(De)Facing Time: Ashbery's "Clepsydra" and Baudelaire's "L'Horloge"

Shawn Normandin

The 1965 poem "Clepsydra" challenges some of the historical claims made about the late John Ashbery. Marjorie Perloff (1978: 196) has cited Ashbery's work and Frank O'Hara's as evidence "that poetry in the second half of the twentieth century has finally turned its back on the legacy of Symbolism."[1] David Herd (2001: 109) finds "Clepsydra" "discoursing on Romantic and modernist aesthetics even as in its practice it is moving dramatically beyond them." But turning one's back on something is not a reliable way of displacing it, and "Clepsydra" demonstrates the resilience of literary traditions. Instead of placing Ashbery beyond one or another historical category, we would be better off paying tribute to the literary modernity that motivates such categories. According to Paul de Man (1983: 148), "Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure." A would-be modern poet wants to transcend literature, to create something irreducible to what people think literature is. Though literature as we know it would not exist without this desire, rigorous literary texts concede, with varying degrees of coyness, the impossibility of satisfaction: "After the initial moment of flight away from its own specificity, a moment of return follows that leads literature back to what it is" (159). Few twentieth-century poems are as aware as "Clepsydra" of the compulsive futility of wiping out the past. Ashbery's resistance to linear time allegorizes the process of literary modernity that de Man would theorize a few years later. "Clepsydra" grows tired of its ingenious efforts, and fatigue reinscribes the poem in a literary tradition (be it symbolist, modernist, or romantic). The reinscription affirms an austere truth, but the poem's chief rewards are the manifold ways it flirtatiously evades this truth.

One way to trace the poem's evasion is to study its handling of a particular trope, prosopopoeia. James Paxson (1994: 1), the leading theorist of prosopopoeia, defines it as "the readily spotted figure— through which a human identity or 'face' is given to something not human." Defacing this trope—the trope of the face—"Clepsydra" resists the literary past, since nothing says Literature like personification allegory.[2] But by repeating this tactic, Ashbery calls attention to what he defaces and performs its tenacity. Though the defacement of personification is discernible in many of his other poems, "Clepsydra," thronged by spectral faces, makes the trope a character in the temporal predicament the poem narrates. As we will see, "Clepsydra" often floats ephemeral personifications, like the faces of drowned people rising just below the surface only to sink once more. Ashbery admired Auden's "way of personifying and of making things concrete" (Remnick 1980: 14).[3] Nonetheless, the recurrent struggle of "Clepsydra" is to prevent personifications from becoming concrete.

"Clepsydra" is a rare word for a rare thing. "It's a physical device for telling the time," Timothy Morton (2012: 104) explains; "a clepsydra is old enough and weird enough to force you to see that time isn't just something that happens in watches or clocks." Where might Ashbery have found such a strange, archaic word? Shoptaw (1994: 84) suggests that the poet "learned" the titular word "while reading Maurice Scève's *Délie*" (111).[4] Yet Ashbery in all likelihood discovered the clepsydra in a less remote book. Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* includes the poem "L'Horloge," which announces, "Le gouffre a toujours soif; la clepsydre se vide" (20) ("The abyss is always thirsty; the water clock drains").[5] Tellingly, while the lyric exercise in which Scève's "Clepsidre" forms a witty *adynaton* does not seriously challenge Ashbery's poetics, Baudelaire uses the word in a poem hostile to time, Ashbery's signature theme. When he wrote "Clepsydra," the American poet—who had been living in France for about a decade—was already familiar with Baudelaire's poetry.[6] Indeed, Scève's "Clepsidre" may have caught the attention of Baudelaire's American reader partly through the force of déjà vu.

If the recurrence of a word from Baudelaire as a title in another poem may not seem unduly significant, it is worth recalling that Ashbery laid particular stress on the significance of titles: "It seems to me that the title is something that tips the whole poem in one direction or another. . . . I feel the title is a very small aperture into a larger area, a keyhole perhaps, or some way of getting into the poem which I suppose is my thoughts at any particular moment, which I can then organize by this

means" (Bloom and Losada 1972: 11–12; see also Kostelanetz 1976). If a title is a "keyhole," then perhaps we can take Baudelaire's "L'Horloge" as a key to "Clepsydra," one of Ashbery's major works—though, of course, for a poem as lengthy and complicated as this one, there are no doubt many locks and many keys.[7] Whether or not Ashbery might have been conscious of "L'Horloge" while composing "Clepsydra," some of the difficulties of reading it do abate if we understand the poem as (among other things) a response to an allegorical temporality of which "L'Horloge" is an extreme example. Here Baudelaire personifies time, and, as Walter Benjamin (1999: 351) observes, "'L'Horloge' ['The Clock'] takes the allegorical treatment quite far."

Not all of Ashbery's admirers have insisted on reading him as part of a French tradition, and he sometimes discouraged such reading: "I think French poetry on the whole hasn't influenced me in any very deep way" (Bloom and Losada 1972: 32; see also Osti 1974: 86). Harold Bloom (1985: 60) has emphasized Ashbery's American identity and sees as "nonsense" the idea that Ashbery is "a French poet writing in English." But Ashbery's contacts with French culture and Baudelaire were in fact extensive, and he was a prolific translator of French poetry (Ashbery 2014). Bloom notwithstanding, we do not have to choose between a French Ashbery and an American Ashbery (Williamson 1984: 117, 128; Ford 2000: 21).[8] Indeed, Baudelaire is an important precursor of Anglophone modernism, and was singled out by T. S. Eliot (1932: 341) as "the greatest exemplar in *modern* poetry in any language, for his verse and language is the nearest thing to a complete renovation that we have experienced." Studying how "Clepsydra" engages with "L'Horloge," then, reveals much about Ashbery's pursuit of literary modernity in the face of literary history.

Baudelaire conceives of time very differently than does "Clepsydra," and the contrast clarifies much about what is at stake in Ashbery's poem. To Baudelaire's chopping up time into linear bits, "Clepsydra" opposes a sense of time as circular and fluid. Thus, where in "L'Horloge" "*clepsydre*" functions as a synonym for the title word, for Ashbery it helps highlight how the material differences between keeping time with a pendulum and keeping it with a water clock register very different temporalities. Where the ticking and ringing pendulum clock renders time as a jittery succession of segmented units,[9] the gradual lowering of a water clock enacts the gentleness of time's flow. In calling his poem "a meditation on how time feels as it is passing" (Kostelanetz 1976), Ashbery's ambiguity— does the poem meditate on what the passing of time makes the meditator

feel or on what Time itself feels in the act of its own passing?—resists the either/or logic of the pendulum, but even if one settles on the more likely first meaning, time won't feel the same to all poets. "L'Horloge" also meditates on "how time feels," for example, but here the speaker's dominant feelings are panic and guilt. He begins by addressing the clock as a god, "Horloge! dieu sinistre" (line 1) ("Clock! Sinister god"), and from the end of line 2 until the end of the poem, it is the clock who speaks, threatening us with a series of grim personifications: Time presents an immediate and "effrayant" ("frightening") loss (line 1); every instant devours part of our finite supply of joy (lines 7–8); every second reminds us to remember (9–10); the clock, speaking all languages, commands us to take advantage of every minute while we can (13–16); time is a gambler who always wins (17–18). Presumably, we are the losers, for night grows longer at the expense of day (19); Time will no sooner relent than the pit will slake its thirst (20). Finally, the Clock ends by foretelling the moment in the near future when Chance, Virtue, or Repentance will inform us that we should die, for it is too late (21–24).

The idiosyncrasies of Ashbery's poem have much to do with its deviation from this bleak representation of time as an insatiable devourer. Indeed, where "L'Horloge" offers an intense manifestation of a chronophobia expressed in many of Baudelaire's poems, Ashbery's work is generally chronophilic.[10] Their contrasting sensibilities have formal consequences. While the hands of Baudelaire's clock move in a circle to measure the irreversible linear time, Ashbery's lines doodle time's circularity. In both cases, there is a rift between message and medium. Where Shoptaw (1994: 84) emphasizes "the indivisible form of 'Clepsydra,' a single 253-line stanza," "L'Horloge" is eminently quantifiable and divisible: the poem divides itself into six quatrains of alexandrines; the twelve syllables of the alexandrine suggest the twelve months of the year; and the poem's twenty-four lines stand for the twenty-four hours in a day.[11] In this way, the very lineation of the poem is allegorical. The last line hammers out its quantification with what Patrick Labarthe (1999: 193) calls a "martèlement offensif des monosyllabes": "Où tout te dira: Meurs, vieux lâche! il est trop tard!" (24) ("Where all will tell you, 'Die, old wimp, it is too late!'"). Even as "L'Horloge" invites counting, it keeps its own count: "Trois mille six cent fois par heure, la Seconde / Chuchote" (9–10) ("The Second whispers three thousand six hundred times an hour"). Similarly, in its exoskeletal "insecte" (11) the poem offers an emblem of its own segmentation. If in a certain sense,

like any written text, "Clepsydra" is also segmented (divisible into letters and lines), Ashbery tries to make interpretive segmentation as difficult as possible, highlighting not the divisions of time but, rather, its continuity. As Shoptaw (1995: 249) points out, "though the capitalized lines of 'Clepsydra' consistently oscillate between pentameters and alexandrines, their phrasal patterning keeps the reader from thinking of them as measures. Lines end, but sentences must continue." Where Baudelaire exalts the integrity of the line, then, Ashbery dissolves it.

Baudelaire is the seminal poet for the modernist tradition that Ashbery in the 1960s was trying to displace.[12] Early on, Ashbery rejected the allegorical features of modernist writing in English, contrasting Eliot, Pound, Joyce, and Yeats with the French poet Reverdy:

> Reverdy parvient à restituer aux choses leur vrai nom, à abolir l'éternel poids mort de symbolisme et d'allégorie qui excède chez les auteurs que j'ai cités. Dans *The Waste Land* d'Eliot, le monde réel apparaît avec les rêves qui lui sont propres, mais il est toujours artificiellement lié à une signification allégorique—l'usine à gaz et le «dull canal», par exemple. Tandis que chez Reverdy un canal ou une usine sont des phénomènes vivants, ils font partie du monde qui nous entoure.[13]   (1962: 111)

Perloff (1978: 177) has argued that Ashbery's resistance to allegory enables him to break from the symbolist tradition that extends to figures like Eliot: "Canals and gasworks," Perloff emphasizes, "should be regarded as living phenomena; they should not stand for something else."[14] Finding "a presentational immediacy" in images from "The Skaters," such as the "bewhiskered student in an old baggy overcoat" and the "Old American films dubbed into the foreign language," she suggests that "it is difficult to assign" these images "any symbolic value. For one cannot finally say what it is that has been illuminated beyond the fact that the poet, and therefore the reader as well, has undergone a process of discovery" (194). But these images do not occur in a literary-historical vacuum: within the poetic tradition we and Ashbery have inherited, such opaque images function as allegorical signs of the resistance to allegory—which is, after all, how Perloff *reads* these images. Not content with savoring their "presentational immediacy," she grants them significance in a historical narrative—making them mean "something else." One could never intuit the mid-twentieth-century renunciation of symbolism merely by staring at or imagining a "bewhiskered student in an old baggy overcoat."

Ashbery's relation to allegory is thus more complicated than progressivist literary histories allow. He is repelled by it but also attracted—a dynamic illuminated by de Man's notion that literary modernity is inherently recursive. And if allegory entails belatedness, it is not an accident that allegory came to seem old-fashioned to poets like Ashbery. For de Man (1983: 207), the "relationship between signs" in allegory "necessarily contains a constitutive temporal element; it remains necessary, if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it. The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the *repetition* . . . of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority."[15] We can understand *The Waste Land*, for instance, as relying on such "pure anteriority." Suggesting that Ashbery reacted strongly against Eliot's "mythical method," Ben Hickman (2012: 117) argues that it "denies the present by suggesting it has already happened in myth. For myths have nothing to do with their having occurred in the past; and Eliot's 'mythical method' is an attempt to construct a primordial, ahistorical story of all history, including the present." Indeed, "if there is a concern with the present in Eliot, . . . it is only in so far as the present is a falling away from (or in hostility to) the 'unified sensibility' of the mythical past" (118). In de Manian terms, one could say that Eliot regards the present as a congeries of mere allegorical signs for a mythic past, whose ontological superiority does not require it to have taken place. While Ashbery's attitude toward the present is far less contemptuous than Eliot's, as "Clepsydra" meditates "on how time feels as it is passing," it bears the full burden of the "passing": the poem honors the present moment precisely in its becoming past, the nonpresent. In this poem, then, Ashbery both defies and ratifies Eliot's disparagement of the present. Eventually the poem itself must become past—must end.

Ashbery's representation of the continuity of time comes into conflict with this disjunctive finitude of literary texts. Indeed, the transition from the last line of any poem to the blank space beneath will always be abrupt. And in allegory, a similar abruptness also marks the shift from a sensory image to a concept, or vice versa, "a properly allegorical reading," as Andrzej Warminski (2013: 25) suggests, converting "something available to the senses into a figure for a meaning that bears no necessary or motivated relation to the phenomenal aspect of that figure." Baudelaire's (1975: 21) seeing "Vertu" as the "épouse encore vierge" of "Hasard" (22), for example, is absurd, since virtue is

not a person, cannot get married, and can neither have sex nor not have sex. By contrast, a metaphor like "Achilles is a lion," while also false, isn't really absurd, since there is considerable continuity between Achilles and a lion (both are large carnivorous mammals, both have reputations for strength and courage); unlike Virtue and a virgin spouse, Achilles and a lion occupy the same phenomenal plane of existence—at least, in the fictional world of Homer.[16]

Though many allegories can be mistaken for mimetic narratives, personification when it appears alerts readers that a text is meant allegorically. Especially when it capitalizes the word for a concept as though that word were a proper name, personification cues readers to convert an individual character into a concept. This conversion does take time, however little, and this time divides the textual experience into fundamentally different (though juxtaposable) modes: phenomenal description and conceptual discourse. If readers may momentarily visualize Virtue as a virgin spouse, they nonetheless know that there is no necessary connection between these terms. For Andrzej Warminski (2013: 26), then, "allegory empties the phenomenal form of its representational . . . function and turns it into a mere sign for a meaning external and foreign to it," just as, in Ashbery's "Fragment," a reduction of sensory richness attends personifications ("ideas" equipped with "profiles"):

> On this new area ideas kept the same
> Distance, with profiles spent into the sparse
> Immediacy of excavation, land and gulls to be explored.
> It was time to compare all past sets of impressions
> Slowly peeling these away so that the mastered
> Impression of servitude and barbarism might shrink to allegorical
>   human width.   (*CP* 241)

Though all verbal signs involve disjunction, allegory, especially when it involves prosopopoeia, flaunts that disjunction, designating "primarily a distance in relation to its own origin," as de Man (1983: 207) argues, and, "renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference." Fittingly, "L'Horloge" confronts the speaker, and us, with the ultimate disjunction: the annulment of phenomenal experience that is death.

Eliot takes disjunction further than Baudelaire—at least stylistically. In turn, the young Ashbery attempted to radicalize the fragments of *The Waste Land*, so that, as Hickman (2012: 120) argues, "The Skaters"

"has a fragmentary organisation quite alien to the fragmentary surface of *The Waste Land*, which is the aesthetic expression of decidedly non-fragmentary critical ideas." Later, responding to Eliot in a rather different manner, Ashbery assays a nonfragmentary poetics of unifying fluidity.[17] Indeed, allegorizing the attempt to unify Eliot's fragments, "Clepsydra" imagines that "the pieces / Are seen as parts of a spectrum, independent / Yet symbolic of their staggered times of arrival" (*CP* 140). As it highlights temporal disjunction between sign and meaning, prosopopoeia is thus at odds with the poem's unifying project. The poem dreams of splicing "staggered times of arrival" into a synchronic totality, "a spectrum," but Ashbery will have to resort to a devious method. Instead of abstaining from prosopopoeia altogether, he puts it under a sort of Derridean erasure—teasing the trope, coaxing it to emerge only in the act of negating it.

The intricacy of Ashbery's rhetoric in "Clepsydra" demands close reading, but no close reading can do justice to the suppleness of the poem's grammar.[18] Necessarily quoting only fragments, that is, a close reading is forced to deform the poem's sentences, diluting its power. If, as Herd (2001: 108) reports, the "relentless speed of the poem's transitions" seems "to leave the reader little choice but to go with the flow," the critic nonetheless has little choice but to misrepresent that flow, and the chronological parsing of the poem's rhetoric that follows inevitably amounts to a reductive enterprise. An anxiety about reductiveness, however, governs the poem's prosopopoeia itself. In sketching the coincidence of truth and its negation, the opening page thus prefigures the anxiety of the critic, comparing the truthfulness and untruthfulness of "Each moment / Of utterance" to

> the way air hides the sky, is, in fact,
> Tearing it limb from limb this very moment: but
> The sky has pleaded already   (*CP* 140)

Sometime in the past, the sky had been personified, and thus could enter a plea, but in the present of the poem it no longer can.[19] The personification emerges only as a past that a dismembering present hides. Because dismembering is not an activity confined to humans, the "air" that dismembers here may or may not be personified. Ashbery speculates about

> A recurring whiteness like
> The face of stone pleasure, urging forward as
> Nostrils what only meant dust.

Initially, the "recurring whiteness" (the whiteness of a cloudy sky, of a clockface glanced at repeatedly?) has a "face," but it is then dehumanized (or disanimated), attributed to "stone." Ashbery does provide "Nostrils," two holes in a face—prosopopoeia degree zero. But this sketchy prosopopoeia is immediately reduced to "dust."

Dust is an emblem of diminishment. And it is fitting that the word appears multiple times in "Clepsydra," since, as Paxson (1994: 95) has compellingly shown, diminishment is one of the structural consequences of prosopopoeia. "Major psychic diminishment is suffered by the narrator or prime human actant," Paxson finds, "while he is about to provide narration dealing with the traditional agents of allegorical literature—namely, personification figures." The imprisoned and despondent Boethius dwarfed by Philosophia, the insomniac and lovesick narrators of Chaucer's dream visions, Langland's lethargic and socially marginal Will—in all these cases, when a human figure associates with personifications, Paxson observes, the human suffers diminishment. In medieval prosopopoeia, Paxson discovers

> a corollary between the narratorial consciousness and the personification figures it apprehends. In this structural corollary, speech is the signature of the vital, sentient mind. Its diminishment in the psychically reduced narrator (either through *acedia-dorveille*, depression, or melancholia) accompanies its proportional increase in proximate, figurally invented beings. As the narrator's or the protagonist's minds dissolve into stasis, the "mind" of the personification is generated. (96–97)

In other words, "As the figurated consciousnesses grow, the figurating consciousness shrinks" (97).

This outcome, however, is by no means confined to medieval literature. In "L'Horloge," Baudelaire's speaker reduces himself to quoting a personified clock, who, after several quatrains of discouragement, dismisses him as "vieux lâche" (24).[20] And indeed, "L'Horloge" abounds in prosopopoeia, its dominant trope, as the divinized clock reels off a series of personified abstractions: "Les vibrantes Douleurs" (3), "le Plaisir" (5), "la Seconde" (9), "Maintenant" (11), "Autrefois," "le Temps" (17), "le divin Hasard" (21), "l'auguste Vertu" (22), and "le Repentir" (23). In line 11 prosopopoeia nests within a prosopopoeia nested within a prosopopoeia, not merely "readily spotted" (Paxson 1994: 1) but aggressively multiplied. "Clepsydra," by contrast, makes

prosopopoeia a little hard to spot, Ashbery's repeated defacements of personification working to defend the poet's "figurating" consciousness from the allegorical tradition he occasionally disparaged. Although this is not simply a prophylactic enterprise, as fending off personifications also stimulates Ashbery's figurative inventiveness, this appetite for stimulation nonetheless courts diminishment, pushing the poem to the brink of allegory. And such hazards of personification are reflected in the tone of "Clepsydra," as it lurches with little warning from exhilaration to despondency and back.

In Paxson's reading of Prudentius, "the un-making or defacing of a prosopopoeia character can be literalized in actantial scenes of decapitation, the smashing of mouths, and the tearing out of teeth, tongues, and eyes" (137). If Ashbery's reductions of a "face" to "stone" and of "Nostrils" to "dust" are less gory versions of this unmaking, they perform the same function. "Clepsydra" reckons with

> the miserable totality
> Mustered at any given moment, like your eyes
> And all they speak of, such as your hands, in lost
> Accents beyond any dream of ever wanting them again.   (*CP* 141)

In this odd prosopopoeia, one part of the face, the "eyes," has another, a mouth that can "speak," and what is spoken of are other body parts or metaphorical parts of a clock ("hands"). Nonetheless, the power of speech here negates itself: if one loses one's accent, one cannot speak in it, and either the eyes do not want the objects of their speech, or the accents are so far lost that their owner does not want them back. While Ashbery disables the personification, some of the "miserable totality" seems to have at least partly diminished him, since he cannot dispel a hint of erotic failure, a form of diminishment. He goes on to write,

> it was these
> Moments that were the truth, although each tapered
> Into the surrounding night. But
> Wasn't it their blindness, instead, and wasn't this
> The fact of being so turned in on each other that
> Neither would ever see his way clear again?   (141)

Gendered (with "his"), these "Moments" are at least minimally animated if not personified, but either their facial features are reduced to blind eyes or they lack eyes entirely, again effacing the *prosopon* in the act of making it.

The ambiguity of "The look of the horizon" (either its appearance or its gaze) likewise prevents personification from consolidating. It can become only "more or less established" (142). Malfunctioning mouths succeed malfunctioning eyes:

> there was no statement
> At the beginning. There was only a breathless waste,
> A dumb cry shaping everything in projected
> After-effects orphaned by playing the part intended for them

These lines seem to refer to the poem's own beginning, "Hasn't the sky?"—an incomplete question, rather than a "statement"—but they also allude to the beginning of Genesis (Kane 2012: 27). God initiates creation with a wish or an order ("Let there be light"), not a statement exactly, but unlike the Biblical "face of the waters," here the inaugural waste remains "breathless," without "Spirit" (Carroll and Prickett 1997: 1). The personification (or divination) of the "cry" as a "shaping" agent is counteracted by the word "dumb," oxymoronically rendering the "cry" silent. "After-effects" are personified as "orphaned" actors, but only in projection, and that projection would be fulfilled only at the cost of diminishing the "After-effects" by orphaning them. After musing on a telescope, Ashbery returns to his contemplation of moments:

> Each moment seemed to bore back into the centuries
> For profit and manners, and an old way of looking that
> Continually shaped those lips into a smile.   (*CP* 143)

If the "moment" here takes on human agency—can "bore," desire "profit and manners," seek "an old way of looking" for an antique face that can provoke ("a smile") on another face—there's no sign that such desiring is fulfilled. Here the *prosopon*, more mask than face, hovers in dispossession.

Momentarily, the poem forgoes facial imagery:

> it was
> Like standing at the edge of a harbor early on a summer morning
> With the discreet shadows cast by the water all around
> And a feeling, again, of emptiness, but of richness in the way
> The whole thing is organized, on what a miraculous scale,
> Really what is meant by a human level, with the figures of giants
> Not too much bigger than the men who have come to petition them

In these long lines, the water clock has grown into a "harbor," a place of refuge rather than a measuring device. Ashbery retains Baudelaire's concern with emptiness ("la clepsydre se vide"), but where in Baudelaire emptiness signals human impoverishment, Ashbery yokes "a feeling . . . of emptiness" to one of "richness"—an aquatic reformulation of the bid for "an empty yet personal / Landscape" (142).

Nonetheless, the poet's confidence wavers. The fantasy of being "Not too" diminished in the presence of "giants" is an attempt to bargain with prosopopoeia, to accept a "human level" as a compromise. Although this "level," however "miraculous" (implausible), is not as alluring as the poetic exaltation of the human subject, the compromise would be less demeaning than the diminishment human subjects usually endure in the company of personifications. Ashbery clarifies the temporal aspect of his fantasy when he wishes for "A moment that gave not only itself, but / Also the means of keeping it, of not turning to dust" (143). This fantasy "of not turning to dust" can't seem to survive the "contract," which

> had reduced that other world,
> The round one of the telescope, to a kind of very fine powder or dust
> So small that space could not remember it.

Where here the personified space that might remember something arises only in a negation (space in fact "could not remember"), in "L'Horloge," the space of the clock not only remembers things (all languages, for example) but it also nags the human subject: "*Souviens-toi*" (2, 10, 13, 17, 19). For Ashbery, dust exceeds space's memory. Realizing that longings for the "other world" are futile and that human reduction is inevitable, he imagines coming to terms with personification, sifting dignity out of diminishment.

Pulverization yields to architecture, as Ashbery questions how "all this new construction" has ended up "giving itself the airs of a palace" (*CP* 144). This "new construction" (a physical building, the unusual poem "Clepsydra," or the innovations of the avant-garde in general) is first personified (as giving itself airs, a human proclivity) and then reified as "a palace"—an antiquated form that vitiates the construction's novelty. This equivocating leads to one of the poem's great "moments of relief": "And yet her hair had never been so long" (144).[21] Hair growth indicates the passage of time but not with any precision, since it can neither regulate legal arguments (like a clepsydra) nor regulate the work day (like an *horloge*). Constituted by a density of individual lines/strands, a head of long hair amounts to a flowing whole—an apt emblem for Ashbery's

project itself. As such, the hair appears as both an unconventional clock and an anticlock. While most clocks note recurrence, here the long hair marks the unprecedented, even as the line unfolds in perfectly regular iambic pentameter, the most traditional of English verses. Seductively, that is, the poet here can have it both ways—can defy literary tradition (Baudelairean clock time) in the act of exploiting it (with iambic pentameter). With rallied spirits, Ashbery then thinks that "The past is yours" and that you can turn it into "useless" but "irreproachable" maps of "your desires," maps

>   beyond
> Madness and the toe of approaching night, if only
> You desire to arrange it this way. Your acts
> Are sentinels against this quiet
> Invasion.   (*CP* 144)

If Night is minimally personified by having a "toe," the speaker then pits night (death, age) against the poem's first unqualified personification: "Your acts / Are sentinels" (here Ashbery is reworking a line from "These Lacustrine Cities": "The night is a sentinel" [125]). While personification normally causes diminishment, personifying the human subject's own "acts" promises invigoration. Ashbery has glimpsed a way to end the poem, a way to break off the cycle of prosopopoeia negation. If "Clepsydra" ended at this point, it would be much more uplifting.

    But the personification by which "acts" become "sentinels" also puts the human subject on the defensive, an implication Ashbery is too rigorous to overlook. He insists that he is

> Not speaking of a partially successful attempt to be
> Opposite; anybody at all can read that page, it has only
> To be thrust in front of him.   (144–45)

If, as we have seen, "Clepsydra" *is* nonetheless "a partially successful attempt to be / Opposite" to various precursors—*The Waste Land* and the vast *tempus fugit* tradition culminating in Baudelaire, in and beyond "L'Horloge"—here Ashbery's disavowal registers his self-consciousness and worry about that oppositional orientation: being "Opposite" threatens to produce a text that "anybody at all can read," too explicitly polemical and, thus, vulgar. It is perhaps for this reason that Ashbery refines the defensive posture of "sentinels" by muting the conflict ("this *quiet* / Invasion" [emphasis added]).

Ashbery thus ventures something "broader" than the oppositional page, something he finds "as much in the rocks / And foliage" as in "the invisible look of the distant / Ether" (145). As the ambiguity of "look" once again both glances at prosopopoeia and keeps it at bay, Ashbery loses confidence:

> I see myself in this totality, and meanwhile
> I am only a transparent diagram, of manners and
> Private words with the certainty of being about to fall.

If prosopopoeia involves the projection of human identity onto nonhuman entities, then the poet discovers he has projected himself at the price of his own defacement. "Only a transparent diagram," the severely diminished "I" now lodges his hope in a relationship with an apparently beloved "you," someone who makes him believe that "any direction taken was the right one." This "you" recalls the long-haired woman of the previous page, the transition from third to the second person auguring a metamorphosis into a state of "Maturity when your hair will actually be the branches / Of a tree with the light pouring through them." Yet the speaker's hope quickly expires:

> It seemed he had been repeating the same stupid phrase
> Over and over throughout his life; meanwhile
> Infant destinies had suavely matured; there was
> To be a meeting or collection of them that very evening.

The human subject is debased, as destinies are tentatively personified, and, while "meeting" suggests people, "collection" suggests things, the line hesitating between personification and reification.
  Ashbery thinks,

>   There should be an invariable balance of
> Contentment to hold everything in place, ministering
> To stunted memories, helping them stand alone
> And return into the world, without ever looking back at
> What they might have become   (145–46)

Ashbery wants to orchestrate a rhetorical ecology in which possibility would resist diminishment ("memories" preserved against "What they might have become") and personification would remain nonthreatening, a provider and recipient of equilibrial nurture. But the "balance of / Contentment" (personified as a "ministering" agent) and memories

(personified as agents capable of standing and withholding their gaze) are proposals of what "should be," not statements of what is. The hoped for resistance is itself a matter of (not) "looking," rather than an action, and even that hoped for resistance to "looking back" is undermined by the enjambment, inducing the reader to in fact "look back" at the left margin to see what becomes of the prepositional phrase.

Ashbery imagines heaven, "that sphere of pure wisdom and / Entertainment," rather hellishly as something that "burns like the mouth that / Closes down over all your effort like the moment / Of death" (146). Despite its musings on "dust," "Clepsydra" hadn't broached "death" itself. Now, after more than two hundred lines, the poem finally moves toward death, as the morbid "mouth" the poem must contend with, the sense of time as a devourer that it has striven to deny (as in "L'Horloge," "Chaque instant te dévore" [7]). The human subject, present in the second person, awakens to discover that "the walls / Are turning on you" and

> the windows no longer speak
> Of time but are themselves, transparent guardians you
> Invented for what there was to hide.   (*CP* 146)

In not cooperating with "you," walls and windows achieve an agency only in negation. As they act to turn, the walls withdraw their faces, and the windows are imagined as capable of speaking only as they fail to speak. The "acts," once "sentinels," have given way to brittle and "transparent guardians." Insofar as one can often approximate the hour by looking through a window at the environment beyond, to "speak / Of time" is the default mode of windows, a mode that here seems suspended (by curtains?). Whatever "there was to hide" (time? The sky?) having assumed its own agency, it "has now / Grown up, or moved away," and that personification also comes at the expense of human diminishment, "this / Existence sap[ping] your own." Nearing its end, "Clepsydra" finds it increasingly difficult to sustain the energy required to resist personification and linear time.

Ashbery rouses himself for one last protest: "It is not a question, then, / Of having not lived in vain." The stilted double negative betrays Ashbery's diminishment—as does the non sequitur of the disavowed question (Gilson 1998: 500)—and the poem's final sentence considerably weakens this already anemic denial:

What is meant is that this distant
Image of you, the way you really are, is the test
Of how you see yourself, and regardless of whether or not
You hesitate, it may be assumed that you have won, that this
Wooden and external representation
Returns the full echo of what you meant
With nothing left over, from that circumference now alight
With ex-possibilities become present fact, and you
Must wear them like clothing, moving in the shadow of
Your single and twin existence, walking in intact
Appreciation of it, while morning is still and before the body
Is changed by the faces of evening.   (*CP* 146)

The vigor of this sentence is "sapped" by the prosaic reliance on the passive voice, which promises an almost comically feeble victory: "it may be assumed that you have won." Where "L'Horloge" expresses the poet's conventional fear that he lacks time to express himself, to make a mark on literary history and thereby prove that his life was not in vain, Ashbery takes for granted that "you" will inevitably succeed. But as it proceeds, the sentence becomes less glib, as in its second half "you / Must" wear the past of your lost potential (like a worker's uniform). Early in the morning, Walt Whitman's (1977: 187) presumably naked Adam calls for someone to touch "my body as I pass," to "Be not afraid of my body." Clothed in his own diminishment ("ex-possibilities"), Ashbery, in contrast, awaits the changes brought by night. No longer insisting on a "Contentment" that shuns "looking back" (*CP* 145–46), he is now attuned both to the indulgence in and the negation of possibilities, their conversion into "fact," though even this is possible only "while morning is still." Earlier, "Night" was given no more than a "toe." Now the "evening" is given "faces," a surplus of prosopopoeia, and the poet, though not reduced to dust, seems considerably, though gracefully, diminished.[22]

If in repeatedly frustrating personification allegory "Clepsydra" aims to bypass allegory's disjunctive temporality, the end of the poem gives way to it: the morning may still be "still," but the "faces of evening" must be reckoned with. "Clepsydra," however, has always one more trick up its sleeve: the substitution of "late words for early words . . . or early words for late words" Bloom (1975: 74) defines as "metalepsis"—figurative reversals of past and future or cause and effect.[23] For Bloom, Ashberian metalepsis works as a mode of "self-defeat"

(206), which "pioneers in undoing" Wallace Stevens's own revival of metalepsis. But if in some sense he "undoes" metalepsis, in another sense Ashbery multiplies it, the trope informing not just his imagery but also his grammar, giving purchase on his famously indeterminate pronouns, which Ashbery has compared to "variables in an equation" (Bloom and Losada 1972: 24). Where pronouns are normally derivative, presupposing an antecedent, his pronouns often project the antecedent into the future, leaving it to readers to assign referents, a pronominal metalepsis working to invert de Manian allegory, which is oriented toward the past.[24] A personification signifies a preexisting concept ontologically distinct from the figuration itself. In "Fragment," for example, spring is personified as "a girl in green draperies" (*CP* 233), though seasons have occurred on this planet long before there were any girls; while girls and draperies are individual entities, spring is a recurrent phase. Of course, no one who reads "Fragment" would think that spring really is literally a girl: that literal distinction is the premise of the trope itself. Ashbery's metaleptic pronouns, by contrast, confuse the future with the past, sketching a circular rather than linear time, so that, in "Clepsydra," the virtual past of grammatical expectation coincides with the hermeneutical future determined by readers. Describing the poet's "allusive mode," Hickman (2012: 127) argues that "in placing the reader at the centre of the poem, Ashbery enforces a crucial break with Eliot that in turn represents a radical break with the author-centric poetics of the last two hundred years." Like Perloff, though, Hickman probably underestimates the difficulty of breaking with tradition. As it yields authority to readers, Ashbery's pronoun usage erodes the ground on which both reader and author might base distinct identity, so that the ubiquitous "you" of Ashbery's poems could be Ashbery, a particular reader, some other reader, or anybody. Within the decentered authority of "Clepsydra," reader and author, as defaceable as the personifications within the poem itself, resemble the vertices of "a transparent diagram"—or the "variables of an equation." Rather than enacting "a radical break," the result may prove to be not all that different from Eliot's notorious impersonality.

Like his pronouns, Ashbery's nouns also induce metalepsis in a way that potentially implicates readers. About a "reply," introduced some lines earlier, in "Clepsydra" the speaker observes:

> it seems that
> It is we, our taking it into account rather, that are
> The reply that prompted the question   (140−41)

Questions will prompt replies, but not all replies will prompt questions. Here, with a first-person plural pronoun that may include readers, Ashbery inverts the usual relationship of cause (question) and effect (reply). If it's not clear what the question is that had been prompted, one very plausible candidate is the question that begins the poem, "Hasn't the sky?" (140). If that's the case, then the normally derivative "reply" here appears as the poem's origin, preceding its beginning. Temporal scrambling continues, as Ashbery writes,

> certainly this is
> Peace of a sort, like nets drying in the sun,
> That we must progress toward the whole thing
> About an hour ago.   (141)

Here, the end of a process (fishing nets drying after the boat has docked) is revealed not as a preparation for the future but as a movement into the past ("About an hour ago"). And though sunlight is a desiccating force, evaporated water becomes part of the "Whether" and eventually returns to the sea as rain, so that the drying of nets participates in a circular process rather than an irreversible one.[25] Elsewhere, Ashbery similarly substitutes the future for the past:

> the calm
> Of this true progression hardened into shreds
> Of another kind of calm, returning to its conclusion, its premises
> Undertaken before any formal agreement had been reached   (143)

The slightly odd phrase "returning to its conclusion," a metaleptic play on "returning to the beginning," disrupts linear time.[26] If one has not reached the conclusion, one cannot return to it; if one is returning to it, one has not properly concluded. Whether the past is substituted for the future or the future for the past, here they meet in a circle that may bestow "calm," an affect at odds with the anxiety of both "L'Horloge" and *The Waste Land*. At the same time, Ashbery's metalepsis can itself betray an anxiety, nowhere more so than in his imagining of heaven, a future existence that only reflects "an incomplete / Former existence" (146).

Bloom suggests that metalepsis occurs most often near the end of a poem, as if to somehow position the poem as earlier than (hence, superior to) its precursors (1975: 101, 141–42; 1997: 141). This happens, he suggests, in the penultimate stanza of Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West," where

> the glassy lights,
>   The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
>   As the night descended, tilting in the air,
>   Mastered the night   (quoted in Bloom 1997: 106)

Bloom (1977: 102) reads the artificial light as overpowering the lateness of evening, reconstituting the night as a metaphorical dawn, and thus "making the twilight into a Romantic aurora, a fresh earliness of seeing." Some of Ashbery's poems follow this pattern, he suggests—notably "Soonest Mended," which concludes by "coming back / To the mooring of starting out, that day so long ago" (quoted in Bloom 1997: 146). In this reading, Ashbery substitutes the distant past for the finality one might expect at the end of a poem; the end of a process, "mooring," turns out to be a beginning, a "starting out."[27]

Reversing this pattern, metalepsis abounds throughout the body of "Clepsydra" but is abandoned in its final line. Where "Soonest Mended" pictures the end as a refreshed commencement, here linear time prevails, as morning will succumb to "evening." It's true that the writing of the final lines preceded the rest of the poem, as Ashbery recalled: "When I was trying to end 'Clepsydra' and getting very nervous, I happened to open that notebook and found these two lines. . . . They were just what I needed at that time" (Stitt 1983). For reasons this essay has tried to explain, ending "Clepsydra" must have represented a particularly difficult challenge. Even if he wrote the last lines first (a sort of compositional metalepsis), the finished poem ends up reasserting prosopopoeia and linear time. Earlier, in considering the problem of lineation, the speaker thinks, "it may be that / It is lines contracting into a plane" (*CP* 141). Lines contract by turning to form a loop that changes the one-dimensional movement of linear time into a two-dimensional circular field. But the field so created is empty.[28] That the poet must repeat his metaleptic operations suggests that the circle is a fiction that keeps dilating into linearity.

If, as Bloom (1975: 103) has it, one effect of metalepsis is its "sacrificing the present to an idealized past or hoped-for future," then in abandoning metalepsis the final line of "Clepsydra" forgoes sacrificing the present, which in any case Ashbery knows he lacks the "means" to keep. In that sense, in relinquishing the struggle against prosopopoeia and linear time, the end of "Clepsydra" bears out de Man's generalized pronouncement that "After the initial moment of flight away from its own specificity, a moment of return follows that leads literature back to

what it is." At the same time, however, the subject of the last sentence, the pronomial metalepsis "you," remains someone potentially unmoored from literary history. Here, any particular referent of "you" will perforce return to what literature is, but the word "you" itself, a "variable" in the poem's "equation," will retain its capacity to solicit new referents—pointing toward the yet unborn and unimagined. In this context, this capacity appears less as an idealistic hope than as a prosaic grammatical inevitability (assuming the continuation of humanity itself, an increasingly idealistic proposition). As Ashbery deconstructs the rhetoric of hope, that is, he also retains hope as an option immanent to the poem's peculiar grammar. De Man may be right that "allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference." Not content, however, with designating the "void," "Clepsydra" doubles the "temporal difference": it recognizes the void as the melancholic space between the present poem and the past, but also as the space of promise between the present poem and its future reconfigurations. In its lines the allegorical tradition is sutured to a metaleptic unknown.

§

Shawn Normandin is associate professor of English at Sungkyunkwan University, Seoul. He is author of *Chaucerian Ecopoetics: Deconstructing Anthropocentrism in the "Canterbury Tales"* (2018) and *Jane Austen and Literary Theory* (forthcoming).

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. David Shapiro (1979: 117) makes the more nuanced claim that in "The Skaters" Ashbery's work "becomes a bittersweet criticism of orthodox symbolism."

2. *Prosopopoeia* literally means the making of a face (πρόσωπον); *OED Online*, 3rd ed., s.v. "prosopopoeia, *n*," www.oed.com/view/Entry/153015?redirected From=prosopopoeia.

3. John Shoptaw (1994: 3, 67, 121) traces the influence of Auden's personifications.

4. Maurice Scève (1966: 184) claims, "Plus tost au Temps sa Clepsidre cherroit. . . . Qu'en moy mourust ce bien, donc i'ay enuie."

5. All translations from the French are my own. Here, I cite Baudelaire's "L'Horloge" parenthetically, by line number. As an anonymous reader for this journal informed me, the word *clepsydre* also appears in Stéphane Mallarmé's "Hérodiade" (1992: 79), a poem Ashbery probably knew by the time he wrote "Clepsydra."

6. As an undergraduate, Ashbery composed an imitation of "Un voyage à Cythère" (Shoptaw 1994: 40). In a part of "The Skaters" that has attracted much commentary, Ashbery alludes to Baudelaire's "Le Voyage": "Into the unknown, the unknown that loves us, the great unknown!" (*CP* 160). Ashbery's 1963 essay on Constantin Guys derives much of its insight from Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life" (1989: 44–45). De Man takes his best examples of literary modernity from the same Baudelaire essay (1983: 156–60).

7. Ashbery has discussed the importance of "Clepsydra" to his poetic development (Kostelanetz 1976). Shoptaw (1994: 87) sees it as "one of the most productive poems of Ashbery's career." John Koethe (2016) singles out "Clepsydra" as "an astonishing performance, possibly the purest poem Ashbery has written."

8. It is true that some of the "French" poetry that influenced Ashbery was itself influenced by American poetry. Baudelaire himself was, after all, a translator of Poe and Longfellow, and he pilfered lines from English literature in much the way that T. S. Eliot came to pilfer lines from him. Baudelaire's clock even speaks English: "*Remember!*" (13).

9. Annette Gilson (1998: 503n6) attributes a more violent tempo to "Clepsydra," which she describes as "a relentless torrent, flowing continuously onward as does time itself."

10. Erhard Hobert (1972: 647) takes interest in "Chronophobie Baudelaires," and Judith Spencer (2009: 571) reviews Baudelaire's hostile reactions to time. It should be said, however, that Baudelaire is not always chronophobic. The poem that comes immediately after "L'Horloge" in *Les Fleurs du mal* (*CP* 737; Ashbery 2014: 15) is "Paysage" (which Ashbery translates in *A Wave* [1984]), whose speaker, as Runyon (2010: 159–60) describes it, "delights in observing the passage of time," and "offers an entirely different, indeed an *opposite*, perspective on time" from that of "L'Horloge."

11. For the numerical connections between the poem and the divisions of time, see Hobert 1972: 648; and Labarthe 1999: 192.

12. Ashbery's poems are "unthinkable without their modernist forebears," Longenbach (1997: 106) suggests, while Williamson argues that Baudelaire's disillusionment provided a model for Anglophone modernism (1984: 129).

13. Here is a translation:

> Reverdy succeeds in restoring to things their real name, in abolishing the eternal dead weight of symbolism and allegory, which is excessive in the authors I have named. In Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the real world appears with its own dreams, but it is always artificially bound to an allegorical meaning—the gasworks and the "dull canal," for example. By contrast, in Reverdy a canal or a factory are living phenomena; they belong to the world around us.   (Ashbery 1962: 111; translation mine)

14. Perloff (2013: 16) has recently revised her assessment of Eliot, whom she now sees as an increasingly "palpable" precursor of Ashbery.

15. De Man (1983: 207) contrasts allegory with the romantic symbol, which evokes a "relationship" of "simultaneity" between "image" and "substance"; this relationship is "spatial in kind," and in it "the intervention of time is merely a matter of contingency."

   In an essay Ashbery wrote as an undergraduate, he contrasts poetic simultaneity, which he favors, with allegory, which "requires at least a temporary separation of the object from the 'meaning' in order to make its point" (quoted in Ross 2017: 16). Michael Golston has recently argued that "postmodern poetry appears when allegory shifts from the poem's thematic levels into its formal registers" (2015: 6). "Clepsydra" is not postmodern in Golston's sense: here allegory (as prosopopoeia) is a thematic concern, and the poem's form is not systematically allegorical.

16. De Man discusses the lion metaphor in *Allegories of Reading* (1979: 151).

17. Ashbery recalled that in writing "Clepsydra" he felt "for the first time a strong unity in a particular poem" (Kostelanetz 1976).

18. For an instructive account of the bewildering force of Ashbery's "labyrinthine sentences," see Lerner 2010: 203–6.

19. Shoptaw (1994: 86) notes the "troubling personification" in this passage, but he does not say more about how the trope functions in "Clepsydra."

20. Eugene Holland (2006: 105) argues that prosopopoeia "compensates for the eclipse of the Poetic voice," but it would be more accurate to say that prosopopoeia causes the eclipse. Margaret Miner (1998: 54) describes how the clock depletes the speaker's memory and lyric energy.

21. Herd (2001: 108) observes that "Clepsydra" provides "moments of relief . . . when, although the flow has by no means ceased, a feeling of clarity sets in." Such Wordsworthian moments contrast with the homogeneously negative temporality of "L'Horloge."

22. Gilson (1998: 501) also sees "defeat" in the end of the poem, but she argues that the "psychological acuity" with which Ashbery depicts his defeat gives him "an independent poetic identity"—a paradoxical success. Having recognized the ambition of Ashbery's resistance to prosopopoeia, one could also see his defeat as a rhetorical inevitability.

23. Bloom reads Ashbery's "Fragment" as a metaleptic response to Stevens's "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (1997: 142–44). He also discerns metalepsis in "As You Came from the Holy Land" (1975: 206). Mary Kinzie (1987: 397) seems to have metalepsis in mind when she argues that "Ashbery's most characteristic intellectual gesture" is "dissembling one movement in time beneath another."

24. Kinzie (1987: 394) notes that Ashbery's pronouns "seem to toy with the 'aura' of antecedents for phrasings that have none." Bloom also discusses metalepsis and projection (1975: 101–3).

25. Shoptaw (1994: 86) notes the pun *whether/weather* and connects it to the ambiguity of the French word *temp*. In "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," Ashbery helpfully alludes to "the weather, which in French is / *Le temps*, the word for time" (*CP* 476).

26. Google's *Ngram Viewer* suggests that when Ashbery wrote "Clepsydra" the phrase "returning to the beginning" was much more common than "returning to the conclusion" (books.google.com/ngrams).

27. For Richard Jackson (1988: 147), "Soonest Mended" "seems to mark a self-referential progress, always coming back to the mooring, the non-origin." Baudelaire, a problematic origin in more ways than one, prefigures the nautical aporia of "Soonest Mended": in her reading of "Invitation au voyage," Barbara Johnson (1980: 29) asks, "Are these ships, which 'come from

the ends of the earth' to 'fulfill your least desire,' in the process of leaving or arriving?"

28. "The Skaters" humorously addresses the problem:

> the carnivorous
> Way of these lines is to devour their own nature, leaving
> Nothing but a bitter impression of absence, which as we know
> involves presence, but still.   (*CP* 152)

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