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## *The Associative Style in Warren and Ashbery*

JOHN BURT

In the late 1970s critics often spoke of Robert Penn Warren and John Ashbery in the same breath.<sup>1</sup> One does not hear that association much any more, except among some who, like me, first came to both poets through Harold Bloom's enthusiasm for them.<sup>2</sup> But the current sense that the two poets do not sort together may be more a sociological than a poetic fact, something to be accounted for not by the poetry but by the different reception histories of the two poets over the last ten or fifteen years. Warren, for instance, has increasingly, but I think against his own intentions and somewhat to the detriment of his reputation, come to be seen as a regional poet, so that anyone with mixed feelings about that region has been invited to have similar mixed feelings about the poetry. Those who know Warren chiefly through his association with that great New Critical textbook which taught three generations of students how to read poetry, *Understanding Poetry*, have tended to assume that his poetry is a far different thing, less politically charged, less formally daring, than it actually is, so much so, indeed, that among some kinds of critic it is fashionable to speak of Warren chiefly in terms of what poems one does not read or include in one's anthologies. Ashbery is often seen with the other poets of the New York School, or with more recent postmodern poets, and few think of him and Warren as being in any sense contemporaries, even among those who do notice that they reached high points of their respective careers at about the same period.

I do not want to suggest that Warren and Ashbery are involved in the same project, or even share poetic values. The very limited correspondence between them preserved in the Robert Penn Warren papers in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale suggests that they respected each other's work and took each other seriously as poets, but that neither looked for lessons from the other. But they had more in common than either perhaps knew, sharing not values or language so much as a common poetic predicament, the necessity of finding a poetic language and method appropriate to poetry's high calling, to poetry's peculiar access to the visionary and to the absolute, in the face of a general cultural skepticism about that calling which even they partly share. Both seek a high poetic knowledge, but both share a doubt about whether that high knowledge is still available, and indeed about whether poetry's claim to high knowledge was ever in fact an earned one. For this reason, they can press their search for poetic knowledge only under cover of an ironic denial that that knowledge can be spoken about with a straight face. Both poets at once seek and disown poetic knowledge, seeing their questing in a skeptical, even jeering light, but continuing, even if only in undertones and asides, a kind of poetic quest even in the face of that skepticism, as if always acting

under the cover of plausible deniability. At the same time, their skepticism can never be fully evaded, so that anything won from that skepticism is likely to be fleeting and provisional, and subject always to second thoughts and a kind of moral hangover of disillusion.

By putting together Ashbery and Warren I wish to make a point about both poets. Ashbery is often seen merely as a postmodern ironist, at home with a rhetoric of fracture and dislocation, committed to perspectivism and the dispersal of the poetic "I" (to the extent that either of those things can be described in the language of commitment), and resigned to an ironic and defensive caginess about questions of poetic power. Andrew Ross, in mocking tones, astutely notes how in the public mind Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" has come to define the "look" of what he calls late modernist writing, "its appetite for diffraction and loss of legitimate perspective, its mannered dialogue with a highly precarious representation of the self, and the parodic, almost allegorical bent of its framed surface, wrought to a sumptuous high finish." To see Ashbery that way is somewhat to under-rate him, to see him merely as another link, although an important one, in a chain that goes back through surrealism and forward through language poetry to yet unknown modes of the avant-garde.<sup>3</sup> I still think, as Charles Berger showed twenty years ago, that Ashbery's uniqueness is his ability to hold the mode of fracturing and irony and the mode of high romantic poetic ambition together in one hand, as Stevens did, and as Ammons, although in a completely different register, also does. About Warren, I want to argue that it is fruitful to see his poems not only in the context of his own ever-evolving views about what poetry is and how it might be written (the revolution in his style in 1953, at the end of his ten year period of silence, the development of his "late style" after 1968), and not only in the context of the work of his models, mentors, friends, and students (from Marvell and Donne, to Hardy and Eliot, to Ransom and Tate, to Jarrell and Smith) but also in the context of one of the main poetic strains of the years from 1965 to 1985, to pick rather over-precise dates at both ends, the effort to speak as a poet in the name of a high calling in the face of an ironic sensibility which would undo that poetry, has strong grounds for undoing that poetry, and may yet succeed in doing so.

One way in which the two poets lend themselves to comparison is in the different ways in which they resort to what I will call the associative style. What I mean by this term, which may or may not be a very useful one, is a style in which successive elements are not linked together by an unfolding story or by a developing argument but by what Randolph Runyon calls a poetic sorites, in which each element ties locally back to the last and locally forward to the next without any obviously global sense of direction, although there is a global coherence implicit—but never fully explicit—in the poem as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

The associative style provides one way of responding to the impasse between poetic ambition and poetic skepticism that I have been describing. The associative style is an attempt to encompass in words what cannot be expressed in words, to mark the poet's persistence in an act of attention to what cannot be conceived, the poet's endless but not pointless attempt to serve what the poet both betrays and is betrayed by, the quest for dignity that the poet continues on despite the poet's more than half-conscious sense of increasing ridiculousness.<sup>5</sup> What the associative style is designed to render is not just the tentativeness or half-heartedness of poetic thinking, nor even just the impersonality of the poetic sensibility, which does its work in a space never fully the property of the poet's biographical self but beneath it, in a deeper inwardness, or beyond it, in transpersonal

habits of thought that circulate through an entire culture, although all of these are in play in the associative style. Whatever else it does, the associative style also renders the provisional way in which, caught up in a problem one can neither solve nor evade, one thinks out loud, reaching from one thing to the next guided not by a plan so much as by a vague intuition that there is a *zusammenhang* which will make sense in retrospect of what makes no sense in prospect. The associative style, although it disguises itself as puzzling, or even as mere noodling, is a mode of inquiry into what does not yield to inquiry, a way of articulating, even if fleetingly and doubtfully, things that direct statement would inevitably have played false.

The associative style is a style appropriate to thinking aloud, rendering not only the provisionality with which the poet gropes, through many false starts, in the direction of a truth to which everything is a false start, but rendering also how the poet overhears himself or herself in the act of thinking the poem through. Self-overhearing is a way of engaging the intimate otherness of the poet's own imagination in the two-in-one of conversation, a two-in-one which, precisely because it is a matter between two and not one, offers possibilities of an inwardness purified of narcissism. Self-overhearing in the two-in-one of inward conversation also offers possibilities for the kind of serendipitous discovery that only happens in the midst of a conversational engagement. Our conversations with ourselves, no less than conversations with others, sometimes take surprising turns, such as when we overhear ourselves and recognize, say, that we mean and know something different from what we thought we did (or that we don't know what we really meant at all, except that we were wrong about what we thought we thought).

Think for instance about how Jack Burden, hearing himself congratulate himself after his confrontation with Tiny Duffy towards the end of *All the King's Men*, suddenly notices a sour taste in his mouth. When we hear others, we hear in what they say something larger than our theories about them would have led us to expect, and the recognition that they are larger than our theories continues to shadow us even as we formulate new theories about them. When we hear ourselves, even if we cannot successfully articulate a new view of ourselves, we nevertheless take the rebuking point that we do not really know ourselves, that that voice we hear, like the voice we hear when we get our own answering machines, just plain is not us.

These surprises are not easily available in structures which have the formal coherence of argument or calculation. But such surprises are common in conversation, which has local connectedness but not global structure, and which could conceivably have gone anywhere, but which, having gotten somewhere almost by accident, discovers that place in retrospect to have been its inevitable destination. (This is why I compare the associative style to conversation, which is pursued for its own sake and unfolds in its own way, rather than to dialogue, in which the parties are concerned to develop a point of view rather than to see merely where the engagement that they spin out among themselves will go. A dialogue, unlike a conversation, is always threatening to become an adversary proceeding. People in dialogues can gain the upper hand over their interlocutors, although ideally perhaps parties to dialogues are supposed to seek consensus. But no one seeks either the upper hand or consensus in a conversation that remains conversational.) The associative structure, the shock of self-overhearing and self-estrangement, and the implicit coming into the presence of poetic knowledge despite all ironies are for this reason linked themes.

The phrase “two in one of conversation” is from Hannah Arendt’s *The Life of the Mind*. The phrase refers to what Arendt calls “thinking,” by which she means something very different from calculation, and something very different from expression. Thinking, for Arendt (as for Heidegger, from whom this sense of the word derives), is an endless but not pointless brooding on unanswerable questions of meaning. Although thinking cannot in principle answer the questions of meaning it sets itself, the experience is itself meaningful, and is the foundation of a specifically human life. By describing thinking as the two in one of an internal conversation Arendt has in mind to render how in thinking we occasionally, through self-overhearing and a rebuking shock of recognition about what we have been saying to ourselves, work our way in thought to some region not already bounded by the premises we start out with. One might imagine thinking as a kind of internal Socratic dialogue in which one is always playing Euthyphro to a shadowy Socrates. Or perhaps one is always playing Socrates to a shadowy Socratic *daimon*.

The poet, no less than the reader, interprets something in the course of the poem, if nothing more than the precise quality of the obscure itch which itched him or her into the poem. What in the poem do I feel the urgent pressure of but do not understand, do not even originate? How, by overhearing myself speak about it, do I learn to recognize it? How, having wrestled with it inconclusively all night, do I come not to conquer it or be conquered by it but to win a new name from it?

Speaking of Ashbery, Charles Altieri describes a “poetics of thinking” that “opens new alternatives to conventional dramatic ways of presenting and understanding the forms of relatedness and patterns of unfolding central to our emotional life.” The result is a poetics which does not concentrate imaginative force but disperses it. As Altieri says of Ashbery, “He subjects the normal concentrative focus of the lyric imagination to a series of self-conscious dispersals over apparently diverse associations, so that his work has at least the appearance of basing value on the capacity to engage fully in continually shifting degrees of emotional intensity.”<sup>6</sup>

The associative style begins early in Warren's poetry, even before the break in his style that we now tie to his poetic crisis of the late 1940's. Early poems such as “Original Sin” or “Pursuit,” both from *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme* (1942), show some features of that style, although they also ostentatiously display an architectonic control alien to the associative style. The protagonists of these poems—but not their narrators—are subject to an obscure misery they cannot locate or account for. “Crime” compares this misery to the state of one who may have committed a crime but has forgotten what it was. The mad killer whom the protagonist envies has at least buried his victim, and his various lurid delusions are at least more vital than the protagonist's own obscure itch, which he can only define by playing an unsettlingly comic associative riff upon the idea of the killer's victim and the killer's delusions:

Though for you a tree is a tree, and in the long  
Dark, no sibilant tumor inside your enormous  
Head, though no walls confer in the silent house,  
Nor the eyes of pictures protrude, like a snail's, each on its prong,

Yet envy him, for what he buried is buried  
By the culvert there, till the boy with the air-gun  
In spring, at the violet, comes; nor is ever known  
To go on vacations with him, lend money, break bread.

And envy him, for though the seasons stammer  
 Past pulse in the yellow throat of the field-lark,  
 Still memory drips, a pipe in the cellar-dark,  
 And in its hutch and hole, as when the earth gets warmer,

The cold heart heaves like a toad, and lifts its brow  
 With that bright jewel you have no use for now;  
 While puzzled yet, despised with the attic junk, the letter  
 Names over your name, and mourns under the dry rafter.

Similar associative riffs pervade *Eleven Poems*, from the various places where the protagonist of “Original Sin” seeks to elude the malevolent but apparently pathetic imaginary stranger he believes is on his tail, to the various forms of remedy imagined for ennui and acedia that the narrator brandishes in the face of the protagonist of “Pursuit,” ending with the powerful and haunting, but also pointedly opaque and horrific, turn he prepares for the protagonist in an imagined trip to Florida, where “Ponce de Leon clanked among the lilies”:

But meanwhile, the little old lady in black, by the wall,  
 Who admires all the dancers, and tells you how just last fall  
 Her husband died in Ohio, and damp mists her glasses;  
 She blinks and croaks, like a toad or a Norn, in the horrible light,  
 And rattles her crutch, which may put forth a small bloom, perhaps white.

What these poems share with the associative style is a locally connected sequence of events, each surprising when it happens, perhaps sometimes but not always making sense in retrospect, held together by a syntactic structure and by an intelligible succession of tones and feelings that dictate an emotional logic that may be more important than the intellectual logic which ostensibly structures the poem. In fully realized versions of the associative style the emotional logic replaces the intellectual logic entirely, but for all that the poem remains an act of mind rather than of feeling or of arbitrariness, for behind the local structure of the poem, implicit in its becoming but never fully explicit in its shape, is the poetic or metaphysical problem about and around which the poem broods. These poems in *Eleven Poems* differ from poems in the fully realized associative style, however, in that in *Eleven Poems* the narrative persona, although not the protagonist, remains fully in control. The associations are flung at the protagonist in what are from his point of view a random or at least disjunctive order. But they make perfect sense to the narrator. Protagonist and narrator are not distinct in this way in poems in the associative style. The speakers of a poem in the associative style are almost entirely impersonal; the poems do not record the experiences of any real or imagined person but a sequence of thoughts connected by a local chain of similarities or of sequence. (This is true even if the events are, in fact, events of Warren’s own life: they are presented as general events, events that happened to “someone,” or “you,” but not necessarily or especially to him. They do not record the urgencies of a character so much as register how certain thoughts and certain events hang together in a totally implicit way to be made explicit only by imagining the metaphysical problem that stings the poem into being.) The speakers of these poems are certainly not the biographical author, and not even the lyric subject, but what John Koethe, speaking of Ashbery, calls the metaphysical subject.<sup>7</sup>

The associative style is, except for “Garland for You,” a clumsy reprise of the themes of *Eleven Poems* that opens *You, Emperors and Others* (1960), not a feature of Warren’s middle style. The apparently random “collocation of memories” that structures

“Colder Fire,” the last of the sequence “To a Young Girl, One Year Old, in a Ruined Fortress” which opens *Promises* (1957), is apparently not an associative sequence but a plausible version of the happen-so of the imagined afternoon on which the poem is set. Even the phantasmagoria of “Ballad of a Sweet Dream of Peace,” “I am Dreaming of a White Christmas,” and “Forever O’Clock” have more to do with the disjointed but obsessively significant succession of events in dreams than with what I am calling the associative style, which is always conscious and always a function of self-overhearing rather than merely of free reverie.

In Warren’s poetry, the associative style does not fully come into its own until late in his career, figuring in volumes from *Can I See Arcturus from Where I Stand* (1975) to *Rumor Verified* (1981), and most especially in the “Speculative” section of the 1979 *Now and Then*. It is the dominant style of none of these volumes, which are more characterized by personal meditations such as “Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart Encountered Late at Night When Driving Home from Party in the Back Country” or intense lyrics from a high romantic tradition such as “Evening Hawk” or “Heart of the Backlog.” But poems in the associative style are a continuous feature of Warren’s poetry of the late 1970s, and their number includes such poems as “A Way to Love God,” “Dream,” “Dream of a Dream,” “The Mission,” “Code Book Lost,” “Sister Water,” “Inevitable Frontier,” “Dream, Dump-Heap and Civilization,” “Auto-da-fé,” “What was the Thought,” and “The Corner of the Eye.”

Nobody would mistake “A Way to Love God,” which opened Warren’s crucial 1975 *Can I See Arcturus from Where I Stand*, for a poem by Ashbery. But “A Way to Love God” shares some features of rhetoric and of motivating problematic with some Ashbery poems of the same period. Notice, for instance, how the speaker, although more personal than Ashbery’s speakers are, and, indeed, instantly recognizable as Robert Penn Warren, nevertheless seems to withdraw into abstraction as the poem goes on. What drives this poem from example to example is a metaphysical urgency no example does justice to, so that the lengthening train of associations renders not only the ineffability of the concept but also the limitations of this or any other imaginable speaker confronted with the same pitiless necessity. Each is, as the first line announces, a shadow of truth, and none are true, so that the poem enacts the metaphysical loss it depicts, although whether the speaker is or is not subject to that loss (since he seems so expert about it as in a way to have mastered it despite everything) is still an open question.

I do not recall what had burdened my tongue, but urge you  
 To think on the slug's white belly, how sick-slick and soft,  
 On the hairiness of stars, silver, silver, while the silence  
 Blows like wind by, and on the sea's virgin bosom unveiled  
 To give suck to the wavering serpent of the moon; and,  
 In the distance, in *plaza, piazza, place, platz*, and square,  
 Boot heels, like history being born, on cobbles bang.

Everything seems an echo of something else.

And when, by the hair, the headsman held up the head  
 Of Mary of Scots, the lips kept on moving,  
 But without sound. The lips,  
 They were trying to say something very important.

Notice here how the speaker keeps suggesting metaphors, disowning them (sometimes even ridiculing them), yet for all of the distancing never totally retracting them. One hears the poet holding the Parnassianism of “on the sea’s virgin bosom unveiled / To give suck to the wavering serpent of the moon” at arm’s length between two fingers, yet (like something a lawyer gets out in court, knowing that the other side’s objections to it will be sustained but that the jury will hear it anyway) he still does not fully cast the metaphor aside. And the tone of “The lips, / They were trying to say something very important,” can only be jeering, jeering perhaps at the expense of the speaker’s own metaphysical need, but the jeering does not fully undo the saying.

The concluding metaphors are taken up with a straight face, but here they are meant to have a lacerating force directed against both the speaker and the hearer:

But I had forgotten to mention an upland  
Of wind-tortured stone white in darkness, and tall, but when  
No wind, mist gathers, and once on the Sarré at midnight,  
I watched the sheep huddling. Their eyes  
Stared into nothingness. In that mist-diffused light their eyes  
Were stupid and round like the eyes of fat fish in muddy water,  
Or of a scholar who has lost faith in his calling.

Their jaws did not move. Shreds  
Of dry grass, gray in gray mist-light, hung  
From the side of a jaw, unmoving.

You would think that nothing would ever again happen.

That may be a way to love God.

Is what is being described here a way to love God? Only if one loves God from the depths of the most profound alienation and bewilderment, as if hunger for God lurks most in the shadow of the mute and stupid animal persistence of being, grimly and vaguely and hopelessly holding on in the face of everything. And even here, in the dull hardihood of mere being, we love God only in the subjunctive mood.

By way of comparison, consider the lyric with which Ashbery opened his own 1975 *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, “As One Put Drunk into the Packet Boat”:

I tried each thing, only some were immortal and free  
Elsewhere we are as sitting in a place where sunlight  
Filters down, a little at a time,  
Waiting for someone to come. Harsh words are spoken,  
As the sun yellows the green of the maple tree. ...

This poem, like “A Way to Love God,” turns on the tension between a high poetic ambition and a sense of the limitations of poetry in the face of poetry’s object. Charles Altieri, in *Self and Sensibility in American Poetry*, puts it eloquently, “How, he asks, can poetry serve significant cultural roles without asserting special powers of poetic integration that in fact blind it to its own impotence and conceal the powers it does have” (133). David Lehman says of this brisk and ambitious opening – these lines are, for Ashbery, written in an unusually personal voice and in an unusually declamatory style – that it “wipes the slate clean” of prior markings. But the curious thing, for all of the celebrated modesty of Ashbery’s claims, is that some things – poetry, presumably – really *are* immortal and free, although fewer things are immortal and free than promise themselves to be so. The poem veers back and forth between a vigorous, even aggressive

attempt to seize the axis of poetic speech, and a rueful sense of the belatedness and even ridiculousness of the attempt.

So this was all, but obscurely  
 I felt the stirrings of new breath in the pages  
 Which all winter long had smelled like an old catalogue.  
 New sentences were starting up. But the summer  
 Was well along, not yet past the mid-point  
 But full and dark with the promise of that fullness,  
 That time when one can no longer wander away  
 And even the least attentive fall silent  
 To watch the thing that is prepared to happen.

One of the reasons poetry makes nothing happen is that the thing it seeks to make happen was impossible in the first place, but the fact that it is impossible does not make that thing any less crucial, and not just for the poet. The title, taken from the opening lines of Marvell's vicious and jolly satirical elegy upon the death of the minor poet Tom May, implies perhaps that the poetic afflatus which powers the poem may not only be unearned but silly, but the poem seems to press on in the face of that doubt with great force:

A look of glass stops you  
 And you walk on shaken: was I the perceived?  
 Did they notice me, this time, as I am,  
 Or is it postponed again? The children  
 Still at their games, clouds that arise with a swift  
 Impatience in the afternoon sky, then dissipate  
 As limpid, dense twilight comes.  
 Only in that tooting of a horn  
 Down there, for a moment, I thought  
 The great, formal affair was beginning, orchestrated,  
 Its colors concentrated in a glance, a ballade  
 That takes in the whole world, now, but lightly,  
 Still lightly, but with wide authority and tact.

In other poems, Ashbery usually follows moments of high assertion with deflating moments of ironic self-realization, as for instance when early on in the 1982 "A Wave" he ridicules his belated ambition as if he were "A Mute Actor, a future saint intoxicated with the idea of martyrdom." In "A Wave," Ashbery goes on to describe the reduced world he attempts, with only partial success, to accommodate himself to, in language in which the willed stoicism is in visible tension with ironic bitterness:

And our landscape came to be as it is today:  
 Partially out of focus, some of it too near, the middle distance  
 A haven of serenity and unreachable, with all kinds of nice  
 People and plants waking and stretching, calling  
 Attention to themselves with every artifice of which the human  
 Genre is capable. And they called it our home.

Only the last line gives away that the speaker is not quite fooled by his own somewhat campy geniality, although perhaps only hearing himself say this makes it quite clear to himself that even the less ambiguous moments of reconciliation to realities later in the poem may not stand close scrutiny. Yet at the same time, "A Wave's" rueful but not bitter description of its task cannot ultimately, finally be written off as the special

pleading of disappointment, as something we are meant to see through, even though that disappointment keeps leaking through the resignation:

Our own kind of stiff standing around, waiting helplessly  
 And mechanically for instructions that never come, suits the space  
 Of our intense, uncommunicated speculation, marries  
 The still life of crushed, red fruit in the sky and tames it  
 For observation purposes. One is almost content  
 To be with people then, to read their names and summon  
 Greetings and speculation, or even nonsense syllables and  
 Diagrams from those who appear so brilliantly at ease  
 In the atmosphere we made by getting rid of most amenities  
 In the interests of a bare, strictly patterned life that apparently  
 Has charms we weren't even conscious of, which is  
 All to the good, except that it fumbles the premise  
 We put by, saving it for a later phase of intelligence, and now  
 We are living on it, ready to grow and make mistakes again,  
 Still standing on one leg while emerging continually  
 Into an inexpressive void, the blighted fields  
 Of a kiss, the rope of a random, unfortunate  
 Observation still around our necks though we thought we  
 Had cast it off in a novel that has somehow gotten stuck  
 To our lives, battening on us. A sad condition  
 To see us in, yet anybody  
 Will realize that he or she has made those same mistakes,  
 Memorized those same lists in the due course of the process  
 Being served on you now.

Indeed, in "A Wave," even this moment of exquisitely balanced disappointment and acceptance gives place to a moment of unambiguous consolation, not that erotic or poetic satisfaction is finally any more imaginable, but that the small life in the shadow of a large ambition is still a living:

everything, in short,  
 That makes this explicit earth what it appears to be in our  
 Glassiest moments when a canoe shoots out from under some foliage  
 Into the river and finds it calm, not all that exciting but above all  
 Nothing to be afraid of, celebrates us  
 And what we have made of it.

But in "A Wave," even this moment of reconciliation to realities is temporary and provisional, as reconciliations tend to be. And the moment of reconciliation may later even, for all of its beauty, turn out to have been a moment of pathetic self-deceit.

The receding away from the moment of vision in "As One Put Drunk into the Packet Boat" is less grim than the parallel moment in "A Wave," and in a way more generous, if only because it realizes that the recession of vision has a kind of poetry too, albeit the poetry of the sober coloring of an eye that has looked on human suffering:

The prevalence of those gray flakes falling?  
 They are sun motes. You have slept in the sun  
 Longer than the sphinx, and are none the wiser for it.  
 Come in. And I thought a shadow fell across the door  
 But it was only her come to ask once more  
 If I was coming in, and not to hurry in case I wasn't.

The night sheen takes over. A moon of cistercian pallor  
 Has climbed to the center of heaven, installed,  
 Finally involved with the business of darkness.  
 And a sigh heaves from all the small things on earth,  
 The books, the papers, the old garters and union-suit buttons  
 Kept in a white cardboard box somewhere, and all the lower  
 Versions of cities flattened under the equalizing night.  
 The summer demands and takes away too much,  
 But night, the reserved, the reticent, gives more than it takes.

One of Warren's most daring uses of the associative style is among his last, the 1979 poem "Auto-da-fé." Notice how, thinking of the body's vulnerability, its power to trip up the pride of the mind, its candor, its intensities that consciousness itself never equals, never mind fathoms, the speaker's overhearing—as he speaks to a "you" who is clearly nobody in particular—of his own quotation of St. Paul's text seems to set him off on an ever more intense rhapsody on the subject of being burned alive, until the speaker himself seems barely human, transformed by his own darkly manic riff. The enabling fiction of the poem is that its speaker only falls into the subject of burning alive, not having started the poem with that subject as his intended destination. The poem begins as a temperate meditation on the subject of the body, but having hit as if by accident upon the thought of burning the speaker finds he must plunge into the center of that thought, leaping from example to example in what finally becomes a white-hot, self-destroying, even world-destroying frenzy. Indeed, one almost hears the poet breathlessly challenging himself to see how far he can go with his thought:

Beautiful the intricacy of body!  
 Even when defective. But you have seen  
 Beauty beyond such watchmaker's craft,  
 For eyes unshutter in darkness to gleam out  
 As though to embrace you in holiness.

"... though I give my body to be burned,  
 And have not ... " You know the rest,  
 And how the "I" is not the "body."  
 At least, according to St. Paul's text.

Beautiful in whatever sense  
 The body be, it is but flesh,  
 And flesh is grass, the season short.  
 Is a bag of stercory, a bag  
 Of excrement, the worm's surfeit,  
 But a bag with movement, lusts, strange  
 Ecstasies, transports, and strange dreams.  
 But, oh!—not "I" but "body" screams  
 When flame licks like a lover. That  
 Is the pure language of body, purer  
 Than even the cry, ecstatic, torn out  
 At the crisis of body's entwinement. That voice  
 From flame has a glory wilder than joy  
 To resound forever in heart, mind,  
 And gut, with thrilled shock and soprano of Truth.

Warren follows with an increasingly horrific catalogue of instances of being burned alive, from Dresden and Tokyo, to the Battle of the Wilderness, to the imagined

“soft-bellied citizen,” whom Warren zestfully describes piling up his new Cadillac onto the overpass buttress. “You can be quite sure he screams,” the poet remarks, with relish. This thought raises in his mind the examples of those who have not screamed in the flames – Joan of Arc, Latimer, and most of all Cranmer,

who, in slow drizzle,  
 Outraces the pack, ragtag and bobtail-  
 Though old, first to the blessed stake.  
 Climbs up. Waits. Composed, austere.  
 Faggots lighted, white beard prickling sudden in  
 Wisps of brightness, he into fire thrusts  
 The recreant hand. No, no, not his!-  
 That traitor in the house.

Unwilling, however, to assert the final transcendence of the body, the speaker backs into a position he cannot resolve:

Such evidence can scarcely attest  
 Sure meaning.

But executioners  
 Might choke flame to smoke to suffocate  
 Clients quickly. Or sometimes gunpowder in packets,  
 To belly affixed, made a human grenade  
 Timed short for the job. This, perhaps,  
 From some fumbling thought of the holiness or

Beauty of body.

In these lines we see Warren having talked himself into the hawk’s eye view, immortal only because he has discovered himself spurning mortality, his own first of all.

**[Place endnotes as footnotes on respective pages. –Eds.]**

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<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Modern Language Association meeting in December 2000. Citations to Warren's poems are from *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), and citations to Ashbery's poems are from *Selected Poems of John Ashbery* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985).

<sup>2</sup>Both are treated extensively, for instance, in *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974) and *Repression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

<sup>3</sup>Of course, this view is a bit of a stereotype, characteristic not so much of the scholarly literature about Ashbery as of the brief remarks one hears about Ashbery in talks on other subjects, or in surveys. Thomas Gardner, in *Regions of Unlikeness* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), intelligently lays out Ashbery's skepticism about language and identity, and his Stevensian ambition to render the mind in the act of finding what will suffice, veering back and forth between testimony to the ungroundedness of language and testimony to the ineffability of its ambitions, finding "in language's pause a blossoming of new relations" (104). See also Peter Stitt, *Uncertainty and Plenitude: Five Contemporary Poets* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), and the chapter on Ashbery in Andrew Ross, *The Failure of Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), which painstakingly distinguishes Ashbery's ambitions from those of other avant-gardist poets (160).

<sup>4</sup>Runyon is mostly concerned with the unfolding sorites that develops between adjacent poems across entire volumes, however; and my focus here is on associative structures only within poems. Also, Runyon sees the links-and-bobolinks which tie Warren's volumes together as part of an unconscious or perhaps semi-conscious meaning-making, whereas what I have in mind is always conscious, even if concerned with plumbing implicit things that never fully yield to articulation. The associative style resembles the drift of thinking aloud more than it resembles language or the unconscious mind. This reference is to *The Braided Dream* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990).

<sup>5</sup>Laura Quinney shrewdly groups Ashbery with other poets of what she calls "disappointment," poets whose rhetoric turns against itself, against its ambitions, against even its own impatience with its limitations, seeing in all of them a soured narcissism it can upbraid but not escape. In *Poetics of Disappointment* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999).

<sup>6</sup>Charles Altieri, *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 137. Compare John Shoptaw's description of how Ashbery, through association and dislocation, makes "his poetry the stream of everybody's and anybody's consciousness," and "creates an all-purpose subjectivity which is neither egotistical nor solipsistic." In *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 3.

<sup>7</sup>John Koethe, "The Metaphysical Subject of John Ashbery's Poetry," in *Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery*, ed. David Lehman (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), 87.