PART TWO AESTHETICS AND THE EVERYDAY

4 CRUEL OPTIMISM

Lauren Berlant

When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us. This cluster of promises could be embedded in a person, a thing, an institution, a text, a norm, a bunch of cells, smells, a good idea—whatever. To phrase "the object of desire" as a cluster of promises is to allow us to encounter what is incoherent or enigmatic in our attachments, not as confirmation of our irrationality but as an explanation for our sense of *our endurance in the object*, insofar as proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises, some of which may be clear to us while others not so much. In other words, all attachments are optimistic. That does not mean that they all *feel* optimistic: one might dread, for example, returning to a scene of hunger or longing or the slapstick reiteration of a lover's or parent's typical misrecognition. But the surrender to the return to the scene where the object hovers in its potentialities is the operation of optimism as an affective form. In optimism, the subject leans toward promises contained within the present moment of the encounter with their object (Ghent 1990).[1]

"Cruel optimism" names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be *im*possible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic. What's cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have *x* in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being; because whatever the *content* of the attachment is, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world. This phrase points to a condition different than that of melancholia, which is enacted in the subject's desire to temporize an experience of the loss of an object or scene with which she has identified her ego continuity. Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object *in advance* of its loss. One more thing: the cruelty of an optimistic attachment is, I think, usually something an analyst observes about someone's or some group's attachment to *x*, since usually that attachment exists without being an event, or even better, seems to lighten the load for that individual or group. But if the cruelty of an attachment *is* experienced by someone or some group, even in disavowed fashion, the fear is that the loss of the object or scene of promising itself will defeat the capacity to have any hope about anything. Often this fear of loss of a scene of optimism as such is unstated and only experienced in a sudden incapacity to manage startling situations, as we will see below.

One might point out that all objects or scenes of desire are problematic in that investments in them and projections onto them are less about them than about what cluster of desires and affects we can manage to keep magnetized to them. I have indeed wondered whether all optimism is cruel, because the experience of loss of the conditions of its reproduction can be so breathtakingly bad, just as the threat of the loss of *x* in the scope of one's attachment drives can feel like a threat to living-on itself. But some scenes of optimism are clearly crueler than others: where cruel optimism operates, the very vitalizing or animating potency of an object or scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place. This might point to something as banal as a scouring love, but it also opens out to obsessive appetites, working for a living, patriotism, all kinds of things. One makes affective bargains about the costliness of one's attachments, usually unconscious ones, most of which keep one in proximity to the scene of desire or attrition.

This means that a poetics of attachment always involves some splitting off

of the *story* I can tell about wanting to be near *x* (as though *x* has autonomous qualities) from the *activity* of the emotional habitus I have constructed by having *x* in my life in order to be able to project out my endurance as proximity to the complex of what *x* seems to offer and proffer. To understand cruel optimism, therefore, one must embark on an analysis of rhetorical indirection as a way of thinking about the strange temporalities of projection into an enabling object that is also disabling. I learned how to do this from reading Barbara Johnson's work on apostrophe and free indirect discourse. In her poetics of indirection, each of these rhetorical modes is shaped by the ways a writing subjectivity conjures other ones so that, in a performance of fantasmatic intersubjectivity, the writer gains superhuman observational authority, enabling a performance of being made possible by the proximity of the object. Because this object is something like what I am describing in the optimism of attachment, I will describe a bit of the shape of my transference with her thought.

In "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion" (1986), which will be my key referent here, Johnson tracks the political consequences of apostrophe for what has become fetal personhood: a silent, affectively present but physically displaced interlocutor (a lover, a fetus) is animated in speech as distant enough for a conversation but close enough to be imaginable by the speaker in whose head the entire scene is happening. But the condition of projected possibility, of a hearing that cannot take place in the terms of its enunciation ("you" are not here, "you" are eternally belated to the conversation with you that I am imagining), creates a fake present moment of intersubjectivity in which, nonetheless, a performance of address can take place. The present moment is made possible by the fantasy of you, laden with the *x* qualities I can project onto you, given your convenient absence. Apostrophe therefore appears to be a reaching out to a you, a direct movement from place *x* to *y*, but it is actually a turning back, an animating of a receiver on behalf of the desire to make something happen *now* that realizes something *in the speaker*, makes the speaker more or differently possible, because she has admitted, in a sense, the importance of speaking for, as, and to, two: but only under the condition, and illusion, that the two is really (in) one.

Apostrophe is thus an indirect, unstable, physically impossible but phenomenologically vitalizing movement of rhetorical animation that permits subjects to suspend themselves in the optimism of a potential occupation of the same psychic space of others, the objects of desire who make you possible (by having some promising qualities, but also by not being there).[2] Later

work, such as on "Muteness Envy" (1998), elaborates Johnson's description of the gendered rhetorical politics of this projection of voluble intersubjectivity. The paradox remains that the conditions of the lush submerging of one consciousness into another require a double negation: of the speaker's boundaries, so she or he can grow bigger in rhetorical proximity to the object of desire; and of the spoken of, who is more or less a powerful mute placeholder providing an opportunity for the speaker's imagination of her, his, or their flourishing.

Of course psychoanalytically speaking all intersubjectivity is impossible. It is a wish, a desire, and a demand for an enduring sense of being with and in *x*, and it is related to that big knot that marks the indeterminate relation between a feeling of recognition and misrecognition—recognition is the misrecognition you can bear, a transaction that affirms you without, again, necessarily feeling good (it might idealize, it might affirm your monstrosity, it might mirror your desire to be nothing enough to live under the radar, it might feel just right, and so on).[3] Johnson's work on projection shows that scenes of impossible identity, rhetorically rendered, open up meaning and knowledge by mining the negative—projective, boundary-dissolving—spaces of attachment to the object of address who must be absent in order for the desiring subject of intersubjectivity to get some traction, to stabilize her proximity to the object or scene of promise. In free indirect discourse, a cognate kind of suspension, the circulation of this kind of merged and submerged observational subjectivity has less pernicious outcomes, at least when Johnson reads Zora Neale Hurston's practice of it. In a narrator's part-merging with a character's consciousness, say, free indirect discourse performs the impossibility of locating an observational intelligence in one or any body, and therefore forces the reader to transact a different, more open relation of unfolding to what she is reading, judging, being, and thinking she understands. In Johnson's work such a transformative transaction through reading or speaking "unfolds" the subject in a good way, despite whatever desires he or she may have not to become significantly different (Johnson 2002, 8). In short, Johnson's work on projection is about the optimism of attachment, and it is often itself optimistic about the negations and extensions of personhood that forms of suspended intersubjectivity demand from the reader.

What follows is not so buoyant: this is an essay politicizing Freud's observation that "people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them" (1957, 244). It comes from a longer project about the politics, aesthetics, and projections of politi-

cal depression. Political depression persists in affective judgments of the world's intractability—evidenced in affectlessness, apathy, coolness, cynicism, and so on—modes of what might be called detachment that are really not detached at all but constitute ongoing relations of sociality.[4] The politically depressed position is manifested in the problem of the difficulty of detaching from life-building modalities that can no longer be said to be doing their work, and which indeed make obstacles to the desires that animate them; my archive tracks practices of self-interruption, self-suspension, and self-abeyance that indicate people's struggles to change, but not traumatically, the terms of value in which their life-making activity has been cast (Sedgwick 2006).

Cruel optimism is, then, like all phrases, a *deictic*, a phrase that points to a proximate location: as an analytic lever it is an incitement to inhabit and to track the affective attachment to what we call "the good life," which is for so many a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it. My assumption is that the conditions of ordinary life in the contemporary world even of relative wealth, as in the United States, are conditions of the attrition or the wearing out of the subject, and that the irony that the labor of reproducing life in the contemporary world is also the activity of being worn out by it has specific implications for thinking about the ordinariness of suffering, the violence of normativity, and the "technologies of patience" or lag that enable a concept of the later to suspend questions of the cruelty of the now (Berlant 1997, 222). Cruel optimism is in this sense a concept pointing toward a mode of lived imminence, one that grows from a perception about the reasons why people are not Melville's Bartleby, why they do not prefer to interfere with varieties of rimmiseration, but instead choose to ride the wave of the system of attachment that they are used to, to syncopate with it, or to be held in a relation of reciprocity, reconciliation, or resignation that does not mean defeat by it. Or perhaps they move to normative form to get numb with the consensual promise and to misrecognize that promise as an achievement. This essay traverses three episodes of suspension—from John Ashbery (2005), Charles Johnson (1994), and Geoff Ryman (1992)—of the reproduction of habituated or normative life. These suspensions open up revelations about the promises that had clustered as people's objects of desire, stage moments of exuberance in the impasse near the normal, and provide tools for suggesting why these exuberant attachments keep ticking not like the time bomb they might be but like a white noise machine that provides assurance that what seems like static really is, after all, a rhythm people can enter into while they're dithering,

tottering, bargaining, testing, or otherwise being worn out by the promises that they have attached to in this world.

The Promise of the Object

A recent, untitled poem by John Ashbery stages the most promising version of this scene of promises for us, foregrounding the Doppler effect of knowledge, phrasing as a kind of spatial lag the political economy of disavowal we drag around like a shadow, and yet providing an experience of liveness in the object that is not only livable, but at once simplifying and revolutionary—the bourgeois dream couplet:

> We were warned about spiders, and the
> occasional famine.
> We drove downtown to see our
> neighbors. None of them were home.
> We nestled in yards the municipality had
> created,
> reminisced about other, different places—
> but were they? Hadn't we known it all
> before?
>
> In vineyards where the bee's hymn
> drowns the monotony,
> we slept for peace, joining in the great
> run.
> He came up to me.
> It was all as it had been,
> except for the weight of the present,
> that scuttled the pact we made with
> heaven.
> In truth there was no cause for rejoicing,
> nor need to turn around, either.
> We were lost just by standing,
> listening to the hum of the wires overhead
>
> (Ashbery 2005)

The opening frame is the scene of the American Dream not realized, but almost—or as Ashbery says in a contiguous poem, "Mirage control has sealed the borders/with light and the endless diffidence light begets" (Ash-

bery, "Filagrane"). In this poem, home and hymn *almost* rhyme; but nature threatens our sense of plenitude; and then there is what the speaker calls "the weight of the present" that makes our politics, therefore, quietist, involving sleeping for peace, deflating the symbolic into the somatic. How long have people thought about the present as having weight, being a thing disconnected from other things, as an *obstacle* to living? Everything in this poem is very general, and yet we can derive some contexts from within it—imagining, for example, the weight of the default space of the poem as it instantiates something of the American Dream, suburb-style. Is it merely moralistic or politically smug to note that the people who maintain the appearance of manicured space are not present in the poem's "we," that the poem does not image the workers who make possible the reproduction of the lovely life, and where they came from, and the noises of their day, and their leisure? That the sounds of suburban leisure are other people's labor sounds? That the unmarked speaking people are probably white and American and their servants so often not?

These concerns are not foregrounded in the poem's sense of its event or scene of prolific consciousness, but it does not violate the poem's aesthetic autonomy or singularity to think about the conditions of the production of autonomy in it. If anything, the explicit rhetoric of the neighbor shows it to be aware, after all, that the American Dream does not allow a lot of time for curiosity about people it is not convenient or productive to have curiosity about. It is a space where the pleasure that one's neighbors give is in their propinquity, their light contact: in the American Dream we see neighbors when we want to, when we're puttering outside or perhaps in a restaurant, and in any case the pleasure they provide is in their relative distance, their being parallel to, without being inside of, the narrator's "municipally" zoned property, where he hoards, I mean enjoys, his leisured pleasure, as though in a vineyard in the country, and where intrusions by the nosy neighbor, or superego, would interrupt his projections of happiness from the empire of the backyard.[5] The buzz of other people's labor in the vineyards is the condition of the privilege of being bored with life and three-quarters detached, absorbed in a process of circulating, in a vaguely lateral way.

In short, in this untitled poem, "we" have chosen to be deadened citizens, happy to be the color someone has placed inside of the lines: "we" would be tickled if, after all, "we" were those characters in Donald Barthelme's short story "I Bought a Little City" (1976), who live simply in a housing complex that, seen from the sky, reproduces the *Mona Lisa* for anyone with the time

and money to inhabit a certain perspective. "We" live our lives as works of formal beauty, if not art: "we" live with a sense of slight excitement, composing ourselves patiently toward fulfilling the promise of living not too intensely the good life of what Slavoj Žižek might call a decaffeinated sublime (2004). There is nothing especially original or profound in Ashbery's send-up of suburban pleasures: the comforting sound and slightly dull rhythm of cliché performs exactly how much life one can bear to have there, and what it means to desire to move freely within the municipality, a manicured zone of what had been a fantasy.

The political economy of perspective in its relation to property, and property in its relation to self-medication, is commented on by Marx in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*:

> Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it—when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc.,—in short, when it is *used* by us. . . . In the place of all physical and mental senses there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of all these senses, into the sense of *having*. The human being had to be reduced to this absolute poverty in order that he might yield his inner wealth to the outer world. . . . The abolition of private property is therefore the complete *emancipation* of all human senses and qualities, but it is this emancipation precisely because these senses and attributes have become, subjectively and objectively, human. The eye has become a *human* eye, just as its *object* has become a social, human object—an object made by man for man. *The senses* have therefore become directly in their practice theoreticians. They relate themselves to the thing for the sake of the thing, but the thing itself is an *objective human* relation to itself and to man, [in practice I can relate myself to a thing humanly only if the thing relates itself humanly to the human being] and vice versa. Need or enjoyment [has] consequently lost its *egotistical* nature, and nature has lost its mere *utility* by use becoming *human* use. (1974, 162)

The resonances of Marx's analysis of the senses penetrate Ashbery's poem complexly. As Marx would predict, the "we" of this poem begins by owning what it sees and seeing what it owns, feeling nature as an impingement on his autoreferential world: but, then, it is haunted that its knowledge is a repetition of a something it can't quite remember, perhaps because, as subjects of productive and consumer capital, "we" were willing to have our memories rezoned by the constant tinkering required to maintain the machinery and

appearance of dependable life. "We" were docile, compliant, good sports. "We" live in proximity to a desire now bound up in this version of the good life and can almost remember being alive in it, flooded by a sense of expectation that "we" knew was only pointed to by property and the dependable life we meant to make for it. Our senses are not yet theoreticians because they are bound up by the rule, the map, the inherited fantasy, and the hum of worker bees who fertilize materially the life we are moving through. Then again, maybe we did not really want our senses to be theoreticians because then we would see ourselves as an effect of an exchange with the world, beholden to it, useful for it, rather than sovereign, at the end of the day. What do we do for a living, after all? "We" seem to be folks of leisure, of the endless weekend, our own exploitation off-screen, where a consumer's happy circulation in familiarity is almost all that matters: "Hadn't we known it all before?"

But despite the presenting face of it, as a poem voiced from within the community of faceless universal subjects of self-referentiality, the action of the poem is not bound up wholly in the vague attachment to an American Dream that is actually lived as a series of missed encounters with disaster and human contact, cut to size in barely experienced episodes. The action of the poem is charted in the small movement between home, hymn, and hum. Most importantly, there is an event that breaks up the undramatic self-hoarding of the collective life, and it is not the vacation in the vineyards that the relief of suburban unproductivity suggests.

Ashbery might be having a Christian thought, in the space between reverie and reverence: the bees seem to echo the famous passage from Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* that describes how the wisdom of bees is far in advance of what human reason understands about its condition.[6] Relatedly, with all the Miltonic and Eliotic resonance of the poem's tropes he might be revising his relation to religious lyric.[7] We might even think that the point is to contrast the poem's wittily ironic and vaguely sacred meditations with its key present and fleshly event, that scene of gayness in America embodied in the phrase: "He came up to me." It's like "Chloe liked Olivia": the sensorium-shaking transformative event in Ashbery's lyric remembers the efficiency of a similar transformation for Virginia Woolf (1957).[8] He came up to me and broke my contract with heaven not to be gay. Queerness and religious affect open up a space of reverence here: in the end, life is at the best imaginable of impasses. Life has been interrupted or, as Badiou would say, seized by an event that demands fidelity.[9]

This event, however, also has impact *despite* the autobiographical. The

poem closes by focusing on what happens when someone allows himself to be changed by an event of being with the object, not in the semi-anonymous projected proximity of apostrophe or the we-did-this and we-did-that sociality of the first stanza and not in terms of a dramatics of an uncloseted sexual identity, indeed not in terms of biography at all. The seismic shift takes place in yielding to the proximity of an intimacy undefined by talking, made by a gesture of approach that holds open a space between two people just standing there linked newly.

This shift in registers, which relocates the speaker of the poem into somewhere suspended, might be understood in a Habermasean way. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) Habermas talks about the public/private zoning of normative being in terms of a split within the man of modernity, who is a man of the house and a man of the market. Habermas suggests that the problem of living capitalist modernity is in managing the relations between these spheres as a bourgeois and a subject of emotions. A bourgeois is someone who instrumentalizes his social relations in terms of the rules of the market, and who is zoned by the people who assign value to property as having value in proximity to his property and his being self-possessed. For the bourgeois there is property, there is home, and the man is a little leader in the home, and everyone recognizes his authority wherever he carries his propriety onto property. At the same time the man cultivates an image of himself as fundamentally shaped in transactions of feeling, not capital. The "*homme*" in the house who sees himself as effective in the world and an authority in all domains of activity is distinguished and made singular by participation in a community of love, among people who choose each other, who, one might say, can come up to each other (30–50). The poem says that "in truth there was no cause for rejoicing": there was no cause for rejoicing in truth, or objectivity. Instead, there is the expectation of intimacy. And lyric poetry.

What live intimacy there is in this poem, though, seems to happen outside of the home and the municipality, in an unzoned locale. The event of the poem is the thing that happens when "he" comes "up to me" and reminds me that I am not the subject of a hymn but of a hum, the thing that resonates around me, which might be heaven or bees or desire or electric wires, but whatever it is it involves getting lost in proximity to someone and in becoming lost there, in a lovely way. He and I together experience a hum not where "we" were but all around, and that hum is a temporizing, a hesitation in time that is not in time with the world of drives and driving;

nor is it in a mapped space, but rather a space that is lost. What intersubjectivity there is has no content but is made in the simultaneity of listening, a scene of subjective experience that can only be seen and not heard. This intimacy is visible and radically private, and pretty uncoded. Life amongst *les hommes* between home and hymn becomes interrupted by an um, an interruption of truth, where the people are now lost but alive and unvanquished in their displacement.

It might be kind of thrilling to think about this poem as delineating a means of production of the impasse of the present that hasn't yet been absorbed in the bourgeois senses, but takes one out to the space of sociality that listens, is receptive, and calls for theory. Be open to he who comes up to you. Be changed by an encounter. Become a poet of the episode, the elision, the ellipsis . . .

At the same time, one might note that it matters who wrote this poem, a confident person. He finds possibility in a moment of suspension and requires neither the logic of the market to secure his value nor the intimate recognition of anything municipally normal or domestic to assure that he has boundaries. He can hold a non-space without being meaningful. This does not seem to threaten him. Thus this instance of optimism might or might not be a part of cruel optimism: we don't know. The promise is everywhere, and the dissolution of the form of being that existed before the event is not cause for mourning or rejoicing: it is just a fact. Does the episodic nature of the interruption enable him, after the moment, to return to the suburbs refreshed? Will they go to a high-end café and buy some intensified coffee supercharged by sugar and milk? Will they go get otherwise stimulated? Will they become different in a way that they can build a world on? Is the couple a stand-in for the collective that can now be awake for peace rather than somnambulant? Does the aesthetic moment of the different autonomy they get when they exist together in reverie become not a condition for *detaching* from the market but the condition of living in it, so that they can think that who they *really are* are people who can be lost in a moment? Habermas would perhaps note that the fantasy of the lovers' apotheosis enables Market Man to drown out the news that he is also the exploiter of gardeners, an instrumental and instrumentalizing agent. John Ricco (2002) might argue that the men's outsideness and outsiderness demonstrate the potential resource of all gayness to make a queer antinormativity that does not look back to domesticity wishfully. It is impossible to say how deep the break is. By the end, the speaker thinks he *really* lives now, in a

moment of suspension. He *really* is a lover, an intimate, no longer the user of gas and fertilizer and the delegator of hard labor to others. That was in another life, so it seems.

Or, perhaps we can read the scale of the shift in terms of the humming soundtrack. The soundtrack is the genre of ineloquence most conventional to melodrama: it is what tells you that you are really most at home in yourself bathed by emotions you can always recognize and that whatever material harshness you live is not the real, but an accident that you have to clean up after, which will be more pleasant if you whistle while you work. The concept of "the soundtrack of our lives," to cite a cliché that is also the ironic name of a great post-punk neo-psychedelic band and a growing category of niche marketing, is powerful because it accompanies one as a portable hoard that expresses one's true inner taste and high value; it holds a place open for an optimistic rereading of the rhythms of living and confirms everybody as a star. Your soundtrack is one place where you can be in love with yourself and express your fidelity to your own trueness in sublime conventionality, regardless of the particularity of the sounds. We hear the hum of the universe, says Ashbery's optimist, and aspire to be in proximity to it: but the analyst of cruel optimism wants to understand how much an instance of sentimental abstraction or emotional saturation costs, what labor fuels the shift from the concrete real to the soundtrack reel, who is in control of the meaning of the shift, the pacing of the shift, and the consequences of detaching, even for a moment, from the consensual mirage. Moving from home to hymn to hum, the poem by Ashbery makes an interruptive stillness that is ineloquent and eloquent, meaningful and a placeholder for an unformed experience. The soundtrack he hears is like lyric itself, comfortable with displacing realism about the material reproduction of life and the pain of intimacy and numbness to another time and space.

Moving from home to hum, to *homme* to um, an interruption: it sounds like punning, this Thoreauvian method of sounding out the space of a moment to measure its contours, to ask what is being stopped, who gets to do it, and what it would mean to be in this moment and then beyond it. It is always a risk to let someone in, to insist on a pacing different than the productivist pacing, say, of capitalist normativity. Of course "he" is not my object, my cluster of promises: "he" came up to *me*. Even if being the object is more secure than having one and risking disappointment, the poem stops before anyone gets too deep into the projecting and embedding. It is a poem about being open to an encounter that is potentially transformative, without having yet congealed into the couple form, a friendship, a quick sexual

interlude, anything. It gestures toward being lost or suspended in a process of knowing nothing about how a scene of collaborative action will open up a space of potential liveness that is not a space on which anything can be built. In the space of lag between he and me something happens and the royal or sovereign we of the poem is no longer preoccupied but gets to catch up to himself in the um of a singular sociality whose political economy we are asking questions of. Its happiness might be cruel, requiring someone else's expenditure; we'll never know: the substitution of habituated indifference with a spreading pleasure might open up a wedge into an alternative ethics of living, or not. What happens next is the unfinished business of the poem: right now, the senses it stages are open to becoming theoreticians.

Whatever it is, sounding the poem for the meaning of the impasse it portrays in an event that displaces and dissolves ordinary life does not confirm that all lyric or episodic interruptions are even potentially a condition of possibility for imagining a radically resensualized post-Fordist subject. But analytically this singular lyric opens up an opportunity to learn to pay attention to, have transference with, those moments of suspension in which the subject can no longer take his continuity in history for granted but feels full of a *something* ineloquently promising, a something that reveals, at the same time, a trenchant *nothing* general about conditions of optimism and cruel optimism. Attending to the heterosonic and heterotemporal spaces within capital in which an event suspends ordinary time, sounds, and senses can change, potentially, how we can understand what being historical means. Because Ashbery's speaker is confident, because he has the ballast of normative recognitions and modes of social belonging in the habit of his flesh, I believe, he can stand detaching from the promise of his habituated life and can thrive in the openness of desire to form, as heady as that might be. If it is to be any more than a story about his singularity, though, the new intersubjective scene of sense would have to be able to extend the moment to activity that would dissolve the legitimacy of the optimism embedded in the now displaced world, with its promising proprietary zones, scenes, scapes, and institutions. Otherwise this is not an event, but an episode in an environment that can well absorb and even sanction a little spontaneous leisure.

The Promise of Exchange Value

Ashbery's speaker is very lucky that he gets to dissolve and thrive in the collaborative unknowing initiated by the gesture, the encounter, and potentially the event that unbottle whatever it is that "he/me" can now rest in

hearing. In Charles Johnson's "Exchange Value" (1994) a situation that might also have turned out that way does not, and the story's enumeration of what happens to the people who enter a new atmosphere of new objects, a scene between one habituated life and another yet to be invented, says something about why the phrase "political economy" must run alongside our analysis of cruel and usual optimism. Why do some people have the chops for improvising unknowing while others run out of breath, not humming but hoarding?

As with Ashbery's lyric, this story begins with a meditation on neighbors and neighborhoods. "Exchange Value" takes place during the 1970s on the South Side of Chicago, around 49th Street.[10] The protagonists, eighteen-year-old Cooter and his older brother, Loftis, are poor and African American. They do not drive downtown regularly to see their friends, or frequent other neighborhoods, regularly: they do not have cars. Home and the hood are spaces of localized, personalized practices of encountering, wandering, and scrounging. But here, the intimacy of proximity has nothing to do with anyone's lyric intersubjectivity, even though the story takes place in the meditative rhythms of Cooter's way of parsing a new situation. The subjects of "Exchange Value" are expressive and opaque, but with quite different valences than in our previous example.

The story develops as the two brothers concoct a plan to rob their possibly dead neighbor, Miss Bailey. Who is Miss Bailey? Nobody knows: she is a neighbor, so one does not need to know her; her job is to be around, to be a "character," which is what you call someone who performs a familiar set of actions around you but is not intimate with you. Miss Bailey dresses in cast-off men's clothes; like Cooter and Loftis, she eats free meals that she begs off of a local Creole restaurant; when Cooter gives her pocket change, she doesn't spend it, she eats it. This is what Cooter knows about her, deducing nothing more about her from her actions. The story takes place because she is always around and then she isn't. Cooter and Loftis think that perhaps she has died, and they determine to get the first pickings.

This kind of behavior, this scavenging in other people's stuff, is not characteristic of Cooter, but it doesn't violate his fundamental relation to the world either. Compared to his brother, he has always been branded a loser. "Mama used to say it was Loftis, not me, who'd go places. . . . Loftis, he graduated fifth at DuSable High School, had two gigs and, like Papa, he be always wanting the things white people had out in Hyde Park, where Mama did daywork sometimes." The children's parents are both dead by this point

in their lives: Papa from overwork and Mama because she was as "big as a Frigidaire." Having watched this, Cooter refuses to ride the wave of the American Dream: remembering his parents "killing theyselves for chump change—a pitiful li'l bowl of porridge—I get to thinking that even if I ain't had all I wanted, maybe I've had, you know, all I'm ever gonna get" and so organizes his life through the lateral enjoyments of fantasy. "I can't keep no job and sorta stay close to home, watching TV, or reading *World's Finest* comic books, or maybe just laying dead, listening to music, imagining I see faces or foreign places in water stains on the wallpaper" (28–29).

During the 1970s the *World's Finest* series paired Batman and Superman as a crime-fighting team. But Cooter's fantasies aren't mimetic—they are aleatory and passive ways of inhabiting and making an environment in which attachments are not optimistically pointing toward a cluster of transcendent promises, but toward something else, something bearable that holds off not just the imminence of loss but the loss that, inevitably, just happened. For Cooter fantasy isn't a plan. It calibrates nothing about how to live. It is the *action* of living for him, his way of passing time not trying to make something of himself in a system of exploitation and exchange, which in the political economy of his world does not produce rest or waste but slow death, the attrition of subjects by the exchange values of capital, which are to trade the worker's body for a deferred enjoyment that, if they are on the bottom of the class structure, they are not likely to be around to take pleasure in, as his parents' fate demonstrates (Berlant 2007a).

In contrast, Loftis's relation to fantasy is realist. He inherited his parents' optimism toward his life by being ambitious. But his strategies are strictly formal. He takes classes from Black Nationalists at the "Black People's Topographical Library," reads *Esquire* and *The Black Scholar*, and sews upscale labels onto his downscale clothes: to him getting ahead is what counts, whether it is via power, labor, or the "hustle" (29). His opinion of Cooter is quite low because the younger brother is dreamy and has no drive. Nonetheless, they decide to do the job together.

Miss Bailey's apartment is pitch dark and reeks of shit: a newspaper clipping from the *Chicago Defender* among the garbage reveals that her former employer, Henry Conners, had left her his entire estate, and that all of the years of scavenging and weirdness masked her possession of enormous wealth. It all makes sense in the dark. But when the light turns on, Cooter notes, "Shapes come forward in the light and I thought for an instant like I'd slipped in space" (30). In this moment Cooter enters an impasse: his talent at

making out foreign shapes becomes applied to his own life, which he can no longer occupy, as hearing the soundtrack in the mode of deadened life is no longer available as a means of passing time.

> Her living room, webbed in dust, be filled to the max with dollars of all denominations, stacks of stock in General Motors, Gulf Oil, and 3M company in old White Owl cigar boxes, battered purses, or bound in pink rubber bands . . . everything, like a world inside the world, you take it from me, so like picturebook scenes of plentifulness you could seal yourself off in here and settle forever. Loftis and me both drew breath suddenly. There be unopened cases of Jack Daniel's, three safes cemented to the floor, hundreds of matchbooks, unworn clothes, a fuel-burning stove, dozens of wedding rings, rubbish, World War II magazines, a carton of a hundred canned sardines, mink stoles, old rags, a birdcage, a bucket of silver dollars, thousands of books, paintings, quarters in tobacco cans, two pianos, glass jars of pennies, a set of bagpipes, an almost complete Model A Ford dappled with rust, and I swear, three sections of a dead tree. (30–31)

How do we understand this collection not only of things but of details? Cooter's verbal response is not to be a historian, but a moralist: "A *tree* ain't normal" (31). But to my eye the story's main event, the scene of potential change, is somatic. Change is an impact lived on the body before anything is understood, and it is simultaneously meaningful and ineloquent, an atmosphere that Cooter and Loftis spend the rest of the story and their lives catching up to. It's like winning the lottery, getting a wash of money you haven't earned: being possessed by coming into possession of possessions, they are shocked into something impassive. This crack in the necessities of history makes Cooter's head get light—"My knees failed; then I did a Hollywood faint" (32); Loftis "pant[s] a little" and "for the first time . . . looked like he didn't know his next move" (31): their bodies become suspended.

But if riches change history, they also make it possible for history to be something other than a zone of barely or badly imagined possibility. Loftis returns to crazy reason and puts the brake on their adrenalin. He forces Cooter to catalogue everything. Eventually,

> that cranky old ninnyhammer's hoard adds up to $879,543 in cash, thirty-two bank books . . . I wasn't sure I was dreaming or what, but I suddenly flashed on this feeling, once we left her flat, that all the fears Loftis and me had about the future be gone, 'cause Miss Bailey's property was the past—

> the power of that fellah Henry Conners trapped like a bottle spirit—which we could live off, so it was the future too, pure potential: can *do*. Loftis got to talking on about how that piano we pushed home be equal to a thousand bills, jim, which equals, say, a bad TEAC A-3340 tape deck, or a down payment on a deuce-and-a-quarter. Its value be (Loftis say) that of a universal standard of measure, relational, unreal as number, so that tape deck could turn, magically, into two gold lamé suits, a trip to Tijuana, or twenty-give blow jobs from a ho—we had $879,543 worth of wishes, if you can deal with that. Be like Miss Bailey's stuff is raw energy, and Loftis and me, like wizards, could transform her stuff into anything else at will. All we had to do, it seemed to me, was decide exactly what to exchange it for. (34–35)

Cooter's senses, awakened to the promises clustered around things, have truly become theoreticians. Exchange value is not identical to the price of things, but marks a determination of what else a thing can get exchanged *for*, as though money were not involved, exactly, in the mediations. Your coat for a piano. Your money for your life.

The scene of shocking wealth changes the terms of the meaning of life, of the reproduction of life, and of exchange itself. Loftis gets very quiet. Cooter grabs a bunch of money and goes downtown to spend it. But though downtown Chicago is just a few miles away, it is like a foreign country to Cooter: he does not speak its economic language. Theory aside, in practice Cooter doesn't have a clue what to do with the money and realizes sickeningly, right away, that money can't make you feel like you belong if you are not already privileged to feel that way. He buys ugly, badly made, expensive clothes that shame him right away. He eats meat till he gets sick. He takes cabs everywhere. When he gets home, his brother's gone psychotic. Loftis has built an elaborate trap, a vault to protect the money. He yells at Cooter for spending, because the only power is in hoarding. Loftis says, "As soon as you buy something you *lose* the power to buy something." He cannot protect himself from Miss Bailey's fate: "suffering that special Negro fear of using up what little we get in this life" (37); inheritance "put her through changes, she be spellbound, possessed by the promise of life, panicky about depletion, and locked now in the past because *every* purchase, you know, has to be a poor buy: a loss of life" (37–38).

Notice how frequently Johnson reverts to the word "life": can a person on the bottom survive living "life" stripped of the illusion of indefinite endurance via whatever kinds of fantasmatic practices he has been able to

cobble together? How quickly can one dispense with the old bargains between defense and desire, adapting to a regime whose rules provide no felt comfort? Is the story of the break to which the brothers cannot adapt the proof that time is money? "Exchange Value" demonstrates the proximity of two kinds of cruel optimism: with little cultural or economic capital and bearing the history of a racial disinheritance from the norms of white supremacist power, you work yourself to death, or coast to nonexistence; or, with the ballast of capital, you hoard against death, deferring life, until you die. Cooter is the realist; he can see that there is no way out, now, no living as if not in a relation to death, which is figured in all of the potential loss that precedes it.

This story is exquisitely tender toward the surrealism of survival in the context of poverty so extreme that riches can only confirm insecurity. On either side of the capital divide, human creativity, energy, and agency are all bound up in bargaining, strategizing: it only begins with the mother at the sink predicting which of her sons has the sense to ride the rhythms of remuneration in the system; the parents dying before the kids are of age because of having had to scavenge for what Cooter scathingly calls "chump change"; Cooter choosing to live to feed his passivity and capacity for fantasy; and Loftis living amorally among a variety of styles for gaining upward mobility. Before the windfall they all manifest the improvisatory opportunism of people on the bottom who, having little to lose, and living in an economy of pleading, sharing, and hiding, will go for something if the occasion permits (29).

But the inheritance the men engineer produces a sensorial break for them, and whereas the earlier modes of optimism included a community and a meanwhile that meant being somewhere and knowing people no matter what style of living one chose, the later modes almost force privacy, hoarding, becoming pure potential itself. The inheritance becomes the promise of the promise, of a technical optimism; it sutures them both to life lived without risk, in proximity to plenitude without enjoyment. For Loftis it destroys the pleasure of the stress of getting through the day because the scale of potential loss is too huge. Cooter is more passive: he will fold himself into his brother's crypt because that is who he is, a person who navigates available spaces, not makes them. At the same time, the withdrawal of the brothers from even vague participation in a life made from scheming mimes one aspect of the logic of capital in which they have been relocated. The post-inheritance sensibility is crazy in the way that reason is crazy, because the

cruel optimism of capital fragments into so many contradictory logics. Hoarding controls the promise of value without enjoyment; consumption promises satisfaction and then denies it because all objects are placeholders for the enjoyment of never being satisfied; spending is not an exchange, but a loss and a letdown more emotional than actuarial. In "Exchange Value" insanity substitutes for the mirage that enables disavowing the knowledge that when owning money mediates sociality, exchange value *is* the fantasy and there was never ever any exchange value.

Optimism, even under the racial mediations of experiencing entrenched capitalist inequalities in the United States, involves thinking that in exchange one can achieve recognition. But, one must always ask, recognition of what? One's self-idealization, one's style of ambivalence, one's tender bits, or one's longing for the event of recognition itself? For Ashbery recognition's exchange value takes him out of personality, that cluster of familiar repetitions: it is pure potentiality in the good sense, and it provides a lovely experience of realizing that the flurry of activity that stood in for making a life was an impasse now passed by and replaced by another, a slower one, where one is experiencing something, hanging around, letting something or someone in the way a sound comes, undefensively, and not feeling yet that the condition of possibility has become misrecognized by becoming embedded in mere objects or scenes. For the men who still feel like boys at the close of "Exchange Value" the affect attached to optimism is either panic or numbness, not humming. While, as defenses, these modes of vibrating near-paralysis are cognate to the modes of getting by that preceded Miss Bailey's death, those earlier styles of floating beneath value while tending toward fantasies of it now seem utopian compared to the crypt of shattered being that pecuniary optimism cruelly engenders.

The Promise of Being Taught

It is striking that these moments of optimism, which mark a possibility that the habits of a history might *not* be reproduced, release an overwhelmingly negative force: one predicts such effects in traumatic scenes, but it is not usual to think about an optimistic event as having the same potential consequences. The conventional fantasy that a revolutionary lifting of being might happen in the new object or scene of promise would predict otherwise than that a person or a group might prefer, after all, to surf from episode to episode while leaning toward a cluster of vaguely phrased prospects. And yet,

at a certain degree of abstraction both from trauma and optimism the sensual experience of self-dissolution, radically reshaped consciousness, new sensoria, and narrative rupture can look similar; the subject's grasping toward stabilizing form, too, in the face of dissolution, looks like classic compensation, the production of habits signifying predictability as a defense against losing emotional shape entirely.

I have suggested that the particular ways in which identity and desire are articulated and lived sensually within capitalist culture produce such counterintuitive overlaps. But it would be reductive to read the preceding as a claim that anyone's subjective transaction with the optimistic structure of value in capital *produces* the knotty entailments of cruel optimism as such. People *are* worn out by the activity of life-building, especially the poor and the non-normative. But lives are singular; people make mistakes, are inconstant, cruel, and kind; and accidents happen. This essay's archive focuses on artworks that explicitly remediate singularities into cases of non-universal but general abstraction, providing narrative scenarios of how people learn to identify, manage, and maintain the hazy luminosity of their attachment to being *x* and having *x*, given that their attachments were promises and not possessions after all.

Geoff Ryman's historical novel *Was* (1992) offers yet a different scenario for tracking the enduring charisma of the normative. Weaving highly subjective activities of fantasy-making through agrarian Kansas and the mass culture industry, *Was* uses encounters with *The Wizard of Oz* to narrate the processes by which people hoard themselves against dissolution and yet seek to dissolve their hoard in transformative experiences of attachment whose effects are frightening, exhilarating, the only thing that makes living worthwhile, and yet a threat to existence itself. *Was* provides a kind of limit case of cruel optimism, as its pursuit of the affective continuity of trauma and optimism in self-unfolding excitement is neither comic, tragic, nor melodramatic, but meta-formal: it absorbs all of these into a literary mode that validates fantasy (from absorption in pretty things to crazy delusion) as a life-affirming defense against the attritions of ordinary violent history.

In this novel as in our other examples, the affective feeling of normativity is expressed in the sense that one ought to be dealt with gently by the world, and to live happily with strangers and intimates without being torn and worn out by the labor of disappointment and the disappointment of labor. Here, though, evidence of the possibility of enduring that way in one's object or scene is not embedded in the couple form, the love plot, the family, fame,

work, wealth, or property. Those are the sites of cruel optimism, scenes of conventional desire that stand manifestly in the way of the subject's thriving. Instead, the novel offers a two-step of saturation in mass fantasy and history as solutions to the problem of surviving the brutality of trauma *and* optimism in the ordinary world. It sees leaving the singular for the general through a wide range of kinds of stranger intimacy as the best resource for thriving: but at least in one case, even those encounters endanger the subject so worn out by the work of surviving the bad life, as all she has left, in a sense, is her defenses.

Was constructs a post-traumatic drama that is held together, in the end, by the governing consciousness of Bill Davison, a mental health worker, a white heterosexual midwesterner whose only previous personal brush with trauma had been ambivalence toward his fiancée, but whose professional capacity to enter into the impasse with his patients, and to let their impasses into him, makes him the novel's optimistic remainder, a rich witness. The first traumatic story told is about the real Dorothy Gale, spelled Gael, partly, I imagine, to link up the girl who is transported to Oz on a strong breeze to someone in prison, and also to link her to the Gaelic part of Scotland, home of the historical novel, the genre whose affective and political conventions shape explicitly Ryman's meditation on experiences and memories whose traces are in archives, landscapes, and bodies scattered throughout Kansas, Canada, and the United States. Like Cooter, this Dorothy Gael uses whatever fantasy she can scrape together to survive her scene of hopeless historical embeddedness. But her process is not to drift vaguely but intensely, by way of multi-generic invention: dreams, fantasies, private plays, psychotic projection, aggressive quiet, lying, being a loud bully and a frank truth-teller. Dorothy's creativity makes a wall of post-traumatic noise, as she has been abandoned by her parents, raped and shamed by her Uncle Henry Gulch, shunned by children for being big, fat, and ineloquent. Part 2 of *Was* tells the story of Judy Garland as the child Frances Gumm. On the *Wizard of Oz* set she plays Dorothy Gale as a desexualized sweetheart, her breasts tightly bound so that she can remain a child and therefore have *her* childhood stolen from her. It is not stolen through rape but by parents bound up in their own fantasies of living through children in terms of money and fame (Gumm's mother) or sex (Gumm's father, whose object choice was young boys). The third story in *Was* is about a fictional gay man, a minor Hollywood actor named Jonathan, whose fame comes from being the monster in serial killer movies titled *The Child Minder* and who, as the book begins, is

offered a part in a touring *Wizard of Oz* company while he is entering AIDS dementia. All of these stories are about the cruelty of optimism revealed to people without control over the material conditions of their lives, or whose relation to fantasy is such that the perverse shuttling between fantasy and realism destroys, according to Ryman, people and the nation. I cannot do justice here to the singularities of what optimism makes possible and impossible in this entire book but want to focus on a scene that makes the whole book possible. In this scene Dorothy Gael encounters a substitute teacher, Frank Baum, in her rural Kansas elementary school.

"The children," writes Ryman, "knew the Substitute was not a real teacher because he was so soft" (168). "Substitute" derives from the word "succeed," and the sense of possibility around the changeover is deeply embedded in the word. A substitute brings optimism if he hasn't yet been defeated—by life or by the students. He enters their lives as a new site for attachment, a dedramatized possibility. He is by definition a placeholder, a space of abeyance, an aleatory event. His coming is not personal—he is not there for anyone in particular. The amount of affect released around him says something about the intensity of the children's available drive to be less dead, numb, neutralized, or crazy with habit; but it says nothing about what it would feel like to be in transit between the stale life and all its others, or whether that feeling would lead to something good.

Of course often students are cruel to substitutes, out of excitement at the unpredictable and out of not having fear or transference to make them docile or even desiring of a recognition that has no time to be built. But this substitute is special to Dorothy: he is an actor, like her parents; he teaches them Turkish; and he tells them about alternative histories lived right now and in the past (171). Dorothy fantasizes about Frank Baum not in a narrative way, but with a mixture of sheer pleasure and defense: "Frank, Frank, as her uncle put his hands on her" (169); then she berates herself for her "own unworthiness" (169) because she knows "how beautiful you are and I know how ugly I am and how you could never have anything to do with me" (174). She says his name, Frank, over and over: it "seemed to sum up everything that was missing from her life" (169). Yet face to face she cannot bear the feeling of relief from her life that the Substitute's being near provides for her. She alternately bristles and melts at his deference, his undemanding kindness. She mocks him and disrupts class to drown out her tenderness, but she obeys him when he asks her to leave the room to just write something, anything.

What she comes back with is a lie, a wish. Her dog, Toto, had been murdered by her aunt and uncle, who hated him and who had no food to spare for him. But the story she hands in to the substitute is a substitute: it is about how happy she and Toto are. It includes sentences about how they play together and how exuberant he is, running around yelping "like he is saying hello to everything" (174). Imaginary Toto sits on her lap, licks her hand, has a cold nose, sleeps on her lap, and eats food that Auntie Em gives her to give him. The essay suggests a successful life, a life where love circulates and extends its sympathies, rather than the life she actually lives, where "it was as if they had all stood back-to-back, shouting 'love' at the tops of their lungs, but in the wrong direction, away from each other" (221). It carries traces of all of the good experience Dorothy has ever had. The essay closes this way: "I did not call him Toto. That is the name my mother gave him when she was alive. It is the same as mine" (175).

Toto, Dodo, Dorothy: the teacher sees that the child has opened up something in herself, let down a defense, and he is moved by the bravery of her admission of identification and attachment. But he makes the mistake of being mimetic in response, acting soft toward her in a way he might imagine that she seeks to be: "I'm very glad," he murmured, "that you have something to love as much as that little animal." Dorothy goes ballistic at this response and insults Baum, but she goes on to blurt out all of the truths of her life, in public, in front of the other students. She talks nonstop about being raped and hungry all the time, about the murder of her dog, and about her ineloquence: "I can't say anything," she closes (176). That phrase means she can't do anything to change anything. From here she regresses to yelping and tries to dig a hole in the ground, to become the size she feels, and also to become, in a sense, an embodiment of the last thing she loved. After that, Dorothy goes crazy, lives in a fantasy world of her own, wandering homeless and free, especially, of the capacity to reflect on loss in the modalities of realism, tragedy, or melodrama. To protect her last iota of optimism she goes crazy.

In *Was* Baum goes on to write *The Wizard of Oz* as a gift of alternativity to the person who can't say or do anything to change her life materially, and who has taken in so much that one moment of relief from herself produces a permanent crack in the available genres of her survival. In "What Is a Minor Literature?" Deleuze and Guattari exhort people to become minor in exactly that way, to de-territorialize from the normal by digging a hole in sense like a dog or a mole (1990). Creating an impasse, a space of internal displacement,

in this view, shatters the normal hierarchies, clarities, tyrannies, and confusions of compliance with autonomous individuality. This strategy looks promising in the Ashbery poem. But in "Exchange Value," a moment of relief produces a psychotic defense against the risk of loss in optimism. For Dorothy Gael, in *Was*, the optimism of attachment to another living being is itself the cruelest slap of all.

From this cluster we can understand a bit more of the magnetic attraction to cruel optimism, with its suppression of the risks of attachment. A change of heart, a sensorial shift, intersubjectivity, or transference with a promising object cannot generate on its own the better good life: nor can the collaboration of a couple, brothers, or pedagogy. The vague futurities of normative optimism produce small self-interruptions as the utopias of structural inequality. The texts we have looked at here stage moments when it could become otherwise, but shifts in affective atmosphere are not equal to changing the world. They are, here, only pieces of an argument about the centrality of optimistic fantasy to surviving in zones of compromised ordinariness. And that is one way to measure the impasse of living in the overwhelmingly present moment.

Notes

1 Emmanuel Ghent's contribution to this sentence is the word "surrender," which, he has argued, has an importantly different valence than the word "submission" with great consequences to the ways this essay calibrates the difference between being absorbed in something and being dominated by it. Daniel Stern's phrase "the present moment" (2004) introduces here a conceptualization of "the present" as a duration that is not just always lost and fleeting but which people slow down by projecting or moving it into space.

2 One senses that Johnson conjures, in this scene, the absent presence of the Lacanian *petit objet à*; but in many ways Johnson's work on rhetorical intersubjectivity is closer to Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen's construction of projection in mimetic attachment in *The Freudian Subject* (1988).

3 For further elaboration of enduring in transference with the object, see Jessica Benjamin (1994). In accounting for the analysand's insistence on being found or recognized somewhere, by someone, this wonderful essay also overaligns the formal optimism of attachment as such and the *affects* of self-preserving desire.

4 The phrase "political depression" emerges from discussions in a working group on public feelings: special appreciation goes to Ann Cvetkovich, Katie Stewart, Debbie Gould, Rebecca Zorach, and Mary Patten.

5 The neighbor has been slowly emerging as a figure for adjudicating the complexities of intimacy, recognition, and misrecognition in situations of unequal power: I cite

here Joan Copjec's analysis of the transferential relations among colonial and colonized neighbors in *Read My Desire* (1994, 65–116); Slavoj Žižek's "Neighbor and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence" (Žižek, Santner, and Reinhard 2006); and Amy Hempel's story "Beach Town" (2005), in which, in order not to experience the atrophy of her own life, a narrator sits in her backyard listening to her neighbor's conversation with another woman about the neighbor's betrayal and abandonment by her husband.

6 "Indeed what Reason may not go to School to the Wisdom of Bees, Ants, and Spiders? What wise hand teacheth them to do what Reason cannot teach us? Ruder heads stand amazed at those prodigious pieces of Nature, Whales, Elephants, Dromedaries and Camels; these, I confess, are the Colossus and majestick pieces of her hand: but in these narrow Engines there is more curious Mathematicks; and the civility of these little Citizens more neatly sets forth the Wisdom of their Maker" (Browne 2007, section 15).

7 Bradin Cormack has suggested to me that, in breaking with heaven, Ashbery breaks with Milton as well: see the poem "On His Blindness," which closes with "They also serve who only stand and wait." Ashbery is breaking with Milton's account of standing: it is no longer God's watch but that of he who approaches. The waiting here too is now luscious and sensual, open and unhidden, having nothing to do with servitude: but in alignment with Milton, it's not sight that's privileged by Ashbery but the hearing that becomes more intensified when one is not, as it were, constantly searching and driving. As for Eliot, the famous lines from *Ash Wednesday* speak here: "Because I do not hope to turn again/Because I do not hope/Because I do not hope to turn/Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope/I no longer strive to strive towards such things/(Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?)/Why should I mourn/The vanished power of the usual reign? Because I do not hope to know again. . . ." One might also note the poem's proximity to Theodore Roethke's "I Knew a Woman": "How well her wishes went! She stroked my chin/She taught me Turn, and Counter-turn, and stand;/She taught me Touch, that undulant white skin:/I nibbled meekly from her proffered hand;/She was the sickle; I, poor I, the rake,/Coming behind her for her pretty sake/(But what prodigious mowing did we make.)" All of Ashbery's emendations tend toward a radical revision of what glorious impassivity might mean to someone not as an opposite to action, but as most apposite.

8 The whole phrase is worth reading: " 'Chloe liked Olivia . . .' Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women" (Woolf 1957, 82).

9 To be seized by the event is to become a subject organized by fidelity to the unknowns released into the field of possibility by the event's truth processes. Badiou links the truth potentials in the love encounter to less personal seizures of affect, including revolutionary activity (Badiou 2001, 41–43, 118).

10 Cooter notes his brother's "Geoffrey Holder" laugh, which places this story in the mid-1970s, which is when Holder would have been famous for his role in *Live and Let Die* and also as the spokesman for 7-Up, "the uncola."