

# 科技部補助專題研究計畫報告

## 約翰·艾希伯里後期詩選中的基督教思想

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本研究具有政策應用參考價值：否 是，建議提供機關  
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本研究具影響公共利益之重大發現：否 是

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中文摘要：2017年約翰·艾希伯里（John Ashbery）享耆壽九十，當時多數人已視他為同代人中最重要的美國詩人之一。然而，一如史蒂芬·傑·羅斯（Steven Jay Ross）指出，文評人士大多關注詩人的早期與中期之作，使得他晚期的作品維持一片「遼闊且大部無人涉足的領域」。在這個計畫裡，我成果的重心是以研讀一些艾希伯里最重要且未受矚目的晚期詩作為目標，藉此延伸至他鮮為人知的身分認同這一面向——意即他於天命之年皈依為基督徒的這一身分。

艾希伯里於2003年的訪談文字稿提供了我初步的理解；艾希伯里提及自己閱讀了特定幾位他認為「貼近詩作」的哲學思想家之著作，我因此察覺自己研究中理論部分倚重的一位哲學思想家亦名列其中，即是十九世紀的基督徒丹麥思想家暨筆名美學之始祖——索倫·齊克果（Søren Kierkegaard）。我對於晚期艾希伯里的基督教思想詩學之分析，部分定位在一些針對齊克果畢生著作的批評所衍生的間隙裡。其中包含了美學、道德以及宗教處世方式間的拉鋸；「間接交流（indirect communication）」以及實質上、日常中對他者的關懷間的拉鋸；自身遮蔽（self-concealment）的戲仿手法以及在上帝之前告解般地、透澈地坦白的自生（self-creation）方法間的拉鋸；絕望與希望間的拉鋸；現實中轉瞬的有限性以及藉目的論達到無限之境界間的拉鋸。

我的研究涉及艾希伯里全部已出版詩作的分析，包括一些非常近期的逝後出版作品；而他214頁的詩作《流動與圖》（Flow Chart (1991)）則是本計畫的核心源文本。我運用哲學思想分析並協調文本後的結果，是一種建立在約翰·夏普托（John Shoptaw）和約翰·埃米爾·文森（John Emil Vincent）公開發表的世俗主義者（secularist）評論之上的詮釋；透過回顧詩裡使人迷惑的戲仿手法，以及衍生自齊克果式基督徒信念與渴望中「一覽無遺中隱身」（hiding-in-plain-sight）的具象體，更進一步擴大兩人的評論。夏普托和文森分別連結了詩中矛盾的自白特質，以及自我反思的顧慮與作為永續構成之原動力的焦慮；我的使命則是探尋詩人自我與自我本身直至無限之境界間，不穩卻漸趨果斷的自白「變動」。我這部分的成果大體上是根據雪麗丹·克拉夫（Sheridan Clough）和馬克·伯尼爾（Mark Bernier）以及他們與其他學者所作的樂觀詮釋的研究，將其帶入齊克果理論中各種變化形式的絕望。伯尼爾也是其中一位齊克果作品的詮釋者，他的著作幫助我以日常中（同性）情慾的角度來連結《流動與圖》，將此與齊克果在《愛在流行：一個基督徒的談話省思》（Works of Love (1847)）中的理解做結合，而齊克果的理解是針對當愛人接收到同胞之愛和上帝之愛時，所呈現出的基督徒轉捩點的可能性。

中文關鍵詞：艾希伯里，現代詩，「紐約學派」，基督教精神，齊克果，目的（哲學），戲仿（哲學），自白，絕望，希望，同性情愛

英文摘要：When John Ashbery died in 2017 at the age of 90, he was widely regarded as one of the most important American poets of his generation. And yet, as Stephen J. Ross points out, critics have largely focused on the poet's early and middle periods, with the result that his late work remains a "vast, largely unexplored territory." At the heart of

my work for this project is the aspiration to produce a reading of some Ashbery's most significant and under-appreciated later poetry and to carry this out by attending to an aspect of his identity that has received even scant attention, namely the Christianity to which he converted at around the age of 50.

Having taken my initial cues from the transcript of a 2003 interview in which Ashbery mentions reading certain philosophers he considered "close to poetry," I have found that the theoretical part of my research has been focused to a considerable extent on just one of those philosophers—the nineteenth-century Danish Christian thinker and creator of pseudonymous aesthetic texts, Søren Kierkegaard. My readings of the later Ashbery's Christian poetics are partly situated in the fault-lines emerging from a range of recent critical responses to Kierkegaard. These include tensions between aesthetic, ethical, and religious ways of being in the world; between "indirect communication" and practical, quotidian care for the other; between parodic strategies of self-concealment and forms of self-creation directed toward confessional transparency before God; between despair and hope; and between the reality of temporal finitude and a teleological bid for the infinite.

My research has involved a reading of all of Ashbery's published poetic works, including some very recent posthumously published works, and his 214-page poem *Flow Chart* (1991) has become this project's central primary text. The result of my philosophically mediated reading of this work is an interpretation that builds upon avowedly secularist critical responses by John Shoptaw and John Emil Vincent and enlarges them by attending to the poem's deceptively parodic, "hiding-in-plain-sight" embodiment of Kierkegaardian Christian faith and longing. Where Shoptaw and Vincent relate, respectively, the poem's ambivalently confessional character and its self-reflexive concern with anxiety as an engine of continued composition, my account tracks a faltering yet cumulatively decisive confessional "movement" of relation of self to itself toward the infinite. This part of my work is substantially informed by optimistic exegetical investigations by Sheridan Clough and Mark Bernier among others into the transformative uses of despair in Kierkegaard's theology. Bernier is also one of the interpreters of Kierkegaard whose writing has helped me to relate the quotidian (homo)erotic aspects of *Flow Chart* to Kierkegaard's understanding, in *Works of Love* (1847), of the Christian horizons of possibility that are presented when the lover

is loved as the neighbor and through God.

英文關鍵詞：Ashbery, modern poetry, “New York School,” Christianity, Kierkegaard, telos, parody, confession, despair, hope, homoerotic love

## **“Christianity in John Ashbery’s Later Poetry”: End of Research Period Report**

As will have been the case for a large number of academics recently funded to do research by the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) in Taiwan (R.O.C.), the COVID-19 pandemic had a very considerable effect on my research. In the case of this particular project, I was unable to travel to the United States of America to study relevant archives (most notably the John Ashbery Papers in Houghton Library, Harvard University) and to attend either the 2020 annual conference of the American Literature Association (ALA), which was cancelled, or the same organization’s 2021 conference, which took place but for which my attendance would have necessitated a lengthy quarantine upon my return to Taiwan. My individual proposal for a paper on Ashbery (entitled “Christianity in John Ashbery’s Later Poetry”) was accepted on both occasions. In her reply to my proposal for the 2021 event, Professor Olivia Carr Edenfield, Director of American Literature Association, wrote me (in an email dated Nov 3, 2020): “I remember your proposal and being very excited to hear your paper.”

It was very disappointing to be prevented from having the opportunity to get feedback on my Ashbery work from the participants of a highly respected international conference and especially galling to be denied the chance to sift the archives for evidence of Ashbery’s unpublished textual engagement with Christian ideas and practices. But thankfully—and I really want to express my heartfelt gratitude to the policymakers at MOST for this—I was able to redirect all of the funding that would have been spent on travel, accommodation, and academic activities in the U.S. toward the purchasing of books for my project. The result was that I am now much better informed about the philosophical background to Ashbery’s Christian thinking and practice as a poet than I would otherwise have been. It could be said that because of the restrictions necessarily imposed

on us all due to COVID-19, my Ashbery project took an inward direction, with a slightly greater focus on the relations between specific poetic and philosophical texts (Ashbery's and overwhelmingly those of Kierkegaard) and a lighter emphasis on the sociopolitical and biographical aspects of Ashbery's Christianity than was originally envisaged. I have divided up the main body of this report into two sections. The first section, "Kierkegaard," relays the ideas from the philosophical and religious literature which have turned out to be most relevant in relation to my literary focus on Ashbery. As predicted in my proposal, the theological and philosophical writings of Kierkegaard—as mediated by some of his recent interpreters—have provided me with the main intellectual context for my literary analysis and it is on this literature that I focus here. The second section, "Ashbery," presents an account of my original literary analysis, though in fact it begins with a (sympathetic) critical summary of two other critics' readings of the primary text on which all my attention was eventually turned—namely, Ashbery's 1991 book-length poem *Flow Chart*. Whereas in my proposal I expected to compare Ashbery's Christian poetics to that of contemporary and older writers such as W.H. Auden and James Schuyler, the impossibility of accessing archives has held up this part of my project. (Section 2 contains a brief reference to Auden.) I very much hope that the reader of this report will reach the conclusion that the close-read analysis presented in the second main section of this report is sufficiently illuminating to make up for the loss of a wider social and intertextual approach. The report ends with a Works Cited. This reflects the reading I have done toward the analysis specifically offered in this report.

Before launching into the first of the two main sections of this report, I believe it will be helpful to reiterate the starting point for this project; which, in the simplest terms, is that John Ashbery was one of the major twentieth- and twenty-first century American poets and, though he

converted to Episcopalian Christianity at “around the time he turned fifty” (MacFarquahar 93), his poetry has not yet been examined through the lens of his religious faith or through an extensive consideration of the religious ideas to which his work may relate. The British critic Jeremy Noel-Tod is unusual in drawing attention to this context to my work: “One little-known fact of Ashbery’s biography is that he was a church-goer, who belonged to an Episcopalian congregation—and indeed the language of Christianity is as much a part of his all-American diction as the language of cartoons” (Noel-Tod unpaginated). Prominent scholars of modern American poetry have tended to place Ashbery (and his fellow “New York School” poets) on the side of materialism and an anti-epiphanic tendency in modern literature as a whole (see Epstein 26-27). Fine critics, including the late Lauren Berlant and the two critics to whom I respond in Section 2, have sometimes noted the presence of religious language or even “a religious thought” (Berlant 32) in the poems they’re analyzing, but have chosen not to peer deeply into the possible theological dimensions of that language. In trying to rectify that situation I am attempting to do justice to a part of what Stephen J. Ross has called the “vast, largely unexplored territory” of Ashbery’s later poetry (159).

### **Section 1: Kierkegaard**

As already noted in my proposal, Ashbery indicated the potential relevance of Kierkegaard’s writings to his own in an interview conducted by Mark Ford in 2003. Replying to the question, “Did you read philosophy ever?” (Ashbery, “John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford 58), Ashbery in the transcript says: “I read philosophy that is close to poetry: Plato, Epictetus, Montaigne, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, William James. Wittgenstein a little. Not Spinoza, Hume or Kant” (58). Because of the focus in my project, I naturally began by investigating the

work of the three philosophers mentioned here whose thought is most intimately and affirmatively connected to Christianity—namely, Pascal, Kierkegaard, and William James.<sup>1</sup> But the appropriateness of my original intention to concentrate above all on the Kierkegaardian aspects of Ashbery’s Christian poetics was confirmed when a key phrase from this part of the interview, “philosophy that is close to poetry,” drew my attention to a crucial fault-line in Kierkegaard scholarship with potentially significant implications for our understanding of Ashbery’s work as well.

To emphasize, as Ashbery does in the Ford interview, Kierkegaard’s poetic aspects is to place oneself discursively in the company of interpreters of the Danish philosopher such as Roger Poole, who puts the matter very plainly: “Kierkegaard is, first and foremost, a writer” (“Twentieth-Century Receptions” 61). For this scholar, the “dramatic and dialectical structure of Kierkegaard’s texts” (61) compels us to see him as philosophical writer in the vein of Plato, one whose repeated uses of the modes of pseudonymity and “indirect communication” result in a text which “does not tell us something, it asks us something” (61). Poole fleshes out his characterization of the specifically Kierkegaardian version of “indirect communication” with the statement, “[Kierkegaard] modifies a worldview, in a suggestive and insidious way” (50); and Poole frames the matter more contentiously, as it turns out, by referring to the sense in which Kierkegaard’s “irony and his many-voiced-ness, his *heteroglossia*, distance him from any position that could be asserted to be finally ‘his’ position” (48).

This last interpretation can be considered provocative since, as Poole himself emphasizes, his own “literary” and ultimately “postmodernist” (“Twentieth-Century Receptions” 48-49) view of

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<sup>1</sup> The reader of this report will find two footnote references to the ideas of Pascal and James within this section. This reflects the purely supporting role these fascinating thinkers ended up playing in the present research project. In my future studies I suspect they may feature more centrally.

Kierkegaard puts him at odds with a major strand of Kierkegaard's late modern reception. Whereas Poole in his 1993 work, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, argues (in a classically Derridean and de Manian manner) that a sense of a philosophical intention only emerges in Kierkegaard's work (and then only provisionally) as a result of the textual "traces" and "supplements" accumulated by an historically informed reader's literary-critical response to his texts *as rhetoric*, other Kierkegaard interpreters—especially those published recently by Oxford University Press—have contributed to a view of the philosopher which attests above all to the coherent and possible-to-summarize ethical and theological import of Kierkegaard's writings. The Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford, George Pattison, has been an influential and industrious figure in the latter camp. In Poole's disparaging (and even somewhat patronizing) account, Pattison is one of those who have come to the mistaken conclusion that "once all the games are over" ("Twentieth-Century Receptions" 64)—the distancing games of pseudonymity, that is—then the theologically minded reader will reach Kierkegaard's expression of a "pure and uncontaminated *gnosis*" (64). A more discerning reader, Poole lets us know, would see that Kierkegaard's aesthetic acts of displacement and contradiction necessarily invalidate any such "withdrawal to 'higher' conceptual ground" (64). For Poole, then, Kierkegaard is ethically and epistemologically ambiguous, *all the way down*.

And yet, if anything, the anti-postmodernist theological tradition in Kierkegaard studies to which Poole is opposed has grown in confidence and volubility since the 1990s. Along with books by Pattison there have been several more or less religiously inflected philosophical accounts of Kierkegaard, including those by Clare Carlisle (who has also written a somewhat novelistic biography of Kierkegaard called *Philosopher of the Heart*), Anthony Rudd, Sheridan Hough, and Mark Bernier. Not all of these commentators bypass the complicating factors of

pseudonymity and irony in the way Poole implies is likely to happen when a theologian gets their hands on Kierkegaard's elusive, existentially fragile texts. And for reasons that will be outlined in more detail in the next section of this report, I discovered that these recent anti-postmodernist interpreters offered my project a great deal, especially with regard to my attempts to analyze how some of the later poetry of Ashbery—himself a highly ironic and ambiguous literary performer who has been associated with postmodernism (e.g. Jameson 1)—emerges out of tensions between the aesthetic and the religious and ethical ways of life rather as Kierkegaard understood these things.

In his 2012 book *Self, Value, and Narrative: A Kierkegaardian Approach*, Rudd establishes his own stall in contradistinction to a number of specified interpretative communities, which include “conservative theologians, who see Kierkegaard as firmly planted on the right side of a ‘deep, ugly ditch’ separating Biblical and Platonic beliefs,” and “postmodernists, who want to see Kierkegaard as pioneering the critique of the ‘logocentric’ metaphysics which they castigate Plato for foisting on us” (40). Rudd’s Kierkegaard is Platonic and therefore anti-postmodernist in the specific sense that, like Plato, he apparently holds to what Rudd calls a “richer” teleological view of the self, according to which the self can only be made authentic and whole if it is “aimed, first and foremost, at one particular thing, namely the Good” (45),<sup>2</sup> which both philosophers saw as eternal but which Kierkegaard, unlike Plato, identified with God.

Taking his cues mainly from the “psychological or philosophical” Part One of Kierkegaard’s 1849 work *The Sickness unto Death* (see Rudd 42 n.44), Rudd relays the view he finds there, as expressed by its pseudonymous author Anti-Climacus, that the self is made up of elements that

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<sup>2</sup> This “richer” form of teleology is contrasted with “the more minimal version,” in which the self needs to aim at *something*, but that something can be whatever the self has chosen to will (Rudd 44; emphasis in the original).

are fundamentally in conflict with each other—the poles of self-shaping (transcendence) and of self-acceptance (immanence) (see Rudd 43; see Kierkegaard, *Sickness* 43: “A human being is the synthesis of the infinite and the finite”). On the one hand, there are, as Kierkegaard suggests in *The Sickness unto Death*, “the drives to ‘eternity’ and ‘infinite’ that he took to be essential components of the (potential) self” (Rudd 153); repressing the drives to absolute longing or infinite love, for instance, could leave the individual in an atrophied condition of “petty bourgeois mentality” (Kierkegaard, *Sickness* 71-2) or in the condition of absolute negation perversely welcomed by Sartre (as Rudd would see it). On the other hand, there is our existence as self-conscious temporal agents who are “aware of the pasts we have and . . . consciously attempt to build our futures on the basis of those pasts as we understand them” (Rudd 175). In order to flourish authentically as our human selves, we need to bring the poles of transcendence and immanence into harmony or balance. Doing so is our *telos*, and the difficult but essential means of attaining this goal is by “relating the self as whole to ‘something else’” (43), which is to say the Good/God.

What would an attempt to balance these poles look like in practice? Much of the second half of Rudd’s book is occupied with an argument against the contemporary philosopher Galen Strawson’s view that a person with a non-integrated, non-narratological view of their life can be ethical. Rudd’s stance, following that of the pseudonymous pastor Judge William in Kierkegaard’s first substantial work of 1843, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, is that “the ethical—or we might say, more broadly, the evaluating—life is one that unifies” (Rudd 201) and that “evaluation necessarily takes a narrative form” (208). Taking his cues from the Jungian notion of a need to recognize and integrate “those parts of one’s personality that have been left relatively underdeveloped” but above all from Kierkegaard’s “schematic typology” of persons

(Rudd 241) such as the Schlegel-like aesthete “A” in *Either/Or* who is unable to make specific choices in the right spirit because he has repressed the drive to give his life a specific character or shape (see Rudd 73-77)—which would itself only be possible through a specific projection of the Good (telos)—Rudd offers his own example of the insufficiently realized person. He calls her “the Fifties Wife”. Rather than “just walking out on her marriage and children” (247), Rudd suggests, this type of person should “see her acknowledged desires to be a homemaker, and her repressed desires to be independent, as both valuable aspects of herself (her self)” (247)—for to know oneself “involves coming to know what I care about and value” (248) and to discover “what, at the deepest level, I most value, is to discover what the Good is—or, at any rate, what aspects of the Good I have affinity for, can best *be* for” (248).

The last quoted sentence is typical of the second half of *Self, Value, and Narrative: A Kierkegaardian Approach*, in that Rudd’s concern is with an (hypothetical) individual’s repressed relation to the Good or ethical; the word “God” is conspicuous by its absence. As I continued to think about the implications of Rudd’s subtly secularized approach to Kierkegaard, I remained convinced that an engagement with it could help me to formulate an argument about the rhythms of telos-denying and telos-disclosing in the *discontinuously* narratological textures of Ashbery’s poetry. But I was also conscious of the Christian focus of my project slipping somewhat. At this point, therefore, I turned toward interpretations of Kierkegaard in which the focus, in Judge William’s terms, was not only on an individual’s transition from an aesthetic way of being in the world to an ethical one but from both of these ways of being to a religious mode of existence.

In *Kierkegaard’s Philosophy of Becoming: Movements and Positions* (2005), Carlisle offers an ultimately rather different perspective from Rudd’s on the relation between transcendence and

immanence.<sup>3</sup> In her account of Judge William’s lecture to the aesthete A in the second volume of *Either/Or*, the judge’s ethical view asks for a self-transcending transition from “indifference, impotence, necessity, melancholy, and a preoccupation to the past” on the aesthete’s part into “responsibility, decisiveness, freedom, purpose, and an interest in the future” (58). These two opposed lists of stances within a life represent the either/or of the title; the individual is required to *choose* (from) these possibilities in order to make the direction of her life her own. Where Carlisle’s book begins to differ from Rudd’s is in the emphasis she places on the fundamental shift in horizon between, on the one hand, “a finite approach to ethics” (65) and, on the other, “the infinite relationship to God” (65) as she puts it. In her reading of Judge William’s sermon “Ultimatum” at the end of *Either/Or*, Carlisle frames that difference in the following hierarchical terms: “The aesthete is *indifferent* to the possibilities available to him; the ethical individual recognizes *meaningful difference* such as that between good and evil; the religious person affirms an *absolute difference* between himself and God” (65). In other words, the infinite relationship to God is itself constituted partly through an awareness of one’s finitude. Living *simply* by the “finite” approach involves, in Carlisle’s paraphrase, “calculat[ing] one’s righteousness ‘to a certain degree,’ and with regard to the judgments of men” and as such “leads only to self-doubt” (65), whereas being in an infinite relationship to God involves these felicitous dynamics:

[It] means recognizing that He is absolutely different; being in an infinitely free relationship means that this recognition is filled with love, that God’s difference is joyfully

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<sup>3</sup> At times Carlisle may seem close to the “conservative theologians” to whom Rudd is opposed in his Platonic reading of Kierkegaard. In a chapter on *Repetition* (1843), Carlisle takes this work’s pseudonymous polemicist author, Constantin Constantinius, to be providing an authoritative critique of the Socratic/Platonic theory of knowledge as recollection—authoritative in her view, since, as she puts it, “For Kierkegaard, recollection is *incompatible with Christianity because it signifies immanence*, and a grasp of the truth only in terms of knowledge” (72; my emphasis).

affirmed. While the doubts integral to finitude inhibit one's freedom by reducing one's powers of action, the belief that one is always in the wrong before God, because His love is greater than ours, is "an animating thought" that "makes a man glad to act." . . .

Understanding God's difference is edifying "in a double way," because it at once releases the individual from the paralysis of doubt, and "encourages and inspires action." (Carlisle 65)

Apropos the word "edifying," it should be observed that Carlisle confirms her alignment with the theological/anti-literary branch of Kierkegaard exegesis when she suggests that the difference between Kierkegaard's pseudonymous texts of 1843 and his non-pseudonymous, religious texts of the same period boils down to the following: though both are concerned with the task of becoming a Christian and of "mak[ing] people aware of the essentially Christian," the "aesthetic" literature does this more implicitly[,while] "the religious discourses make their edifying intentions very clear" (*Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming* 114-15). If one were to select a sentence from Carlisle's book to sum up its general drift, it might be this one (referring to Kierkegaard's pseudonymous *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* [1846]) "The Christian's relationship to God transforms his existence by raising it to the significance of eternity, of an eternal happiness" (130).

At the time of writing my proposal I wrongly believed that, in his concern with the theme of teleological selfhood in Kierkegaard's writing, Rudd occupied a somewhat solitary position within his academic field. More recently, however, I have benefitted from a close reading of a number of essays and books centered around this topic. Carlisle's book about becoming is one of them and another is Sheridan Hough's 2015 study, *Kierkegaard's Dancing Tax Collector: Faith, Finitude, and Silence*, which expands on some of the issues raised by Rudd and Carlisle through

a focus on one of the many personae or pseudonymous authors employed by Kierkegaard in his work. Hough's eponymous tax collector is initially Johannes de silentio (John of Silence), whom she calls "a pseudonym with a lot to say" (2), and she frames her book as a love story about "him" and his meditation, in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843), on Abraham—"the anticipatory Christian paradigm of the faithful life" (3). Hough's book has turned out to be an especially rich resource for me in my project since her lucid account of the teleologically organized process of self-creation, repentance, and authentic confession as enunciated by Johannes/Kierkegaard provides a point of comparison with *Flow Chart* (1991)—the long poem from Ashbery's Christian era which has come to be the central primary text in my study. (See the section of this report for discussion of this and other works by Ashbery.)

Appropriately enough, considering the implied music in its title, *Kierkegaard's Dancing Tax Collector* begins with a prelude, includes a postlude and coda, and is substantially constituted by four "movements." The latter word quickly turns out to cover a densely specific range of Kierkegaardian themes and approaches. As Hough acknowledges, albeit only in a belated-looking footnote in the postlude (see Hough 144), the theme of motion in Kierkegaard's works is one on which Carlisle had already meditated to an impressive degree. In Hough's book, "movement" refers initially to the state of movement in which the reader of *Fear and Trembling* continually encounters Johannes de silentio's embodied and pleasurably directed presence—whether we find him singing, dancing, strolling the streets of Copenhagen, or eating with relish. But, as was already the case in *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming*, the term gradually takes on more and more of a sense of "the movements of faith," and eventually we discover Hough has more than one Kierkegaardian tax collector in mind.

In her first movement, Hough is concerned with the creation and retention of a self which needs to occur if a person is to break out of the “prison” or “House of Mirrors” induced by the process of reflecting, which cannot by itself “produce values, commitments or loyalties” (17). Turning at this point toward a non-pseudonymous Kierkegaard text, *Two Ages: the Age of Revolution and the Present Age, A Literary Review* (1846), Hough quotes Kierkegaard asserting that “religious inwardness” is needed for a sufficiently stolid degree of “character” (quoted in Hough 20;) —a level of character or selfhood that can withstand the self-annihilating chattering, hissing, and booing of public opinion, thereby making it possible for a person to “find rest within himself, [and to be] at ease before God” (quoted in Hough 21). A self, Anti-Climatus tells us in *The Sickness unto Death*, is only established when a person becomes a self that relates to itself and wants to be itself, *despite and because of* the despair which consists of not wanting to be (having wanted not to be) this particular self. (The theme of despair will be discussed later in this section of my report.)

But the self’s affirmative relation is itself only possible “by relating to that which has established the whole relation” (*Sickness* 44); or, as Anti-Climatus also puts it, “in relating to itself and wanting to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the power that established it” (44). For Anti-Climatus and for Hough, that power (or ultimate telos) is God and, with Johannes and other authorial figures from Kierkegaard’s works (including Kierkegaard-as-himself) as her guides, Hough suggests that the most fully transparent relation of self to itself and to the ground of its possibility is through confession, or rather “true confession” (Hough 97). True confession is only possible once a person has gone through two processes or “movements”—(1) establishing a self in the manner set out by Anti-Climatus and (2) beginning the process of repentance—“this ongoing reflection on one’s transgressions, ebbing and surging with the quotidian tide” (103).

The latter movement “finds its fruition in the formal act of confession” (103), the “confession-event” (104), which Hough also evokes in the introspective language of what she calls “existential ownership” (104):

We are told that a person “finds out something” during confession: but this “finding out cannot be learning in the ordinary sense. . . . Kierkegaard claims: “God does not find out anything by your confessing, but you, the one confessing do” [*Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (1847) (23)]. . . . What the person “finds out” in confession is something that was already present to her or him in the collection-bag of repentance: but these transgressions are now admitted as part of the very constitution of who one is. I, as a sinner, am not looking on at the rubbish-heap of my failings. I *am* my failings. I am simply a sinner, clothed in my recognition of that sin, standing before God” (104).

As will be explored in the next section of this report, Hough’s Kierkegaardian and highly Christian language is powerfully evocative—when it speaks of “ebbing and surging with the quotidian tide” and the inwardly existential condition of owning/becoming one’s faults—of the textual character and dynamics of Ashbery’s later Christian poetics, especially *Flow Chart*.

Carlisle’s discussions of the Kierkegaardian theme of inwardness also have a bearing on Ashbery’s ambiguously “confessional” Christian poetics, though in her case the emphasis is on inwardness or “secrecy” (*Kierkegaard’s Philosophy of Becoming* 50) as a movement against Hegelian philosophy, in which, as Johannes de silentio points out, the outer is higher than the inner (see *Kierkegaard’s Philosophy of Becoming* 119). When Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous author of the preface in *Either/Or*, Victor Eremita, informs the reader that the manuscript forming the main body of the book was hidden for years inside an escritoire and behind a secret door and that the papers yield no information (“hold their peace” [*Either/Or* 35]) about the

external identity of their two authors, all of this is taken by Carlisle to be part of an essentially disruptive philosophical act on Kierkegaard's part. Eremita "invokes instances of contradiction between inner truth and external manifestation in order to challenge Hegel's description of spiritual progress in terms of increasing self-transparency" (Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming* 50); "contrary to Hegel's view that interiority is dialectically continuous with its external expression . . . an individual's inward life may be concealed" (49).

Carlisle picks up on this anti-Hegelian element later in *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming*. While "the Hegelian scale of truth ascends according to increasing intellectual clarity, the Kierkegaardian scale of truth ascends according to increasing subjective intensity, increasing power, increasing freedom" (95), which Carlisle also refers to as "passion" (95). The latter is a response to what Johannes—in his meditation on the famously problematic case of Abraham, who was prepared to commit the inhuman crime of killing his son out of *faithful* obedience to God—calls a "teleological suspension of the ethical" (*Fear and Trembling* 56). Noting that Johannes does not explicitly tell us why he regards Abraham as an heroic "Knight of Faith" rather than as a murderer, Carlisle helpfully gathers up clusters of ideas from *Repetition* and elsewhere to argue that Johannes' Abraham embodies a transcendent movement beyond the ethical stage of self-doubt (for ethics demands a grounding for its distinctions between good and evil in the universal, which proves to be unforthcoming<sup>4</sup>) into a fully self-actualizing, inward condition of religiousness, which she characterizes thus: "Religiousness—the double movement

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<sup>4</sup> Hough explains the limitations of the ethical way of being in the world thus: "Every ethical claim runs headlong into this epistemic boundary: a person can never be certain that her choices—or her evaluation of those choices, or of the choices of others—are absolutely the right ones" (87). And she also quotes C. Stephen Evans' concise (though arguably circular) remark: "The religious sphere begins when an individual acquires a sense that the demands of the ethical life are ones that cannot possibly be fulfilled" (Hough 87).

of resignation and faith—expresses the maximum passion, accomplishes the greatest transformation, and is, therefore, the highest truth” (95).

Carlisle quotes Johannes on what makes Abraham’s act of faith possible—possible for Abraham himself, though not necessarily for anyone reading his words in nineteenth-century Christendom, which Kierkegaard considered overrun by commercial and other bourgeois considerations and therefore complacently resistant to authentic Christian imperatives: “Faith is preceded by a movement of infinity; only then does faith commence, *nec opinante* [unexpected], by virtue of the absurd” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 69; quoted in Carlisle 95). But despite there being several pages listed under “absurd” in the index of Carlisle’s book and also of Hough’s book, neither of these otherwise very illuminating interpreters reflective extensively on the implications of Johannes’s repeated emphasis on the absurd aspects of religiousness. This matters for my project since Ashbery’s poetry is famously much given over to the absurd (as well as to the surreal) and there is even a hint of it in the section about Christian faith in the interview-article by Larissa MacFarquhar that was so foundational for my project: “I guess this is what I believe no matter how unlikely it seems that there really is a God” (MacFarquhar 93).<sup>5</sup>

It is helpful, therefore, to turn to Michael Hamburger’s provocatively titled “review” of Kierkegaard’s *Journals 1853-55* of 1965, “A Refusal to Review Kierkegaard,” in which the poet-critic refers to the journals as “not so much edifying, as profoundly shocking and disturbing, since they call in question not only official Christianity of every kind, but the humanistic and

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<sup>5</sup> Another possible way of reading Ashbery’s statement would be in terms of the pragmatic defense of religious faith provided by William James in the 1896 essay “The Will to Believe.” There, the American thinker adopts a slightly modified version of Pascal’s famous wager to argue that the pursuit of the good and of truth is too important to attempt to avoid error at all costs in the way that the religious sceptic is inclined to do: “We cannot escape the issue by remaining skeptical and waiting for more light, because, although we do avoid error in that way *if religion be untrue*, we lose the good, *if it be true*, just as certainly as if we positively choose to disbelieve” (James 26; emphasis in the original).

materialistic values, including the aesthetic and artistic, that have replaced religion, as Kierkegaard knew that they would” (47-48). At the outset, Hamburger declares: “to review this book is indecent, like giving a running commentary on the eruption of a volcano, from a safe distance” (45). He is particularly struck by Kierkegaard’s apparent view that women were unfit to become Christians as a result of their inability to “experience God as the absurd” (47), and he quotes these lines from the journals, among others: “No, I am serving God, but without authority. My task is to make room for God to come. . . . So it is easy to see why I must be quite literally a single man, and so must be maintained in great weakness and fragility” (quoted in Hamburger 47). Hamburger’s responses to Kierkegaard’s journals may be conditioned to a considerable extent by secular humanist conceptions of psychological equilibrium, but the impression the poet-critic leaves us with is not entirely different from that created by the theologically-minded Kierkegaardian M. Jamie Ferreira in her reading of the Christian “leap of faith” as it represented by the pseudonymous Climacus in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Telling us that Kierkegaard equates passion (see Carlisle above) with pathos or tension, she relays to us that “there is tension in an *individual’s* relation to an *eternal* happiness, to an *absolute* telos” (Ferreira 223; emphasis in original) and that pathos is “sharpened” in Christianity (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 581) because it demands that a person “venture against the understanding” (429)—which is to say it involves great *risk* to one’s thought.

To be fair to Hough, her book does make space for some of the more disquieting psychodynamics involved in the movement of faith as Kierkegaard presents them, though she tends to reach a happy ending rather more quickly than Hamburger’s anti-review would seem to allow. The climax to her narrative comes when she reflects on how the cheerfulness of the pseudonymous tax collector of *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes de silentio, “comes into focus”

(116) as a result of the experiences relayed by *another* pseudonymous tax collector in Kierkegaard's oeuvre. In *Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* (1849) (collected in the English-language compilation *Without Authority*), a second tax collector confirms what Hough calls the "reassurance" of communion that "all human suffering—even the sinful results of negligence and perfidy—can be healed and made use of in the world" (Hough 114). The confirmation comes through his description of being utterly alone "before God's holiness" with a feeling of being horribly displeased by himself and then finding that "the cry comes by itself . . . terror produces this cry, 'God be merciful to me, a sinner'" (*Without Authority* 131; quoted in Hough 115). From this, Hough suggests, we can understand how Johannes, despite his sense of inferiority in relation to Abraham and of course God, can be accepted as a true representation of a life authentically animated by "delight in his immediate, finite circumstances" (Hough 116), since his is a life structured around thanksgiving, "a thanks only made possible by his encounter with God, through confession" (116).

Hough's language in this section struck me as pivoting very suggestively between what Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino, in their introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (1998) call a "volitionist reading" of the philosopher—"which suggest[s] that faith is conditioned by an act of will"—and the opposing view that "it is only by the mercy and grace of God that God comes into our lives" (10). The volitionist view is emphasized in what we saw above of Carlisle's endorsement of Judge William's instruction to the aesthete to choose a responsible direction in life as part of a liberating-to-act acceptance of the finitude he is in relation to God. On the other hand, we find Philip L. Quinn drawing attention, in his essay "Kierkegaard's Christian Ethics," to the idea that when the pseudonymous author of Kierkegaard's *Practice in Christianity* (1850) Anti-Climacus issues the injunction to readers to

become “contemporary with Christ’s presence” (*Practice* 9)—which in practical terms means being prepared to be offensive and to suffer as Christ did for the good—this ethics of imitating Christ allows for “the propriety of having recourse to grace because [it is] embedded in a larger Christian worldview” (Quinn 374).<sup>6</sup> Which is another way of saying, as Hough does, that when the terrified cry of the sinner goes out into the universe, it should be in expectation of God’s presence manifesting itself in order to help the sinner continue along her best teleological way.

Hough’s flexibly optimistic Christian response to the uses of despair in Kierkegaard is echoed in Mark Bernier’s *The Task of Hope in Kierkegaard* (2015), despite some crucial differences of emphasis. This is an extremely subtle and thoroughgoing response to Kierkegaard’s work as a whole—one that is alive to nuance and written by an author who is unafraid to disagree (respectfully) with other interpreters. Bernier’s book helped me to understand the *logic* of the absurd in Kierkegaard’s work in a way no other commentator had done, even if he doesn’t stare into its horrifying and nullifying aspects with the same degree of passion as that of Kierkegaard-as-Johannes in *Fear and Trembling*.<sup>7</sup> Abraham’s faith, as it presented by Johannes, is grounded in the absurd. It is grounded in the absurd because “The absurd is to stake oneself on everything being possible for God,” Bernier writes (192), for this is “not a claim that can be evaluated by human understanding” (192). Abraham knows God has promised him a child of blessing, and this “makes Abraham’s faith even more blatantly grounded in the absurd” (195), since, as

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<sup>6</sup> Considerably less optimistic versions of grace exist in the theological canon. In “Grace and Religious Belief in Pascal,” Michael Moriarty explains Pascal’s view that when some “hitherto religious sin and never recover[,] . . . the deprivation of grace is permanent” and “lapsing is not their own fault” (Moriarty 150)—not least because “prayer itself requires a gift of grace: it is not altogether within our power” (150).

<sup>7</sup> “Thinking about Abraham is another matter, however; then I am shattered. I am constantly aware of the prodigious paradox that is the content of Abraham’s life. I am constantly repelled, and, despite all its passion, my thought cannot penetrate it, cannot get ahead by a hairsbreadth. I stretch every muscle to get a perspective, and at the very same instant I become paralyzed” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 33)

Johannes puts it, “During all this time he had faith; he had faith that God would not demand Isaac of him, while he was willing to sacrifice him if it was demanded” (*Fear and Trembling* 35).

From this Bernier deduces that “Kierkegaardian faith is essentially trust—in particular, it is to trust God with one’s highest good, which must include the vindication of the ethical form of one’s life” (Bernier 303). For “the impossibility of Abraham’s life is not only in keeping Isaac, but it is being able to fulfil both duties simultaneously: the religious and the ethical” (204). In summary, “faith is the willingness to hope” (203) and “faith is the movement to secure a ground which makes hope possible” (204), which is “the role of the absurd” (204). Earlier on in *The Task of Hope in Kierkegaard*, Bernier focuses his attention on *Works of Love* (1847), in which, as Bernier puts it, “Kierkegaard’s discussion of authentic hope is rooted in his interpretation of the Apostle Paul’s claim in I Corinthians 13: 17 that ‘love hopes all things [*Works of Love* 246]’” (Bernier 126). There is little explicit mention of the absurd here, but nonetheless certain aspects of this section struck me as being extremely relevant to Ashbery’s work, and especially to *Flow Chart*.

Authentic hope for Kierkegaard, Bernier relays, is “ultimately an expectation of the good” (128) and the fulfilment of this possibility would be realized either by salvation in the afterlife or through what Kierkegaard calls “the multiplicity” (*Works of Love* 249). This last phrase refers to the collection of all things for which we should hope and from which potential basis Kierkegaard tries to suggest the following (in Bernier’s formulation): “an attitude of *openness* toward possibility, toward the future as such—to see all possibility hopefully, [to see] that all possibility stands in relation to the possibility of the good” (Bernier 129; emphasis in the original). The idea of an inclusive temperament of openness toward possibility is one with which Ashbery in

particular and the “New York School” in general have long been associated (see, for instance, Lehman 105)—usually in a favorable and always in a secular way. For that reason, Bernier’s text seemed to disclose the possibility of reorienting critical responses to Ashbery without sacrificing the insights of a tradition. But Bernier’s commentary on *Works of Love* appeared yet more intimately related to Ashbery’s poetics when I arrived at his paragraph discussing Kierkegaard’s concern with the way we relate to possibility “through temporal process, where the future is disclosed slowly, rather than all at once” and where the multiplicity of all things is “never fully present to the one who hopes” (Bernier 129). This will be returned to in the next section.

The other part of Bernier’s commentary on the theme of hope in *Works of Love* that seemed germane to my research relates, unsurprisingly, to love. As Bernier points out, Kierkegaard views love as “a task, a duty” (134)—one which takes shape first through a reiteration of the injunction of Matthew 22: 39 to love your neighbor as yourself (*Works of Love* 17). It then develops through Kierkegaard’s contention that one should also hope for one’s neighbor as if she were oneself, since, in Bernier’s dazzling paraphrase:

[W]hether one hopes or despairs, for oneself or the other, is determined by one’s relation to the possibility of the good. . . . If this good is the same for everyone—in this eternal, spiritual sense—and it relates to and manifests in possibility, with an “infinite connectedness” [and Kierkegaard is indeed claiming all these things, “by virtue of the absurd,” as Bernier’s book later makes clear], then the distinction collapses between my own horizon of possibility, and the horizon of the other. The good is the same in each case, and closure to the good for either horizon will have the same result on the self. Thus, to limit possibility for another is to limit it for oneself. (Bernier 137)

Here again Bernier's elegant attentiveness to Kierkegaard's religious ethics holds open the possibility of revisiting secular critical responses to Ashbery—in particular, to his manner of “providing space for the reader in his poems” (Vincent 143) and even of “show[ing] a faith in his poetry to contact others, or conjure them” (Vincent 153), including lovers—but doing so now in the context of his assumed Christian faith. In a section of *Works of Love* called “You Shall Love the Neighbor,” Kierkegaard uncompromisingly states that the poet writing *qua* poet under Christendom (i.e. in the bourgeois societal circumstances in which true faith is made less likely) is necessarily secular because poetry's treatment of “erotic love and friendship belongs to paganism” (44) and “contain[s] no moral task” (50-1). My analytical task therefore became partly one of examining whether or not Ashbery, in *Flow Chart* in particular, offers a way to imagine *through poetry* how, with God as the middle position between us and those we love, human individuals might be able to ascend to the duty of the Christian love of neighbor— a love that must be applied equally to all, including one's own self; a love that Kierkegaard believed to be “invulnerable to alterations in its object” (Quinn 355), because, unlike the erotic lover, the neighbor is not the one who “holds you fast” (Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* 355).

Carlisle's, Hough's, and Bernier's studies of Kierkegaard's writings are all based on the assumption that the reader will accept the necessity of an explicitly Christian religious faith/hope—for others as for oneself—in the teeth of any despair arising from the difficulty of coming to such acceptance. Rudd makes a similar assumption about the galvanizing power of an ethical telos forged from within the becoming self of the individual. And in some of George Pattison's recent commentary on Kierkegaard, there is, if anything, even more emphasis on the practical (as well as ritualized) day-to-day steps that the theologically inclined reader could take to becoming a Christian in the (pseudonymously or non-pseudonymously) Kierkegaardian sense.

In his 2012 book *Kierkegaard and the Theology of the Nineteenth Century*, Pattison turns to the philosopher's short work of 1849, *The Lily and the Bird of the Air: Three Godly Discourses*, where Kierkegaard makes the case that Christianity offers a cure for anxiety, which he defines as pagan. A Christian is someone who has embraced their freedom so as to transcend (or forget) suffering and has done so in approximate imitation of the silence, obedience, and joy manifested by the birds of the air and the grass of the field (Matthew 6: 24). A daily practice of silence is required since, as Pattison explains, "language increases suffering because it transposes it into a realm where one suffering can be compared with another and suffering as a whole compared with happiness" (122). While acknowledging that Kierkegaard engaged with the reality of suffering more extensively elsewhere—including in *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) and in the section of *The Sickness unto Death* comparing anxiety to vertigo (the guilt-inducing freedom to throw oneself into the abyss) (see Pattison 132-34)—Pattison nonetheless cleaves to the 1849 work's exhortation to accept that "simply by virtue of our bodily life in the world, we can turn to God and become like the lilies and the birds: 'the world' can become God's good creation" (210).<sup>8</sup>

Reading Pattison and the other optimistically teleological interpreters' work, one may sometimes feel a little removed from the obsessive, circular, worrying voice that characterizes some of Kierkegaard's most influential works. In my original proposal for this research project, I pointed to Laura Quinney's pessimistic Kierkegaardian reading of Ashbery's pre-conversion *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975) as one model for interpreting his post-conversion poetry.

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<sup>8</sup> "[T]hat you came into existence, that you exist, that 'today' you receive the necessities of existence . . . that you can see—consider this: that you can see, that you can hear . . . that it becomes winter, that all of nature disguises itself . . . that spring comes, that birds come in large flocks . . . that autumn comes, that the birds fly away . . . so that you will not become bored with them . . . Is this supposed to be nothing to rejoice over!" (Kierkegaard, *The Lily of the Field* 78-9)

I wondered if I would discover reading later Ashbery—as Quinney found reading middle-period Ashbery through Kierkegaard’s/Climacus’ *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*—that the more we discover of our own subjectivity, the more we are disappointed by our failure to have “cognitive command” (Quinney 145) over our experience. This note seems to be quite rare in the contemporary Kierkegaardian literature, but I was reminded of Quinney when I read Hannay’s essay “Kierkegaard and the Variety of Despair,” which has a much more open-ended and certainly less hopeful account of the uses of despair than is found in Bernier or Hough.

According to Anti-Climacus in *Sickness*, Hannay reminds us, “the most common forms of despair ‘in the world’ are those in which people are as yet not conscious of themselves ‘as spirit’” (Hannay 345). But becoming conscious of ourselves as spirit requires us to “stand before God” (344) and “The problem facing Kierkegaard himself,” we are told, “was that even when the ‘measure’ is God, one still does not *know* whether one is in despair or not” (344; emphasis in the original). Waking up to one’s finitude in the face of God can actually mean waking up to *greater* anxiety and despair in the face of what Daniel Watts (in his ambivalently commendatory review of the books by Rudd and Pattison discussed in this report) calls “the possibility of a devastating collapse in one’s sense of being in control” (23).

The longer I immersed myself in the Christian Kierkegaardian literature, the more grateful I was to his interpreters for clarifying and connecting his ideas, but I also found I needed to return to Kierkegaard’s and his personas’ “actual” voices—voices such as this one, for instance: “For the self is a synthesis in which the finite is the confining factor, the infinite the expanding factor. Infinitude’s despair is therefore the fantastic, the boundless; for the self is only healthy and free from despair when, precisely by having despaired, it is grounded transparently in God” (*Sickness* 60). The fantastic and the boundless are where we regularly seem to find ourselves as readers of

Ashbery's *Flow Chart*. In this way Kierkegaard's own dialectical language (here mediated by the pseudonymous Anti-Climacus) has regularly whetted my appetite anew for discovering how much of despair and how much of the freedom from despair would seem to typify Ashbery's religious engagements, especially in his most voluminous effort in the poetic mode of self-creation within sight of the radical transparency of true confession.

## **Section 2: Ashbery**

It is difficult to say exactly how or when I determined to make *Flow Chart* the focus of my close reading of Ashbery's Christian period. In any case, at a certain point during my project I began to notice significant links between the teleologically oriented interpreters of Kierkegaard's Christian philosophy and Ashbery's book-length poem—and also between the former and some of Ashbery's most attentive critical readers, even if the latter group could be seen to be holding back from or actively eschewing religious and teleological glosses. In fact, I began to see my dialogue with the major commentaries on *Flow Chart* as one in which I had an opportunity to allow Kierkegaardian religious concerns to rise up as if from the superseded pre-conscious of these readings in the interests of a new understanding about what makes Ashbery's dauntingly long 1991 work both so strange and so compelling.

Any critic expecting to say anything original about the poetry Ashbery published up to and including *Flow Chart* must first check to see whether John Shoptaw already said it in his 1994 book *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry*. The chapter of his book on *Flow Chart* begins with an epigraph, a quotation from Book X of Saint Augustine's *Confessions* in which the Berber-Roman theologian is raising the question of what value there might be in

making known what he is now in the way that many people, both strangers and acquaintances, apparently wish him to do (“What does it profit me, then, O Lord, to whom my conscience confesses daily”? [quoted in Shoptaw 301]). This sets the stage for a dense and lively commentary that at one point links the poem to Augustine through the fact that the latter’s mother “figures prominently in the conversion narrative” (321) and that Ashbery’s poem began to come into being in the fall of 1987 when the artist Trevor Winkfield (later the designer of the book’s cover) suggested the poet write a “one-hundred-page poem about his mother, who had died the previous January” (302).

Later on, Shoptaw mentions that “Like Augustine, Milton, and the Ashbery of *Three Poems* [1972], the author of *Flow Chart* raises the question of predetermination” (315). But in a characteristic move, this critic assures us that the poem’s voiced concern about the lack of free will is foreshadowing not a religious concern but an ethical and political one about the power of governments to overrule a people’s right to democracy or an individual’s right to privacy. The latter theme is particularly prominent in a reading that depicts *Flow Chart* as what Shoptaw calls a “misrepresentative” autobiography (304)—“a flow chart or schematic outline of an autobiography into which readers may process their own manufactured lives” (307) and that has already been studded with popular, generic, fictional, and mythical names that “have little or nothing to do with their autobiographer” (304-05).

In other words, the poem is being read as a form of disavowal of the autobiography genre, but one that carries spectral traces of canonical autobiographical (or “autofictional”) writers from Augustine through Wordsworth’s “spontaneous” approach (Shoptaw 308), and up to Barthes’ foregrounding of his mother in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (Shoptaw 322). By consistently breaking the traditional pact or “law” (a recurrent word in the poem) that

autobiographers should “tell the whole truth of [their] life and to judge (and ‘sentence’ it accordingly)” (331), Shoptaw suggests, Ashbery is inviting a deviation *out* of a literary culture of enviously scrutinizing readers, *out* of a “new activist incursion” into the individual rights to sexual relations among consenting homosexuals such as Ashbery in 1980s America (335),<sup>9</sup> and *into* the “latent happiness” (333) of a poetic mode Shoptaw characterizes as a “a retrospective ramble, wandering, seemingly without premeditation or embarrassment, from one vaguely defined scene or topic to the next” (301-02). Shoptaw also frames it in this way: “*Flow Chart* is not the mimetic, autobiographical record of his entire life up to the time of writing, but the accurate, faithful transcript of over six months spent reflecting on his own and anybody’s life and life story. *Flow Chart* is thus as autobiographical as Book X of St. Augustine’s *Confessions*” (308).

As already suggested here, the very interesting thing about Shoptaw’s account of *Flow Chart* from the point of view of my project is that on numerous occasions he draws attention to religious language in the poem—beginning with the comment that “The opening pages, with their religious atmosphere, feature a congregational ‘we’” (Shoptaw 310)—but at no point is there even a suggestion that anything non-secular should be thought to be going on there. Noting the appearance at one moment of the poem of what the critic calls a “confusing” “vision of an alternate universe” (316), he suggests that the description of the latter as “dimensionless and without desire” (Ashbery, *Flow Chart* 200) should be read as a playful deformation of “dimensionless and without end” and that Ashbery is essentially rejecting the idea of a “heavenly ‘world without end’” because it “leaves no room for desire” (Shoptaw 316): “Ashbery plays

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<sup>9</sup> “[I]n *Bowers vs. Hardwick* (July 1986) the Supreme Court ruled 5 to 4 that the Constitution does not protect sexual relations between consenting homosexual adults. The Georgia sodomy case, as it is called, signaled a new activist incursion into individual rights by the Supreme Court . . . In Reagan’s 1980s, consenting homosexuals became hostages in their own bedrooms” (Shoptaw 335).

instead according to the rules of teleology without reaching an ending, only the end of the room” (316)—which is to say he is pushing at the limits of metaphysically/ideologically imposed confinement in the domain of human desire. (Shoptaw elsewhere notes the way in which “[t]he divergence of the homosexual from the heterosexual way of life is often represented in *Flow Chart* as an original fork or crossroads” [326]). When this critic reads Ashbery responding to people—apparently his envious reviewers—who have accused him of “playing mind-games” with the hostile-sounding words, “we’ll see who rakes in / the chips come Judgment Day” (*Flow Chart* 123), the clear assumption is that any authoritative judgment in the matter will not be divine.

The phrase “Last Judgment” is also quoted in the other very substantial published critical response to *Flow Chart*—John Emil Vincent’s 2007 book *John Ashbery and You: His Later Books*, which overlaps with Shoptaw’s book only in its coverage of *Flow Chart* and Ashbery’s preceding volume, *April Galleons* (1987). Vincent is actually quoting the phrase where it appears in a different part of the poem from that quoted by Shoptaw (Ashbery, *Flow Chart* 128; see Vincent 63), but once again the context is made to seem as secular as possible. Vincent’s interest at this point and many other points in his chapter on *Flow Chart* is with what he sees as its self-reflexive tracing of “the agonistic relation between an author and the structure of the book he has chosen for it” (55). The idea of a final reckoning, according to Vincent’s reading, corresponds to “the poet’s worries about living up to the demand of the project” (63-4).

It is an interpretation which resonates with the contemporary study of literary lateness and old age. Reading the lines, “One can retool the context, but slowly, / slowly . . . one / should think of it as a virtuoso spinning-song whose relentless *roulades* promise minor / disturbances” (Ashbery, *Flow Chart* 33), Vincent offers the following gloss: “The poet starts to invent ways of preventing

the loss of the pulsion effected by the increasingly demanding chart” (Vincent 58). He repeats the word “pulsion” several times in his chapter and it aligns with Ashbery’s own word “purpose” from near the close of *Flow Chart*: “There must have been some purpose to this, / some idea hiding in the vacuity, the regular oblongs that comprise / your adverse assessment of my capabilities” (*Flow Chart* 68). Whereas Shoptaw’s general reading is one that would encourage us to see the poet metaphorically punching back against his over-zealous critics and the surveillance state, Vincent sees this as the poet worrying about whether the “purpose of the exercise” will have become clear by the time the limited number of sheets has been filled up. In my view, however, this late-in-the-poem insistence (whether desperate or confident) that there “must have been some purpose in this” is an invitation to readers to consider if there is any part of the poem’s *raison d’être* that they have so far been inclined to miss.

The account of *Flow Chart* that has emerged in my research—from my repeated readings of it through the prism of Kierkegaard’s theologically interpreted writings—is one in which the “religious atmosphere” of the first section of the poem is not some arbitrary or thematically refracted rhetorical feature, as Shoptaw implies, but rather the beginning of a serious yet often artfully submerged meditation on Christian religious concerns. Where Shoptaw reads the poem as a subversion of autobiographical genre conventions for the sake of freedom from repressive scrutiny and Vincent highlights a self-reflexive concern with anxiety as an engine of continued composition, I find a faltering yet cumulatively decisive confessional “movement” of relation of self to itself which the poet is eventually seen to have undertaken in the interests of an opening awareness of God’s absolute, liberating difference to the human individual. In other words, the previously quoted line, “There must have been some purpose to this,” may indeed refer self-reflexively to the chart poem as the poet inspects it near the point of its completion, but it also

stands for a longing for and anticipatory tasting of “telos,” to employ Rudd’s and other Kierkegaardians’ terminology.

As noted above, teleology, in Shoptaw’s view, is something that Ashbery playfully invokes merely in order to concentrate on the anti-authoritarian (homo)textual pleasure principle. And, indeed, *Flow Chart* does often look and read as a postmodern endorsement of the inevitability and even desirability of flux. But leaving the matter there is to miss the way in which it “slowly, slowly” advances the “purpose” of an ethical and religious critique/confession of its own aesthetic drives. This happens as a result of an accumulation of teleological and religious images and tropes that seem at first to be parodic in intent but retrospectively—and especially in light of Ashbery’s publicly stated conversion to Episcopalianism and his stated interest in Kierkegaard—take on the form of a Christian hiding in plain sight.

For anyone approaching the opening lines of *Flow Chart* via Kierkegaard and his interpreters, the resonances they fetch up from his theological philosophy are certainly hard to miss:

Still in the published city but not yet  
overtaken by a new form of despair, I ask  
the diagram: is it the foretaste of pain  
it might easily be? Or an emptiness  
so sudden it leaves the girders  
whanging in the absence of wind,  
the sky milk-blue and astringent? We know life is so busy,  
but a larger activity shrouds it, and this is something

we can never feel, except occasionally, in small signs

put to warn us and as soon expunged, in part

or wholly. (*Flow Chart 3*)

While the “new form of despair” at this opening could definitely refer to Ashbery’s feelings about his mother’s death—that violently resonant “emptiness”—the metaphysical and transformative potential of this ostensibly negative emotion is figured already in the notion of “a larger activity” *shrouding* the busyness of life. We seem to have been thrown into a version of the Platonic cave situation in which the proleptic “signs” of ultimate significance and of nourishing (“milk-blue”), admonitory judgment (“astringent,” “warn us”) are available but intermittent. That this scene of introspection (“I ask the diagram”) and anticipation (not yet overtaken”) is to be imagined as Christian in character is hinted at in the word “shrouds”—which brings thoughts of Christ’s tomb; or at least it is able to do so under the retrospective influence of several words and phrases studded into the lines following the quoted opening: “Sad grows the river god” (Ashbery, *Flow Chart 3*); “those who sense something / squeamish in his arrival know enough to look up /from the page they are reading” (3); “the plaited lines that extend / like a bronze chain into eternity” (3).

It needs to be admitted from the outset that these phrases—and many others like them later in the poem—are far from being straightforwardly Christian in meaning. Poole’s term “indirect communication” would be one way of referring to Ashbery’s slyly self-protective manner of advancing his ethical and religious thematics. The translationese syntax and lower-case “g” for “god” in “Sad grows the river god” suggest Ashbery is serving up a pastiche of the Swabian German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, whom he admits, in his prose work *Other Traditions* (2000), to

having used as a “poetic jump-start for times when the batteries have run down” (5). And “squeamish” may seem an odd word to use if your serious concern is with the immanent coming of Christ into the world—a referent for the lines in question especially if we accept the sly tonal allusion in them to W.H. Auden’s ekphrastic “Musée des Beaux Arts,” where everyone and everything in Brueghel’s *Icarus* painting—including a ship that “must have seen / Something amazing”—are observed “turn[ing] away” either from the disaster of Icarus’s descent or from the figuratively even more Christ-like “miraculous birth” (Auden 179). In this intertextual context, the unappealing squeamishness of “his” (lower-case “h”) “arrival” reinforces the sense of an as-yet-uninstalled astringent mode of judgment, one that must compete for attention with the “noisy” public thoroughfare (“the published city”) of Ashbery’s own polyvocal poem, with its own claims to “eternity”—fame or the endless “chains” of signifiers, perhaps.

At this point, the poet interrupts himself in his already wildly associative flow:

*It seems I was reading something;*

I have forgotten the sense of it or what the small

role of the central poem made me want to feel. No matter.

The words, distant now, and mitred, glint. Yet no one

ever escapes the forest of agony and pleasure that keeps them

in a solution that has become permanent through inertia. (*Flow Chart 4*)

These lines record a loss of purpose, a sense of inertia: even in their absence from the organizing point of consciousness, the distant words have a metallic obduracy (“mitred”) that seems to supplant public religious ceremony but also the individual agency of the mind (or spirit). But

then a transitional sentence suggests that a sticky yet dialectically fluid “solution” of personal despair and joy—to use words made familiar by the Kierkegaardian literature—is “permanent,” a formulation that can make us wonder whether the poem has already been attempting some sort of movement away from “the paralysis of self-doubt” (Carlisle, *Kierkegaard’s Philosophy of Becoming* 65) through a voluntarily staged or grace-donated encounter between God’s infinity and the individual’s harrowing attention upon her own finitude.

What needs to be emphasized is that when *Flow Chart* supplies us with a sense of the teleological Good that must be aimed for in order to overcome stasis, it does so in a deflationary, and skittish manner, and in a way that points to the enduring hold of “the sheer activity of self-creation (and then of self-deconstruction and re-invention)” (Rudd 39)—which is the “radically ephemeral” (39), non-shaping, non-transcendent mode of existence that Kierkegaard criticized Schlegel for upholding (see Rudd 39-40). For instance, on p. 43 of the poem, Ashbery uses a phrase, “to take full awareness of one’s unawareness” (*Flow Chart* 43), which evokes the Kierkegaardian ethical imperative to shape the disparate parts of our lives into an end-defined narrative flow and ultimately to do so through a staking of oneself in God that cannot be evaluated by human understanding. The same section evokes the practical Kierkegaardian Christianity of “You Shall Love *the Neighbor*” in the teleological language of a supernatural quest:

The old ghouls

will have to be derided before one faces up to the specter of the empty stadium

at dusk, bare branches aquiver. How about your friend

in the hospital: did you call him? How many bridges between here and the end of that journey?

Over wells, along walls, silently one creeps along. (*Flow Chart* 43)

Would it be over-interpreting to hear part of Kierkegaard's solution to the vertigo-like anxiety of consciousness in the word "silently"? It probably would be, though the word "end"—signifying the Christian's self-galvanizing hope in the *universal* friend/neighbor but also a guilty sense of vulnerability in relation to a possible death of a *particular*, hospitalized friend<sup>10</sup>—tunes up our preparedness for the teleological significance of the spectral human "unawareness" or emptiness to which one must "face up." But as I have already suggested, progress beyond an aesthetic condition of directionless becoming in pursuit of the Good (never mind toward God) is far from uncomplicated, not least as a result of Ashbery's libidinal addiction to an associative deformation of conventional autobiography and allegory. The poet who was just now an anonymized creeping quester suddenly tells us, "Employment is difficult: I mean / it's difficult for me to hold a job long" (43), which seems to belong to the entirely non-interiorized confessional world of AA meetings or late 1980s TV talk shows. And when the injunction "to take full possession of one's unawareness" arrives it does so as part of that disingenuously self-exculpating sentence. If this is authentic confession, then it is of an unstable sort, and yet it is on the way.

To demonstrate how a properly religious sense of purposeful hope and self-transparency lingers throbbingly in *Flow Chart*, despite incessant deviations into the aesthetic mode, one can attend to the way certain figurative elements develop or at least maintain a foothold in the

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<sup>10</sup> As Vincent and others have shown, HIV/AIDS is a floating, intangible presence in Ashbery's books from at least *April Galleons* onwards. (See Vincent 30.)

textuality. The quest or journey motif is one of these, so that we find the poet returning on p. 49 to the opening's imagery of blocked yet proleptically available telos and Christ's tomb as a signifier of preposterous, essential hope, this time expressed in a simultaneously more banal but also more immediate and epiphanically joyful way: "I was sitting in my car / and suddenly I could see down the whole distance I had come, and the fog-shrouded destination / became clear again, as it has so many times over the past weeks" (49). Six pages later we encounter another of the metaphorical strains that persists. The poet projects himself as a landscape gardener, which implants the idea of a purposeful shaping within finite given circumstances ("I would assemble / landscapes from insect-tunneled wood" [55]). At times the gardening imagery suggests a painful duration within the temporality of patience, which Ashbery desentimentalizes in his characteristic way: "the unplanted cabbages stand tearful out of the mist, there is no / reason to go on ploughing the garden once winter has begun, yet/ what else is there to do, except sweep the floor / with automatic hand" (62). The allusion to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in the last two words (Eliot 64) implies masturbatory sterility or perhaps endurance. In any case, there is a more fertile sense of passionately emergent inner telos when the poet announces, "It is never too late to mend / no matter how we clamor to redo everything from the ground up; the chatter never subsides / . . . / a longing one does not subdue" (73).

Bearing in mind the poetic context, "chatter" here certainly refers to the individual's internalized voices of desire but it also carries the idea, already carried by the journey/quest motif, of a private process of establishing selfhood at a distance from noise of public opinion. The would-be gardener has already told us he would "go live in a hole somewhere / lest pleasant anomalies impose bumptious charades promoting peace to others and to all comers" (55), which sounds like a surreal but, in the anti-surveillance context explored by Shoptaw, no less resolved

version of Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (Yeats 60). We are told about "the luxury of getting away" (55). In the lines directly preceding the introduction of the gardening motif, the poet-speaker makes the comically extreme and—from a Christian/Kierkegaardian point of view—blasphemously self-limiting statement: "Anything so long as it's not caused by neighbors / whose potential for wrecking your life is greater now than at any point in the future" (55).

The switch from "past" to "future" at the end of the sentence keeps the idea of destination and radical (self-)transformation in the foreground—as does the imperative a few lines later: "Talk it over with your gardener, see / the bright shoots . . ." (55). Optimism may seem corny at this precise moment, but the fact that the aspiration "to assemble / landscapes . . . and go live in a hole" comes shortly after the injunction to resolve conflicts through "your gardener" strongly implies a teleological process of imitation of Christ the God-man—a process in which the neighbor can and must be loved as oneself so that neither is denied the freedom to become authentically themselves (free from *inauthentically* neighborly chatter) on their way to becoming fully ventured Christians.

The penultimate and final sections of *Flow Chart* are notable for a handful of love lyrics. At one point, Ashbery seems to be parodying the Shakespearean language of endings ("I'll riddle thee / about what we heard before we came here, how much is already done" [192]), but the overall effect is one of offering the reader some quite moving and intimate snapshots of the phenomenology of (homo)erotic or married daily life in late middle or old age:

I awoke, yet I dreamed still. It seemed that all had been destined for me  
all along, and as I had travelled in fear, and alone, always the sun  
traveled with me. At night one sleeps in fear of wetting the bed

but he makes amends for that by pointing to our eventual death

as a teacher would point with a wand to the solution of a problem on a blackboard. (*Flow Chart* 192)

This particular lyric is notable for the manner in which it points to the ground (or “wand”) of absurdity on which faith is built and yet sustains us. Faith here is faith in the intimate loving guidance of the beloved, but there is also a suggestion here of the long-delayed arrival into the domestic texture, two pages before the end of the whole poem, of “God.” I call this arrival delayed, because the final section is unusual in having no Christian language up until this point. In having. The language at this reentry is willfully casual: “In addition to which God doesn’t want us to be stupid” (214), but read through the prism of Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*, it helps to establish God as the intervening middle position between the speaker and his lover so that the exclusive relationship we have observed (“And O I / held you through the long winter, held to you” [211]) is dissolved back into what the penultimate page of the book calls “The multiplication of everything” (215).

The delayed reappearance of “God”—note the upper-case “G” at last—recalls the most extravagant act of postponement in the poem. I will turn to Vincent’s personal confession of encountering it as a reader:

The first several times I read *Flow Chart*, I read through its famed “sunflower” double sestina, starting on page 186, without noticing the form. . . . The fact that Swinburne’s end words from his poem “The Complaint of Lisa” . . . are repeated twelve times as end words for twelve stanzas didn’t strike me as remarkable. For me, on these first delighted but hypnotized reads, the form of the sestina was just what Ashbery announces it is going to be

a page before his formal experiment. [Vincent then quotes from p. 185 of *Flow Chart*, ending with the words, “and it’s all over so fast you’re not sure you even saw it.”]

Ashbery, after predicting what will happen to a dupe of the kind I was, then explains that being such a dupe is not such a bad thing; by doing the unexpected, the coming experiment “proved that it was quite the thing to do” [Ashbery, *Flow Chart* 186]).

I would like to end this report by suggesting that the belatedly experienced double sestina is faithful to the Kierkegaardian religious impulse found within *Flow Chart* as a whole. Ashbery’s book shimmers with what Mark Bernier, in his reading of *Works of Love*, calls “‘the multiplicity of ‘all things’ for which one should hope” (128). But since we “relate to possibility through a temporal process, where the future is disclosed slowly, rather than all at once,” this means “‘all things’ are never fully present to the one who hopes” and “[a]t any particular moment possibilities will be hidden, perhaps only later to be revealed through the course of time” (129). When we read this later, Christian Ashbery closely, he makes us into the reader who hopes, and doesn’t stop hoping, for the good in the heart of our busily subjective and intersubjective life—or even for “the larger activity that shrouds it” (*Flow Chart* 3).

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108年度專題研究計畫成果彙整表

計畫主持人：狄亞倫		計畫編號：108-2410-H-003-011-		
計畫名稱：約翰·艾希伯里後期詩選中的基督教思想				
成果項目		量化	單位	質化 (說明：各成果項目請附佐證資料或細項說明，如期刊名稱、年份、卷期、起訖頁數、證號...等)
國內	學術性論文	期刊論文	0	篇
		研討會論文	0	
		專書	0	本
		專書論文	0	章
		技術報告	0	篇
		其他	0	篇
國外	學術性論文	期刊論文	0	篇
		研討會論文	0	
		專書	0	本
		專書論文	0	章
		技術報告	0	篇
		其他	0	篇
參與計畫人力	本國籍	大專生	0	人次
		碩士生	3	
		博士生	0	
		博士級研究人員	0	
		專任人員	0	
	非本國籍	大專生	0	
		碩士生	0	
		博士生	0	
		博士級研究人員	0	
		專任人員	0	
其他成果 (無法以量化表達之成果如辦理學術活動、獲得獎項、重要國際合作、研究成果國際影響力及其他協助產業技術發展之具體效益事項等，請以文字敘述填列。)		My proposal for a conference paper entitled "Christianity in John Ashbery's Later Poetry" was accepted for inclusion in the 31st Annual American Literature Association Conference in San Diego, CA, which was to have been held during May		

	<p>21-24, 2020. This event was later cancelled due to COVID-19. My proposal was then accepted for the same association's conference in Boston in 2021, but I was unable to attend this event due to travel restrictions necessitated by COVID-19.</p>
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