text for him/herself, and will then continue "on [his/her] own way…and have a life full of happy, active surprises". The textual position of the writer in the poem has no control over the reader, and any ideas he may have been able to impose on the reader may soon be dispelled after the reading is over.

Similar 'send-off lines' for the other, perhaps also for the reader, which are common in Ashbery's poetry in general, are also encountered again at the end of 'Litany' where the speaker notes "*But you are leaving*". He explains about a tape he has erroneously been billed for, and then makes a direct appeal to *you*: "*I've written them several times but / Can't straighten it out—would you / Try?*" ('Litany', *As We Know*: 67-68). The poem ends with a sense of failure on the speaker's part, and he reaches for an other to help him. The question is left open; it does not, obviously, get an answer. Still the openly challenging, direct address leaves a space for communication where the question is waiting for a reaction. Despite the fact that these 'send-off lines' are posited as specific fictive events, their context in a poem that evidently reflects on the nature of poetry and art invites readings that pertain to the construction of the text itself. Moreover, because the poem is ultimately disjunctive and does not contain a single position for the *you* or *I*, even specific events lose some of their potential to signify 'as such', as events that are only meaningful for a single person in terms of a biographical account or in search of a self-discovery, although they can be that. The fact that these utterances do not unambiguously have such significance does not mean that the utterances are ultimately meaningless; instead they are open for possibilities.

The possibilities of *you* as the reader, the *you* as the embodiment of the 'writer' of the poem as well as the *you* as a fictive character in the above passages are all available. The relationship between *you* and *I* in 'Litany' is never fixed, and the referents of the pronouns do not stay the same throughout. As Charles Altieri (1984: 162) affirms when discussing the beginning of 'Litany', "[p]erhaps the self primarily a function, not an entity – a function that is manifest in our assertions of desire or our investments in things". The beings or presences that the pronouns refer to are primarily textual constructions, senses of presences that posit the utterances as

emanating from a source, and the utterances are thus embodied by the presence of what might be called an indefinite 'character' in the world of the text, one that acts and interacts with others.

The *you* and *I*, or different *you*s and *I*s, as well as those 'characters' referred to by third person pronouns, are presented in constantly changing situations, be it at an airport, at a party or waiting for a taxi, at college or at school, in the present or "back in the fifties". Readers do not, however, get a clear sense of the boundaries of these 'characters'. Readers can still see the different positions as representing or 'reflecting' real world situations and situate them within their understanding of the world, even though there is a variety of ways of understanding as only the basics of the situation are given. These effects are brought about through the linguistic signifying process. The disorderliness and indeterminacy of the narrative leave one wondering what events really took place and what are merely possibilities, what is simply being hinted at, but not actually 'happening'.

To return to the passages quoted in the beginning of this section, the juxtapositions between the two columns create intricate, conflicting connections between similar themes and ideas. *You* in the left column is searching for ways to give the readers of a story what they are looking for. A voice in the left column also appears ironic towards the idea of what readers want, which is suggested specifically by the subtly hyperbolic formulations such as "all rapt", "sweep them off their feet". Simultaneously, also the right column can be understood as ironic towards its stance on the ideas of criticism, as the tone is unusually assertive compared to the other parts of the text. There are sentences like "*But today / Nobody cares or stands for anything, / Not even the handful of poets one admires*" ('Litany', *As We Know*: 33). Placed next to the far less assertive voice of the left column, a voice that longs to become one with the other and eventually turns to admitting that it may have been "all just a little / Well, silly" ('Litany', *As We Know*: 37), the assertiveness of the right column becomes only one position among many, a possibility that is not final. In order to illustrate how the two columns affect each other's tones and viewpoints, and how multiple meanings are placed against each other, the metacritical discussion of art and criticism that 'Litany' is concerned with requires further consideration.

3.3. "New criticism": Metatextual discourse and the present moment

Already in the beginning of the poem, 'Litany' presents in a central position an *I* who engages in events, speaking of the "things I did" and their connections. Yet, this involvement of the *I* does not happen in the way that Charles Altieri has deemed important for most American poetry in the 1970s and early 1980s. In the dominant mode of the period, during which 'Litany' was also published, "an experience is significant in the precise way 'I' engage in it" (Altieri 1984: 22). The sincerity of a particular self and the degree to which other points of view are merged into the dominant speaking voice of the poem are important conditions in creating an act that can be "representative" and a "bond between the self and others" (Altieri 1984: 15, 21-22). Positing voice as sincere also requires maintaining a close relation "between the authorial presence and the dramatic voice" (Altieri 1984: 16). When the sincerity of a central *I* is important, poems are understood as communicative by virtue of the representative value of the events and emotions presented in them; because the reader can perceive an authentic individual whose experience is representative. The readers can then empathize with the emotions and experiences that the individual position presents, and to take the statements that are offered as the sincere opinions of the speaker. This, however, is not as straightforward in 'Litany', as the previous section already showed.

Altieri (1984: 22) notes that the position of a central *I* or a self of a single-voiced poem is only meaningful "beyond language". The sense of presence marked by the personal pronoun has to be an individual, and experiences are meaningful in relation to the person and his/her history. This position of the self outside language relates to Koethe's (1980: 93) aforementioned idea of how a particular "psychological ego" is not significant in Ashbery's poetry. 'Litany' does not present a continuous 'self' that readers would immediately be invited to look for beyond language. Rather, Ashbery's pronouns make readers consider not simply what an act or a statement represents, or what is its ultimate meaning, but the specific way the act or its potential for representation *happens*, how such effects are brought into play, and what the relations between different possibilities of meaning are.

For Altieri (1984: 16-17), poetry that is primarily concentrated on the sincere single voice position may lead to self-containment and not be self-conscious enough.

Such self-consciousness is precisely what 'Litany' achieves in the way it resists the reader's attempts to perceive a single voice in the text and thus foregrounds subjective positions as the result of discursive practices. As Altieri (1984: 76) also suggests, Ashbery generally manages to combine "self-consciousness" with a "flexible personal presence". In 'Litany', the *I* is obviously a point of origin, the one position that is necessary for exploring "time [that] flows round" and the "*present that is / About to happen*", as the poem suggests in the beginning. If this *I* has any particular personality, it is sustained only at the moment of the individual utterance of the *I*. The poem does not have as a speaker a unified persona who would only express his subjective feelings, and the requirement of sincerity as the prevailing attitude is cast aside. In this way, any statements that are made cannot necessarily be accepted or rejected by the reader as such, but instead the reader is invited to consider the relations between positions. This is important in creating the metatextual criticism or what is referred to in the poem as "new criticism" ('Litany', *As We Know*: 34). The investigation of the potentials of representation of poetry and art in general is apparent throughout 'Litany', but it is most clearly expressed in the second part of the poem, and I shall discuss this in the following section.

3.3.1 The interrelations of different voices: Constructing a metatextual consciousness

As noted, the second section of 'Litany' is to a great extent concerned with critical and metacritical commentary. The right column involves a train of thought on art, poetry and criticism, with a disapproving tone which is evident in such pronouncements as "*no one really pays much attention / To anything at all*" ('Litany', *As We Know*: 32). At the same time, the left column is concerned with describing specific events in which *I* and *you* have participated. The tone of the utterances in the left column in the second section is generally more emotionally and personally engaged than the assertive, critical views of the right column. Consider the following passages:

The old-timers will
Let you take over the old lease.
One of them will be in you.

If there were concerts on the water there
We could turn back. Tar floated upriver

Just one minute of contemporary existence
Has so much to offer, but who
Can evaluate it, formulate
the appropriate apothegm, show us
In a few well-chosen words of wisdom

In the teeth of the gulls' outlandish manifestations; The banks pocked with flowers whose names I used to know, Before poetic license took over and abolished everything. People shade their eyes and wave From the strand: to us or someone behind us? ('Litany', *As We Know*: 32)	*Exactly what is taking place all about us?* *Not critics, certainly, though that is precisely* *What they are supposed to be doing, yet how* *Often have you read any criticism* *Of our society and all the people and things in it* *That really makes sense, to us as human beings?*

The speaker in the right column is criticizing modern society, art and people's reactions to it. The word criticism is ambiguous in the context of the whole text; it may refer to art, poetry, or any other form of societal and cultural criticism. What is significant for the speaker is the contemporary reality, which, according to him, is not sufficiently taken into account by critics or artists. Eventually, the speaker goes on to drafting a "*new / Criticism, which is us*" and which should "*dispel / The quaint illusions that have been deluding us*" ('Litany', *As We Know*: 35). The speaker is arguing that there is a lack of critical positions, and this lack is what the "new criticism" is supposed to rectify. The implication of this argument may be either very general or specific, for there are no precise definitions for "our society" or the readers of "today". These deictic markers may be understood as referring to phenomena that were discernible in American society at the end of the 1970s, but no precise references to distinct events or dates are given, rather the deictic markers refer the situation to the immediate present moment. The "new criticism" is not presented as an equivalent of the literary critical approach New Criticism; instead what the poem presents is closer to the postmodernist idea of the intertwining roles of art and theory, which could in a sense suggest that the moment of speaking in the poem is particular, the time when such ideas were starting to be common; indeed, around the time when the poem was written.

While the train of thought about art and criticism goes on in the right column, the left column presents a speaker's thoughts concerning particular occasions or possibilities of occasions, such as "If there were concerts on the water there / We could turn back", and also another character, a companion perhaps, is addressed. The left column passage is then, in a sense, concerned with offering an account of how "*one minute of contemporary existence / Has so much to offer*" as the passage describes the indeterminate positions of *you*, *I* and *we* with their possible concerts and their being surrounded by such ordinary particulars as flowers and gulls. However,

this image of a situation that is rich with details appears to be shattered in the phrase "Before poetic license took over and abolished everything". 'Poetic license', in this sentence, has the power to put an end to the particular moment which someone was able to observe. This is in contradiction with the right column, if the proposition for a new form of criticism that could direct one's attention to "*what is taking place all about us"* is taken to mean that precisely poetry could or should achieve this. The juxtaposition of the two columns resists extracting definite statements from the poem on this issue; instead the poem offers an open reflection in which the indeterminacy of the subjective positions has an important role. The events in the left column are presented as possibilities through the conjunction "if". The constant pronominal shifts resist constituting a clear image of who exactly is involved in these events and what is really happening.

In both columns in the second section of 'Litany', then, there is a sense of the importance of taking in the present moment and assessing its constituents, whether it happens through a form of discursive criticism or through exploring particular memories and occasions that are true for any position. Even though the right column is clearly argumentative and posits statements that are often negative in tone, the poem does not offer a final stance. Poetry, through the account of both columns in this passage, may be understood as providing a "criticism", or it can be understood as a form that fails to provide sufficiently critical stands and actually somehow comes between a true immersion in the present moment, as the notion about the poetic license may suggest. Multiple viewpoints in the two columns allow for a more varied and open way of discussing and questioning ideas on art, representations of contemporary reality, and criticism – which could either be criticism for example in a factual essay, or literature that engages in cultural criticism – that could, perhaps

> *describe the exact feel*
> *And slant of a field in such a way as to*
> *Make you wish you were in it, or better yet*
> *To make you realize that you actually are in it*
> *For better or for worse, with no*
> *Conceivable way of getting out?*
> ('Litany', *As We Know*: 32-33)

The poem does not ultimately define how a projection of the present moment "[*t]hat really makes sense, to us*" could be possible, other than in a paradoxical form that does not provide an unambiguous statement on the issue. Nothing is affirmed. With

the views of the two columns intertwined it becomes difficult to simply read any statements the poem makes as such, as sincere and uncomplicated. To gain a better understanding of this aspect, I shall consider further the inherent uncertainty of attitudes and points of view in 'Litany'.

3.3.2. Uncertain attitudes and multiple meanings

So death is really an appetite for time
That can see through the haze of blue
Smoke-rings to the turquoise ceiling.
She said this once and turned away
Knowing we wanted to hear it twice,
…
What it was like to be mouthing those
Solemn abstractions that were crimson
And solid as beefsteak.
….
Because it is the way of the personality of each
To blush and act confused, groping
For the wrong words so that the
Coup de théâtre
Will unfold all at once like shaken-out
The spaces between the teeth told you
That the smile hung like an aria on the mind
And all effort came into being
Only to yank it away
Came at it
…
The background but were not much more than
The dust as it is seen
In folds of the furniture,
…

Certainly the academy has performed
A useful function. Where else could
Tiny flecks of plaster float almost
Forever in innocuous sundown

('Litany', *As We Know*: 14).

As Brian McHale asserts, metatextual utterances in Ashbery's texts can be difficult to take at "face value", or as spoken by a sincere voice (McHale 2000: 582; see also Shoptaw 1994: 90-91). Similar uncertainty of attitudes is present throughout 'Litany', and it relates to aspects which are central in Ashbery's poetry, namely irony and parody. Perloff (1997) also affirms that Ashbery's poetry is typically so multivalently parodic that the speaker's attitude cannot be determined. In 'Litany', there are elements that can be regarded as parodic, even if humor is not as obvious as in Ashbery's early works as well as in his most recent works from the millennial era onward. For example a sentence such as "it's poetry, it's extraordinary, / It makes a great deal of sense" may seem self-parodic in a text that is so obviously disjunctive ('Litany', *As We Know*: 63).

One may also wonder whether it is wise to read, for example, the sentence from the above passage "*Certainly the academy has performed / A useful function*" as a serious proclamation, as Helen Vendler (1988: 234) has done, concluding that Ashbery is "quite willing, for example, for the academy and the critics to exist". Vendler (1988: 234) ties this part of the poem definitely to the poet's own feelings toward the academy and critics, by which the poem "will be preserved". Certainly it

may be possible Ashbery had this in mind when he wrote the text, but such a biographical reading is in fact ignoring the poem's openness to various other readings. Reading this utterance at 'face value' is obviously one possibility, and this reading would, from my point of view, appear reasonable if it was posited as a possibility that may be true for any one personality out there, but this does not seem to be what Vendler implies. Rather, for her the *I* of 'Litany' appears to refer to a continuous, sincere self, who might as well be Ashbery himself, offering these "perfectly intelligible and heartfelt ruminations on soul-making in art, life, and criticism" (Vendler 1988: 232). A reading of the passage about the academy at 'face value' would also appear more pertinent as an illustration of Ashbery's real opinions that were somehow evident outside the poem, as in John Shoptaw's (1994: 234-235) transparently biographical discussion, where he shows how Ashbery, at the time of writing 'Litany', also expressed "dissatisfaction" with criticism in interviews, and only "faintly praised" the "academy".

However, what the poem really does present is a position that is more complex than either of these readings would suggest. As the previous section already showed, the right column of 'Litany' involves a critique of "criticism", with an observation that critics are not doing "*[w]hat they are supposed to be doing*" ('Litany, *As We Know*: 32). The attitudes of the poem towards critics are obviously not unambiguous. Also, the notion about the academy is complicated by the following statement:

> *Where else could*
> *Tiny flecks of plaster float almost*
> *Forever in innocuous sundown.*
> ('Litany', *As We Know*: 14).

The academy is presented as preserving "*tiny flecks of plaster*", tiny particulars that are perhaps insignificant, which as a reference to works of art may appear ironic or demeaning. In the left column roughly simultaneously with this, the speaker also wonders "What it was like to be mouthing those / Solemn abstractions that were crimson / And solid as beefsteak" ('Litany', *As We Know*: 14). The intermingling of the two columns raises the question of whether something as "solemn" as the academy and its "abstractions" have in fact performed "a useful function". As these notions are juxtaposed, the comment about how "the academy has performed / A useful function" could be understood as a "[s]olemn abstraction" in itself. The

interplay between the two columns undermines the sense of the seriousness of the notion of the academy. Certainly possibilities for less ironic interpretations of utterances exist, and the different attitudes are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

The "solemn abstractions" obviously also characterize the comments about how "death is really an appetite for time" earlier in the left column, which are presented as the speech of a third person, and this creates further ambiguity. The statements that one voice makes in the poem are undermined or questioned by another voice, but yet for example the statement about death remains as a genuine possibility to be taken as such, as it is presented by one voice in the poem.

If the assertiveness of the right column is not a serious attitude, the utterances may also merely exemplify the kind of discourse that is normally used by poets and critics to criticize art and society. In a text like 'Litany' that contains different voices, quotations, and uncertain deictic references, one can rarely be certain whether something can be taken as a 'sincere' utterance or whether it stands as a quotation or an allusion to a discourse that belongs to another specific context. Building on Shoptaw's (1994: 95) discussion of Ashbery's 'The Skaters', McHale states that in Ashbery's poems, it is difficult to distinguish between 'use' and 'mention': whether a "mentioned" statement exemplifies the discourse, the way of speaking about the topic it addresses, or whether something is actually "used" as a statement about the text or as a description of a situation (McHale 2000: 585).

In the context of 'Litany', then, the readers cannot know whether a statement like "*Certainly the academy has performed / A useful function"* or "So death is really an appetite for time / That can see through the haze of blue / Smoke-rings to the turquoise ceiling" is to be taken as a sincere observation of a certain speaker, one that is meaningful for the thematic or narrative development of the text, or whether they are merely examples of such assertions. For example the latter statement about the death appears particularly 'poetic' in a conventional sense, given that it is abstractly metaphorical and "death" is, after all, a privileged theme of a great quantity of poetry. The statement could, therefore, be an example of such traditionally poetic discourse, or an allusion to an undefined source, rather than an assertion that should be taken 'as such'. The same possibility of allusion or 'mention' is true for example for the lyrical utterance "the agony / Of looking steadily…. which is what poetry is" *('Litany', As We Know: 37-38)* that I discussed in section 3.2.1. This also leads to a situation in

which, if there is parody in the text, one cannot exactly be sure what the parody is directed at; whether a statement about death that is either "used" or "mentioned" is posited parodically, or whether it is spoken in earnest.

The use of different discourses as allusions to certain manners of speaking is also evident in the variety of materials in the text. There is for example a passage in which the text suddenly starts to resemble the lyrics of popular music songs or becomes a simple love poem with rhyming, such as "The lovers saunter away / It is a mild day in May. / With music and birdsong alway / And the hope of love in the way" ('Litany', *As We Know*: 52). Intertextuality is evident for example in the suggested beginning for a story that mentions the Mudville nine ('Litany', *As We Know*: 35), which as was noted above, alludes to an old baseball poem. The indeterminacy in the positions of the utterances may lead to a situation where the poem is not a "direct description of some world, fictional or real, but secondhand description, mediated by another, prior representation – intertextuality, not 'reality'" (McHale 2000: 569).

The presence of a variety of textual materials, discourses, tones and attitudes renders the text into a fragmented construction, in which no position or discourse can be dominant by itself. To a great extent, the voices in the text consist of a variety of discourses, some of which may be quoted or exemplified, and there is no certainty of what the real, authentic voice of a speaker is. There is no dominant speaker with a characteristic voice, only a variety of positions. The definitive decisions are left to the readers, and they have to decide for themselves which of these voices and tones – like sentimentality, lyricism, assertiveness or irony – they listen to and which of the pronominal positions they want to empathize with, if any. In order to understand what the metacritical level and the reader's participation can ultimately do for the text, I shall conclude this chapter by discussing the communicative possibilities of 'Litany'.

3.4. The poem and reader in communication: Poetry as criticism in 'Litany'

> *And I too am concerned that it*
> *Be this way for you. That you*
> *Get something out of it too.*
> *Otherwise the night has no end.*
> ('Litany' *As We Know*: 39)

What, then, of communication? I have observed earlier that Ashbery has the reputation of being an incommunicative poet. Undoubtedly a poem like 'Litany' is

'difficult' in its fragmentariness and variousness, and one might be tempted to claim that the text does not communicate. However, particularly because *you* may often be understood as referring to the reader, the poem is primarily concerned with what the lines above suggest: "*That you / Get something out of it too"*, assuming that such an utterance can be taken at 'face value'. Then, even though I may use this utterance as an illustration of what the text indeed does, in the context of the whole text, the utterance retains its uncertain position.

David Herd also asserts that Ashbery's incommunicative reputation is false, and that Ashbery's poetry is best understood as a medium of "democratic communication", rather than as an expression of an idea, and this is related to Ashbery's sense of the present occasion (Herd 2000: 16-19). According to Herd (2000: 138), Ashbery's poetry presents a "deictic relation to the world" to constitute the present moment. The present moment and its constituents, a kind of critical immersion into the present, are indeed central in 'Litany'.

The two column structure and the various voice positions build a metacritical level into the text, and the text attempts to take in the present moment as experienced by *I* and *you* while also discussing the importance of such immersion in the present. The poem attempts to exemplify the inescapable condition of the world, from which we have no "*Conceivable way of getting out"* ('Litany', *As We Know*: 33). Marjorie Perloff (1990: 276-280) has compared Ashbery's poems, particularly the title poem of *As We Know,* with Roland Barthes's book *Barthes by Barthes* (1975), which, according to Perloff, is "surely fictive, if not fictional, in its development" even though the text does not posit itself as a fictive text with characters and a plot, and the speaker is "dispersed… pronouns and tenses shift… and bits of narrative are *intercalated* into the meditative structure". This description also resembles 'Litany'. The poem is an essentially fictional text with its references to memories and specific events that are true for any person referred to as *you* or *I*. Yet the poem contains no clearly discernible plot or full-fledged characters, and materials vary, turning the text into a fragmented mixture of ideas. Various memories and occasions are presented in the text, but through the critical level, they are turned into more than just 'subjective expression' or authentic recollections from the poet-speaker's life: they are the material of each of our lives, potentially representative events. Of course there are individual utterances spoken by an *I* that readers can empathize with just as in reading

the poetry that focuses on a central *I*. Nonetheless, because of the pronominal relations and the structure of the text, readers are invited to remain alert to different possibilities.

The columns comment on similar themes from different points of view, thus creating intricate connections between ideas. The voices change and ideas call each other into question or cancel each other, even though the voices do not enter into direct dialogues. In a sense, the voices speak past each other, contemplating on similar issues, while they do not unambiguously answer each other. Thus, while 'Litany' itself remains ultimately uncertain about what the possibilities of poetry and criticism are, and to what extent these are or can be successful in comprehending the present moment, in a sense the text already engages in a 'new poetic criticism'. What is communicated is not a clearly defined argument or a transparently representative personal experience, but instead an interplay of multiple positions, which includes many different viewpoints without imposing definitive arguments on the reader. When there is no voice of authority as for example in a critical essay, simply different voices and points of view which can be true simultaneously, the text may be, in Herd's (2000: 19) terms, "democratic communication". This leads to a situation which, as Nicholls (2000: 163) asserts, is true of the work of Ashbery as well as the Language poets: reader and writer can collaborate, that is the reader does not simply have to reconstruct some pre-existing text from the author's fragments.

The fluctuation between persons, subjectivities, and constantly varying subject matter, as well as the moments of direct address to a *you,* have the effect of drawing the readers in: they cannot just sit back and 'overhear' the utterance of the singular speaking voice. Instead, the readers have to make decisions about who speaks and what the tone of an utterance is, and whether a statement refers to a fictive event within the world of the text, whether it is metatextual, or whether it refers to the present reality, and whether or not it openly addresses them. Only after such decisions have been made can an implication of an utterance be identified. In this sense, the reader is the one who can make the poem into a "finished artifact", which an Ashbery poem initially is not, as was noted in 2.2.3. in relation to metatextuality (see Breslin 1987: 212). The reader is then really the most central element for the composition of the text (cf. Barthes 1994: 495). Yet, the sense of a 'finished artifact' is only

temporary, as the implications of the utterances in the text are constantly in a process of change.

An effect of "democratic communication" in 'Litany' ultimately arises out of what may initially have seemed like mere difficulty or simply playful indeterminacy. As Susan M. Schultz (1996: 31) has noted, 'Litany' is an "'essay on criticism,' or an essay *of* criticism". Metatextual notions are generally common in Ashbery, and such a form of criticism that 'Litany' presents, mixing particularities and flexible presences with reflections on art and criticism, has also been notable for example in 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror'. Such texts raise the issue of criticism and poetry becoming closer to each other which has often been regarded as characteristic of postmodernism (Kantola 2001: 21). Both 'theory' and 'criticism' have come to be understood as larger enterprises that comprise not only a particular field like literature, but engage into complex interrelationships with many different social and cultural discursive modes and forms of signification, and attempt to create new modes of communication.[2]

Schultz (1996: 31, 45) reads such conflation of criticism and poetry as in 'Litany' in the light of Harold Bloom's understanding of how, in Schultz's words, "there is no real difference between poetry and criticism". In her discussion, Schultz (1996: 24-48) convincingly displays the relations that Ashbery's poetry has to Bloom's ideas, both as a critique of Bloom's position as well as in the form of exploring similar ideas. Nevertheless, 'Litany' hardly submits to another position of Bloom's, the one he has toward the idea of what poetry should be: it "has no true subject except the poet's own selfhood" (Bloom [1982] 1983: 287). 'Litany' is a poem about "someone like me", or it presents many selves and voices, and it is a poem that can contain more than just a profound reflection of one's deep self, including critical reflection, an activity that is in a sense impersonal, at least it aims towards objectivity rather than a subjective, personal statement. Obviously, in conflating particular events in which *I* and *you* participate, the poem *is* in the personal sphere; yet one can hardly say that this is its "true subject".

[2] The notion that 'Litany' is primarily a *poetic* text could be highlighted by comparing it with such texts as Charles Bernstein's poem-essay 'Artifice and Absorption' (1985), Susan Howe's book *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), or David Antin's '*talk poems'* which to a great extent use poetic means and elements, but appear primarily as critical reflections about poetry, whereas in 'Litany' the fictive level, the *I*s and *you*s and their experiences, clearly also has a central place.

Charles Altieri (1984: 26) remarks that in New Criticism, poetry is understood as providing "a nondiscursive alternative to the simplicities of argument". In other words, poetry can offer modes of reflection that are not restricted by the requirements of discursive logic that for example arguments in an academic text must respect. As Altieri affirms, however, Ashbery's poetry presents a challenge to this notion of poetry as an essentially "nondiscursive alternative", because his poems stretch and explore "poetic conventions" in such a way that attention is directed toward how discursive practices in the poems function, as well as to what the relations between a "person" and "the language" a person uses are (Altieri 1984: 26, 76-77). This is evident in 'Litany' in the way in which it puts into play different presences and voices and their relations to specific experiences, and foregrounds the arbitrariness and the linguistic grounds of subjective and individual positions. 'Litany' is aware of poetry as an essentially discursive practice, rather than presenting itself simply as a transparent, representative form of lyric speech, or as hermetic argumentation. The address to *you* that may be regarded as address to the reader serves to ensure that the reader is invited to consider the various positions and their implications. In its attention to discursiveness, 'Litany', then, shows Ashbery coming back again to the old position of the 'New York School', for whom poetry could not be read "the way they taught us back in school", in the New Critical manner (see section 2.1.).

While I have established that 'Litany' is a communicative poem, this is not the only way communication has been an issue in Ashbery's poetry. Undoubtedly Herd (2000: 176) is partly right when he suggests that, after Ashbery's other poems from the 1970s, 'Litany' presents a "communicative breakdown". Herd (2000: 176) notes that the two columns do not engage each other and that the different voices the poem incorporates (by which he seems to mean simply the two voices of the columns) are "like prayer[s] in the face of an unvaried response". Even though address is frequent in the text and the *I* appears to be reaching out to a *you*, and even though the voices comment on similar ideas from different points of view, an actual, direct response is rarely heard: there is little sense of dialogue and exchange. In Ashbery's later poetry, notably in *Your Name Here* (2000), dialogue has been a central element. Communication in this collection of poems becomes not only something that the poems may achieve, but also the issue, the one subject that the poems most notably investigate, and it is to this that I shall turn in the following chapter.

4. Flexible pronouns and conversing voices: Exploring communication in *Your Name Here*

> In no way am I the island I was yesterday.
> Children and small pets rejoice around my ankles;
> yellow ribbons come down from the tree trunks.
> This is *my* day! Anybody doesn't realize it
> is a goddamn chameleon or a yes man! Yes, sir,
> we'd noticed your singular pallor, singular
> even for you. Ambulances have been summoned,
> are rumbling across the delta at this moment,
> I'd wager. Meanwhile, if there's anything we can do
> to make you comfortable for two or three minutes…
> ('Lemurs and Pharisees', *Your Name Here*: 94)

The above stanza from 'Lemurs and Pharisees' exemplifies what is different in Ashbery's recent collection *Your Name Here* (2000) when compared with 'Litany': "In no way am I the island I was yesterday". The *I* of an utterance is no longer as solitary or speaking without getting a response as it was earlier, as this line states making use of the Donne-inspired, partly cliché idea. What has been said in the previous chapter about the role of pronouns in constructing the positions of speaker and addressee as well as about the uncertainty of pronominal references is still relevant in *Your Name Here*, but the consequences differ. In the 1990s, Ashbery's poetry took a turn toward dialogue, and particularly in *Your Name Here*, voices are no longer as unresponsive to each other as the voices were in 'Litany'. Yet the statement of not being an island is spoken with such self-assurance that it casts suspicion upon itself, especially because as I established in discussing 'Litany', deciding whether a statement in an Ashbery poem should be taken seriously or whether it parodies or exemplifies certain discourses can be difficult. A sense of dialogue does not mean that communication will be either unproblematic or transparent. Instead, the poems in *Your Name Here* explore the banalities, shortcomings, and problems of interpersonal, everyday communication by avoiding definite subject matter and closure of meaning, as well as by foregrounding the arbitrariness of the subjective positions within them through the use of indeterminate pronouns.

Fragmentation and disjunction in the speaker position and the poem's tendency to reach out toward something other than 'the poet's subjectivity' is as characteristic of the texts in *Your Name Here* as it was of those in 'Litany'. In short poems like the ones in this collection the speaker position might be tempting to

understand as unified, but it is hardly unproblematic. There is no telling whether or not the speaker remains the same throughout 'Lemurs and Pharisees'. The disjunctive contexts that the poem presents for the pronominal positions cannot easily be merged into a coherent discourse of a certain individual. I can assume that the beginning of the aforequoted middle stanza of the poem until the sentences "This is *my* day! Anybody doesn't realize it / is a goddamn chameleon or a yes man!" is spoken by one speaker, but after that the continuity is less certain. "Yes, sir" echoes rather literally the notion on "a yes man", which is a definition given by the speaker to someone who would not realize the speaker's particular situation. If I assume that the speaker changes here, the stanza is split between at least two speakers who are in conversation: first one voice proclaims the singularity of his situation and demands acknowledgement, and another voice then responds to the demand by saying that "we'd noticed your singular pallor".

On the other hand, the speaker may equally well be read to be the same 'persona' throughout the stanza as there is no clear indication of change such as speech marks or reporting clauses. In that case, only the addressee changes from a general audience referred to by "anybody" to a specific "sir" and an undefined *you*, and one could, for example, assume that the rejoicing takes place because ambulances have been summoned. Even though at least one relatively consistent position could be discerned for the *I* in the poem or in parts of it, the text still does not dissolve into solipsism or mere interpretation of the self. Regardless of who is or are speaking, the presence of others is clearly the issue in the excerpt: the addressees are people whose recognition of the self is wanted and whose desire for comfort conversely also needs to be addressed. The situation of communication and its problems become central in the poem, and this stanza alone gives rise to at least two different narratives, which are present simultaneously.

In what follows, I shall then discuss the dialogical relations and investigation of communication in *Your Name Here.* Considering these issues in relation to the communicative nature of 'Litany' in its attempt to address the readers and to engage them in a self-conscious act of constructing meaning from the text, something similar might be expected to be at work here. Even the title of the book, *Your Name Here*, seems to address the readers, to allow them to name the book after them and turn themselves into a subject in the text. Also the last line of 'Lemurs and Pharisees'

proclaims quite clearly “Next time, you write this”, appearing to invite the reader to participate in the actual construction of the text. However, the situation is more complex than these apparent statements would suggest.

Your Name Here presents a variety of poems which differ from each other in the use of different voices and pronouns. An *I,* or a subjective position, is present in most poems, and whenever there is an *I*, there is usually also a *you*. The address to an other is as significant in this collection as it was in ‘Litany’. However, the implications of the address are sometimes rather different, as I will come to discuss in 4.2.1. Even though a subjective position or a ‘self’ as well as an other exist in most texts, *I* and *you* are not primarily discursive devices for voice positions, but positions of presence or ‘characters’ that allow for an investigation of social discourses and aspects of communication. The expectation of narrative coherence that many of the poems create is important for enabling this investigation. Many of the texts in *Your Name Here* are narrative in the sense that they mostly record series of events, sometimes even surprisingly (considering Ashbery’s characteristic disjunctiveness) coherent ones. Narrativity is especially evident in impersonal, descriptive statements such as “The heath is ablaze again” in ‘Lemurs and Pharisees’, where “again” creates a sense of temporality and of the recurrence of an event. The use of third person or conversely the absence of a central speaking first person position is also important for this effect.

In addition to the expectation of narrative coherence, one can identify two other aspects which are central in the texts with regard to voice and pronominal positions. First, some poems create a sense of *dialogue*: echoes and expectations of response in texts where *I*, *you*, as well as other indeterminate pronominal positions abound and the boundaries between different voices are often difficult to define on the level of the whole text, as ‘Lemurs and Pharisees’ also exemplifies. Secondly, in relation to the sense of dialogue, the *you-I* relationship becomes the defining conjunction in the book, the axis on which an open field of possibilities for communication is clarified. The *I* in *Your Name Here* is defined through the address to an other, and the *you* is often fixed as a ‘particular’ persona, even though the position is still ultimately uncertain and flexible.

The identification of different aspects is not intended to classify the texts, because obviously the aspects are intertwined and complement each other. I will first

discuss *Your Name Here* through these aspects and finally analyze the title poem in more detail. I shall begin with a discussion of the narrativity in *Your Name Here*.

4.1. Narrativity and the use of third person

Many of the poems in *Your Name Here* create an expectation of narrative coherence through a sense of seemingly linear continuity and recurrence. There are, however, still always unexpected turns which disrupt the logic of narrative; the poems do not offer a clear, linear story. Utterances often appear to refer to recurrent or previous situations, which, however, have not been specified, like "The heath is ablaze again" in 'Lemurs and Pharisees'. Pronouns and connectives such as "[m]eanwhile" create a sense of cohesion and succession in the events. There is a sense of temporality, of the passing of time. The linguistic devices like 'meanwhile' contribute to raising expectations about coherence in the reader's mind, but the sense of continuity is undermined by disjunctions in the content of utterances and through uncertainty of pronominal reference. As the previous chapter showed, 'Litany' is disjunctive, and entails a certain amount of narrativity insofar as it refers to specific events in which *you* and *I* participate, but it is also, argumentative in the sense that the voices in the poem posit statements for example about poetry. The argument is then shattered by disjunctions and changing speakers. In the poems of *Your Name Here*, however, the focus is on the fictive events rather than on positing arguments and theoretical statements.

As Perloff ([1985] 1996: 160-162) notes while discussing, among others, Ashbery's early poem 'They Dream Only of America', narrativity and story are elements that have traditionally not been regarded as central in poetry, but postmodern poetry has turned to emphasizing them. Particularly in Modernism, "*poetry*, the lyric expression of personal emotions, and *prose*, the language of fiction, of the novel" were clearly kept separate (Perloff [1985] 1996: 158). Poems are not expected to tell stories. The poems of Ashbery and of some of his contemporaries turn to doing this, but their stories are not ones with coherent plots, but rather the narrative is, in Perloff's ([1985] 1996: 161) words, "a point of reference, a way of alluding, a source… of parody".

The poems in *Your Name Here* that contain descriptive, narrative statements, then, foreground impersonality rather than a personal, single voice whose experiences could be meaningful as a biographical narrative. Conversely, for example the poem 'Memories of West Street and Lepke' by Robert Lowell, which was discussed in section 2.1.2., is structured in such a way that it does entail a certain amount of narrative: the memories of war and being in prison that are presented in the poem can be understood as describing the precise experiences of one person, and the poem ultimately aims toward a biographical revelation that is meaningful for that person (see Perloff [1985] 1996: 157). This, however, is not what the narrative poems in *Your Name Here* aim at, as most of them are impersonal. Even though there may sometimes be a continuous position for the *I*, still the poems cannot be totally assimilated to a similar kind of biographical narrative as Lowell's poem. A poem like 'Lemurs and Pharisees' focuses on investigating not the experience or history of one person, but communicational exchanges in which various 'persons' participate.

The lack of consistency in Ashbery's narratives is related to the reader's understanding of the "level of world" in reading a poem, in other words perceiving meaningful incidents or contexts and "scenes" for certain stories in the text, as identified by Brian McHale (1992: 8-9) in his discussion of what he calls the "nonsense" or difficult poetry by Ashbery, Charles Bernstein and J.H. Prynne. McHale's conception is based on Veronica Forrest-Thomson's (1978: xii-xiii) theory of how readers make sense of poems by structuring the details of the poem with the help of a certain "level of coherence" or an "image-complex". This helps the readers to "distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant" and to focus on certain aspects; and particularities in the text can be understood as relevant in relation to a broader theme or idea (Forrest-Thomson 1978: xii-xiii). McHale (1992: 11-12) finds in a discussion of Ashbery's poem 'Metamorphosis' from *As We Know* that there is no single "discernible scene or situation" or context in the poem which would justify the particulars in the text. This is also the case of 'Lemurs and Pharisees', which does not present a unitary context or a linear description of a certain scene or event. Each of the three stanzas in the poem, of which the middle one was quoted above, presents, in a sense, one scene, but there is no clear internal consistency within the stanzas either.

In David Lehman's (1980: 108) words, "Ashbery's poetry communicates the syntax rather than the content of an argument or a story". For example 'Lemurs and

Pharisees' appears, particularly because of cohesive linguistic devices like "[m]eanwhile", as if it was a story of something, but it presents several situations and scenes which cannot be easily joined together. The causal and temporal links between events in the poem are missing: one finds it difficult to tell why exactly the situation is so singular for the speaker or where the "yellow ribbons" came from. The ribbons probably are decorations for a celebration, as one voice in the text speaks of 'rejoicing', but then in the midst of a celebration the summoning of an ambulance sounds rather unexpected. This is even more unexpected if one assumes there is more than one speaker in the poem.

The turn from commonplace discourse to an emergency also echoes some other poems in *Your Name Here*, such as 'A Postcard from Pontevedra': "Call me old-fashioned. No, don't, / on second thought. We'll call an ambulance // instead" (*Your Name Here*: 74). Here the clichéd utterance "Call me old-fashioned" is reversed and made strange by drawing attention to one of its constituents, the word "call". The expectations of habitual communication are broken in these passages from the two poems which contain several different voices, and which also acknowledge the presence of an other as the addressee. The texts depict an uncertainty in a communicative situation, which consists of ordinary, even trivial or clichéd utterances like "Call me old-fashioned". The continuity that is created through linguistic means breaks down. This also means that any meanings one can read into the text may soon have to be reconsidered. It is difficult to imagine a context that would unite the several different scenes and justify them in terms of a clear narrative of a series of events or a personal account. 'Lemurs and Pharisees' does not, then, posit one person as central, and narrative coherence is dispelled.

As Nick Lolordo (2001: 760) points out while discussing another Ashbery poem, *Flow Chart*, meaning in Ashbery's poems is "provisional meaning, that obtained within a process of reading that continues rather than leaving texts as read". Therefore any account I make of the speaker position for example of the aforequoted stanza from 'Lemurs and Pharisees' is also provisional. Ashbery's disjunctively narrative poems force their readers to consider that there are always other ways of understanding than that which is immediately apparent. In the following section I shall explore in more detail the dimensions of the narrative indeterminacy in *Your Name Here*.

4.1.1. Narratives and prose effects

> "Her name is Liz, and I need her in my biz," I hummed wantonly. A band of clouds all slanted in the same direction drifted across the hairline horizon like a tribe of adults and children, all hastening toward some unknown destination. A crisp pounding. Done to your mother what? Are now the… And so you understand it, she…I. Once you get past the moralizing a new winter twilight creeps into place.
> ('The Bobinski Brothers', *Your Name Here*: 6; ellipsis as in the original)

The narrativity in *Your Name Here* opposes the conventions of most prose writing, where narratives are usually expected to follow at least a certain basic logic and consistency, even a discernible plot, even though the plot might be narrated in a nonlinear order. In addition to narrative elements like impersonal descriptive statements, most poems in *Your Name Here* consist of fragments of conversation, quotations from unspecified or sometimes vaguely specified sources, and addresses directed at another, as 'The Bobinski Brothers' exemplifies. In presenting a descriptive context like "A band of clouds all slanted in the same direction drifted across the hairline horizon" the poem invites the readers to consider the context of the unspecified utterances like "Done to your mother what?", but the context cannot readily be perceived as unified.

The narrative qualities of poems like 'The Bobinski Brothers' or many other poems in the collection are related to prose as a formal textual feature. *Your Name Here* contains several poems in prose format. For Ashbery, prose has been a common poetic technique already from the series of long prose poems, *Three Poems* (1972), onwards, but in *Your Name Here*, the distinctions between verse and prose are no longer as great. Whereas *Three Poems* appeared mainly to relate to critical prose, in *Your Name Here*, the prose quality becomes something that is perhaps closer to a novel insofar as novels contain stories. In *Your Name Here*, the content is what matters, as the narrative sense appears not to be dependent on the form. Narrativity is equally possible in poems that appear as traditionally versified as in prose texts.

Perloff ([1985] 1996: 170, 175-181) asserts that in postmodernist literature narrative and prose are becoming more prominent when, as already noted earlier, "lyric" poetry and traditional "Romantic subjectivity" are in turn diminishing in centrality. In discussing prose poetry, Stephen Fredman (1990: 1), for his part, suggests that poetry can sustain an attention to language in a way that differs from prose, and on the other hand prose has "linguistic density" which may help provide a

complex representation of the world. Fredman's notion points toward the reasons as to why prose might be considered a relevant point of contrast for lyric poetry in the first place. The narrativity in poems like 'Lemurs and Pharisees' or 'The Bobinski Brothers' can sustain an openness of context and meaning in a way that is unattainable for subjectivity focused on the movements of the individual mind. Yet, these poems do not have to create a broad fictional world with a fully-fledged narrative like for example in a novel, rather the focus is on the uses of communicative language.

Insofar as the 'deconstruction' of the single voice in Ashbery's poems is always related to the use of personal pronouns, another issue surfaces in relation to narrativity and prose: the use of the third person. Certain texts in *Your Name Here*, such as 'Memories of Imperialism', 'The Underwriters' or 'The Bobinski Brothers' make use of the third person pronoun, instead of only presenting the subjective position of the *I* as central. A variety of third person objects is clearer in *Your Name Here* than in 'Litany', where there was no certainty whether the third persons are actual third persons or examples of pronominal slippage, alternative projections of those personas who have also been referred to as *I* or *you*. As we know from Barthes (1993: 157-159), the third person *he* is essential to novels, because the pronoun brings about a departure from the immediate position of the *I,* and the utterance is thus not about subjectivity only, but veers towards impersonality. In rather the same way as descriptive statements, such as "A band of clouds all slanted…" identified above in 'The Bobinski Brothers', the utterances where the third person takes the central position are impersonal, distanced from the speaker. This is narration much like in a novel narrated in the third person, where the function of the narrator is not to speak of him/herself, but about other characters and events. I shall return to the idea of poetry as opposed to the novel in the conclusion to this thesis, but for the moment I will have to consider in more detail the use of third person and its relation to the use of proper names, which in *Your Name Here* differs from 'Litany'.

4.1.2. The voice of history: Third persons and proper names

> Sir Joshua Lipton drank this tea
> and liked it well enough to start selling it
> to a few buddies, from the deck of his yacht.
> …
> You see what it's like here—

> it's a madhouse, Sir, and I am planning to flee the first time
> an occasion presents himself, say as a bag of laundry
> or the cargo of a muffin truck. Meanwhile, the "sands"
> of time, as they call them, are slipping by with scarcely a whisper
> ('The Underwriters', *Your Name Here*: 96)

The above excerpts are from the beginning and from the middle of the 'The Underwriters' which, like many other poems in *Your Name Here*, creates a sense of narrativity by the use of connectives and impersonal descriptive statements. The text appears almost like history writing, the recounting of a specific, albeit fictitious, story of the past, as it opens with an utterance referring to a named third person. As the poem later turns to the more common Ashbery composition where the *I* appears to be telling the story to *you*, the problem of determining who is speaking presents itself again. The "Sir" in the address may be understood as referring to Sir Joshua Lipton, though this is an uncertain issue. Again, the readers do not know which parts of the text would be the discourse of a singular self or the central speaker, and which segments of speech are the discourse of some other persona. The opening voice of history writing gives the text a sense of generality, and the subjective position which surfaces later becomes situated in a flux of neutral history. The factual basis of the story is already uncertain in the proper name, since the founder of the Lipton tea company was really called Thomas Lipton. When a mainly fictitious Sir Joshua Lipton is invoked through the act of naming, his story turns into a framework for the observations of a subjective, anonymous *I*.

Proper names occur in some other poems in *Your Name Here* as well. The speaker introduces himself as "Hans" in 'If You Said You Would Come With Me' (*Your Name Here*: 4). The painter Caravaggio is referred to in 'Caravaggio and His Followers' (*Your Name Here*: 19-20) and 'Memories of Imperialism' (*Your Name Here*: 34-35) presents a 'character' called "Dewey". Like Sir Joshua Lipton, Dewey is imagined rather than real, because the poem introduces intimate personal details and combines two historical figures, Admiral George Dewey who "took Manila" and Melvil Dewey who "invented the decimal system" that is used in libraries, in proposing that "In his dreams he saw library books with milky numbers / on their spines floating in Manila Bay" (*Your Name Here*: 34).

Many of the proper names in *Your Name Here*, then, refer to fictional characters who remain consistent throughout the text and gain definitions from the

context or through the utterances that are attributed to them. ‘Memories of Imperialism’ for example presents the combined person Dewey rather clearly wondering “What have I done?” Dewey is described from the outside in the third person, and he also speaks to himself briefly. This is different from the situation in ‘Litany’, where, as I noted in the previous chapter, the proper names were hardly much more than empty signs that gave us little more, if not less, of a reference toward a specific person than the shifting personal pronouns do. If in ‘Litany’ there were hardly any names because a name would point toward “something unique”, which would be opposed to the openness and generality of Ashbery’s poems (Morse 1995: 17; see section 3.2.1.), in *Your Name Here*, the naming of vague fictional characters seems to serve somewhat different ends. With naming, the problem of uncertain pronominal reference may appear to be solved for a while, but not necessarily on the level of the whole text. The openness of ‘person’ is less relevant here than in ‘Litany’. Instead, the relationship between ‘reality’ and the truth of fiction becomes questionable. This may also diminish the possibilities for the readers to read themselves into the text, since the third person description and the naming of specific characters is a deviation from the direct address. I shall come back to the position of the reader in the next section.

In ‘The Underwriters’, the subjective voice leads the poem into a final meditation on the passing of time and the limitedness of life as it speaks of how “We’ll manage to get back someday” to consider together “what the tea leaves said / and whether it turned out that way” (*Your Name Here*: 96). ‘Memories of Imperialism’ is more categorical in avoiding a subjective position except in the quoted dialogues. The poem tackles the limitedness of life as Dewey is presented as stating “If one is to go down in history, it is better to do so for two things / rather than one” and later people are hoping “that nothing more would happen, ever, that history had ended” (*Your Name Here*: 34-35). In both of these poems, then, the naming and communicational third person discourse are used to constitute unique events which are treated as though they were representative and illustrative of broad issues like ordinary life, although the poems do not necessarily offer an insight about life that could be treated as a sincere, lyrical statement. Instead, for example Dewey’s pronouncement on going down in history appears more like a cliché that is here placed under investigation. This is another type of generality than the pronominal

openness of ‘Litany’. The narrativity and the prosaic features, like the third person of the fragmentary texts, allow for a context that is wider than a context that an individual speaker recounting his subjective thoughts could sustain. For example the title ‘Memories of Imperialism’ may lead the reader to expect an account of the memories of a certain person, but instead the poem is an impersonal narrative, which does not provide a fully developed, consistent subjective position who would be doing the memorizing, and combines two real historical figures.

The contexts that *Your Name Here* tackles appear to be predominantly social, since ordinary communicational situations or disruptions of such situations are central. The poems present people conversing habitually and the ordinariness is underlined by parody. This is evident in the utterances where the characters address each other within the fictive world of the poem, as in the discussion between Dewey and his wife or in the addresses to the unidentified “Sir” in ‘The Underwriters’ and in ‘Lemurs and Pharisees’. Whereas the corollary of the play of different voices in ‘Litany’ was a form that brings the languages of poetry and criticism closer together, in *Your Name Here* this is not an issue that needs to be explicitly addressed. Instead, the poems engage in what ‘Litany’ suggested someone should do: they show people immersed in the ordinariness of everyday life, or surrounded by the prosaic world.

Metatextual themes appear to be less obviously a concern in *Your Name Here* than in ‘Litany’, or in many other Ashbery books like *Shadow Train* or *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. Of course the absence of direct metatextual material does not prevent one from reading an utterance as referring to the situation of speaking at the same time as it refers to another specific context, as was noted in section 2.2.2. In *Your Name Here*, there are still short metanotions like “Thought I’d write you this poem. Yes, / I know you don’t need it” in ‘Not You Again’, where even the title contains a hint of irony toward the omnipresent *you* of Ashbery’s poems (*Your Name Here*: 7). Also in the poem ‘Railroaded’, there is a passage that appears to present the expression of subjective experience or personal confession in an ironic light: “Tell us more about your experience. / That’s what really interests our readers. You know, times when you were down and out / and depressed, like everybody” (*Your Name Here*: 89). The request to “[t]ell us” recalls the cliché idea of popular demands for artists to speak of their subjective experience. ‘Railroaded’ spells out in subject matter the same issue which is present throughout *Your Name Here* on the level of

form, when the poems resist the possibility that they could be read as purely subjective expression even when the pronoun *I* is always present. In their resistance to personal reflection, these poems, then, also invoke the old position of the New York School of poets.

Ashbery's avoidance of a conventional sense of narrative and thematic integration gives his poetry the ability, in Stephen Paul Miller's (1995: 148) words, "to register cultural nuances and patterns that poetries of more overt narrative or thematic intent might overlook". While the narrative poems in *Your Name Here* approach coherence, mostly a unitary speaking position is difficult for the reader to identify, because there are always particularities that cannot be accounted for by an encapsulating image of the presence of a certain person or a speaker. However, what has been said earlier about the function of the personal pronouns in the creation of a presence is still relevant. If one cannot identify a single voice, one may still perceive in these poems a discursive principle, a necessary illusion of unity in the reader's mind that hosts within it the different voices. This structure is not a matter of one register or discourse, much less of one person, but a loosely organizing principle gathering together various modes of speaking such as the anonymous voice of history. The principle also brings together not only the positions of the *you* and *I*, but also the named, albeit still rather flat, characters. The different voices are not gathered together and subsumed under the control of the pronoun *I* which, like in 'Litany', is one element among many, and does not impose a unitary argument or a subject for the poem.

The narrativity and prosaic qualities of *Your Name Here* allow for the presentation of dialogues between specific, though mostly undefined, positions. This would hardly be possible in a text that is more traditionally poetic, pertaining to the single self. The dialogue that for example 'Memories of Imperialism' presents is, however, distinctly defined in that the voices are kept separate through speech marks and the context of the discussion is presented clearly. Here Brian McHale's (1992: 14-15) question about whether the "juxtapositions of voices, registers, discourses and/or styles in [Ashbery's postmodernist "nonsense"] text [can] be motivated in terms of some reconstructed image of interacting speakers" receives a positive answer. This, however, is not the case in many other texts of *Your Name Here*, and these so-called dialogical poems will be discussed in the following section.

4.2. Dialogical poems

There is a sense of dialogue in many of the poems in *Your Name Here*, which does not, however, necessarily mean that there is a transparent dialogue between distinct personas. In many poems the *I* addresses the *you* with questions and statements which anticipate a response, but none can be found. Consider the following example:

> I've got to finish this. Father will be after me.
> Oh, and did the red rubber balls ever arrive? We could do something
> with them, I just have to figure out what.
> …
> Well, so long,
> and don't touch any breasts, at least until I get there.
> ('Merrily we live'; *Your Name Here*: 11)

Such addresses without a response are certainly characteristic of Ashbery, but the sense of address to a specific person is clearer in the above example than anywhere in 'Litany'. The tone is conversational with casual tags like "Oh, and" which follow the speaker's process of thought, and the utterances are clearly structured in such a way that a response is expected. The function of such speech is not to reflect on the self or to make a statement, but to communicate about issues that are meaningful for two persons. The particular contexts referred to are known only to the participants of the exchange. The poem ends with "Well, so long", which might suggest that the utterances in the poem are a part of a letter which, of course, would explain why there is no immediate response. The *you* is then also a specific, though vague and notably absent, character existing in the world of the poem. The reader is abandoned, on the surface level, excluded from the conversation. Specificity of address does not, however, have to mean that the poems resort to solipsism or completely exclude the reader.

In addition to the addresses without a response, *Your Name Here* presents several more clearly dialogical poems, where the speaker's tone indicates he may be getting some response from another person, even though this response is not always clearly heard, as in the following segment from towards the end of 'The File on Thelma Jordan':

> Hey, you don't think there's any more
> over the horizon? I'm not sure I could stand it if there was,
> I mean their faces. Oh, they'll all be home for Christmas
> sometime, I'm sure. Why don't you take a little trip
> to an aching village? You look tired. Are you OK?
> It was just my brother calling from Wichita. He says the downtown's on

fire.
Well if I was you I wouldn't go there
No, I have no intention of doing so.
('The File on Thelma Jordan', *Your Name Here*: 40)

The discourse in the above passage is ordinary, perhaps even banal, as the utterances are neither poetic nor literary, they belong to the domain of the everyday. In the beginning of the excerpt, the impression of direct address and the absence of an actual response is created through the line "Oh, they'll all be home for Christmas". This would, within the rules of normal conversation, be taken to indicate another person has spoken of "their" arrival or absence, and the reader is inclined to suspect that there is a gap in the poem, or that the sentence derives from another, separate conversation of which the sentence is only a fragment. A similar principle of echoes from another person's unheard utterance produces fragmentation in many of the poems in *Your Name Here*. Toward the end of the above passage, the lines gradually form a conversation between what are possibly two or even several different 'persons'. None of the sentences are marked with speech marks, so the readers have no way of deciding which of these voices that are addressing each other without getting an answer, or getting one as indifferent as "No, I have no intention of doing so", should be read as the 'real' speaker, the singular voice of the poem, and which utterances this speaker would be merely quoting. The poem does not reveal how many participants there are in the conversation, and it breaks into a dialogical, or perhaps a polylogical, construction.

As the dialogical texts show, typically in *Your Name Here* the *you* is a specific position that exists within the dialogue. Metatextual moments that direct the readers' attention to the text itself and allow for the *you* to be read as referring to the reader are rarer than in 'Litany', even if not completely absent, as also the title *Your Name Here* shows. I shall come back to the problem of the title, but before that the position of the *you* will have to be considered further.

4.2.1. The *you* as a dialogical position

Even though the pronoun *you* in 'The File on Thelma Jordan' appears to refer to someone specific, this specific position is also someone of whom the readers know very little. The readers also know little about the *I*, nor can they decide exactly where

these positions are distinct. The *you* and *I* may be constantly changing their positions, and the pronouns do not necessarily refer to single positions throughout the text. The speech to another is a device through which each possible speaker constructs himself, although the presences are flimsy, sustained only at the moment of utterance or address. Even those utterances of a poem like 'The File on Thelma Jordan' which do not contain the pronoun *you* are still clearly directed at another, as in "Oh, they'll all be home for Christmas / sometime, I'm sure", where "Oh" is clearly a tag that is used in a discussion to acknowledge for the speech turn of the other. The *you*, or the fact that there is an addressee, is thus more fundamental to the text than the position of the *I* as the speaker.

In the previous chapter I observed that *you* is a central feature of 'Litany': a point of reference, a mark that may point toward a presence, but the pronoun is rarely easy to pin down to a single, particularized character in the long poem, and thus, in the context of this fundamentally metatextual poem, it may in some cases also refer to the reader. In *Your Name Here*, such a possibility is no longer as clear. John Emil Vincent (2007) has discussed the importance of *you* in Ashbery's poetry. He notes that the position of the pronoun changes over time. Analyzing a poem that was published in 1981, Vincent observes that by that time, *you* appears to have become a "paradox", or a generic position which may sustain almost anything, and the speech of the poem is directed at the speaker himself or to unknown people (Vincent 2007: 147-148). This was true of 'Litany' to the extent that a variety of positions are available for the *you*, but the speech is also clearly an attempt to establish a line of communication to another, and *you* may be an address to the reader, although the voices that address another rarely receive a response. In the late 1980s and 1990s, then again, Vincent observes, *you* is for Ashbery no longer a mark of "presence" but instead "a placeholder of absence" and "unresponsive" (Vincent 2007: 149).

According to Vincent (2007: 151), *Your Name Here* is Ashbery's "most 'you' directed book ever", but *you* does not contain the possibility of referring to the reader as often as in Ashbery's earlier poetry. Instead, as I also observed above, *you* is mostly someone specific, even though the title of the book would appear to suggest otherwise (Vincent 2007: 151). Sometimes *you* appears absent, but equally, as such poems as 'The File on Thelma Jordan' show, it may be a position that is clearly present in the situation not as an unresponsive listener, but as someone who may

eventually respond and speak in his or her turn, take the position of a speaker. On the other hand, when the absence of the voice of the other is inscribed into the speaker's words, as in such utterances as "Oh, they'll all be home for Christmas / sometime, I'm sure", their function is another matter.

The gaps of non-response, indications of possible response, and sudden shifts of subject in a poem like 'The File on Thelma Jordan' reflect the situation of communication. Readers may begin to fill in the gaps, and this also draws attention to the nature of common phrases used in phatic communication such as "You look tired. Are you OK?". The juxtapositions that are created through the fragmentariness of this elusive poem promote an *openness* of meaning, which does not, however, need to be *absence* of meaning. The possibility of involving the reader is not, in *Your Name Here*, so much the result of situating the reader as *you*, but precisely of the emptiness of *you*. There are gaps that cannot be filled with a recognition of an ultimately clearly defined presence; instead the reader is directed towards the nature of the social situation and the language that is used.

Vincent goes on to suggest that the *you* in *Your Name Here* is used for "mourning" Ashbery's former partner during his Paris years, Pierre Martory, who died in 1998 and to whom the book is dedicated (Vincent 2007: 153). What Vincent is doing is to look for a biographical reading to account for the problematic position, in this particular book, of the *you* that occurs constantly in Ashbery's oeuvre. In the light of 'The File on Thelma Jordan' and other similar texts, I am, however, inclined to suggest that the position of the *you* goes beyond this biographic purpose, which may well hold true on some level but, as with many a biographic reading, we have no way of knowing for sure. There is no direct and unambiguous evidence in the text for such an outside referent for the *you*, which raises the question of the relevance of such a reading to the understanding of this book. Also, the biographical reading does not really account for the reader's position, as a relation between the real-life person of the poet and his former partner is only a text-external issue that the reader most likely knows very little about, apart from the dedication at the beginning of the book.

Bonnie Costello asserts in her 1982 essay that (at least in the light of Ashbery's work up to that date), the way Ashbery includes *you* as the reader ensures that the texts are not merely concerned with "solipsism", but instead with "larger questions of communication" (Costello 1982: 493-494). This was, as we saw, true of

'Litany', but, as Vincent also proposes, in Ashbery's later poetry, the idea of the reader as *you* and the position of the pronoun in general change. This does not need to mean that the poems resort to mere solipsism and turn towards the self; nor does it have to mean, as Vincent (2007: 154) suggests, that the book is about communicating with "the dead", rather than with its readers.

An idea that Costello suggests in passing requires more consideration: when readers encounter a text like many of Ashbery's poems that consist of clichéd utterances, "stock situations" and a "record of formulaic experience", they can begin to "recognize the anxieties of [their] own daily fictions" (Costello 1982: 510). As observed earlier, clearly in *Your Name Here* the language that is used is common, and the situations that are referred to are ordinary. For example such utterances as "Meanwhile, if there's anything we can do / to make you comfortable for two or three minutes…" ('Lemurs and Pharisees', *Your Name Here*: 94), "Call me old-fashioned" ('A Postcard from Pontevedra', *Your Name Here*: 74), or "You look tired. Are you OK?" ('The File on Thelma Jordan, *Your Name Here*: 40) are shared, social discourse.

Perhaps the commonness of the utterances here presents similarities to the inherent ordinariness of Frank O'Hara's momentary associations which I discussed in 2.1.2, but the difference is that in Ashbery's recent poems, the focus is not on definite situations that are true for a specific *I*, but rather on the *language* that is used in ordinary situations, on all these discussions that we have daily, or on "the language really used by men" as Wordsworth would have put it. The texts offer a space for reflecting such discourse and what is at stake in it, as the readers are invited to fill in the gaps of the conversations and to participate in generating meaning. Certainly, different registers and discourses are at work also in 'Litany', as discussed in 3.2.2., but this is even more relevant in relation to *Your Name Here*, if we are to assume that the line of (seemingly) direct communication to the reader is somehow ruptured here.

As for the idea of the 'social' in Ashbery's texts, Mohanty and Monroe assert that, while Ashbery is often characterized "as a poet obsessed with the solitary Self", the focus of the poems is really on "the self-world relationship… exploring the features of a social voice and identity" (Mohanty and Monroe 1987: 37). Accordingly Mohanty and Monroe argue that art, including poetry, is primarily "an extension of the very process whereby humans negotiate both their 'selfhood' and their 'world' in

their activity of reading each through the other"; from which it follows that "all life is for Ashbery social life" (Mohanty and Monroe 1987: 42). The "social" is "an internal force that manifests itself above all through the multiple presence of conflicting discourses", in other words the self and the speaker consist of various discursive positions and constructions which are common, not the property of an individual (Mohanty and Monroe 1987: 45). This is consistent with what I have come to observe throughout this chapter, and the poems of *Your Name Here* clearly explore a social dimension: interrelations between people and the language that is used in such relations rather than one person's experience. The positions that the pronouns evoke are of course constructed as particular fictive 'characters' through their uttering phrases like "Call me old-fashioned", but such common discourse entails that the positions the poems present are distinctly general.

The speaker positions in the dialogical texts in *Your Name Here* are ultimately open for the readers' own associations, even though the reader may, on the surface level, be excluded from the conversation. The poems do not, in a sense, need to address the reader, because the ordinariness of the utterances and of the situations that are alluded to or put into play in the texts ensure that the reader is already a part of this distinctly common world. The scenes of the poem are not meaningful for one person's experience or for a central self, but for multiple positions and presences, on a common level, which would scarcely be possible in a single-voiced poem. The poems of *Your Name Here* become a space where the social, interpersonal dimension of contemporary American or Western life is investigated and reflected. When the poems are disjunctive and a single context or an understanding of the 'world' of the text may be difficult to discern for one poem, readers can certainly imagine alternative contexts for the fragments of language in it. As Perkins (1987: 621) remarks, Ashbery's poetry takes into account how the "reality" and the present moment are so multifaceted that a full picture of them would be impossible. If a poem can then be 'full' in its representation of reality, it achieves this through the reader's ability to fill in the details and imagine parallel contexts for utterances that point toward different frames of reference.

Unclear distinctions between voices and indeterminate pronoun references in the dialogical poems need not rule out the possibility of an understanding of voice. If voice is taken to mean a category that is essentially related to the unity of a person

engaged in certain events and participating in a definite scene, it is certainly problematic in *Your Name Here*, but still the idea of voice requires some more consideration here.

4.3. Generality, particularity, and the social voice

Acknowledging Ashbery's use of multiple voices and pronoun shifts, Barbara Malinowska (2000: 28-30) characterizes the speaker position of Ashbery's poems as a "composite persona" in which the "poet's ego as a directly speaking persona" is replaced with "plurality". Malinowska (2000: 49-50) notes that the indeterminate use of pronouns results in a polyphony, or an extended "identity", which consists of different voices. For her, this polyphony is primarily in the service of "(re-)construct[ing] the world/reality in its multiple aspects" while being concerned with "human existence", an understanding which she bases on Martin Heidegger's concept of *Dasein,* which is related to the temporality of being in the world with others and being confronted by the possibilities that are available (Malinowska 2000: 5-6). Malinowska (2000: 30) states that because the "composite persona" is multiple and undetermined, it can reveal the "truth of our Being". The 'composite persona' is partly a fitting understanding of the speaker position of poems that include multiple voices and positions of presence within them, especially when an understanding of a speaker-persona originates from the readers' will to conceive such a position no matter how much of a challenge the poem presents to this. Certainly the plurality and multiple voices in Ashbery's poems construct a varied picture of the world and reality, and this is in accordance with what I have observed throughout this chapter about narrativity and the dialogical aspects of the poems in *Your Name Here*.

For the purposes of my perspective to reading the poems of *Your Name Here* in the light of communication, however, Malinowska's understanding is of somewhat limited use insofar as her concern is ultimately philosophical or ontological, which leads her to attempt finding the meaning of the poem in certain key lines of it. In her reading of 'Business Personals' from *Houseboat Days* (1977; see *Selected Poems*: 218-220), Malinowska (2000: 58-60) states that in the line "What caused us to start caring", "the speaker acknowledges our worldly being as being-with others" whilst simultaneously reverses this acknowledgement in the context of the whole text. For

Malinowska, this fluctuation between possibilities is related to the use of the pronoun *you* in the poem, and the philosophical notion can be attained through the "composite persona". To some extent, this resembles the uncertainty of the position of an utterance that I have also found in Ashbery's poems throughout this study, and Malinowska's understanding is sustainable in the context of her philosophical framework.

Nevertheless, even though Malinowska (2000: 59-60) acknowledges that the position of the line "What caused us to start caring" depends on the presence of others, she does not appear to acknowledge the inherent parody and the pervasive presence of recycled, common language in Ashbery's texts which, as Perloff (1991: 183-184) has pointed out about 'Business Personals', is evident in how the poem consists largely of "clichés, sentimentalities, and slogans", and none of the words are actually "the poet's own words". This characterization is equally true of the poems in *Your Name Here* where, as noted above, the clichés and sentimentalities are those of everyday communication. The voice that speaks is anyone's, or the voice of our common, conventional language. The utterances in dialogical poems like 'The File on Thelma Jordan' often appear as if they were fragments of a conversation that has taken place in another, prior context from which the fragments have been borrowed and placed in the poem. As the language is so notably habitual, they are indeed such fragments: all of these discussions have, in a sense, already happened somewhere. While these poems are not necessarily actual collage, like some of Ashbery's early texts as was noted in 2.2., the principle of organization of the materials presents similarities to the early work. For Perloff (1991: 186-187), poetry that consists of actual and apparent quotations becomes "radical artifice" which is primarily concerned with "postmodern information systems" and "issues of connotation, nuance, context", rather than with "accuracy" or, one might add, with the content of the utterances. This is in essence also what results in the examination of communication in the poems of *Your Name Here*.

Obviously, an utterance like "What caused us to start caring?" in 'Business Personals' is not an empty statement; it can be taken as a genuine question that could pertain to, for example, the modern man's sensibility for empathy. However, the poem in which this sentence is placed does not offer a clear context that would determine that it really is such a statement. Here Veronica Forrest-Thomson's (1978:

158) account of the functions and content of utterances in Ashbery's 'They Dream Only of America' appears illuminating. She notes that the utterances of that poem indeed *can* be taken for example as "poetic empirical imagery", "a comment on a state of society", or "personal lyricism", in other words the utterances can be taken 'as such', but the way they are presented in the poem through multiple pronominal positions and in the context of the other utterances "prevent[s] them from remaining such" (Forrest-Thomson 1978: 158).

When an Ashbery poem, for example 'The Bobinski Brothers' (*Your Name Here*: 6), stages an utterance like "Once you get past the moralizing a new winter twilight creeps into place", this can of course be understood as a comment that could, perhaps, suggest of some general need to stop "moralizing". However, that is not all it is: the statement is also distinctly placed in the world of the poem, and offered as one fragment in the flux of a disjunctive narrative, where such an utterance may only be true for any one *you* or only for the speaker who utters this statement. As the utterance occurs in the middle of what appear to be fragments of conversations and situations, it is distinctly deprived of a clear context that would give it the force of simply being a statement about a general need to stop moralizing. I referred earlier to Forrest-Thomson's (1978: xii-xiii) idea of the "image-complex" or "level of coherence" which helps to structure the poem. The absence of a clear context or a level of coherence is precisely what posits the utterances of the poems in *Your Name Here* as open.

When a poem consists of actual or apparent 'quotations', or segments of speech that may or may not originate from some other, previous source where habitual language is used, the reader is left on the surface of the text, observing the way the different utterances in it function in relation to each other. In this sense, the reader is not an outsider to the text, even when the pronominal position *you* is posited as particular. A reading that focuses on the content of certain lines is only possible after the utterances have been fixed to a certain context or to a source. The reader has to arrive at some kind of a finished understanding of the poem or of the position of an utterance before concentrating on the content of an utterance or a statement. In this way, the poems defer making statements and are open to multiple meanings.

If some understanding of a 'voice' as a poetic principle is necessary in reading the dialogical texts in *Your Name Here*, the voice may be understood as functioning

as a discursive organizing principle in a rather similar way as in 'Litany': a structure that gathers together the various voices, discourses and registers, perhaps also a 'composite persona'. When there are no clear distinctions between different voices, and one cannot decide how many voices there are in a poem, the positions that the poem stages become distinctly generalized. Poems like 'The Bobinski Brothers' or 'The File on Thelma Jordan' present pronominal positions and presences that are only defined through their discourse to the other, in the relations that form between the different positions and particular events. The *you* and *I* are void of features that would distinguish them personally and turn them into full-fledged characters the reader might empathize with. Instead the readers are invited to fill in the details themselves and, in the light of their personal experience and understandings of similar situations, to consider the nature and possible contexts of the conversational utterances that the pronominal positions instigate. A "composite persona" of a poem, or the conglomerate of voices in it, then, also does not exist simply by itself and is not complete by itself, but instead becomes defined in a complex relation to the reader.

As McHale (1992: 15-17) asserts about Ashbery's 'Metamorphosis', a postmodernist poem that does not conform to traditional expectations of logic can host different, even conflicting, registers and discourses rather than a unified voice. The clash between the discourses, the act of bringing them together in the poem and juxtaposing them emphasizes their distinct natures and raises questions about how they function. The emptiness of the address, of *you* and *I* as only necessary illusions of presence, allows them to function as operators within these discourses. This is what actually foregrounds the social aspects in the texts of *Your Name Here*, shifting the perspective from the content of utterances to larger questions of the social world of communication. For us as the readers, this serves, indeed, in Costello's (1982: 510) aforequoted words, to help "recognize the anxieties of our own daily fictions". Let me, then, finally consider the title poem of *Your Name Here* in the light of the fragmentation of voice and the idea of the social. This will also allow me to focus on the position of the *you* that is of special importance in the title poem.

4.4. 'Your Name Here': From solitariness to communication

> But how can I be in this bar and also be a recluse?
> The colony of ants was marching toward me, stretching
> far into the distance, where they were as small as ants.

…
Well, let's forget that scene and turn to one in Paris.
Ants are walking down the Champs-Elysées
in the snow, in twos and threes, conversing,
revealing a sociability one never supposed them as having.
('Your Name Here'; *Your Name Here*: 126)

'Your Name Here' begins with a question pertaining to the self: "But how can I be in this bar and also be a recluse?", as if to suggest this sense of isolation is what the text will primarily explore. Again, as in many other Ashbery poems, there are sudden jumps from one idea to the next and segments of speech that cannot be attributed to a specified speaker. The poem entails various registers, such as the poetic lines "autumn is still just a glint in its eye / a chronicle of hoar-frost foretold", or the "you great big adorable one, you", which may be understood as containing a sense of sentimental irony toward the idea of the *you* that is almost omnipresent in Ashbery's poetry.

The proliferation of multiple registers and segments of speech also indicates that the position of the speaker is not unified. However, unlike in the other poems in the collection, the title poem offers more unity: the scene could be set in a bar in the first two stanzas, and what deviates from the bar scene can be understood as memories or thoughts that may somehow, although it is not entirely clear how, illuminate the present situation. There seems to be some sort of narrative logic here, even though many of the details are left undefined. It seems relevant to consider that the *I* may refer to the same character throughout, except for the several parts that are explicitly set in speech marks. These, in turn, can be interpreted as something that the speaker-persona hears and records from around him and they can therefore also illustrate his position and his self, even if there are no indications as to where the utterances originate from. As these segments of speech follow the ant scenes, they could, as Vincent (2007: 156) also appears to be suggesting, be excerpts from the conversation of the ants. The ants are conversing, which may suggest they are in fact people that are seen from such a long distance that they look like ants. Insofar as they reveal "a sociability one never supposed them as having", the scene could also allow for a more literal reading. The same ambiguity of the origin of voices is then present here as in most Ashbery poems, albeit to a lesser extent.

More cheerful citizenry crowded in, singing the Marseillaise,
…
"Yes and he was going to buy all the candy bars in the machine

> but something happened, the walls caved in (who knew
> the river had risen rapidly?) and one by one people were swept away
> calling endearing things to each other, using pet names.
> 'Achilles, meet Angus.' " Then it all happened so quickly I
> guess I never knew where we were going,
> ('Your Name Here'; *Your Name Here*: 126-127)

The second stanza of 'Your Name Here' returns to the bar presented briefly on the first line, and includes more speech segments from unidentified voices, possibly pertaining to the experiences of other people in the bar, or again, they could also reflect elements of the speaker-persona. The second segment in speech marks in the second stanza also refers to an emergency, in which the people suddenly find themselves. There is a *he*, who has to give up buying candy bars in the face of people being "swept away". This is presented within speech marks, as if it referred to a distant event that someone is merely telling about to someone else in the present moment, but in the next sentence the return to a discourse that is not separated from the rest of the text by speech marks, which can be understood as the speech of the speaker-persona of the poem who is in the bar, reveals that he is being swept away in this series of events as well.

In the third stanza the speaker-persona is in an "oubliette", a kind of dungeon in a cellar. Whereas throughout the first two stanzas he has not directly addressed anyone, but instead recorded quotations from others, observing situations and events, in this stanza he turns to addressing a *you*. The shifting between modes of address and segments of speech contributes to the sense of the absence of a unified speaking position. *You* appears to be among the few who survived "the eclipse":

> Now is the time for you to go out into the light
> and congratulate whoever is left in our city. People who survived
> the eclipse. But I was totally taken with you, always have been.
> Light a candle in my wreath, I'll be yours forever and will kiss you.
> ('Your Name Here'; *Your Name Here*: 127).

The *I* confesses to having been "taken with you" and promises to be "yours forever". *You* is important to *I*, yet he urges him/her to "go out into the light", thus allowing him/her an existence on his/her own terms, instead of being solely defined by the *I*. It is possible to think of *you* as another character in the poem, but readers know virtually nothing of this elusive character. Such a presence is only important to the extent that the speaker feels a certain way about him/her. Another possibility would be to see this again as metapoetic, to assume that the *you* can be the reader. As the

poem and the whole collection are coming to a close, the reader is allowed to go, to develop his or her own place. As I also noted about 'Litany', such 'send-off' lines for the readers to continue on their own terms are common in Ashbery's oeuvre. As Vincent explains, the last lines of 'Your Name Here' and the whole book eventually promise for the reader "a future of greater intimacy" with the speaker (Vincent 2007: 158). The reader's fundamental role also appears to be inscribed in the title, but it is worth considering this in more detail.

"Your name" in the title is the name of someone else, not the speaker, whereas "here" is the place where the speaker is, and where no one else can ever be at the same time, as Vincent (2007: 152) also notes, suggesting that the title is a "tease". The reader can never be the speaker of the poem, he or she will never be its *I*, just as the *I* cannot be *you*, and just as the *I* is present and exists only through his/her words, at the moment of speech. In the poem, the sequence of events is indeterminate, and connections between the characters are fleeting and unsteady. The speaker position becomes fragmented through the segments in speech marks and the speaker's reaching out towards *you* at the end. The relations to others are noted in passing, even though the speaker is constantly concerned with the presence of the others, however distant (as ants or as largely anonymous "cheerful citizenry") they may be. The speaker will have to let the *you* go, and they will never be one. Therefore the speaker is always, on some level, alone.

Yet, the poem evidently encompasses multiple positions, not a solitary voice, even if it is possible to construct a more or less defined position for one character, the *I*. The *you* remains ambiguous in reference and other speakers are present in their own speech segments, and on the other hand, through the first speaker's account of them. The various speech segments, for example, do not simply illustrate the speaker's state of mind and emphasize his isolation, they also point towards other discourses and other frames of reference than the speaker's current situation, such as to the poetic "autumn is just a glint in its eye", or to the familiar discourse "my home, my hearth are open to you". The segments that are presented in speech marks are not self-evidently a part of the speaker-persona's voice or self-exploration, rather these segments exist on their own. The presence of multiple positions is evident in the common nature of the language used and the ordinariness of the scenes that are

presented in the poem. In this sense, the voice of another is already in the poem; "your name" can, in a sense, be "here".

The poem also presents the sudden "eclipse" which takes people by surprise. Another poem in the collection, 'Fade In', presents a similar scene: "Others stumbled onto the fringes of a large city / just as the revolt was breaking out", and at the end of the poem "The monsoon, striking at five, / just as elaborate drinks were at last being served, / canceled civility, forcing huge residents to flee" (*Your Name Here*: 122). In 'Fade In', people are trying to keep up appearances under a difficult situation; to stay as tourists in a city under revolt, whereas in 'Your Name Here', the people end up "calling endearing things to each other, using pet names" at the face of the walls caving in and the river rising, and afterwards, things simply get "real quiet", as some have not survived. Scenes of chaos, occurrences that disturb the flow of everyday life, have also been common in many other Ashbery poems: other examples include for example 'A Wave' and 'Sortes Vergiliniae'.

'Your Name Here' and 'Fade In' both are concerned with a sense of anxiety, as they explore these sudden situations, where people are either forced to flee, or get "swept away". Both of these poems contrast normal, even cheerful, everyday situations with a somewhat chaotic vision in the end: in 'Your Name Here', there are "cheerful citizenry… singing the Marseillaise" in the bar; whereas in 'Fade In' "elaborate drinks" are being served just as the situation culminates. The emphasis in both poems is on situations of communication: how people relate to one another, how they reach out towards others and react to each other's conventional modes of communication, and how they try to keep up appearances under unexpected circumstances. The poem does not, however, suggest a single, unitary 'truth' about any of these issues, rather it focuses on depicting the ordinary habits and manners of speaking. As Fredman (1990: 107) remarks in a discussion of *Three Poems*, Ashbery's poetry is concerned with "language's relation to experience, how our ways of speaking structure how we think about what happens" instead of presenting events simply as such, as fictive occurrences that are meaningful for one person. This effect is brought about precisely through the use of different voices and discourses, and through the juxtaposition of fragmented scenes.

An understanding of the communicative possibilities of the poem and its elements has become available through careful reading focused on the convention of

voice that the poem both makes use of and deviates from. Even though 'Your Name Here' might be explained in terms of a biographical narrative, on the surface level, however, the poem remains obscure, many of its details pointing towards different contexts that cannot be readily explained towards a coherent whole, at least not decisively, as the indeterminacy of the different voices provides multiple possibilities. What, then, is the purpose of such writing, and why should it be motivated in comparison with more coherent forms of writing, where singular meanings are easier to grasp?

Brian McHale points out how, to some extent, Ashbery's poems function in the manner of the texts of the Language poets, who "motivate their works in terms of a highly abstract, high-powered political intention" (McHale 1992: 24). McHale's view is that the kind of postmodern poetry Ashbery writes can be one way of representing and restructuring the complex postmodern worlds and cultures that we are immersed in (McHale 1992: 27-29). McHale's discussion draws on Fredric Jameson's (1991: 44-54) conception of "cognitive mapping" which pertains to art and its possibilities of helping people structure their relationships to the social contexts and realities within which they find themselves in the postmodern world. As was already noted in 2.2.1., there are connections between the work of the Language poets and Ashbery, even though Ashbery cannot be counted as part of the actual Language poets' group, but rather as a precursor, and Ashbery's career extends beyond the point of influence which, as was mentioned, was *The Tennis Court Oath*. It appears, however, that his work comes in contact again, this time overlapping, with the work of the Language poets, leading to a situation where all of them are writing in this day and age, where such a 'political function' for contemporary poetry has been and, perhaps increasingly, still is an acknowledged issue, especially with the advance of the 21st century.

As noted in Chapter Two, for both Ashbery and the Language poets attention to the template of voice and its dispersal is one of the aspects that allow for positing an exploration of political or social dimensions. While Ashbery certainly does not avoid such linguistic devices as personal pronouns, which work to create an illusion of a subjective point of view and of a presence, his poetry is clearly not about the direct expression of the self. The speaker in 'Your Name Here' sets out to discuss in the beginning of the poem whether he can "be in this bar and also be a recluse". This

line crystallizes the fundamental condition of Ashbery's poetry: there is always an *I*, but this position is never solitary or entirely self-contained, but instead surrounded by different voices and indeterminate presences. What the speaker's question suggests is ultimately not possible: in a bar, one is of course surrounded by others, no matter how solitary one may feel. Likewise, the *I* in the poems in *Your Name Here* is permeated by other voices and discourses, and the *I* can only be defined when it comes into contact with other presences, at the moment of utterance or address, in speaking the common language. At the end of 'Your Name Here', the reader's or the other's position is ultimately the most fundamental, as the *you* is allowed to go and to develop his or her own place.

Fragmentation of the category of voice is precisely what allows for an examination of forms of communication and social situations in the poems of *Your Name Here*. Fragmentation brings about the possibility of negotiating between different registers and speaking positions. *I* and *you* in *Your Name Here* are no more so much the speaker and the reader communicating directly from one to the other, but they are, rather, necessary 'place-holders' in the language that works to represent and to question what is essentially social, not only about *I,* or even about *you* as someone separate from the *I*, but about us and about the way we communicate and behave in social situations in the contemporary world. Finally, then, I shall consider the implications of Ashbery's fragmented voice in the context of the concept of polyphony.

5. Polyphony and the reader's position

> the poet lies down under the vast sky,
> dreaming of the sea. For poetry, he
> now realizes, is cleverer than he.
>
> So where to go, what to be in?
> For as the robin builds a nest,
> so each day weaves a bower of itself
> to offer to the world. I am standing
> here listening, but no one word proves the truth,
> though several do. And we shall acclimate
> towns, cities, sunsets, to our desire, O
> accidental mandarin,
> ('Sometimes in Places', *And the Stars Were Shining*: 37)

> 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.
>
> These are examples of leaving out. But, forget as we will, something soon comes to stand in their place. Not the truth, perhaps, but—yourself. It is you who made this, therefore you are true. But the truth has passed on
>
> to divide all.
> ('The New Spirit', *The Mooring of Starting Out*: 309)

In the beginning of this thesis, I quoted 'No Way of Knowing', which exemplifies the basic problem of Ashbery's poetry: "there is / No common vantage point, no point of view / Like the "I" in a novel" (*Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*: 56). I observed that such an absence of a 'vantage point' in a poem can potentially be understood as leading to nonsense, to a largely meaningless or difficult text. I also remarked that contrary to the poem's claims, novels are often regarded as containing what Bakhtin ([1981] 1983, 1984) describes as "heteroglossia" or a polyphony of voices instead of a single *I* perspective. Poetry, on the other hand, is usually considered to be subjective, to be spoken by one voice. In reversing this understanding, 'No Way of Knowing' appears to be addressing a topical issue, given that the poem was published in 1975, when Bakhtin's ideas had been translated into English a while earlier for the first time. The absence of a single "vantage point" is not, however, merely something to be explicitly stated in a poem, but it is also a matter of structure. As discussed earlier, the speaker position in Ashbery's poems is often not a particular "psychological ego" (Koethe 1980: 93). As I observed in section 3.2.1. in relation to

'Litany' and in 4.3. in relation to the poems in *Your Name Here*, the 'voice' of these poems is not a particular personality, but a structure which contains within it multiple voices and a variety of positions.

In this final chapter, then, I shall consider what becomes of this polyphonic situation in Ashbery's poetry, and how it can be related to the polyphony of a novel, which I shall discuss here in relation to Ashbery's and James Schuyler's joint novel *A Nest of Ninnies*. I shall also illustrate my points with the help of the above excerpts from two different poems. The poems appear to suggest already in their content certain aspects which are fundamental to the structure of most of Ashbery's poetry.

'Sometimes in Places' is a short poem of three stanzas in length from the 1994 collection *And the Stars Were Shining*. As the quotation shows, the poem is initially concerned with poetry and its possibilities for variety, but the text also contains references to other contexts such as the "towns, cities, sunsets" or the "accidental mandarin". These specific contexts are undefined or 'strange' in the world of the poem, though in the sense that these details can be "acclimate[d]… to our desire", this may suggest that readers can make of the details what they will. As Douglas Crase (1980: 33-35) affirms about Ashbery's poems in general, they contain "many contexts", with the details pointing in different directions. One cannot, then, definitively conclude that the poem is 'about' poetry only, even though I take that aspect as central in my metatextual reading which I use to illustrate the more general issue of polyphony in Ashbery's poetry.

The other excerpt comes from the beginning of the long prose poem 'The New Spirit' from Ashbery's 1972 book *Three Poems*. John Ernest (1995: 181) has suggested that the poem emphasizes "heteroglossia". The context of the long poem is broad, and I only use the excerpt above to illustrate my arguments about polyphony and do not suggest readings that would necessarily apply outside the excerpt. Generally, however, 'The New Spirit' is concerned with the issues that are established already in the aforequoted beginning: the possibilities and limitations of art and poetry, and the relationship between the *I* and the *you*, who in this fundamentally metatextual poem can often be the reader.

5.1. "No one word proves the truth": Constructing provisional meanings

The pronoun *I* is present in most of Ashbery's texts, but the position is hardly singular: the presence is multiplied and dispersed into different positions through the use of other personal pronouns such as *you* and *he* that have no clear referents. This indeterminacy is also evident in 'Sometimes in Places', where the first stanza presents a third person, "the poet", who is referred to as *he* and observed from the outside, but in the second stanza an *I* suddenly appears. The pronoun *I* may equally refer to "the poet"/he or to another, separate speaker. Both of these possibilities are present simultaneously. Next, the pronoun changes to the plural *we*. The third and last stanza, which is not quoted here, is again addressed to a *you*.

When discussing the pronoun reference in Ashbery's and Kenneth Koch's poetry, McHale (1987: 39) points out that readers cannot necessarily even decide what effect choosing one of the potential referents instead of another would have on the meaning of their texts. I shall not discuss at length here what the indeterminacy in 'Sometimes in Places' implies. The implications of the fragmentation of the speaker position to various pronominal positions have been addressed earlier in this study, particularly in 3.2.1. and 3.3.1. in the context of 'Litany' and its varied reflections on art and criticism, as well as in 4.3. in relation to how the poems in *Your Name Here* defer final meanings. Generally, through multiple voices the poem can investigate for example argumentative possibilities without positing one statement or idea as dominant. Moreover, what is more pertinent than making a definite distinction between possibilities is that these different positions suggest that 'Sometimes in Places', like most Ashbery poems, is penetrated not by a single consciousness or a subjective identity, but instead by a variety of possible presences. All of the statements that the poem appears to make, like "poetry… is cleverer than he", are suggested as possible for one of the positions in the text, but there is no unambiguous, subjective position of an *I* who would affirm definitively, for example, that 'poetry is cleverer than the poet'.

There is, then, no single, final meaning in poems like 'Sometimes in Places'. In this sense, Ashbery's poetry exemplifies what 'Sometimes in Places' proposes: "no one word proves the truth, / though several do". Several words, or polyphony of

voices and viewpoints, illuminate an issue in a way that is more open and varied than anything that a single, subjective point of view could sustain. What these lines suggest should not be understood in the sense that the poem could reveal a final, normative truth or an ultimate meaning through several voices, but rather contingent, ambiguous meanings, even contradictory possibilities which, taken together, could amount to a 'truth'. I shall return to discuss further the position of the *I* in 'Sometimes in Places' and its relation to the other poem that I quoted above, but before that, the idea of multiple voices requires some consideration.

Even though I have often referred to Ashbery's poems as polyphonic, little has been said of the actual concept of polyphony. As defined by Mikhail Bakhtin, a polyphonic text presents "a *plurality of consciousnesses*… [which] combine but are not merged in the unity of the event" (Bakhtin 1984: 6; emphasis as in the original). Such a description fits what I have observed about the speaker and pronominal positions in 'Litany' and *Your Name Here*, as the texts present a plurality of voices rather than a single consciousness or a point of view. Cohen (1980: 148-149) makes an observation of Ashbery's *Three Poems* that is true for most of Ashbery's work: the *I* consists of "many subsidiary subjects". Thus, the poems present no totalizing voice that would affirm a certain meaning and guarantee that what is uttered in the poem should be taken as a sincere, definitive statement on any of the issues that the poem is concerned with. This is evident in 'Litany', where the positions of the *you* and *I* are blurred to the point of indeterminacy and the two-columned poem does not offer a certainty of continuity. Instead, the poem places the statements and possibilities for example about art and criticism that come forward in the poem through *I* and *you* into a position in which the reader may consider their implications and relations. In *Your Name Here*, the dialogical poems present voices in conversation. There is no totalizing voice governing the dialogical utterances, and the focus is on the connotations and contexts. The *I* and *you* are not consistently defined in the context of the whole poem in 'Litany' or in the poems of *Your Name Here*. Thus, the texts also manage to "affirm someone else's 'I' not as an object but as another subject", which Bakhtin (1984: 10-11), redefining Vyacheslav Ivanov's idea, asserts is the "fundamental principle" of polyphony in Dostoevsky's novels.

The polyphonic meaning generation also manifests itself in the inherent parody of Ashbery's poems. In 'Litany', parody serves to ensure that what may

appear like a sincere statement or an assertive argument cannot simply be taken at 'face value'. In *Your Name Here*, parody is often related to how the poems are permeated by formulaic utterances like clichés, in other words, phrases that have a life of their own because of their cliché status. This was discussed in the previous chapter in relation to such utterances as "You look tired. Are you OK?" in 'The File on Thelma Jordan' (*Your Name Here* 40). The poems in *Your Name Here*, in particular, examine the clichés of communication. The clichés are treated as examples of a common discourse, and the indeterminacy of the constituents and participants of the exchange draws attention to the cliché nature of the utterances. The *I* and *you* are ultimately defined through the common language that they use, the language that is not the property of an individual.

The clichés of the everyday in *Your Name Here* exemplify how, in Bakhtin's terms, the language and words are essentially dialogical, in that they consist of various "social speech types", dialects and jargons, and "[e]ach word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life" (Bakhtin [1981] 1983: 262, 293). Bakhtin affirms in his discussion of heteroglossia that to neglect "the social situation or the fate of a given word in life" and to examine "*the word as such*" would be "*senseless*" (Bakthin [1981] 1983: 292; emphasis as in the original). Because an Ashbery poem does not present sufficient unity in terms of narrative, argument, or pronominal reference, the text can direct the readers' attention toward the contexts in which clichéd utterances are used, thus offering a space for reflection on their functions and connotations. The open pronominal positions, particularly the *I* and *you*, which involve presence, as was discussed in 3.1., are what allow for the utterances to appear not simply 'as such', but as open, representative possibilities.

Bakhtin (1984: 43) connects the idea of polyphony in the novel to "a unity standing above the word, above the voice, above the accent". As I have observed, Ashbery's poems do not present an ultimate unity in terms of voice. 'Unity' here must be understood as the basic structural organization of a text that allows for the presence of different voices, or for the appearance of indeterminate pronominal positions. There is in Ashbery's poems an *I*, which constitutes a speaker position, but as there is no single voice, 'unity' has to be understood as a structure that organizes the different voices and allows for the presence of the *I* as well as other positions and voices.

In section 4.3. I also discussed Malinowska's (2000: 28-30, 49-50) idea of the "composite persona", in which the single position of a solitary author is displaced and there are multiple positions in the text. I came to the conclusion that Ashbery's poems can be described as having a "composite persona": a speaker position that is not an individual psychological self, but one that contains different voices and possibilities for presence, provided that the description is not simplified to suggest that the persona has access to a normative truth or a final meaning of the poem through containing multitudes. However, what the "composite persona" can bring forward is a composite truth, or several relative meanings which can be present simultaneously and do not cancel each other.

As discussed in Chapter Three, 'Litany' explores the present moment and the relations between poetry and criticism through the polyphony that is created by its two column structure and the indeterminacy in the pronominal positions. In this way, the text does not present unambiguous statements that could be taken as sincere and authentic. The reader's position is central, not least because the occurrences of the pronoun *you* in the poem can often be understood as metacomments, direct addresses to the reader, which call attention to the text and its construction. On the other hand, the pronouns *I* and *you* can also refer to particular personas within the world of the poem, which allows the utterances related to these positions to also be read in an essentially fictive light. This emphasizes the criticism that the poem drafts in relation to the variety of the present moment. The utterances or statements that the text presents can be taken as possibilities that are put into play against each other and offered to the reader for consideration. As suggested earlier, the reader's position in a poem like 'Litany' is not simply to be an overhearer, instead there is a genuine communicational possibility.

Even though 'Litany' does, then, provide a position for the reader, the voices in the text are mostly unresponsive to each other. The existence of an other is acknowledged in the frequent address to *you*, but clear responses are not heard. In *Your Name Here*, dialogue becomes the fundamental condition. The direct address to the reader is rarely possible, as the pronominal positions are defined through their context to such an extent that they can be understood as particular within the world of the text. Communication is what the poems primarily explore, as the utterances establish dialogues between different pronominal entities, sometimes even between

characters who are referred to by a proper name. The boundaries between different voices are, typically, difficult to discern. Instead of establishing a seemingly direct relationship between the reader and speaker, in the poems in *Your Name Here* the personal pronouns function as 'place-holders' that are necessary for projecting the ordinary exchanges of communication. Even though the readers in some poems of *Your Name Here* are left outside the communicational exchange, they can still participate by reading their personal meanings into the clichéd utterances. The complex exploration of communication that *Your Name Here* presents would hardly be possible in a single-voiced poem, because the variety and the shifting pronominal positions direct the reader's attention to the clichés, shortcomings and gaps of communication.

Of course for Bakhtin, polyphony is a fundamental condition of the novel, not of poetry. He understands poetic style conventionally as the discourse of a single voice. The poet must use words, ideas, and expressions for the purposes of "his own intention", and separate the language from any other contexts it might relate to (Bakthin [1981] 1983: 285, 297). This is not what happens for example in a poem like 'The File on Thelma Jordan' (*Your Name Here*: 40) in such lines as "You look tired. Are you OK? / It was just my brother calling from Wichita", which were discussed in the previous chapter. Not only do the utterances of the dialogical text echo the words of other fictive presences, but they also, in their ordinariness, echo other similar, everyday conversations. The utterances can be seen "not as the impersonal word of language but as a sign of someone else's semantic position, as the representative of another person's utterance" (Bakhtin 1984: 184). In essence, the utterances are used in such a way that they do not completely "lose… their connection with specific contexts" which, according to Bakhtin ([1981] 1983: 297), happens in poems. Rather, the openness of the context of the poem itself and of the positions in it allow for different contexts to be available.

Clearly, then, Bakhtin's contention about polyphony being limited to novels becomes questionable when it is considered in relation to 'Litany' and *Your Name Here*. I observed in section 4.1. that the investigation of communicational situations in *Your Name Here* is also partly dependent on the narrativity of the poems, as the texts present narratives that appear to recount specific series of events, even though the sequences are disjunctive, and the illusion of causality and the progress of an

event are created through linguistic means, but are not evident in the content and details. In *Your Name Here*, the poems are narrative and prosaic often regardless of whether the poem is set in prose or more traditionally versified. Some level of narrativity also holds for 'Litany' as it presents materials of both a fictional narrative as experienced by the various subjective positions and of critical prose. The narrativity and 'prosaic' features serve to explain, partly, why Bakhtin's conception of poetry requiring the poet to cleanse words of any other meanings does not work where Ashbery is concerned. As was mentioned earlier, prose poetry has to some extent become an alternative to 'lyric' in postmodernist literature (Perloff [1985] 1996: 175, 180-181, Fredman 1990: 1). In a sense, Ashbery's poetry has moved beyond traditional lyric poetry and instead has come to occupy a space which is close to prose particularly in its ability to sustain polyphony. However, the situation is more complex, as a discussion of Ashbery's co-written novel *A Nest of Ninnies* will show.

5.2. The inherently polyphonic novel? The case of *A Nest of Ninnies*

As a point of comparison for the poems, I shall consider the issue of voice in the novel *A Nest of Ninnies* (1969), which Ashbery wrote in collaboration with his New York School friend James Schuyler. *A Nest of Ninnies* describes a group of friends who live in the suburbs of New York. They visit with each other, have parties and go to work, and end up on unexpected trips to Paris, Rome, and Florida. There are numerous characters, but there is little development or depth in them: they can for example fall in love and get married unexpectedly. The novel consists mostly of dialogue. Consider the following example:

> "…In the broadcast I heard," she went on, "a scientist explained how very close our planet is to being drained of its natural resources. He seemed to think it quite likely we would run out of them before men have learned how to harness solar energy or the tides, in which case we would all either starve or freeze."
> "Oh, Mildred," Irving said, "he sounds like that discredited alarmist to me."
> "I'm sure it made very good sense as he explained it," Mrs. Kelso said. "The first thing to go will be coal."
> "We could all go down South and live, until the food started running low," Alice suggested pleasantly.
> "Collard greens with salt pork?" Not for me thank you," Fabia said.
> "I don't think it's a joking matter," Mrs. Kelso said.
> "Are these goblets Bohemian glass?" Marshall asked.
> "Of course I don't know why I'm criticizing you," Mrs. Kelso said, ignoring Marshall. "Being an inveterate apartment dweller, I'd be totally hamstrung if the electricity or the gas were to go off."
> (Ashbery and Schuyler [1969] 1983: 35-36)

The conversation is markedly ordinary and the characters' primarily negligent attitude to the environmental matter under discussion is evident in Mrs. Kelso's newly-found concern as an "apartment dweller" and Marshall's switching the topic to goblets. Lehman (1980: 121-122) notes that as the narrator only briefly comments on what is happening and the focus is on the dialogue, the characters can "define themselves". The conversational turns appear dialogical in the sense that they are always directed at others, and the utterance of one character always appears as a direct reaction to what someone else has said, or is presented as clear ignorance of the others' speech like Marshall's question about the goblets. In this sense, the work could also be regarded as polyphonic.

However, Mildred Kelso's concern for the environment does not reflect much that is distinguishable about her character, nor are her concerns thematized on the level of the whole text or its plot. After this brief discussion, the characters switch the topic again and never return to the environmental issue. They are simply having this conversation, like all the other conversations in the novel, as if to pass the time. In that sense, the conversation appears in fact to be 'cited' or mentioned as an example of these kinds of concerns and attitudes towards them, rather than actually being 'used', or intertwined in order to create plot tension or to reveal something about the character who is speaking. This resembles what was discussed in 3.3.2. in relation to the sincerity of utterances in 'Litany' and the distinction between "used" and "mentioned" statements in an Ashbery poem (McHale 2000: 585; Shoptaw 1994: 95). The everyday style of the dialogue of the novel also bears a relation to the habitual cliché-laden dialogues of *Your Name Here*. Clearly such ordinary dialogues, which form the bulk of the novel, are not "in the service of some higher truth" as McHale (1987: 42) notes in another discussion about disjunctive statements in Ashbery's poems. If, however, the above conversation from *A Nest of Ninnies* is 'used' for anything, it is to ridicule or to parody the lifestyle and the ideas that these suburbian, middle-class characters exemplify.

I noted in 2.1.1. that distinguishing between the styles of Ashbery and Schuyler in the novel is difficult, even if reportedly they each wrote one sentence at a time (Lehman 1998: 81-82). The dialogues of the novel could be understood as the result of taking turns, but if one did not know about the turn-taking, it would be

difficult to notice the novel is the work of two writers. Herd (2000: 65) observes that the fact that the novel is written by two authors is visible in the sense that the text resembles "a continuation of a private conversation".

Herd (2000: 63) also suggests that in its lack of basic novelistic conventions like characterization and a clear plot, *A Nest of Ninnies* is "a parody of the great American novel". However, in relation to Herd's reading, James Wallenstein (2007) remarks that the text is not really a parody of conventions, as the conventions would still have to "apply", to be in place, if the novel was to be related to the tradition of the American novel. Wallenstein (2007) observes that the novel does not entail "characterization", even if "[t]here are characters of a sort, personages assigned names, ages, and social positions that nevertheless do not distinguish them". The characters are "vacant", and – what is most important here – "[t]heir voices, even when they speak as it were in character, are the authors'" (Wallenstein 2007). Wallenstein is thus suggesting that despite the ongoing dialogue, there is a continuous, single narrative voice in the novel, in other words, what could be termed as "the 'I' in a novel" in the words of 'No Way of Knowing'. As noted above, *A Nest of Ninnies* is permeated by parody of the fictional characters' ideas, as the characters are presented as "ninnies" to such an extent that the parodic narrative voice overrides their efforts to define and to distinguish themselves.

The speech turns of the characters are always presented directly in quotation marks, with a separate line for each speaker, and accompanied with short reporting clauses, and thus the speech of one character is always clearly separated from the speech turn of another. The origin of the utterances is never unclear as often happens in Ashbery's poetry. In *A Nest of Ninnies* the origin of the utterance is made explicit to the point it is almost obsessively so.

In the novel, the narrative voice, a common denominator or a vantage point, which sometimes refers to itself collectively as *we*, only assumes its position explicitly in brief narrative comments about the characters, on their actions, outlook or on the milieu. This collective persona does not have access to individuals' thoughts. Such narration, of course, is part of the reason why there is so little depth in the characters, as their thoughts and feelings are only visible in their speech to the others. The narrative voice in *A Nest of Ninnies* can, then, be understood as one continuous voice that is characterized primarily by parody. The novel does what

Bakhtin suggests of monologic texts: all ideas and utterances are subjugated under a single consciousness. In a monologic text, "an idea, in itself, belongs to *no one*", and any character could utter it (Bakhtin 1984: 79). This is certainly true of this novel where the characters' utterances do not fundamentally distinguish them. In the above passage, it would not make much of a difference if any other one of the characters than Mrs. Kelso had started the conversation on environmental matters, as the 'point' of the passage evidently is a parody of the naïve attitudes. A monologic order is obviously not what one would expect from a novel that is written by two authors and that is then already very concretely rendered as the creation of more than one voice. But then, such text-external starting points do not have to be manifested in the text itself; what were originally two voices can be one.

When the novel is compared to Ashbery's poetry, the difference is that where the novel presents named characters, the poems present, more often than not, empty pronominal positions, which are also flexible by virtue of their emptiness. The pronoun is a place-holder for a consciousness or a presence, but one cannot decide definitively what the pronoun refers to, and it can then contain multiple possibilities simultaneously, or the choice between the possibilities is left to the reader. The poems usually do not provide an immediately clear context for the utterances, and if something is presented in speech marks and thus appears to be 'cited', the origin or the producer of the utterance is often left unclear. This indeterminacy which allows for the polyphony is true of 'Litany' and of the dialogical poems in *Your Name Here*. It is perhaps less true for those poems in *Your Name Here* that present named third person positions that have some sort of existence, even though vague, as a 'character', as I discussed in 4.1.2., but then such poems can also be understood as polyphonic when they present the ordinary, clichéd language as rendered by the third persons in dialogue. While Ashbery's poems also contain parody, such an attitude is never ultimate or final. The reader simply does not have certainty of precisely what the parody is directed at. For example the statements about criticism in 'Litany' are equally possible to take seriously as they can be seen in an ironic or questionable light. The parody is directed towards the *language* rather than towards the content of the utterance itself, or towards an *idea*. In this way, the utterances can retain their links to other possible contexts and not become subjugated under a single idea or a consciousness.

The function of the pronominal shifts in Ashbery's poems is to avoid constituting continuous, single speaker positions and characters that would be expected to develop. Instead, because these are poems that do not require such positions or a plot to be created, the pronouns can give way to an openness that calls attention to the use of the utterances, their connotations and the different contexts they might appear in. The content of the utterances is thus not as central as their possible uses or the language itself. Readers can make inferences about the content only after they have fixed the utterance to a specific context in their mind. In the novel, a definite context is more readily available and thus the 'emptiness' of the characters and their lack of distinction from each other is more marked than in Ashbery's poems, where indeterminacy and emptiness, as well as disjunction in the materials, are clearly a part of the structure through which multiple voices can be present in the text. Thus, the novel does not appear polyphonic like a more conventional novel would, with each clearly defined character representing him/herself and his/her opinions.

In Ashbery's oeuvre, poetry is polyphonic, but his novel is not. This is almost a reversal of traditional genre conceptions: as observed, Ashbery's poetry is not traditionally 'lyric' but instead close to prose in some aspects; *A Nest of Ninnies*, on the other hand, lacks conventional elements of a novel, displays a continuous voice, and even renders the speech turns of the characters each in their separate line, almost resembling a versified poem. This is not to say that *A Nest of Ninnies* fails as a novel or that it could not be regarded as polyphonic on the surface level, but the novel veers primarily toward a parody of the variety of ideas presented in it, not toward a presentation of multiple meanings or the examination of communication.

Ashbery's experimental poetry and his and Schuyler's notably unconventional novel clearly display the problems in Bakhtin's theory of polyphony insofar as he claims that novels are fundamentally polyphonic whereas in poetry polyphony is utterly impossible. As the novel was published in 1969, it could perhaps even be understood as a reaction to the era when Bakhtin's ideas would already have been circulating; a few years before the publication of the first English translation of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. The distinctions between poetry and novels in this regard are obviously a multifaceted issue, and the topic would certainly benefit from further study, for example to obtain a wider understanding of how and precisely to

what effect polyphonic processes may be used elsewhere in American poetry and perhaps also in poetic prose.

It should not be surprising if Ashbery's and Schuyler's novel does not appear conventional. They were, after all, in the habit of experimentation in the 1950s when the novel project was initiated. Of course, to present Ashbery as simply experimental or 'oppositional' does not exhaust the potential of his work, and indeed in this study my ultimate focus has been his later work and the possibilities of communication it presents. What I have also suggested is that in Ashbery's poetry, the alleged 'difficulty' is clearly motivated, even independently of whether this is conscious or not, because precisely fragmentation and disruption of conventions are what allow for a communicative polyphony. Moreover, in Ashbery's poems the polyphony is defined in a complex relationship to the reader. I shall, then, conclude by considering the dimensions of the reader's position in Ashbery's poetry.

5.3. "It is you who made this": The eminence of the reader

Finally, in order to highlight the consequences of polyphony in Ashbery's poetry, let me return to the excerpts from the two poems cited at the beginning of this chapter. In 'Sometimes in Places', the pronoun *I* is specifically diminished in importance, as in uttering "I am standing / here listening", the speaker of the statement is relegated to the position that is normally allocated for the reader of a poem: the place of a listener, or perhaps merely someone who overhears. The speaker of this sentence becomes just one entity among other voices and words, one who listens to the "several" words as they present something that appears to be worth listening to. As I have been observing, this is typically the situation in Ashbery's poems even when it is not as clearly suggested in the *content* of the poem as here.

One may, then, consider what the excerpt quoted in the beginning of this chapter from 'The New Spirit' suggests: "something soon comes to stand in their place. Not the truth, perhaps, but—yourself". When something is left out, when there are gaps, inconsistencies, and indeterminacies in a text, it is *you*, the reader, who has to construct the text, come "to stand in their place". The role of the listener is not simply to be passive or an overhearer, but this position is also powerful as 'The New Spirit' shows: "It is you who made this, therefore you are true". But then, "the truth

has passed on", meanings in the poem are provisional and uncertain, and just as soon as they have been obtained, they will dissolve, perhaps then to be replaced by another version or a point of view.

The readers' role in constructing the text does not mean that the dispersed fragments of the author's idea could be restructured by the reader to reveal "the meaning" of the text, which Larrissy (1990: 173) has seen as characteristic an understanding of the readers' role in reading Modernist poetry. As Larrissy also affirms, Ashbery's postmodernist, late 20th century poetry no longer posits such a possibility, as "coherent meaning" can hardly be found (Larrissy 1990: 173). This is particularly the result of how the poems present details pointing towards many different contexts. Yet, such fragmentation and dispersal hardly leads to nonsense, as in a poetry with no final meanings, one is indeed invited to "think of understanding as a process not an end-point" (Herd 2000: 128).

What I have suggested here about 'Sometimes in Places' and the consequences of the lines "no one word proves the truth, / though several do" is, then, also only notably provisional. The reading is occasional, as I use the poem to illustrate my point, and in order to do this I have had to relate the poem to a specific context. The reader's participation, then, does not result into obtaining a final meaning, but into provisional, personal meanings. As McHale states, different possibilities of for example pronominal references and, in turn, meanings in Ashbery's poetry are "not in the service of some higher truth". The possibilities are present simultaneously, and if something is "erased" or denied in a further utterance, that part will still continue to exist as a possibility (McHale 1987: 41-42). By virtue of indeterminacy, of the "leaving out" and simultaneous presence of multiple meanings, the potential of the text is extended in such a way that it can put different possibilities into play and place them in a position where their connotations can be observed.

In poems that include a polyphony of voices, the situation is what 'The New Spirit' suggests: "yourself" can come "to stand in" the place of the absent or vague characters, to occupy the place created by the personal pronoun. This is, then, what allows for the examination of the present moment and the relation of poetry and criticism in the case of 'Litany', and of communicational situations in the case of *Your Name Here*. Ashbery's poems present several possibilities for meaning and, in their metatextuality and self-consciousness, the poems also attempt to take the reader

into consideration. To some extent, one could speak of such an examination of communicational situations in *A Nest of Ninnies*, as well, but the presence of named characters and the overriding tone of parody call attention to the fictionality of the text rather than leaving the positions empty, which would open up the possibility for the reader "to stand in".

I observed in section 4.4. in relation to the title *Your Name Here* that the reader may never be able to be the *I* of the poem; *your* name cannot be *there* because that is where the speaker is. Yet this has not prevented Ashbery's poetry from continuously striving for such a coming together or changing places between the speaker and the listener, as the title of the book indicates. Such a desire was present in 'Litany', and it is also evident elsewhere in Ashbery's poetry, as in the directly metatextual poem 'Paradoxes and Oxymorons', which concludes by stating that "the poem / Has set me softly down beside you. The poem is you." (*Shadow Train*: 3). Even more clearly, a similar longing is pronounced in the following excerpt of 'A Pact with Sullen Death'. I only quote the last two stanzas of the sixteen-line poem here, as what they suggest is illustrative of Ashbery's poetics on the whole:

> "Is this life?" Yes, the last minute was too—
> And the joy of informing takes over
> Like the crackle of artillery fire in the outer suburbs
> And I was going to wish that you too were the "I"
>
> In the novel told in the first person that
> This breathy waiting is, that we could crash through
> The sobbing underbrush to the laughter that is under the ground,
> Since anyone can wait. We have only to begin on time.
> ('A Pact with Sullen Death', *Shadow Train*: 8)

In wishing that "you too were there "I" / In the novel told in the first person", 'A Pact with Sullen Death' echoes 'No Way of Knowing'. Both are assured of the prominence of the first person position in novels and the absence of such a singular position in the poem itself.

For John Ashbery, the reader always comes first, and follows next. This position that the other, the addressee, occupies, is always important for the one who speaks, or attempts to communicate. The listener is so important that the speaker, the *I*, is constantly in the process of becoming another. In the case of 'A Pact with Sullen Death', however, the speaker does not merely wish to be one with the other. The implication is rather that the other should have an independent position, which

resembles Bakhtin's (1984: 10) idea of how another person's *I* can be present by itself rather than as a mere object under discussion. In 'A Pact with a Sullen Death', a central position is allowed not just for the separate positions of a speaker, who would be primary, and an addressee or a listener, whose position would be secondary, but for at least two independent *I*s. Both of these positions may exist simultaneously. At least one of the voices in the text may be the reader's.

The paradox of 'No Way of Knowing' that was discussed in the beginning of this thesis appears to be resolved. "This breathy waiting", or the text in which we await to find meaning is now a "novel told in the first person", a text that does, nevertheless, contain a first person position, even though "no one never saw the point of any", as 'No Way of Knowing' suggested. This first person position is not totally singular or solitary; it is not a "common vantage point", but rather a possibility of presence, a place-holder that is necessary as the origin of a seemingly subjective statement, one position among many. And such openness, or multitude of meanings and voices, allows for a communicative text.

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Finnish Summary

Johdanto

John Ashberyn runo ”No Way of Knowing” (*Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*: 56) vuodelta 1975 esittää paradoksaalisen näkemyksen runoudesta: ”But difficult to read correctly since there is / No common vantage point, no point of view / Like the “I” in a novel. And in truth / No one never saw the point of any”. Jos runossa esitetyn ajatuksen oletetaan viittaavan tekstin itsensä rakentumiseen, runo pyrkii kieltämään yksittäisen tarkastelukulman mahdollisuuden runossa, kun taas romaanissa on jokin ”minä”. Kuitenkin runoutta on ollut tapana pitää yksiäänisenä, ikään kuin runoilijan tai tekstissä luodun puhujaposition subjektiivisena puheena. Sitä vastoin romaania on pidetty pohjimmiltaan moniäänisenä kirjallisuudenlajina. Nämä käsitykset ilmenevät myös Mihail Bahtinin ([1981] 1983; 1984) polyfoniaa ja heteroglossiaa käsittelevissä teorioissa.

Tarkastelen tutkimuksessani Ashberyn (1927–) tuotantoa, jonka postmoderni runous haastaa perinteisen käsityksen runouden yksiäänisyydestä ja yhden puhujan hallitsevuudesta. Moniäänisyys liittyy erityisesti Ashberyn tapaan käyttää persoonapronomineja, joille ei runossa määrity selkeää, yhtenevää viittauskohdetta. Yleisemminkin runot ovat usein fragmentaarisia ja sisäisesti epäyhteneviä. Osoitan, että merkityksettömyyden sijaan moniääninen runous voi sisältää monia merkityksiä ja tarjoaa myös lukijalle mahdollisuuden osallistua merkitysten muodostamiseen. Tämä liittyy myös siihen kuinka Ashberyn runous pyrkii pitkälti haastamaan lukijaa puhuttelemalla tätä suoraan. Runot ovat tietoisia itsestään kielellisinä, runouden konventioiden määrittäminä konstruktioina. Näin Ashberyn runous tähtää ennen kaikkea kommunikaatioon sekä sen tarkastelemiseen. Tutkimukseni nojaa vahvasti Ashberyn runojen tarkkaan luentaan. Tarkastelen niissä ilmeneviä pronominien viittaussuhteiden epäselvyyksiä, jotka kumoavat yhden puhujan ja läsnäolon mahdollisuuden.

Kysymys runon puhujan ja äänen keskeisyydestä on ollut esillä myös laajemmin 1900-luvun jälkipuoliskon amerikkalaisessa runoudessa. Käyn ensin läpi niitä kirjallisuushistoriallisia olosuhteita, joihin Ashberyn tuotanto voidaan kytkeä. Tämän jälkeen keskityn tarkastelemaan ensin Ashberyn vuonna 1979 julkaistua

pitkää runoelmaa nimeltä ”Litany” ja toiseksi lyhyempien runojen valikoimaa nimeltä *Your Name Here*, joka on vuodelta 2000. Moniäänisyys ja kommunikaation mahdollisuudet ilmenevät näissä teksteissä eri tavoin, joten tarkastelen niitä aluksi erillään. Lopuksi liitän ”Litanyn” ja *Your Name Heren* Bahtinin ajatuksiin moniäänisyydestä ja vertaan Ashberyn runouden esittämiä moniäänisyyden mahdollisuuksia Ashberyn ja James Schuylerin yhdessä kirjoittamaan romaaniin *A Nest of Ninnies* (1969).

Tutkimuksessa ei ole yhtä, yhtenäistä teoriapohjaa, mutta lähtökohtina käytän persoonapronomineihin ja runouden diskurssiin liittyviä teoreettisia ajatuksia. Persoonapronominit eli deiktiset ilmaukset synnyttävät vaikutelman subjektiivisesta läsnäolosta ja runon puhujasta (katso esim. Culler 1975: 165–166). Erityisesti *I* ’minä’ ja *you* ’sinä’ ovat keskeisiä. Subjektiivisuus voidaan kuitenkin ymmärtää runon diskurssin tuottamana vaikutelmana (Easthope 1983: 31; Barthes’s 1994: 493). Runon tuottama subjektiivisuuden vaikutelma liittyy käsitykseen siitä, että kaikki runossa oleva on lähtöisin yhdestä tietoisuudesta. Postmodernissa kirjallisuudessa, jota Ashberyn runouskin on, eivät kuitenkaan yksilölliset identiteetit ja subjektiivisuus ole enää keskeisiä, vaan keskiöön nousevat kollektiivisuus ja laajemmat sosiaaliset rakenteet ja diskurssit (Russell 1985: 246–247). Ashberyn runot sisältävät monia diskursseja ja rekistereitä, jolloin käsitys yhden puhujan äänestä kyseenalaistuu.

Kirjallisuushistorialliset lähtökohdat

Tapa jolla Ashberyn runous haastaa käsityksen runoudesta runoilijan subjektiivisena, yksiäänisenä ilmaisuna kytkeytyy laajoihin ilmiöihin 1900-luvun amerikkalaisen runouden historiassa. Kun Ashberyn ensimmäinen laajaan levitykseen päässyt kirja *Some Trees* julkaistiin 1956, amerikkalaisen runouden kenttää hallitsi selkeä käsitys siitä millaista runouden tulisi olla. Käsitys liittyi erityisesti uuskriittisiin näkemyksiin sekä runojen itsensä että runon puhujan yhtenäisyydestä ja siitä, että runon tuli esittää jokin selkeä oivallus (Perloff 1996: 107). Tässä käsityksessä myös runon puhuja oli runoilijasta erillinen, ja osin tämän käsityksen vaikutuksesta vallalle nousi myös niin sanottu tunnustuksellinen runous, jossa keskeistä on runoilijan itsensä suora puhe ja tunneilmaisut, jotka liittyvät erityisesti negatiivisiin kokemuksiin, joihin lukija voi

samastua (katso esim. Breslin 1987: 43). Erityisesti Robert Lowell on kirjoittanut runoja, jotka sopivat molempiin näihin käsityksiin.

Ashbery ja hänen runoilijaystävänsä, niin sanotun ”New Yorkin koulukunnan” runoilijat, vastustivat kukin tavallaan 1950- ja 1960-luvuilla vallinneita runouskäsityksiä. Koulukunnaksi Ashberyn, Kenneth Kochin, Frank O’Haran ja James Schuylerin nimesi John Bernard Myers, joka rinnasti heidät New Yorkin maalaustaiteen koulukuntaan. Käsitys runoilijoiden ryhmästä vakiintui Donald Allenin antologian *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* myötä. Runoilijaryhmälle oli yhteistä muun muassa ironian ja huumorin suosiminen ja halu vastustaa vallinneita runouskäsityksiä. Heillä oli myös paljon yhteisiä kirjoitusprojekteja. Tarkalleen ottaen heidän tuotannoissaan oli myös paljon yksilöllisiä eroja, jolloin käsitys koulukunnasta voi olla harhaanjohtava. Erot näkyvät esimerkiksi siinä kuinka Frank O’Haran runous oli minäkeskeistä, kun se keskittyi kuvaamaan runoilijan arkipäiväistä elämää. Kuitenkin esimerkiksi tarkasteltaessa O’Haran runoja ja hänen humoristissävyistä manifestiaan ”Personism” (1959) voidaan huomata, että tietyssä mielessä hänen tuotannossaan näkyy pyrkimys yksilöllisen persoonallisuuden ja *minän* tarkastelusta kohti yleistä, ja keskeistä on myös puheen osoittaminen jollekin toiselle, *sinälle*, kun taas tunnustuksellisessa runoudessa puhe on usein suunnattu puhujalle itselleen, ja lukija vain ikään kuin sattuu ohimennen kuulemaan sen. Toiselle osoitettu puhe on myös Ashberyn tuotannossa tärkeä elementti jo varhaistuotannosta alkaen.

1950- ja 1960-lukujen valtavirtakäsitykset alkoivat muuttua 1970-luvulla, ja näihin aikoihin myös Ashberyn runous sai aiempaa enemmän arvostusta. 1970-luvulla esiin nousi myös niin sanottu ”Language-runous”. Ashberyn runous on osin, erityisesti kokeellisen varhaisen kokoelman *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) kautta, vaikuttanut Language-runouteen, joten heidän tarkastelemisensa tässä yhteydessä on perusteltua. Myös näiden nuorempien runoilijoiden tuotannossa yksilöllisen tarkastelukulman ja minäkäsityksen hajottaminen ovat tietyssä mielessä keskeisiä. Olennaista on myös metatekstuaalisuus sekä runouden ja teorian tai kritiikin sekoittuminen. Heidän runouskäsityksiinsä, jotka ilmenevät myös runoilijoiden teoreettisissa teksteissä, ovat osaltaan vaikuttaneet jälkistrukturalismin ja dekonstruktion teoriat. Myös tietynlainen uusi kielen valtarakenteita tarkasteleva poliittisuus on keskeistä. Vaikka Ashberyn ja Language-runoilijoiden tuotannossa on

yhtäläisyyksiä myös myöhemmin, on huomattava että Ashberyn ei varsinaisesti voida katsoa kuuluvan tähän runoilijaryhmään. Käsitykset runouden liikkeistä ja koulukunnista syntyvät joka tapauksessa usein ystävyyssuhteiden tai ulkopuolelta tulevien, usein yksinkertaistavien määritelmien vaikutuksesta pikemminkin kuin tyylillisten yhteneväisyyksien perusteella, ja tällaisia määrittelyjä käytettäessä tulisikin olla varovainen.

Osaltaan kuitenkin sekä Ashberyn että Language-runoilijoiden tuotannon voidaan ajatella vaikuttaneen yksiäänisen runouden valta-aseman osittaiseen murtumiseen, mikä voi näkyä myös laajempana tietoisuutena runouden konventioista. Ashberyn tuotannossa tällainen tietoisuus ilmenee sekä runojen selkeissä metatekstuaalisissa teemoissa että esimerkiksi vanhojen runomuotojen hyödyntämisenä. Hänen 1990-luvun tuotantonsa voidaan osittain katsoa palanneen lähemmäs alkuaikojen kokeellisuutta ja hajanaisuutta.

”Litany”-runon itsetietoinen moniäänisyys

Tutkielmani kolmannessa luvussa tarkastelen Ashberyn pitkää runoa nimeltä ”Litany”. Kolmiosaisen runon teksti on aseteltu kahdelle palstalle, jolloin runossa kulkee kaksi ajatuskulkua, joiden välille rakentuu rinnastuksia. Palstojen sisälläkään ei kuitenkaan ole pelkästään yhtä ääntä saati juonta tai argumenttia, vaan ne koostuvat monista eri äänistä. Lukija voi valita missä järjestyksessä kaksipalstaista tekstiä lukee. Keskityn tarkastelemaan erityisesti persoonapronominien käyttöä ja niiden luomia pitkälti määrittämättömän läsnäolon vaikutelmia. Sisällöllisesti ”Litany” käsittelee arkipäiväisiä, nykyhetkeen liittyviä tapahtumia ja sekoittaa yksittäisiä muistoja ja tapahtumia raportoivia ääniä taiteen ja kritiikin mahdollisuuksien pohdintaan.

”Litanyn” alussa asetetaan kyseenalaiseksi yhden, yhtenäisen tarkastelukulman keskeisyys esimerkiksi sellaisilla viittauksilla kuin ”for someone like me” (*As We Know*: 3): kyse on siis jostakusta joka on ”niin kuin minä”, ei pelkästään *minä*. Se että runossa on *minä* luo kuitenkin vaikutelman tietynlaisesta subjektiivisesta läsnäolosta. Tämä liittyy siihen kuinka subjektiivisuuden vaikutelma runossa syntyy kielestä (Easthope 1983: 31). Benvenisten (1966: 251) mukaan pronominit *minä* ja *sinä* ilmentävät läsnäoloa, kun taas kolmannen persoonan pronomini viittaa välittömän puhetilanteen ulkopuolelle. ”Litanyn” alussa olevat

persoonapronominit luovat vaikutelman subjektiivisesta läsnäolosta, joka ei kuitenkaan ole tietty yksittäinen henkilöhahmo. *Minän* monimuotoisuus korostuu runon edetessä, kun teksti ei esitä esimerkiksi yhtenäistä biografista kertomusta. *Minän* vastapainona tekstissä esiintyy toistuvasti *sinä*, jota ei kuitenkaan ole yhtenevästi määritelty, ja se voi viitata esimerkiksi lukijaan, puhujaan itseensä, tai tiettyyn henkilöhahmoon, jolle puhe osoitetaan. Välttäessään yksittäistä subjektiivista tarkastelukulmaa ja korostaessaan *minän* asemaa kielellisenä konstruktiona ”Litany” ei myöskään luo illuusiota yksittäisestä, autenttisesta runon puhujasta, mikä on ollut pitkälti keskeistä muussa 1960- ja 1970-lukujen amerikkalaisessa runoudessa.

Tutkimuksessani pyrin välttämään viittaamasta runon puhujaan tai *minään* sanalla ”Ashbery”, vaikka tällainen nimeäminen onkin runoja analysoitaessa tavallista. ”Litanyn” kohdalla tämä ei ole toimiva strategia, sillä runo itse pyrkii kyseenalaistamaan myös ”kirjoittajan” asemaa. Säkeissä “Anyway, I am the author. I want to / Talk to you for a while, teach you / About some things of mine” (*As We Know*: 48) puhuja ilmaisee olevansa kirjoittaja, mutta tämän lisäksi runossa nimetään myös muita vastaavia positioita kuten “kertoja”. Runosta ei käy ilmi missä kohden “kirjailija” ja “kertoja” eroavat toisistaan, eikä näiden tekstin maailmassa esiintyvien konstruktioiden puhetta voida myöskään yksiselitteisesti erottaa muista runossa esiintyvistä äänistä, koska puhujan vaihtumista on harvoin selkeästi osoitettu esimerkiksi lainausmerkeillä. Toisaalta tekstissä kuitenkin esiintyy johtolauseita, jotka viittaavat kolmannen persoonan puheeseen. Runosta ei voida päätellä mikä tai kuka olisi tekstin varsinainen puhuja vaan ääniä on useita. Tietyn lauseen puhuja voidaan päätellä vain asiayhteydestä. Tällöinkin pronominilla voi olla useita viittauskohteita. Erisnimien käyttökään ei juuri helpota puhujan tunnistamista. Merkityksellistä puhujien vaihtelu on siksi, että runossa voi tällöin olla läsnä useita, ristiriitaisiakin näkökulmia yhden totuuden tai väitteen sijaan. Runosta ei voida erottaa yhtä kokoavaa ääntä vaan ainoastaan tekstuaalinen rakenne, joka kokoaa eri näkökulmia yhteen.

Vaikutelma minämuodossa esiintyvän puhujan läsnäolosta voi saada lukijat samastumaan puhujaan ja tuottamaan tekstistä merkityksiä (Easthope 1983: 43, 46). Ashberyn runossa tällaisen vaikutelman syntyminen on vaikeaa, koska yhtenäistä puhujaa ei tekstissä ole, ja lukijan huomio kiinnittyy esimerkiksi yksittäisen väitteen sävyyn tai asemaan. ”Litany” tarjoaa kuitenkin lukijalle paikan myös *sinä*-

pronominin kautta. *Minän* ja *sinän* välinen suhde on keskeinen, oli kyse sitten fiktiivisten hahmojen tai lukijan ja puhujan välisestä suhteesta. *Sinä* on runossa usein saavuttamaton toinen, toisaalta *minän* ja *sinän* rajat häilyvät, koska pronominien viittaussuhteita ei voida määrittää. Tarkastelen näitä suhteita ”Litanyn” toisen osion valossa. Tässä osiossa ilmenee selkeimmin näkökulmien ristiriitaisuus, kun kahdella palstalla kulkee pitkään rinnakkain taiteen ja kritiikin rooleihin liittyvä argumentatiivinen pohdinta ja toisaalta *minän* ja *sinän* välistä suhdetta reflektoivia kommentteja, joissa viitataan tiettyihin tapahtumiin, joihin fiktiiviset henkilöhahmot ovat osallistuneet. Kumpikaan palsta ei kuitenkaan ole selkeästi pelkästään argumentatiivinen tai narratiivinen. Runossa pohditaan ihmisiin vetoavan ja nykyhetkeen tarkasti pureutuvan ”kritiikin” mahdollisuutta ja pyritään hahmottelemaan “uutta kritiikkiä” (”new criticism”) (*As We Know*: 32-35), joka ottaisi huomioon nykyhetken moninaisuuden. Kun oikea palsta keskittyy kriittiseen puheeseen, vasen palsta pyrkii tietyssä mielessä jo osoittamaan arkipäivän ja nykyhetken moninaisuuden.

Kun ”Litanyyn” sisältyy paljon pohdintaa runoudesta ja taiteesta ylipäänsä, monet tekstin lausumista voidaan nähdä metatekstuaalisina, runoon itseensä kohdistuvina kommentteina. Ashberyn runoudelle tyypillisesti *sinä*-pronominin voidaan ymmärtää viittaavan lukijaan esimerkiksi lauseessa ”But you / Will continue in your own way” (*As We Know*: 36), eli runon luettuaan lukijaa jatkaa omaa tietään, eikä puhujalla ole häneen enää valtaa.

Erityisesti ”Litanyn” ilmestymisaikaan amerikkalaisessa runoudessa vallalla olleessa yksiäänisessä runoudessa tärkeää oli vilpittömyyteen pyrkiminen ja se, että runon *minä* on kielen ulkopuolinen, todellinen hahmo (Altieri 1984: 15, 22). Kun ”Litanyssa” kuitenkin kulkee rinnakkain kaksi palstaa, jotka eivät sisällä yhtä yhtenäistä puhujapositiota, myös vilpittömyys ja autenttisuus kyseenalaistuvat. Lukija ei voi vain pohtia esimerkiksi tietyn väitelauseen merkitystä sinällään vaan myös sitä miten merkitys syntyy ja miten eri merkitysten mahdollisuudet rakentuvat. Tarjolla on vaihtoehtoisia näkökulmia, jotka voivat olla keskenään ristiriitaisia. Tällöin ei myöskään voida selkeästi sanoa, että jokin runossa esitettävä väite tulisi automaattisesti ottaa vakavasti tai ymmärtää sellaisenaan, saati runoilijan omana mielipiteenä. Tietty lause tai väite voi esiintyä runossa vain eräänlaisena mainintana, viittauksena tietynlaiseen puhumisen tapaan, sen sijaan että se kuuluisi johonkin

tekstissä rakentuvaan juonelliseen tai temaattiseen kokonaisuuteen (McHale 2000: 585). Yksikään ääni, asenne tai näkökulma ei ole hallitseva vaan lukijan valinnat ovat merkityksellisiä, sillä vain lukija voi tehdä fragmentaarisesta tekstistä valmiin. Tällainenkin valmius on vain väliaikaista, koska merkitykset ovat jatkuvassa liikkeessä.

Pohtiessaan kritiikin ja runouden mahdollisuuksia argumentatiiviseen sävyyn ja rinnastaessaan tämän pohdinnan kerrontaan *minästä* ja *sinästä,* jotka osallistuvat tiettyihin tapahtumiin, ”Litany” muodostaa itsessään ”uuden kritiikin”, eräänlaisen uuden kommunikaation muodon. Runo on tietoinen itsestään kielellisenä rakennelmana, eikä se joudu esittämään, että se kykenisi tuomaan esiin aukotonta argumentaatiota niin kuin esimerkiksi akateemisten tekstien on toimittava. ”Litany” purkaa näin myös rajoja kaunokirjallisten ja teoreettisten tekstien välillä, mikä on tyypillistä postmodernismille.

Kommunikaation tarkastelu kokoelmassa *Your Name Here*

Vaikka ”Litany”-runo sisältää useita ääniä, jotka tietyssä mielessä haastavat toisensa, äänten välille ei kuitenkaan synny selkeitä dialogeja. Vastauksia harvemmin kuullaan. *Your Name Here* -kokoelmassa ovat keskeisiä dialogisuus ja kommunikaation mahdollisuuksien ja ulottuvuuksien tutkiminen. Tutkielmani neljännessä luvussa keskityn analysoimaan useita kokoelman runoja näiden seikkojen kannalta. Tämänkin kokoelman runot ovat fragmentaarisia, eikä yhtenevää puhujaa useinkaan voida löytää. Kokoelman runot sisältävät ”Litanya” harvemmin metatekstuaalisia ja argumentoivia kommentteja, sen sijaan runossa rakentuva fiktiivinen maailma on keskeinen. Tällöin myös *sinä* on usein määritelty runon maailmassa, eikä sen voida nähdä viittaavan lukijaan yhtä helposti kuin ”Litanyssa”.

Tarkastelen kokoelman runoja ensin kerronnallisuuden kautta. Monissa runoissa syntyy esimerkiksi ajan ilmaisujen ja kielellisten sidossanojen vaikutuksesta tuntuma siitä, että runosta voisi olla löydettävissä jokin selkeä tarina, mutta pronominien viittaussuhteiden hämärtyminen ja eri suuntiin johtavat asiayhteydet hajottavat yksittäisen tarinan mahdollisuuden. Kerronnallisuutta ei ole tavattu pitää runouteen kuuluvana materiaalina, mutta postmodernissa runoudessa tietynlaisesta

koherenssin haastavasta kerronnasta on tullut entistä tavallisempaa (Perloff ([1985] 1996: 158–162).

Esimerkiksi runossa ”Lemurs and Pharisees” (*Your Name Here*: 94) on useita erilaisia tarinan mahdollisuuksia, mutta yhtenäistä vaikutelmaa ei synny. Runon lauseet viittaavat ennen kaikkea arkipäivän kommunikaatioon. Runosta voidaan erottaa useita puhujia, joiden välille muodostuu keskusteluja, joiden loogiset suhteet eivät kuitenkaan ole selviä. Tällöin ei voida lopullisesti päätellä esimerkiksi sitä montako puhujaa runossa on tai miten runossa esitetyt tilanteet ovat suhteessa toisiinsa. Hajanaisuudessaan ja yhden kokoavan äänen puuttuessa runo ei tarkastele yhden henkilön kokemusta vaan kommunikatiivista tilannetta.

Kerronnallisuuteen liittyy kokoelmassa myös proosarunomuodon käyttö. Postmodernissa runoudessa perinteisen ”lyyrisen” runouden voidaan ajatella olevan osin väistymässä. Tilalle tulevat monipuoliset tekstit, joihin voi sisältyä myös proosaa ja kerronnallisuutta, joiden kautta voidaan rakentaa runoon yksittäistä tarkastelukulmaa laajempia näköaloja (Perloff ([1985] 1996: 175–181; Fredman 1990: 1).

Your Name Here -kokoelman runoissa keskeisiä ovat myös kolmannen persoonan pronominit. Ne tarjoavat puhujalle mahdollisuuden olla persoonaton, puhua jostakusta muusta kuin itsestään. Tarkastelen esimerkiksi runoa ”The Underwriters”, jossa kolmannen persoonan käyttö tekee yhtenäisen läsnäolon löytämisestä vaikeaa, kun runo vaihtelee *minä*-muodon ja persoonattoman kerronnan välillä. Runossa esiintyy myös erisnimi, Sir Joshua Lipton, joka rakentuu runossa läsnä olevaksi hahmoksi. Tässä *Your Name Heren* nimien käyttö eroaa ’Litanysta’, jossa nimeäminen veisi huomiota pois yleisestä kohti jotain erityistä. Sen sijaan runossa ”The Underwriters” nimeäminen luo tietyn fiktiivisen maailman, jonka sisällä voidaan tarkastella laajoja teemoja kuten kommunikaatiota ja sosiaalisia tilanteita. Tällaisissakaan runoissa ei ole yhtenäistä ääntä vaan rakenne, joka kokoaa yhteen äänet, puhumisen tavat ja kolmannet persoonat. Arkipäiväiset keskustelut ja tavanomaisten tilanteiden äkillinen katkeaminen ovat esillä monissa runoissa.

Kerronnallisuuden lisäksi tarkastelen kokoelman teksteissä esiintyvää dialogisuutta. Esimerkiksi runossa ”Merrily we live” puhe on selkeästi suunnattu jollekin tietylle, runon maailmassa määrittyvälle toiselle, *sinälle*, ja puhuja tuntuu ennakoivan vastauksen mahdollisuutta. Tällaisissa runoissa puhe ei ole itseilmaisua

tai väitteiden esittämistä, vaan ennen kaikkea kommunikaatiota, joka on merkityksellistä kahden ihmisen välillä.

Tarkastelen myös runoa ”The File on Thelma Jordan”, jossa dialogisuus on vielä selkeämmin esillä. Runossa esiintyy arkipäiväisiä keskusteluja, ja esimerkiksi säkeissä “You look tired. Are you OK? / It was just my brother calling from Wichita. He says the downtown’s on fire” toisen säkeen viittaus puhelinsoittoon voidaan nähdä vastauksena, joka selittää ensimmäisessä säkeessä esitettyä kysymystä toisen hyvinvoinnista. Eri ääniä ei ole kuitenkaan selkeästi erotettu toisistaan, eikä runossa ole hallitsevaa puhujaa. Tekstissä on myös kommunikatiivisia aukkoja, kun lause tuntuisi viittaavan johonkin aiemmin sanottuun, jota ei kuitenkaan ole runossa esillä. Tällöin voitaisiin ajatella, että runon lauseet ovat fragmentteja jostain toisesta keskustelusta, ja lukijan rooliksi muodostuu täydentää runoa ja pohtia siinä esiintyviä keskusteluja suhteessa tiettyihin yhteyksiin.

Dialogisissa runoissa *sinä* on usein ymmärrettävä tietyksi henkilöksi, mutta *sinästä* samoin kuin *minästä* tiedetään vähän, eikä lukija pysty myöskään tarkasti päättelemään missä kohden nämä positiot ovat varmasti erillisiä. Puhuja määrittyy puhutellessaan toista ja suhteessa tähän. Tällöin *sinä* on tekstille keskeinen.

Ashberyn runoudessa *sinä*-pronominia on käytetty eri aikoina eri tavoin. ”Litanya” tarkastellessani osoitin, että *sinä* oli pitkälti avoin positio, johon lukija voi lukea itsensä tai monia muita viittauskohteita. *Your Name Here* -kokoelma on nimensä (”Sinun nimesi tähän”) puolesta selkeästi suuntautunut lukijaa kohti, mutta nimestä huolimatta *sinä* on runoissa usein tietty henkilö. *Sinä* ei kuitenkaan ole pelkästään poissaoleva kuulija vaan ennen kaikkea joku, joka voi vuorollaan ottaa runossa puhujan roolin.

Kommunikaation aukot ja vastauksen puuttuminen ovat merkityksellisiä, sillä ne kiinnittävät lukijan huomion kommunikatiiviseen kielenkäyttöön, joka *Your Name Heren* runoissa on arkipäiväistä, usein kliseistäkin. Runot tarkastelevat kommunikaation ulottuvuuksia ja pyrkivät tarjoamaan lukijalle tilaisuuksia reflektoida arkipäivän viestintätilanteita. Runoja ei tällöin voida lukea yhtenäistä merkitystä tai väitelausetta etsien. Tarkastelen tätä seikkaa suhteessa Barbara Malinowskan (2000) ontologisia merkityksiä etsiviin Ashberyn runojen luentoihin ja osoitan, että epäyhtenäisen, moniäänisen runon lauseita voidaan tarkastella sisällöllisesti vasta kun lukija on määritellyt runon kontekstittomille lauseille jonkin

tietyn kontekstin. Sellaisinaan *Your Name Here* -kokoelman runot keskittyvät kuitenkin tarkastelemaan esimerkiksi tavanomaisten lausumien kuten ”You look tired. Are you OK?” konnotaatioita ja mahdollisia käyttöyhteyksiä pikemminkin kuin tarjoamaan selkeitä väittämiä, jotka liittyisivät esimerkiksi olemassaoloon tai yhteiskuntaan.

Your Name Heren runojen perusteella ei voida ajatella niin kuin tavanomaisesti on ajateltu, että Ashberyn runous keskittyisi ennen kaikkea *minään* ja sisäiseen maailmaan vaan kyse on ennen kaikkea yhteisten kielenkäytön tapojen tarkastelemisesta. Myös *minä* ja subjektiiviset positiot ylipäänsä koostuvat sosiaalisista kielenkäytön muodoista (Mohanty and Monroe 1987: 45). Yksittäisen tarkastelukulman välttäminen ei kuitenkaan tarkoita sitä, että Ashberyn runous hylkäisi kokonaan subjektiivisen näkökulman. Tämä ilmenee kokoelman nimirunossa, jonka ensimmäinen säe “But how can I be in this bar and also be a recluse?” viittaa tietyssä mielessä juuri tähän. Kysymys siitä miten voi olla muiden keskellä ja silti yksin on kokoelman runojen kohdalla paradoksaalinen, sillä runoissa on kyllä *minä,* mutta kyse ei ole yksittäisestä, itseriittoisesta runon puhujasta vaan konstruktiosta, joka rakentuu tekstissä suhteessa toisiin ja myös suhteessa käytettyyn kieleen, joka on ennen kaikkea yhteistä, sosiaalisen kommunikaation kieltä.

Vaikka *Your Name Here* -kirjan runoissa lukijaa ei puhutellakaan yhtä suoraan kuin ”Litanyssa”, runojen esittämä arkipäiväinen, kaikille tuttu puhe ja kommunikaation mahdollisuuksien ja aukkokohtien tarkastelu tarjoavat lukijalle mahdollisuuden osallistua tekstin rakentamiseen, kun tämä voi heijastaa teksteihin omaa kokemustaan ja ymmärrystään.

Moniäänisyys ja lukijan asema

Lopuksi tarkastelen Ashberyn runoutta Mihail Bahtinin polyfonian ja heteroglossian käsitteiden valossa. Bahtinin teorioita ([1981] 1983; 1984) on selvästi ongelmallista soveltaa Ashberyn tuotantoon, kun runoissa ei ole selkeää, yksittäistä persoonallisuutta tai puhujapositiota. Vaikka *minä* esiintyykin selkeästi runoissa, yhtenäistä läsnäoloa ei voida löytää vaan puhujan asema hajoaa erilaisiin, vaihteleviin pronominipositioihin. Runon ääni on vain eräänlainen rakenne, joka voi sisältää useita positioita ja vaihtoehtoisia näkökulmia.

Kun *minästä* tulee vain yksi asema muiden pronominien joukossa, saavutetaan juuri se, mistä Bahtinin (1984: 6) mukaan moniäänisyydessä on kyse: useista tietoisuuksista ja subjektiivisista läsnäoloista, joita ei tarvitse alistaa yhden tarkastelukulman alle. Moniäänisyyden kautta runo voi käsitellä useita, ristiriitaisiakin näkökulmia, eikä yhtä väitettä tai lausumaa tarvitse esittää lopullisena merkityksenä tai totuutena. Esimerkiksi tästä sopii hyvin Ashberyn runo ”Sometimes in Places” (*And the Stars Were Shining*: 37), joka esittää jo sisällössään olennaisen moniäänisyydestä: “I am standing / here listening, but no one word proves the truth, / though several do”. Toisin sanoen yhdellä sanalla ei ole pääsyä totuuteen, mutta useamman mahdollisuuden tai merkityksen kautta on mahdollista saavuttaa eräänlainen ”totuus”.

”Litany”-runossa moniäänisyys ilmenee *minä*- ja *sinä*-pronominien vaihtelussa ja pyrkimyksissä sulautua yhteen. Parodian mahdollisuus myös estää vaikutelman vilpittömyydestä. Näin esimerkiksi runossa esitetyt väitteet taiteesta ja kritiikistä eivät ole yksiselitteisiä. *Your Name Here* -kokoelman dialogiset runot puolestaan käsittelevät arkipäiväistä, yhteistä kieltä, joka näyttäytyy lainattuna, ikään kuin lauseet kuuluisivat aina myös joihinkin toisiin asiayhteyksiin. Tämä liittyy selkeästi Bahtinin ([1981] 1983: 262, 293) ajatukseen kielen dialogisuudesta, sanojen mukanaan kuljettamista muiden asiayhteyksien jäänteistä. Juuri runon avoimuus mahdollistaa dialogisuuden ja muiden yhteyksien läsnäolon.

Lukija on keskeinen suhteessa ’Litanyyn’ ensiksikin koska teksti tarjoaa useita vaihtoehtoja ja toiseksi myös koska teksti pyrkii suoraan puhuttelemaan lukijaa. Myös *Your Name Here* -kokoelmassa lukijan asema on osallistua merkitysten luomiseen.

Kuitenkaan Bahtinin ([1981] 1983: 285, 297) mukaan runo ei voi koskaan olla moniääninen, sillä se vaatii kaikkien aiempien kontekstien tuhoamista ja alistamista runoilijan äänen alle. Ashberyn runot osoittavat tämän käsityksen ongelmalliseksi. Osin tämä voidaan liittää siihen kuinka Ashberyn runous, erityisesti *Your Name Here* -kokoelman tarinallisuus, lähenee proosaa. Perinteisen lyyrisen runouden on myös esitetty olevan väistymässä, ja tilalle voi tulla monipuolisempi runous, joka voi hyödyntää myös proosan keinoja (Perloff [1985] 1996: 175, 180–181, Fredman 1990: 1).

Ashberyn runoutta on myös valaisevaa verrata hänen yhdessä James Schuylerin kanssa kirjoittamaansa romaaniin *A Nest of Ninnies*. Koska romaani on kahden kirjailijan kirjoittama, sen voisi jo tästäkin syystä olettaa olevan moniääninen. Romaani on kuitenkin huomattavan epätavallinen. Se kuvaa New Yorkin esikaupunkialueella asuvaa laajaa ystäväjoukkoa, jotka eivät kuitenkaan kehity tai tule määritellyiksi romaanissa selkeän yksilöllisiksi henkilöhahmoiksi. Teksti koostuu pääasiassa dialogista, jolloin sen voisi myös olettaa olevan moniäänistä.

Tarkastelen erästä romaanin kohtaa, jossa henkilöhahmot käyvät naiiviuden ja huolettoman välinpitämättömyyden sävyttämää keskustelua luonnonvarojen mahdollisesta loppumisesta. Keskustelu ei kuitenkaan edistä millään tavalla romaanin juonta, jota ei selkeästi ole, eivätkä siinä esitetyt mielipiteet kuvaa henkilöhahmoista mitään sellaista, mikä lopulta erottaisi heidät toisistaan. He ovat kaikki yhtä välinpitämättömiä, ja heidän lausumiaan leimaa ennen kaikkea parodia, joka kohdistuu heidän esittämiinsä ajatuksiin. Näin ollen heidän äänensä eivät ole erillisiä ääniä, vaan kirjoittajien tai kertojan parodisen, yhden äänen alle alistettuja. Kun yhden äänen hallitsema parodia kohdistuu yhteen ajatukseen tai ideaan, kyse on juuri siitä mitä Bahtin (1984: 79) toteaa monologisista teksteistä: idean voisi tekstissä esittää kuka tahansa. Romaanin voisi näin myös ajatella olevan suoranainen reaktio aikaansa, koska se ilmestyi aikana, jolloin Bahtinin ajatukset olivat jo tulossa englanninkielisen maailman tietoisuuteen, muutamaa vuotta ennen kuin *Dostojevskin poetiikan ongelmia* julkaistiin ensimmäistä kertaa englanniksi käännettynä.

Vaikka myös Ashberyn runoissa voidaan havaita parodisia elementtejä, ero on siinä ettei parodia koskaan ole päällimmäinen tai lopullinen asenne, eikä sitä ole suunnattu itse ajatusta kohtaan vaan se suuntautuu kieleen, tapaan jolla asia esitetään. Pronominipositioiden avoimuus ja tekstin hajanainen rakenne kiinnittävät lukijan huomion lausumien asemaan ja suhteisiin sekä niiden mahdollisiin muihin konteksteihin pikemminkin kuin itse sisältöön. Lukija voi tehdä sisällöstä päätelmiä vasta kun hän on liittänyt lausuman mielessään johonkin tiettyyn kontekstiin. Rinnakkain tarkasteltuina Ashberyn runous ja romaani osoittavat selvästi Bahtinin moniäänisyyskäsityksen ongelmat. Jatkossakin runouden ja romaanin eroja voisi olla hyödyllistä tarkastella moniäänisyyden kannalta tarkemmin esimerkiksi suhteessa muuhun nykyamerikkalaiseen kirjallisuuteen.

Eräs moniäänisyyden ulottuvuuksista Ashberyn runoudessa on se, että näin myös runojen ”vaikeus” on selkeästi motivoitua, koska juuri fragmentaarisuus sallii moniäänisyyden. Ashberyn runous ei myöskään jätä lukijaa ulkopuolelle vaan pyrkii monella tapaa tuomaan toisen näkökulman mukaan tekstiin. Lukijan rooli on keskeinen merkitysten muodostamisessa, sillä Ashberyn runoista syntyvät merkitykset ovat hetkellisiä, runo itsessään kumoaa ne ja merkitykset voivat vaihtua toisiin. Runot pyrkivät myös puhuttelemaan lukijaa suoraan ja monissa runoissa puhuja toivoo olevansa yhtä toisen kanssa. Tätä ilmentää esimerkiksi runo “A Pact with a Sullen Death” seuraavissa säkeissä: ”And I was going to wish that you too were the “I” / In this novel told in the first person that / This breathy waiting is”. Puhujan toive on, että *sinä*, toinen, saisi *minän* aseman, itsenäisen subjekti- tai puhujaposition, eikä olisi olemassa pelkkänä puheen kohteena. Tämä vastaa Bahtinin (1984: 10) käsitystä moniäänisyydestä. Ashberyn moniääninen, monimerkityksinen runous pyrkii aina kohti toista ja luomaan toiselle oman paikan.