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STUDIES IN MODERN POETS

JOHN ASHBERY

(Selected Poems)

[A Critical Study with Text, Paraphrase,
Critical Appreciations, Important Questions
with Answers and Short Questions with Answers]

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Great efforts have been made during the preparation of this book. The whole material is set in the light of literature. Political consciousness has not been the aim at any level. Even then, if something is found clashing to the national and geographical definitions, the readers are supposed to inform the publishers. Their opinion shall be welcomed and considered wholeheartedly.

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Preface

This is new edition of John Ashbery (Selected Poems). The book in the present form meets all the university requirements with up to date papers solved. All the topics are based on the poems prescribed by the university. The publisher's efforts to provide quality study materials for the Master's students is commendable. It is through their personal and national spirit that this work was updated and printed.

No originality of the book is claimed except for the notes, explanations and the critique of the poems. The rest of the book is the result of the painstaking efforts in collecting the materials. I have consulted various sources i.e. library. Internet and friends and edited their materials to suit them to the university requirements.

I am indebted to all those who have greatly helped me produce this work.

I welcome all the suggestions and proposals to make the book more valuable and helpful for the budding flowers of our nation.

Thanks

Muhammad Naeem

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Contemporary American Poetry: A Critical View

Introduction

The roots of American literature go back to the Maya and Inca Civilizations, but the beginnings of American Literature take place around the sixteenth century when America was discovered and the European world interacted with this New World. However, modern literature begins from the 20th century.

The 20th Century

By 1900 the United States was far different from the new nation it had been a hundred years earlier. Westward expansion, waves of immigration, and increasing urbanization all combined to create a physically larger, more populous, and far more diverse country than its founders could have imagined. These changes are tracked more visibly in America's fiction than in its poetry, but the nation's growing diversity is evident in the diverse voices of 20th-century American poets. American poetry in the opening decades of the century displayed far less unity than most anthologies and critical histories indicate. Shifting allegiances, evolving styles, and the sheer number of poets make it difficult to categorize 20th-century poetry.

Regionalism

Usually set amid the natural beauty of rural New England, the concise, direct poetry of American poet Robert Frost conveys a wide range of emotions. Frost won the Pulitzer Prize in poetry four times (1924, 1931, 1937, and 1943) and became known across the country when he recited his poem "The Gift Outright" at President John F. Kennedy's

inauguration in January 1961. Frost said poetry "makes you remember what you didn't know you knew." According to Frost, the poem "Fire and Ice," "begins in delight, and ends in wisdom."

In the last decades of the 19th century, American literature had entered a period of regionalism, exploring the stories, dialects, and idiosyncrasies of many regions of the United States. Dialect poetry—written in exaggerated accents and colorful idioms—became a sensation for a time though it produced little of lasting value. However, one major poet who rose to fame on the basis of his dialect poems was Paul Laurence Dunbar, a black writer from Ohio. Dunbar's dialect poems, which romanticized the life of slaves in the pre-Civil War South, were extremely popular. His volumes Oak and Ivy (1893) and Majors and Minors (1895) brought attention to African American literature, although the dialect poems later embarrassed many black poets. Dunbar also wrote many nondialect poems and initiated through his work an important debate in African American literature about what voices and materials are appropriate for black writers.

Other regions and groups developed their own distinctive voices. Kansas-born Edgar Lee Masters achieved success with Spoon River Anthology (1915). His poetic epitaphs (commemorations) capture the hidden passions, deceits, and hopes of Midwesterners buried in the fictional Spoon River cemetery. Edwin Arlington Robinson explored the lives of New Englanders in his fictional *Tilbury Town* through dramatic monologues—poems written entirely in the voice of each of his characters. Many of the monologues employ the rhythm of everyday speech and reflect a Puritan sense of humankind's moral corruption.

While Frost's images and voice seem familiar and old, his observations of New England life have an edge of skepticism and irony.

Robert Frost further developed Robinson's New England voice in poems that can be read both as regional and as some of the most accomplished modern poetry of the early 20th century. Restrained, humorous, and understated, Frost's poetry gives voice to modern psychological constructions of identity without ever losing its focus on the local and the specific. He often

wrote in the standard meter of blank verse (lines with five stresses) but ran sentences over several lines so that the poetic meter plays subtly under the rhythms of natural speech. The first lines of "Birches" (1916) illustrate this distinctive new approach to rhythm:

> When I see birches bend to left and right
> Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
> I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
> But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay
> As ice-storms do. Often you must have seen them
> Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
> After a rain…

And while Frost's images and voice seem familiar and old, his observations of New England life have an edge of skepticism and irony that make his work, upon rereading, never as easy and carefree as it first appeared. Frost delivered American poetry into the 20th century.

Modernism

A poet, novelist, and critic, American Gertrude Stein lived much of her life in Paris at the center of a thriving literary and artistic community. Stein coined the phrase "Lost Generation" to describe the disillusioned American expatriate writers living in Paris. Renowned as much for her stylistic innovations as for encouraging and nurturing various young talents, Stein helped such figures as Pablo Picasso, Ernest Hemingway, and Henri Matisse gain recognition.

The early 20th century was a time of huge industrial expansion in America, and many writers found the conditions for creating art unfavorable in a culture that was so focused on business and making money. Part of the struggle among modernist writers concerned the possibility or even desirability of continuing to develop a specifically American poetic tradition. Many writers exiled themselves in cultures that seemed more conducive to art, while others decided to stay and resist through their poetry the growing materialistic culture. One way to categorize the major modernist poets is to separate those who left the United States and wrote most of their poetry as expatriates in Europe from those who stayed in America. Among the expatriates are Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle (who

wrote under the pen name H. D.), T. S. Eliot, and Gertrude Stein. Those who stayed in the United States include William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, Langston Hughes, and Robinson Jeffers. Most of the latter group visited Europe at some point and flirted with the idea of staying there to write.

The Whiteman Tradition

American poet and biographer Carl Sandburg initially gained recognition in the early 20th century, and he won Pulitzer Prizes for both his biographical writings (1940) and his poetry (1951). His unrhymed, impressionistic poetry, first published in 1914, often focused on industrialization and America's future.

During the first half of the 20th century a number of poets carried on what we might call a Whitman tradition. They wrote in free verse—a rhythm that responds to the specific subject instead of adhering to a predetermined, set meter. And they strived for a poetry that would have a wide appeal and would help define and develop a democracy. Carl Sandburg devoted his poetic career to celebrating the power of a tough, free, democratic working class. In this way he shifted Whitman's focus on individual identity to a new concern with social identity, an idea that culminated in his Depression-era book, *The People, Yes* (1936).

Hughes used the rhythmic structure of blues music and the improvisational rhythms of jazz.

Vachel Lindsay set out to tramp across America, trading poems for food. His goal was to build a kind of mass participatory poetry through what he called "the higher vaudeville," performances in which he led large groups of people in chanting his poetry. Langston Hughes, who became one of the century's most important black writers, wrote socially conscious poems that sought to capture the black experience. Hughes used the rhythmic structure of blues music and the improvisational rhythms of jazz in his innovative development of Whitman's ideas, and he insisted on a more inclusive democracy than even Whitman had proposed. Michael Gold, born and raised in New York City slums, wrote impassioned chants to American workers, often invoking Whitman. Were

Whitman alive—so Gold imagined—he would have joined the Communist struggle to liberate the working class.

American writer William Carlos Williams avoided artificiality and sentimentality in his work by producing clear, direct verse about common, everyday subjects. He is known for his innovative language and precise detail, as well as attention to line breaks. Initially acclaimed for his poetry, Williams eventually also won acceptance as a writer of prose. His poem "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," demonstrates Williams's clear style and creative page layout.

William Carlos Williams, a physician from industrial New Jersey, looked to Whitman as the source of his own American rhythms, which he claimed to pick up from listening to Americans talk on the streets. Williams developed forms that broke Whitman's long lines into brief lines that focused attention on the concrete reality in front of the poet: "No ideas but in things," he said. Williams's massive poem *Paterson* (1946-58), released in five volumes, is an epic about *Paterson*, New Jersey. Williams sought to make poetry out of material considered un-poetic by conventional standards: his focus was always on the local and immediate.

Imagism and After

American writer, editor, and critic Ezra Pound's best-known work is the Cantos, a series of poems addressing a wide range of subjects, from the historical to the personal. Pound wrote the Cantos from 1915 to 1970.

Early in Williams's career he belonged to a group led by Ezra Pound called the imagists. Pound, Williams, and Doolittle all met at the University of Pennsylvania and became part of Pound's self-declared movement to remake poetry, or, as he said, to "make it new." The imagist credo called for new rhythms, clear and stripped-down images, free choice of subject matter, concentrated or compressed poetic expression, and use of common speech. The poets who subscribed to this credo applied it differently: Williams found his new rhythms in everyday speech, while Pound sought his new rhythms in adaptations in English of Chinese, Greek, Provençal (southern France), and other poetic traditions. Pound's *Personae* (1909) demonstrated his remarkable ability to write intense, beautiful

experimental verse, echoing poems from other languages. Pound introduced the poetry of Hilda Doolittle as the model of imagism, and her chiseled and often erotic Sea Garden poems (1916) became for many the movement's signature book. H. D., Pound, and Williams left imagism behind, but it continued to influence some poets for a number of years under the leadership of Amy Lowell, a descendent of James Russell Lowell.

The imagist credo called for new rhythms, clear and stripped-down images, compressed poetic expression, and use of common speech.

Pound took his modernist revolution in a surprising new direction, building his brief imagist poems into a jagged collage that eventually became a massive long poem, *the Cantos*. While the individual poems that went to make up *the Cantos* were published in various forms from 1917 until the 1960s, the first complete English language edition of the poem was published in 1970 as *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*. This lifelong work invites comparisons with Whitman's lifelong project, Leaves of Grass. Pound distanced himself from Whitman, however, disliking what he saw as the 19th-century poet's over-infatuation with America. Pound believed the poet should be a citizen of the world and a contemporary of all the ages, able to learn from excellence wherever and whenever it appeared. He and Williams debated this issue for years, Williams insisting that original poetry could emerge only from the local and the present and Pound insisting that fresh beauty could come only by encounters with the distant and the past, the lost and forgotten. Whereas Williams's *Paterson* insists on staying in one place, Pound's *Cantos* move through time, languages, and cultures—leading Pound eventually to a flirtation with fascism, which he embraced while in Italy during World War II (1939-1945). Yet both of their compilations share a collage style, built of sudden, unexpected juxtapositions of disparate materials. Doolittle also turned to long poems with her trilogy, The Walls Do Not Fall (1944), Tribute to Angels (1945), and The Flowering of the Rod (1946). In these works she turned to Egyptian mythology, ancient history, and a reconfiguration of Christian tradition as a response to the violence of World War II.

The Waste Land has been read in many different ways, its meaning as unstable and fluid as its diverse imagery.

An important result of Pound's push to build long poems out of imagist fragments was his editing of *The Waste Land* (1922) by T. S. Eliot. For many readers this poem ranks as the great statement of despair in the aftermath of World War I (1914-1918). Before its publication Pound condensed and reshaped this highly allusive, darkly suggestive work, which is built on fertility myths and the legend of the Holy Grail. *The Waste Land* has been read in many different ways, its meaning as unstable and fluid as its diverse imagery. Eliot, born in St. Louis, Missouri, eventually became a British citizen and joined the Church of England. Much of his later verse, including Ash-Wednesday (1930) and Four Quartets (1943), relates to his spiritual concerns and suggests a religious pathway out of despair and toward a renewed sense of purpose.

Some American poets tried writing responses to *The Waste Land*. Williams was incensed by Eliot's poem, because its erudition suggested that readers of poetry had to be scholars. Williams, meanwhile, championed a poetry more accessible to the general reader, a poetry written in the language of the common person. He saw his own *Paterson* as a kind of local and optimistic answer to Eliot's cosmopolitan poem of pessimism. Hart Crane, too, viewed his epic-length *The Bridge* (1930) as an answer to Eliot. Crane sought a way to bridge the American past to a productive American future and reveal the wasteland of the present as a necessary stepping-stone to that future. *The Bridge* is a difficult poem, written in highly charged, symbolic language and suffused in dense imagery, much of it derived from American myth, legend, and history. Crane eventually came to believe it was a failure. Instead of answering Eliot, Robinson Jeffers wrote some of the bleakest poetry in all of American literature from his isolated home in California. His bitter vision, a kind of post-Waste Land, is of a cold natural world that would be better if cleansed of humanity. With no hint of redemption, Jeffers's poetry anticipates the dark tones of the kind of science fiction that imagines the world after ecological or nuclear holocaust.

Other modernist poets focused even more intently on experimentation with language and form. Some of their work

was quite playful and some of it showed the influence of *dada* and *surrealism*—European movements that undermined and mocked the value and traditions of art. E. E. Cummings wrote highly experimental poetry that parodied the platitudes of what he called the unworld, a sterile modern world that seemed to him to strip human beings of their humanity. Using puns, unorthodox typography—words, all lower-case, divided and sometimes spread out letter by letter across a page—and other fracturing of traditional poetic forms, he created a playful yet serious, highly individual poetic voice. One of the most radical innovators of modern poetry was Gertrude Stein, although most of her poetry was not published until after her death. Her work probed the ways that language ultimately refers only to itself, not to things of the world, and she experimented with multiple, shifting speaking voices.

American poet Wallace Stevens viewed the poet as a person who found harmony in the world's chaos. His first published work, Harmonium (1923), contains some of his best-known poems, including "Sunday Morning" and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird."

Marianne Moore also wrote experimental poems, but her experiments led not to the shattering of form so much as the invention of strict new forms. She imposed on herself a discipline of precise syllable counts and elaborate structures, all in the service of precise, witty, and distanced observation of animals and other objects rendered in surprising metaphors. Her poetry scrutinizes the world and scrutinizes itself, always revealing a strong ethical regard for the things described. An incessant reviser of her poetry, Moore produced a small but intricately complex body of work.

Wallace Stevens created a cerebral, philosophical poetry that nonetheless shimmers with lush and often playful sounds. Abstract and often difficult, Stevens's poetry seems almost the opposite of that of his friend William Carlos Williams. Whereas Williams believed ideas could emerge only from things, and that the poet must therefore attach words to solid reality, Stevens believed things emerged from ideas, and that without thought, there are no things or at least no things that language can embrace. Stevens began publishing his poetry late in life,

and his work forms a mature reflection on the mind's relation to the world and one way that the imagination can encounter the world. This encounter happens through the creation of what Stevens calls the supreme fiction—the belief that poetry or any art creates a meaningful order and pattern in life, an order we accept even while recognizing that it is artificially imposed by humankind.

New Criticism ... tended to value work that was difficult, ambiguous, and that transcended its ... surroundings.

One influential group of modernist poets from the South was dedicated initially to poetry that had a regional basis. But the main commitment of these poets—John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren—was to a well-wrought, ironic, and often indirect or obscure poetry. Their work led to what came to be called the New Criticism, a way of reading poems and other literature that tended to value work that was difficult, ambiguous, and that transcended its personal, historical, and cultural surroundings. The goal was a poem that could survive on its own as a perfected work of art. Their work built upon that of other modernists, such as Eliot, and encouraged a new formalism—that is, a return to careful craftsmanship and tradition as the primary virtues of poetry.

After Modernism

Twentieth-century American poet Sylvia Plath wrote poems that often focused on the painful plight of women, young people, rebels, and misfits. Plath's attempts to exorcise the oppressive male figures that haunted her life served as one of the fundamental themes in her poetry. The opening stanza of "Daddy" demonstrates this theme.

As noted earlier a period of inaction in American poetry followed the death of the great 19th-century poets and lasted until the modernist poets arose a decade or so into the 20th century. A similar lull came after the great poems by the modernists in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. American poetry paused as many poets imitated what had been innovative a few decades before and produced the new formal poems that New Critics called for. By the 1950s most of the major modernists were still alive but they seldom produced innovative work and

no longer had any interest in continuing to lead a poetic revolution.

A middle generation of 20th-century American poets emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, most of them born in the second decade of the century. Many achieved fame, including Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, Theodore Roethke, Karl Shapiro, and Delmore Schwartz. Several came to be known as confessional poets because of their use of modernist techniques to explore their own psychology and their lives. These techniques included irony, collage, verbal finish (careful attention to word choice for the effects of sound or rhythm as well as for meaning), and wide-ranging allusion. Berryman undertook such explorations in his *Dream Songs* (1964-1968), Lowell in *Life Studies* (1959), and Roethke in *Words for the Wind* (1958). Confessional poetry broke away from modernism's dedication to impersonality and reopened poetry to intense self-exploration and frank revelation of personal experiences. Although the early confessional poets rarely used their poetry to explore political issues, their investigations of how personal identity is constructed laid the ground for a more openly political poetry that emerged in America in the late 1950s and was still written at the century's close.

The confessional poets also became the first generation to teach the writing of poetry in America.

The confessional poets also became the first generation to teach the writing of poetry in America. As instructors at some of the earliest poetry workshops, they developed poetry as a subject at a number of American colleges and universities. Some of Lowell's poetry students used his confessional techniques for even more intense and unsettling self-examinations—especially Anne Sexton in *All My Pretty Ones* (1962) and Sylvia Plath in *Ariel* (1966). Steeped in Freudian analysis and imagery, these poems tracked psychological breakdowns; and a number of confessional poets, including Sexton and Plath, took their own lives. Their poetry explored tortured family relationships and examined the female psyche, the female body, and the dynamics of mother-daughter interactions. Sexton's and Plath's poetry influenced the development of feminist poetry—poetry by women that

questioned the traditional roles society assigned to females. Confessional poetry in general served as a counterforce to the prevailing mood of the country in the 1950s and 1960s, when the family was presented in the mass media as the source of stability and happiness.

Also important to the development of feminist poetry and a key poet in the tradition of political investigation is Muriel Rukeyser, whose poetry looks at labor problems and larger class issues. A contemporary of the confessional poets, Rukeyser's work stands apart in its commitment to social justice. Another important female poet who is equally hard to categorize is Elizabeth Bishop. Influenced by Marianne Moore, Bishop was an intense observer of exotic and common things, always rendered in a most uncommon language, and many of her observations suggest a psychological dimension not unrelated to the confessional poets.

Rich's poetry ... explored increasingly radical political positions and interrogated America's assumptions about gender.

Rukeyser and Bishop served as disparate but equally important sources for the poetry of Adrienne Rich, who ranks as one of the most important poets of the second half of the 20th century. Like Plath and Sexton, Rich offers a probing examination of motherhood and of what it means to be a woman in America in a remarkable series of books starting with her first collection, *A Change of World*, in 1951. However, she moved beyond Plath and Sexton in discovering ways to apply her anger not to self-destruction but to pointed critiques and reenvisionings of society. Beginning with a formal and very finished modernist style, Rich's poetry over the years took on a much more experimental form as she explored increasingly radical political positions and interrogated America's assumptions about gender and the ways gender structures our social experience.

New Directions

Many poets who had begun writing formal poetry in the 1950s and 1960s underwent changes similar to Rich's, making striking alterations in their verse forms and opening their poetry up to more experimental rhythms and more radical

social thoughts. Some poets, including Richard Wilbur, Donald Justice, and Anthony Hecht, have devoted their entire careers to writing elegantly structured poems, becoming among the most accomplished formal poets in American history. Others who started out as formalists gave up allegiance to traditional forms to explore and respond to radical political change by opening up their own work to new forms and structures. W. S. Merwin, an admirer of Pound's early work, wrote remarkable poetry in traditional forms in the 1950s. However, in *The Moving Target* (1963) he suddenly abandoned punctuation and created a haunting, new prophetic voice, free of conventional techniques. In later books such as *The Lice* (1967), he addressed societal ills, including the prospect of ecological disaster as a result of human irresponsibility. American poetry became less formal and more political, more engaged in the immediate moment during the 1960s, as America faced the social turbulence of the Civil Rights movement and protests against the Vietnam War (1959-1975).

This break from new formalism traces back to Black Mountain College, an experimental school in North Carolina, where Charles Olson taught, and where poets Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Ed Dorn, and others studied in the early 1950s (see Black Mountain Poets). Olson owed much to Pound but had less interest in Pound's love of tradition than in his attempt to construct a kind of poetic compendium of history and myth, as in the Cantos. Olson's great work was *The Maximus Poems* (1953-1975), which focused on his hometown of Gloucester, Massachusetts, and owed much to Williams's epic based on the city of Paterson. Olson developed a theory of poetry called projective verse, which called for poets to return to an organic basis for their form, to a poetic line controlled by the physiology of the poet's breathing instead of by pre-set meter. He urged an open form that would allow for poetry to be a process of discovery, where form emerged from the needs of the particular poem. Olson's student Duncan later described the experience of reading and writing the new poetry as an "opening of the field," the entering of a poetic space where one could wander and explore instead of being led along predetermined pathways. Olson's call influenced many writers, who formed a variety of dissident groups from coast to coast—all dedicated to

undermining the orthodox insistence on predetermined, closed form.

Significant figure in the development of women's and African American literature in the United States, Gwendolyn Brooks has received numerous honors and awards, including a Pulitzer Prize in 1950. Her poems display a quality of bold and direct social observation that often foreshadows the work of younger contemporary African American poets.

The most famous of the dissident groups came to be known as the Beats, so named for their weariness with American materialism after World War II and their faith in a coming beatification, a new spiritual America. The movement attracted poets like Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, and Gary Snyder. It began with a reading in San Francisco in 1955, when the greatest poet of the movement, Allen Ginsberg, read his free-flowing, surrealistic Howl, the poem that became the hallmark of the movement. Initially dismissed as unpoetical by most established and academic writers, the Beat Generation writers eventually became some of the best-known and most widely read American poets. Whitman had displaced Eliot and Pound as the poetic source for the Beats, and Williams had an increasingly important influence. Ginsberg throughout his career celebrated Whitman and Williams as his poetic progenitors and followed in their tradition as an essentially urban poet. Snyder took the Beat sensibility in a different direction, turning to the wilderness tradition in American literature and combining Zen Buddhism, Native American mythology, and deep ecological awareness in poetry that speaks eloquently of the human responsibility to nature.

From about 1960 on, an explosive new plurality prospered in American poetry.

Following many different trajectories, dissident poets began to explore the ways poetry could combine politics, sexuality, autobiography, and spirituality in an improvisational, jazzy mode. From about 1960 on, an explosive new plurality prospered in American poetry—a sense of multiple directions with no controlling authority. One direction was a black arts movement during the 1960s. This flourishing of African American poetry that resulted was reminiscent of the Harlem

Renaissance in the 1920s and early 1930s, when Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Jean Toomer, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Sterling Brown, Arna Bontemps, Melvin Tolson, and Jessie Fauset were all active writers.

In the 1960s black poetry underwent redefinition and turned to a more confrontational style. Rejecting the old gradualist and integrationist model that saw blacks merging into white society, it became a poetry written in support of social revolution and sought to be a distinctive voice of the black community. Gwendolyn Brooks had written poems about the Chicago slums since 1945, and in 1950 she became the first black to win a Pulitzer Prize for poetry. But with the black arts movement of the 1960s, she redefined her poetic mission, writing more directly for a black audience and becoming, as she said, more "non-compromising." LeRoi Jones, who later took the name Amiri Baraka, was a central figure in the movement. He specifically rejected Eliot and the modernists and embraced the chanting, rebellious voices of Whitman, Williams, and the Beats. The new black poetry turned to the streets of the black communities for its language and to the powerful tradition of African American jazz, blues, and rock music for its rhythms. It also aligned itself with the poetry of oppressed people in other countries, particularly developing countries around the world.

A prominent 20th-century writer and political activist, Amiri Baraka has dedicated himself to the advancement of black culture. Distancing himself from white culture, especially after the assassination of Black Muslim leader Malcolm X in 1965, Baraka turned to black themes in his writings and advocated increased political power for blacks. His poems, plays, novels, and essays have helped move African American literature toward a focus on the black experience.

A number of black poets developed the poetic possibilities of black urban speech in politically aware, performance-based writing, which sometimes involved chanting or rapping. These poets included Don Lee (who took the name Haki R. Madhubuti), Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and June Jordan. Other black poets, such as Michael Harper and Pulitzer-Prize

winner Yusef Komunyakaa, examined the deep ironies of African American history in a more formal voice, yet retained associations with jazz and blues. And still others, including Rita Dove, the first black poet laureate in the United States, produced striking, lyrical composites of autobiography, confession, black dialect, and African American history in a language of precise observation reminiscent of Moore or Bishop.

Another direction away from formal modernism led to deep image poetry, a name given to the work of Robert Bly, James Wright, Galway Kinnell, and others who were born in the 1920s. These poets rejected what they saw as capitalism's sterile public facade and turned to what Bly called a "deep inwardness," looking to internal spiritual sources that lie deep within the self and taking leaps into the unconscious to retrieve mysterious, disturbing, and often healing images.

Yet another direction led to the New York School, a group of artists, writers, and musicians in which John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara represented poetry. Ashbery and O'Hara wrote wildly experimental poetry that derived from dada and from an embrace of Whitman's open-road aesthetic—namely a desire to keep moving and to celebrate change, instability, and chance. The resulting poems provide verbal trips through landscapes of shifting discourse with no center and no fixed voice: modes of speech alternate rapidly, high diction is mixed with street slang, and moments from different realms of experience are juxtaposed. This work influenced Susan Howe, Charles Bernstein, and others who are known as Language poets. This group attacks the idea of a unified voice and, through collaborative work, disguises or erases the distinctions between individual poets. In doing so, the Language poets work to undermine all the institutions that are built on America's infatuation with individualism, including much of American poetry itself.

Vigorous and unbridled variety marked the poetic scene.

It is impossible to name the myriad schools and movements in American poetry that flourished near the turn of the century, when vigorous and unbridled variety marked the poetic scene more than ever. Philip Levine, Frank Bidart,

Sharon Olds, Louise Glück, and many other poets were developing the confessional poem in surprising ways, focusing autobiographical examination in more intense lyric forms than earlier confessional poets had. C. K. Williams added to the confessional poem a sometimes brutal narrative edge as he extended the possibilities (and the length) of the long line favored by Whitman and Ginsberg. Jorie Graham extended the poetic line as well, developing Stevens's philosophical poetry through fascinating labyrinths of speculation and imagery that cross and juxtapose the multiple cultures of her experience.

Multi-Cultural Voices

Poet, novelist, and short story writer Sherman Alexie became part of a late-20th-century resurgence of Native American writing in America. His work explores the impoverishment and hopelessness of reservation life and other issues facing Native Americans today. His volumes of poetry include Water Flowing Home (1995) and The Summer of Black Widows (1996).

In the last decades of the 20th century American poetry gained much of its energy from a melding of America's many distinct cultural traditions. For example, Asian American writers—themselves part of a diverse and multicultured community—turned increasingly to poetry as a means of exploring both their integration into American culture and their growing sense of distinctive ethnic identity within that culture. Garrett Hongo, Alan Chong Lau, John Yau, and Cathy Song are just a few of the recent and remarkable poets whose work expands the definition of Asian American poetry.

Chicano and Chicana poetry also has a long history in America, much of it centered in New Mexico, where Victor Bernal published intricate lyrics in the early 20th century. But the amount of poetry increased dramatically after 1967, when Quinto Sol Publications was founded to publish Chicano and Chicana work. José Montoya, Rudolfo Anaya, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Cherrie Moraga, Benjamin Alire Sáenz, and Gary Soto are among the innovative Chicano and Chicana writers. Much of their work blends poetry and prose, Spanish and English, and oral and written traditions.

Native Americans, of course, have the longest sustained tradition of poetry in North America, and many of the powerful Native American writers at work today ground their work in the long-standing traditions and oral cultures of their peoples. As with Chicano and Chicana writers, some Native American poets wrote in English early in the nation's history. But most Native American poetry in English is of relatively recent origin. The highly original group of writers at work at the close of the 20th century included N. Scott Momaday (of the Kiowa people), Joseph Bruchac (Abenaki), Simon Ortiz (Acoma), Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene), Carroll Arnett (Cherokee), Roberta Hill (Oneida), Wendy Rose (Hopi), James Welch (Blackfeet), Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna), Linda Hogan (Chicasaw), Joy Harjo (Creek), and Ray Young Bear (Mesquakie).

Conclusion

The history of American poetry is usually told as the story of a handful of great poets, from Anne Bradstreet through William Cullen Bryant, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, and Robert Frost. But these poets form a small part of America's vast poetic production, much of which is by people whose names are forgotten. Journals and newspapers preserve much of their work, and scholars have just begun to rediscover 18th- and 19th-century American poetry in those archives. Similarly, much of the most popular, politically astute, and radical 20th-century poetry appeared in workers' newspapers and journals and popular songbooks—and a great deal of this work still awaits rediscovery.

With the vast amount of culturally diverse poetry being written today and with the growth and reach of the Internet, American poetry may well be approaching its most prolific stage. The Internet dwarfs the archives of the past in its ability to make thousands of new poetic voices available to everyone who cares to read them. "To have great poets, there must be great audiences, too," wrote Whitman in 1855. His challenge remains valid today: The poets are out there, thousands of them, waiting for the audience that will be worthy of them.

2

Modern Trends in 20th Century Poetry

Introduction

Though poets don't write for the convenience of theorists, and groupings are often discerned later, analysis can still disclose themes that were powerful because so buried, i.e. not recognized or questioned at the time. One such is the negative aspect of European poetry: what it leaves out. The result has been a local thickening as one aspect or another is taken up, but also an overall impoverishment of theme and language, with poetry dividing into coterie groups that each claim to have the essential truth.

Death of Truth

Pride in country and community, a wish to explore, develop and identify with the aspirations of one's fellow citizens, an abiding interest in the larger political and social issues of the day and a commitment to the moral and religious qualities that distinguish man from brute animals are all aspects of modern democratic life, but they find scant expression in its poetry. Wordsworth's broodings on the ineffable are preferred to his patriotic odes, and Swinburne's urgent rhetoric is no more read today than William Watson's high-minded effusions. Even the Georgians with their innocent depictions of country life were decried by the Moderns, though what was substituted was a good deal less real and relevant to the book-buying public. The New Criticism ushered in by Pound and Eliot, finding in the admired poetry of the past so much that was no longer true, declared that truth was not to be looked for in poetry. All that mattered were the words on the page, and the ingenious skill with which they deployed. The experience of historians was set aside, as was indeed that of readers of historical romances, both of whom can remain

happily suspended between the past and present. What the New Critics wanted were the unchanging laws of science, and they adopted a language of tensions and psychology without understanding the issues involved.

Poet as Social Outcast

Few of the accomplished poets of the nineteenth century worked with the political and social concerns of the day, and their influence waned as the public turned to those who did: journalists, social commentators and reformers. Rather than accept that poetry had a duty to more fully and significantly represent what is most human in us, and so return to the public arena, the later nineteenth-century poets contended that poetry was not language used to its fullest extent, but an altogether different way of using language. Private study was their solution, and publication in small journals that attracted little attention at the time but have since served to canonize their authors: Leopardi, Nerval, Mallarmé, etc. Eloquence and oratory were things to despise, shams that obscured the truth, as the realities of the First World War were soon to show. Poetry could no longer be written in high-minded diction, or perhaps at all after the horrors of the Second World War. In fact it was the cold efficiency of state organization that had so vastly increased, but poets did not read history, or perhaps much philosophy, as some hazardous simplifications were made in identifying man's true nature with his most elementary.

Refuge in the Irrational

Naturally, as they turned from the public to the private sphere, poets encountered the inner doubts and confusions known to writers from antiquity, but which had recently been organized into theories by Sigmund Freud. If standing and influence in the outside world was denied them, poets could explore and colonize the vast realms of the unconscious, founding empires to which every reader had access. They did not wish to know how bogus, trivializing and ineffective was psychoanalysis in practice, but only that it opened doors to vivid expression. Everything was permitted if words were cover for unedifying desires, and a profusion of sects and movements sprang up: Imagism, Crane's symbolism, Pound's ideograms, Surrealism and the Deep Image School, Dadaism, Thomas's

Welsh rhetoric, Romantic revivals in America and England, confessional poetry and poetry that spoke to ethnic and socially disadvantaged groups. Barely keeping up with it came theory: Foucault, Lacan, Derrida and others. In vain were the difficulties of such views set out to them, as they knew that language was an inherently deceptive but yielding, and could therefore be made to say anything they pleased.

Rejection of the Past

No doubt the new approaches challenged what poetry had once been, but the new practitioners rewrote history. Poetry had always been contemporary, they argued, which now meant being direct, personal and American. Great poetry had in fact been more than that, but the proponents of popular Modernism—William Carlos Williams, the Black Mountain School, Beat Poets and the San Franciscans—had answers ready. Poetry must be unmediated if sincere, and the techniques of verse were a handicap to expression. They remembered Pound's "make it new", and asserted that a more democratic age must have a more democratic poetry. And lest anyone think their work trivial, they wrapped matters up in a complex phraseology, redefining the elements of verse in startling ways. Theoretical scaffolding became a necessary part of contemporary poetry, the more so as the floodgates were soon to be opened in schools and writing classes throughout the country. Excellence lay in what authorities could be quoted, and the theoretical considerations accessible in a poem.

Poetry As Special Use of Language

But if poetry had now focused on speculative elements of language, it was also necessary to stress the devious if not altogether treacherous aspects of this medium, how much it was subject to outmoded historical precedent, to unseen political manoeuverings by special interest groups, and to hapless realism from the masses. Poetry therefore splintered further, retreating to coteries with their own perspectives. Geoffrey Hill agonizes over the complicity of words with man's savagery in the historical record. John Ashbery creates extended jokes on and with language. Postmodernists of the Prynne school keep to narrow descriptions of physical sensation and avoid portentous statement. And the Language school

poets send up the whole process of writing anything significant beyond the sheer pleasure of being alive, though pretending otherwise.

Concluding Thoughts

So arose the present scene, a vast medley of communities, all sharing some beliefs and working practices, and uniting round common problems, but still competing for attention, status and economic livelihood. Perhaps that is only natural, and anthropologists often picture communities as successive waves of invaders interbreeding with earlier peoples but also dispersing them to more difficult terrain, where their gene-drift gradually makes them more distinctive but also less productive.

3

John Ashbery—His Life and Works

Introduction

John Ashbery is considered among the most influential and challenging American poets of the post-war period. His highly inventive, often enigmatic verse defies the conventions of logic, linear thought, and realism in an effort to deconstruct language and the paradoxical limits of verbal expression. Drawing attention to the fragmentary quality of unconscious thought and the creative process itself, Ashbery's provocative linguistic experiments, narrative juxtapositions, and improvisational style illustrate the infinite possibility of multidimensional perspective and random experience. Associated with the "New York Poets" during the 1950s and 1960s, Ashbery established his reputation with the award-winning volumes *Some Trees* (1956), *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), *Three Poems* (1972), and *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975). He received subsequent acclaim with additional volumes such as *A Wave* (1984) and *Flow Chart* (1991). An innovative poet of remarkable intelligence, humor, and originality, Ashbery is recognized as one of the leading poets of his generation.

Biographical Information

Born in Rochester, New York, in 1928, Ashbery was raised in Sodus, a small upstate New York town near Lake Ontario. His father was a fruit farmer and his mother a former high school biology teacher. Ashbery's maternal grandfather, Henry Lawrence, was a renowned physicist at the University of Rochester whose personal library became a resource for the precocious Ashbery. Though initially interested in painting and later music, Ashbery began writing poetry as a child. Upon graduation from Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts in 1945,

Ashbery enrolled at Harvard University, where he majored in English literature, completed a senior thesis on W. H. Auden, and befriended poets Kenneth Koch and Frank O'Hara. After finishing his undergraduate degree at Harvard in 1949, Ashbery moved to New York City to begin study at Columbia University, where he earned a master's degree in French literature in 1951. While in New York, Ashbery entered the booming postwar arts scene with painters Larry Rivers and Jane Freilicher and poets Koch, O'Hara, and James Schuyler—later labelled the "New York Poets" with Ashbery as their foremost representative. Ashbery's first volume of poetry, *Turandot and Other Poems* (1953), was a limited edition publication with illustrations by Freilicher. Between 1951 and 1955, Ashbery worked as copywriter for Oxford University Press and McGraw-Hill. During the early 1950s, Ashbery also wrote two plays—*The Heroes* (1952) and *The Compromise* (1955). A third play, *The Philosopher* (1964), appeared in *Art and Literature* magazine and was later republished with his earlier two in *Three Plays* (1978), The manuscript of Ashbery's second volume of poetry, *Some Trees*, was selected by Auden as the winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize in 1956 and published the same year. The recipient of two Fulbright scholarships, Ashbery set off for Paris where he lived and worked for the next decade as a poet and art critic for several prominent periodicals, including the *New York Herald Tribune, Art International*, and *Art News*, for which he later served as executive editor from 1966 to 1972. While overseas, Ashbery produced *The Tennis Court Oath*, earning him the Harriet Monroe Poetry Award from *Poetry* magazine the next year. Upon his return to New York in 1965, Ashbery published *Rivers and Mountains* (1966), a National Book Award nominee. *Sunrise in Suburbia* (1968), *Fragment* (1969), and the novel *A Nest of Ninnies* (1969) with Schuyler. He also received several Guggenheim fellowships, grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, and a National Institute of Arts and Letters Award in 1969. Over the next decade, Ashbery published *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970), *Three Poems* (1972), recipient of a Shelley Memorial Award, and *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award, and National Book Critics Circle Award in 1976. He has since

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published additional volumes of poetry—*Houseboat Days* (1977), *As We Know* (1979), *Shadow Train* (1981), *A Wave* (1984), *April Galleons* (1987), *Flow Chart* (1991), *Hotel Lautreamont* (1992), *And the Stars Were Shining* (1994), and *Can You Hear, Bird* (1995)—and a collection of art criticism, *Reported Sightings* (1989). An art critic for *Newsweek* during the 1980s, Ashbery has also edited numerous anthologies of contemporary poetry, translated several French titles, and taught English and creative writing at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York from 1974 to 1990. He was awarded the Robert Frost medal from the Poetry Society of America in 1995.

Major Works

Ashbery's preoccupation with the indeterminate relationship between language, perception, time, and artistic expression is a prominent feature of his poetry. Influenced by French symbolist writers, modern abstract expressionist art, particularly the action paintings of Jackson Pollack and Robert Motherwell, and the avant-garde music of composer John Cage, Ashbery's poetry derives from the post-logical literary and artistic traditions of the early twentieth century. *Some Trees*, Ashbery's first major publication, displays his technical skill as well as early attempts to articulate multiple levels of reality in flights of imagination and word play. In one poem, "The Instruction Manual," the speaker is a disenchanted technical writer who daydreams about a faraway trip to Guadalajara, suggesting the ironic tension between order and the longing to escape. *The Tennis Court Oath* focuses on the incomprehensible totality of language in disjointed compositions resembling surrealist visual art. The collage poem "Europe," divided into III parts with cut-outs from the 1917 British detective novel *Beryl of the Biplane*, revolves around themes of postwar espionage, political paranoia, and the failure of technology and language. In another poem, "They Dream Only of America," Ashbery similarly evokes the disorienting simultaneity of lived experience in a random assemblage of non sequiturs and wide-ranging references to politics, literature, and popular culture. *Rivers and Mountains* is a transitional work that introduces the innovative roving perspective of Ashbery's mature style, particularly as revealed in the poem

"Clepsydra," whose title refers to a water clock. This poem, characteristic of many of Ashbery's subsequent compositions, begins mid-thought and contains alternating first and second person observations, exposing the nonverbal interaction between conscious and unconscious reflection. The interchangeable use of first, second and third person pronouns to portray shifting perspective would become a staple device in Ashbery's work. Another poem from this volume, "The Skaters," suggests the performativity of linguistic displays as a series of dissolving and surfacing activities and entities. *Three Poems* consists of a book length prose meditation divided into three parts. The middle poem, "The System," is among Ashbery's most important linguistic experiments in which he reflects on the living, open-ended qualities of poetry and posits that in the elusive malleability of language inheres the foundation for love, understanding, and interpersonal connectivity. *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* signals the culmination of Ashbery's previous innovations, incorporating fragmentary digressions, crosscuts, irregular syntax, and dreamlike self-examination in evocative language and sensuous phrasing that denies logical comprehension. The title poem, inspired by the self-portrait of sixteenth century Italian painter Francesco Parmigianino, foregrounds the distortions of self-image and sensory perception to explore the limitations of form and the sprawling byways of conscious thought. In a final recital, a recurring feature of Ashbery's poetry, he summarizes the significance and affirmative power of poetry and art as a means to approach the "otherness" of language. "Litany" a notable poem from *As We Know*, further probes the ineffable gap between perception and language. Consisting of two columns of verse, one in roman the other in italic type, Ashbery illustrates the disharmonious intersection of experience, mood, and free association in a cacophony of competing voices. The lengthy title poem of *A Wave*, another significant work, explores the perpetual unfolding of experience and the preconditions for love, particularly as found in epiphany and replenishing moments of speechless withdraw and distraction. Ashbery's investigations into the essence and dimensions of expression is foremost in the book length poem *Flow Chart*. Divided into six sections, the lengthy composition is a pastiche of personal memory, literary

allusion, extraneous fragments of daily experience, and internal dialogue that suggest the regenerative nature of language despite its inherent inadequacy and perpetual deconstruction. Subsequent volumes, including *Hotel Lautreamont, And the Stars Where Shining*, and *Can You Hear, Bird*, evince similar efforts to come to terms with the insufficiency and ambivalence of language in Ashbery's trademark amalgamation of meandering ruminations, semantic puzzles, deadpan rhetoric, artful solecisms, and moments of awestruck revelation.

Critical Reception

Ashbery is regarded as one of the most important American poets of the last half century. His demanding, idiosyncratic studies of perception, thought processes, and the mutability of language are consistently praised for their capacity to conjure disquieting verbal landscapes of exceptional depth and resonance. While *Some Trees, The Tennis Court Oath*, and *Three Poems* established Ashbery's reputation as a formidable emerging talent, he is best known for his acclaimed *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, generally considered his most significant work. Subsequent volumes, particularly *Flow Chart*, have also attracted considerable critical attention and esteem. Though some critics find fault in the opacity of Ashbery's solipsistic poetry, often oblique to the point of impenetrability, most focus on his remarkable ability to evoke the totality of being in accumulations of random observations, incongruous associations, and the fleeting sensations of awareness. Despite the daunting aspirations of his ambitious investigations into the limits of knowledge and expression, as many critics note, Ashbery counters hopelessness with irony, parody, and invigorating language that extracts nascent and residual meanings from seemingly disconnected musings and the mundane minutiae of everyday experience. Distinguished for his linguistic dislocations and capacious vision, critics frequently cite the influence of Wallace Stevens and Walt Whitman in Ashbery's poetry, as well as the aesthetic concerns of avant-garde art and music, which informs so much of his work. A highly original and much honored poet, Ashbery is hailed as one of the most significant American poets of the twentieth century.

4

In Insight of John Ashbery

"John Ashbery has always been a figure out of the recent future, unpredictable and innovative."

—J. D. McClatchy in *John Ashbery: the Voice of the Poet*

Introduction

John Ashbery is one of the leading literary figures of our time. He is best known for his radically original poetry, which is firmly rooted in both classical tradition and American popular culture. He has published over 20 collections of verse, his most famous being *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), the first book to win all three major American prizes: the National Book Award, National Book Critics Circle Award, and the Pulitzer Prize.

However, Ashbery is more than a great poet. He is a cultural phenomenon; he is both a chronicler of our time and one of the true visionaries of our era. While his accomplishments in the literary and visual arts during the past half-century are enormous and well-recognized internationally, his real—and increasingly acknowledged—achievement has been to change our basic awareness of the world and the fundamental manner in which we perceive and communicate our experiences.

Through his use of language in new and unexpected ways, John Ashbery has permanently transformed our cultural landscape; for this reason, he is recognized worldwide as one of the seminal figures of the century. New York's Governor George Pataki, in his citation awarding Ashbery the state's Walt Whitman Citation and naming him State Poet in January 2001, noted that "by shattering conventional notions of clarity he creates a sharper reality." Many others have commented over the past few decades on this unique aspect of Ashbery's work

and its far-reaching impact on our perceptual sensibilities and our world.

Ashbery's expansively elusive style has made its mark on three generations of writers, painters, composers, and filmmakers.... [He] remains the most outrageously daring verbal mapmaker of the modern imagination.

John Ashbery—Many in one

For half a century, Ashbery also has had a remarkable career as an editor, critic, translator and teacher. He writes astutely on a wide variety of subjects (music, film, literature, the visual arts, and the cultural world in general), and as an editor has shaped significant publications both in America and Europe.

In addition, John Ashbery has made his mark as a playwright and novelist. *The Heroes* was written in 1950 and was staged in New York first by the legendary Living Theatre in 1952, then by the Artists Theatre in 1953, when it was declared "the best new American play of the season" by *The Commonweal*; it was most recently produced at Yale in 1999. *The Compromise* was written in 1955 and premiered by the Poets Theatre in Cambridge (MA) in 1956. These two, along with *The Philosopher* (1959), are published as *Three Plays*. *A Nest of Ninnies*, Ashbery's collaborative novel written with James Schuyler, seems to have fulfilled W.H. Auden's prediction that it "is destined to become a minor classic," having been republished twice since its original issue by Dutton in 1969.

The Achievement of Ashbery

The achievement of John Ashbery is unusual in the way it spans various fields of artistic endeavor as well as in the way it resonates throughout all areas of our cultural life. Indeed, there is arguably no one else in the cultural pantheon of the last half-century who has had such a fundamental impact on the way we experience our world. Ashbery has had, and continues to have, a profound effect on several generations of artists, composers, writers, and performers of all kinds. A characteristic event, for example, was the 50th anniversary celebration of WNYC-FM in 1994: a concert at Lincoln Center comprised exclusively of world premiere performances of commissioned works by twelve

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of America's foremost composers, all based on Ashbery's poem "No Longer Very Clear."

Although his artistic reputation has long been secure in avant garde and intellectual circles, only now, in spite of his legendary "difficulty," is Ashbery's far-ranging impact on our popular culture emerging clearly. No longer categorized as simply a poet or critic, his pervasive presence has become a point of reference—a landmark—in our cultural universe.

Ashbery's work (prose as well as poetry) has been translated into more than twenty languages, proving amply that its power and relevance transcend the boundaries of Western taste and attesting to the international significance of his aesthetics and sensibilities. Indeed, the most recent books to be published *about* him and his work are from France and England (*John Ashbery*, by Antoine Cazé, Paris, Belin, 2000, as part of the well-respected "Voix Américaines" series, and *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, by David Herd, Manchester University Press, 2000).

Often called the most widely honored poet of his generation, Ashbery has won dozens of major awards and prizes (Fulbrights, Pulitzers, Guggenheims, Bollingens, etc.). In addition, he has been recognized internationally for his outstanding career achievements: by several universities with honorary degrees, by the MacArthur Foundation with one of its "genius" awards, as well as by the American Academy of Arts and Letters with its Gold Medal for Poetry, the Academia Nazionale dei Lincei (Italy) with its Antonio Feltrinelli International Prize, the Bavarian Academy of Arts (Austria) with its Horst Bienek Prize, the Poetry Society of America with its Robert Frost Medal, the French government with its Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres award, the Modern Language Association and American Council on the Arts with the Ruth Lilly Prize, among others; in 1996 he was the first English-language poet to win the Biennial International Grand Prize for Poetry, awarded by the Maison Internationale de la Poésie in Brussels. He served as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets from 1988-1999, and in 2001 he was awarded the Signet Medal for Achievement in the Arts by the Signet Associates of Harvard University.

5

Diversity in Ashbery's Poetry

"To create a work of art that the critic cannot even talk about ought to be the artist's chief concern."

—John Ashbery, *Art News*, May 1972

Introduction

Scholars and critics have found it difficult to quantify and discuss Ashbery's writing in conventional terms. This situation has led many to approach the work as almost another art form unto itself, viewed in relation to music, philosophy and the visual arts; it has provoked the development of a new type of literary criticism as well.

When Ashbery's mature work emerged in the early 1970s (particularly *Three Poems* in 1972 and *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* in 1975), heavy-hitters in the critical and academic establishment began their attempts to cope with it by placing it in a larger context, while at the same time admitting that the work made its own demands, resisting categorization and easy explication. Major essays by Harold Bloom, Alfred Corn, Richard Howard, David Kalstone, Laurence Lieberman, Fred Moramarco, and Marjorie Perloff, among others, opened the doors to the field of "Ashbery Studies" and legitimized scholarly efforts in this area.

David Shapiro's Analysis of John Ashbery

David Shapiro's ground-breaking study *John Ashbery, an Introduction to the Poetry* (Columbia University Press, 1979) was the first book-length effort to tackle the issues head-on, acknowledging the "breakdown of conventional notions of causality" in Ashbery's work and presenting "both a reader's guide and a philosophical examination" of the work and its context. As John Unterecker notes in his foreword to this volume, Shapiro helps us explore not the "meaning" of

Ashbery's poetry but the sensibility that gives rise to it and the cultural context of which it is a most vital part ... [giving] us a sense not just of the techniques used by John Ashbery but of a structural aesthetic drawn on by a whole generation of poets, painters, musicians, and sculptors.

David Lehman

During this same period, poet, scholar and cultural historian David Lehman was equally concerned that "the innovative elements of Ashbery's poetry tend to make conventional forms of critical response appear obsolete," and called for *a new "level of critical discourse as advanced in its way as the poetry*." (emphasis added) He commissioned a series of essays designed to remedy this situation, published as *Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery* by Cornell University Press in 1980. As Lehman notes in his introduction, Ashbery's work deprives the critic of his conventional tools and resources ... yet his poetry is far from inaccessible; on the contrary, it could be said to open up a path of entry to whole areas of consciousness and feeling that could otherwise not be reached. In writing about Ashbery, then, we had to address ourselves not only to the poems but to a new and distinctive mode of utterance, one that challenges us to revise our assumptions about how poems come to be written, how they work, and what they wish to say or do. It was incumbent upon us to explain, without explaining away, this enigmatic figure whose power to astonish is legendary.

Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom

By the early 1980s, the apparatus of critical discourse had evolved sufficiently for Ashbery's work to be presented in a way that led to more mainstream acceptance. A seminal essay by noted Harvard scholar and critic Helen Vendler, "*Understanding Ashbery*," was published in *The New Yorker* in 1981; it dismantled the aura of intimidation that had seemed to surround the work for many readers, without actually demystifying it. Yale University's Harold Bloom, widely acknowledged as America's pre-eminent literary critic and one of Ashbery's earliest champions, edited a volume on Ashbery for the distinguished series "Modern Critical Views," which offers "thought-provoking contemporary criticism on those

poets, novelists and playwrights of the English language who are most widely appreciated and studied by readers everywhere. … those men and women who, from medieval times to the present, have shaped the Western tradition." (Chelsea House, 1985) This collection of twelve essays by prominent scholars and critics, including Vendler's and two reprinted from Lehman's earlier volume, demonstrated that the field of "Ashbery Studies" had come of age.

It is a tribute to the resounding power and integrity of Ashbery's work that no convenient niche has yet been found in which to lock it safely away, and that the controversy continues. So, a decade later, in yet another attempt to reorient the critical discussion and as a direct reaction against Harold Bloom and the reigning literary establishment's point of view, there appeared a collection of new essays about Ashbery, *The Tribe of John; Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry*, edited by Susan Schultz (University of Alabama Press, 1995). Schultz believes that greater attention must be paid to the relationship between Ashbery's work and its context.

David Herd and others on Ashbery

The latest addition to this array of critical studies attempting to push the public dialogue about Ashbery and his work to new frontiers is David Herd's new volume *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (Manchester [UK] University Press, 2000). Herd shares Schultz's view of the importance of context in the understanding of Ashbery. He sets out to reconcile the paradox that "John Ashbery is America's greatest living poet. He is also greatly misunderstood," by attempting to "provide readers with *a new critical language* through which they can appreciate the beauty and complexity of Ashbery's writing." (emphasis added) The book is being praised for doing precisely this; Robert Potts in the *Guardian* (UK) commends Herd for offering a critical language more appropriate to Ashbery's peculiarities than pre-packaged approaches, which merely make Ashbery reflect their own concerns. This is one of the most entertaining, lucid, witty, generous and hospitable works of criticism I have had the pleasure of reading.

It has taken nearly 50 years for the world's sensibilities to catch up with John Ashbery and be able to begin to

"understand" what he "means." Most commentators initially could not find conventional "meaning" in Ashbery's work, so they dismissed it outright as drivel; these skeptics were replaced by others who pointed out that *that* was indeed the whole point, offering provocative articles with titles like "The Meaning of Meaninglessness," etc. Critics then discussed the abstract qualities of language systems and the nature of the creative process itself, pointing out that Ashbery's "subject" was the "process." Now, with the emergence of a new generation of scholars and critics, there is a strong consensus that indeed a deep vein of "meaning," in a more traditional sense, is embedded in Ashbery's work, and that the work is after all of great relevance to us and the times in which we live:

> No detail is too grand or lowly, no style of speech too lofty or base, to be included. Everything is poeticised: the shared details of our social, economic and cultural lives freely mix, and through the poems we are persuaded to view them with fresh eyes. In this way, Ashbery's attention to every detail of existence is both generous and humble. It is political in the widest sense of the word - democratic, ... empowering .... It is a poetry of such radical scepticism that ... it gives readers room to think and feel for themselves. (Potts, *Guardian*, 3/10/01)

Conclusion

Thus, one result of this dramatic shift of critical focus has been a growing awareness that Ashbery is indeed very much a participant in our world, and that his writing is firmly rooted in his experience of that world. It is worth noting here that all these greatly divergent critical approaches to Ashbery's work are valid and illuminating. In fact, the acceptance of one or two "theories" to the exclusion of others would be far too limiting, ultimately preventing us from experiencing the multi-faceted dimensions of Ashbery's world, the simultaneous realities that continually reveal themselves.

6

Critical Concepts to Understand John Ashbery

Post Modernism

The postmodern poets were a strange blend of fantastic elements, magical realism, pessimistic impulses and isolation in the confused world of 20th century.

Introduction

To repeat a previous simplification: whereas Classicism, Realism and Romanticism all deal with the outside world, contemporary literature, by contrast, is commonly a retreat into the writer's consciousness — to make autonomous creations that incorporate diverse aspects of modern life (Modernism), or free-wheeling creations constructed of a language that largely points to itself (Postmodernism).

History of Postmodernism

Postmodernism began in the sixties, when there developed on both sides of the Atlantic a feeling that poetry had become too ossified, backward-looking and restrained. The old avant-garde had become respectable, replacing one orthodoxy by another. The poetry commended by the New Criticism — and indeed written by its teachers — was self-contained, coherent and paradoxical. Certainly it was clever, with striking imagery, symbolism and structural economy, but it was also far too predictable. Where were the technical innovations of the early modernists? Where were the alternatives to capitalism and the modern state that feature in Pound's or Lawrence's thought? And if contrary movements existed, they seemed disorganized. The UK might have its neo-Romantics, and a reaction to them. And in Europe were Milosz, Kundera, Ponge and Herbert. But there was no common purpose in these

figures, and no common philosophy to give them intellectual standing. Into this vacuum came radical theory, and the generally Leftist theories of literature.

Features of Postmodernism

Most conspicuously in the visual arts, but shown to varying degrees in novels and poetry, Postmodernism has these four features:

Iconoclasm

To many artists, Modernism had sold out. Its creations were no longer the preserve of an exclusive avant-garde but the subject of academic study. Post-Impressionist paintings appeared on Christmas cards, and contemporary music featured in popular concerts. Even the originators themselves turned away from their high ideals. Pound espoused right-wing views. Eliot wrote in tight forms, became an establishment figure and received the Nobel Prize. Carlos William's poems served to show freshmen how little there was to fear in poetry. By the 1960s, university courses were stressing the continuity between traditional poetry and the contemporary scene. None of this was congenial to writers suffering the usual privations of the struggling artist. The education industry seemed a sham. For all its stress on authenticity and originality, everyone knew that the literary canon could be probed but not ultimately questioned.

Of course the contemporary writer could always go one better, adopt and improve on the skills of the literary great, but this required enormous time, talent and dedication, with very doubtful chances of success. The public bought as critics directed; the critics wrote as they remembered their university courses indicating; and the courses repeated what had been written before. Very few with any influence on the livelihood of writers actually wrote poetry themselves and so could be expected to have the practitioner's eye for craft and accomplishment. The safer approach was to reject the past, devise new styles however vacuous or wrong-headed, and then promote them as usual in a market-orientated consumer society.

Most conspicuously was this done in the visual arts, but book prizes and regional festivals played their part in the literary world. And with its stress on fashion, the need to keep up to date, the advertising industry was the model to adopt. What counted was the interest swirling around the exhibition or publication, and this naturally drew on and supported contemporary events, fashions and concerns. The artworks could look somewhat arbitrary, and the public were apt to mutter that they could do as well themselves, but then the general public didn't buy paintings or poetry in any quantity. For those who did, the wealthy industrialists and a cultured intelligentsia, two strategies were employed. The first was a variation of the game of the emperor's new clothes which Modernism had been playing for decades: the priest-like role of cultural arbiter. And the second was an attack on the cultural achievements of the past. Ours was an age of mass literacy and communications, so that the old themes and their master-servant attitudes no longer applied. The old skills were no more than slavish copying: slick, inauthentic, a cultural imperialism.

The strategies worked, though at a cost. English departments, together with the humanities generally, gradually lost their prestige and then their students. Indeed, if as hermeneutists assert, art is one way in which a society understands itself, poetry must inevitably reflect contemporary attitudes and concerns. But hermeneutists also stress the importance of tradition. Past cultural achievements represent something significant and universal about human nature, indeed must do or we should not respond to them now that their superficial attractions have been stripped away. And against the claims of Postmodernism, the lives and personalities of artists do colour their work. Indeed their lives are so hard, and success so fleeting, that serious artists very much have to believe in the importance of their individual efforts. But then the promoters of Modernism are not generally artists but academics and media salesmen — as indeed most students become — so that any difference between theory and reality is yet another aspect of Postmodernism in which "anything goes".

Points to Remember

1. Decanonizes cultural standards, previous artworks and authorities.
2. Denies authority to the author, discounting his intentions and his claim to act as spokesman for a period contradicts the expected, often deliberately alienating the reader.
3. Subverts its sources by parody, irony and pastiche denounces ethnic, gender and cultural repression strips context, reducing content to an austere minimum.
4. Broods on the human condition disclosed by radical literary theory.

Groundless

Art, politics, public service, life in the great institutions—in none of these could be found any bedrock of unassailable probity. Serious shortcomings could be found in science, mathematics, linguistics, sociology, philosophy — in whatever purported to be true knowledge. All involved assumptions, cultural understandings, agreements as to what counted as important, and how that importance should be assessed. Even our language was imprecise, communal and secondhand. Where did reality stop and interpretation begin? In truth there was no essential difference between art and life: both were fictions. Was psychoanalysis a myth? Very well, so then were science and the humanities. All were self-supporting and self-referencing variably coherent systems with truths that were not transportable.

No doubt history has some ticklish problems of interpretation, but few suppose that the holocaust never happened. Even admirers of Paul de Mann were suddenly aroused from their solipsist musings when damaging evidence was found for their hero's earlier support of Nazi ideas. No one can see how the exterior world can be unmediated by our senses and understandings, but the philosophic problems of asserting that reality is entirely created by language and intellectual concepts are formidable indeed. Science has its procedures and limitations, but its supposed "myths" work in ways other myths do not. All disciplines have their own view of

the world, but they are not equivalent or equally acceptable. Postmodernism largely overlooks how reality constrains actions, language and art.

Points to Remember

1. Employs flat, media-like images that have no reference beyond themselves.
2. Champions the primary, unmediated but not sensuous.
3. Regards both art and life as fictions, sometimes mixing the two in magic realism or multiple endings.
4. Argues that meaning is indeterminate, denying a final or preferred interpretation.

Formlessness

Whence comes this desire for autonomy, for circumscribing form, for aesthetic shape? Look clearly at art and the dissonances will appear just as prominently. The New Criticism and traditional aesthetics simply left them out of account. Deviation from the expected, foregrounding, departures from the conventional are the essence of art, as Ramon Jacobson and the Russian formalists demonstrated. Art will be much stronger for being shapeless, indefinite, even incoherent. Nor need we stick rigidly to genres, or refrain from pastiche and parody. Art is the whole world, and the more that can be included the richer the artwork.

But of course no such essence of art was ever demonstrated. No doubt the New Critics did speak too glibly of aesthetic harmonies and tension resolution, and poems could always be read that way, given sufficient ingenuity. Yet there are limits. The differences between a competent and an outstanding work of art may be difficult to prove to a first-year student, but everyone attests to the increasing discrimination that comes with love of the subject and prolonged study. It is a common observation that art begins in selection, and that an etching or black and white photograph may possess powers in proportion to what they exclude. If that is denied — and it is denied by Postmodernist — then many contemporary artworks will have no appeal to the more traditionally-minded, which is indeed the case.

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Points to Remember

1. Repudiates modernism's preoccupation with harmony and organic form.
2. Narrows the aesthetic distance, art being something to enter into or act out rather than simply admire fragments texts, turning them into collages or montages.
3. Avoids the shaping power of metaphor and other literary tropes.
4. Mixes genres with pastiche, travesty and cliché promotes the fluid and socially adaptable.

Populism

Postmodernism is very appealing. It is avowedly populist, and employs what is well-known and easily accessible in vivid montages. It welcomes diversity, and seeks to engage an audience directly, without levels of book learning interceding. It encourages audience participation. It mixes genres, and so makes interesting what otherwise would be overlooked. It can illustrate social causes, but does not insist on an underlying seriousness, all matters being equally relative.

But if Postmodernism espouses populism, its work do not generally have mass appeal. Response is via theories which are incomprehensible, and purposely incomprehensible, to all but a well-read elite. We may enjoy something a fourteenth century Flemish painting without understanding the religious iconography, but that is not the case with Postmodernist works. Fail to grasp the theory and there is nothing there — which explains the bewilderment and distrust of the general public. The work seems fragmentary, arbitrary, lacking in skill and overall purpose, which it unashamedly is, from broader perspectives.

What of larger ambitions? Are its artworks at bottom a criticism of life? No, and are not intended to be. Do they sharpen our sensibilities, make us see deeper and more clearly, make us more alive to the beauty of the world and indignant at its injustices? Certainly not. They make us more open to experience and less censorious. Postmodernism is not traditional, is indeed an anti-art in many ways, impatient of

grandiose claims and intending no more than entertainment of an easily bored society. Artwork that does more is spurious, and therefore to be excluded from "serious" consideration.

Points to Remember

1. Employs material from a wide social spectrum.
2. Eschews elitist, literary language.
3. Avoids the serious and responsible, promoting the arbitrary and playful.
4. Accepts media images as the most accessible contemporary reality, making these the building blocks of art.

Representatives of Modernism

Poets belonging to Postmodernism in its various phases and manifestations include:

John Ashbery: e.g. *The Burden of the Park*
Frank O'Hara: e.g. *Khrushchev is coming on the right day!*
Barbara Guest" e.g. *Wild Gardens Overlooked by Night Lights*
Charles Bernstein: e.g. *Thinking I Think I Think*
Andrew Levy: e.g. *tom hanks is a homosexual*
Jim Rosenberg: e.g. *Completing the Square*
Tom Raworth: e.g. *All Fours*
J.H. Prynne: e.g. *On the Matter of Thermal Packing*
David Antin: e.g. *War*
Jackson MacLow: e.g. *Very Pleasant Soiling*
Michael Basinski: e.g. *The Atmosphere of Venus*
Susan Howe: e.g. *Eikon Basilike*
Kenneth Goldsmith: e.g. *Fidget*
Robert Grenier: e.g. *Greeting*
George Hartly: e.g. *Envy Pride Glutonny*

7

Postmodern Poetry and John Ashbery

Introduction

For poetry in America, the immediate clarion call was Donald Allen's *New American Poetry* of 1960, an introduction to forty-four poets who had come to prominence in radical American poetry between 1945 and 1960. The poets went on to develop in various ways, but already there were groupings that illustrated important features of the new styles. In the Back Mountain School were Olson, Creeley, and Dorn, poets who believed that lines should be constructed on the pattern of taking breath rather than by syllable or metre. The San Francisco Renaissance poets were performance-orientated, known through poetry readings in the Bay Area. Then there were the Beat Poets—Ginsberg, Kerouac, Corso, etc.—who had turned their back on American consumerism. A fourth group comprised the New York poets with links to abstract expressionism—Ashbery, Koch and O'Hara.

Main features

Fluid subject matter, open (free verse) forms, inward-centered themes, a mistrust of official language: the ensuing poetry was never going to overturn the state, or lead to a general burning of books. The average American remained cheerfully indifferent to it (indeed ignorant of its very existence) and its theorists were constantly driven to redefine themselves and boost their avant-garde status. In due course, the erstwhile firebrands had their work brought out by the big publishing houses, Norton and Harvard among them, and some were included in anthologies intended for school use.

The reasons for the betrayal, if betrayal it was, lies elsewhere, but for the present we return to a purer Postmodernism. Whatever is understood by the term — and

many contemporary poets would be hard put to define Postmodernism, or even explain its working in their own productions — a good deal of contemporary poetry is not what the general reader has hitherto regarded as poetry. Some is doubtless window dressing, and some may be hapless incompetence, but there is nonetheless poetry that attempts to be stridently new and to sever all connection with the past. To the uninitiated, the new poetry looks pedestrian, aimless and fragmentary. Indeed, it is often difficult to know what a poem is about, or how its insights matter. And perhaps the poem doesn't even profess to have content or insights.

Evolution of Postmodernism

Still evolving, Postmodernism is not a coherent movement. Its literary expression tends to the experimental (a leftover from Modernism) but its exponents have certainly not signed up en masse to any unifying concepts like iconoclasm, groundlessness, formlessness and populism. Partially, these elements can be found in all Postmodern work, but not exclusively, which makes the assessment difficult — i.e. poems can succeed despite rather than because of their Postmodernist elements. A case in point is J.H. Prynne's work. Many of the poems in *The White Stones* were enigmatic but rather beautiful, their extraordinary poise and rhythmic deftness winning an appreciative if limited audience. Thereafter the style changed, and later work made no concessions whatever to older conceptions of art. A very uncompromising strand of Postmodernism was being pursued, and clearly deliberately so.

The contrast with Prynne could hardly be more striking. John Ashbery is an international celebrity for whom large claims are made, familiar through countless references to a public that generally takes very little interest in contemporary writing. Ashbery does not write about experiences, real or imagined, but portrays inner trains of thought. The mental excursions have no particular reference to the exterior world, though they do employ its language in various ways, sometimes playfully, sometimes with a deadpan solemnity. Complex patterns of mimicry, observation and rumination appear and disappear across a space created by the poet for no particular reason. Why read them? Because the poems can be

extraordinarily entertaining. At their best, the lines have astonishing charm and freshness — seem exactly what a very gifted poet would begin his creations with. But the inventions are not pursued. Abruptly as they appear they are deflated, evaded, developed in unexpected ways:

> *The thieves are not breaking in, the castle was not being stormed.*
> *It was the holiness of the day that fed our notions*
> *And released them, sly breath of Eros.*
> (*Sunrise in Suburbia* in *The Double Dream of Spring:* 1970)

Many poets would give their eye teeth to have written that second line, which is then happily tossed away. The meaning is problematic, and even more so in the poem's concluding lines that immediately follow:

> *Anniversary on the woven city lament, that assures our arriving*
> *In the hours, second, breath, watching our salary*
> *In the morning holocaust become one vast furnace, engaging all tears.*

Some association of ideas is apparent — sunrise: furnace: holocaust: lament — but Ashbery seems more often content to win approval by literary wizardry:

> *...this moment of hope*
> *In all its mature, matronly form*
>
> *... innocent and monstrous*
> *As the ocean's bright display of teeth*

Is this Zen Buddhism, Surrealism, a playful Dadaism? There are many such influences. Nor are the phrases always empty of content:

> *the loveliest feelings must soon find words, and these, yes,*
> *Displace them*
> *The winter does what it can for children*

Conclusion

Like Wallace Stevens, whose work he admires, Ashbery accepts that we cannot know reality at first hand. But whereas Stevens was content with interpretations of reality that were

credible for their time — "fictions" he called them — Ashbery has speeded up the process. Imagination destroys its fictions as quickly as it creates them. Yet if reality is incoherent or unknowable, a work of art nonetheless requires some form: how do we avoid making that form inauthentic? Ashbery's solution is to create a continual expectation of form that is then frustrated or dissolved away. Life can only be flux, multiplicity and contradictions. Why should we despair at that? Perhaps we are emotionally or morally adrift, but life can be interesting all the same, indeed intellectually exhilarating. All that's required is to be honest to the fundamental human condition.

Such is Ashbery's view, which his work continually expresses. But his ways of deploying that insight are very varied. He muddles up syntax and grammar. He reverses expectations in mid sentence. He constructs collages of contemporary conversation and journalism, not to parody their limitations but to remind us of the multiplicities of "reality." His metaphors turn into something else as we read. The long poems wind towards a climax, and abruptly turn into flatter ground. While the pyrotechnics continue we are charmed and satisfied, and it comes as a shock, almost a churlish reflection, to realize that such a willful misreading of everyday expectations would not survive a moment's operation in the larger world outside.

Why all the fuss? Why not let Postmodernists pursue their games while the general reader gets back to more rewarding stuff? Yes, but what stuff? Postmodernism is now the style winning the reviews, the commissions and appointments. Between its costive excellences and the cliché-ridden banalities of amateur work there is a gap filled by work that too often seems merely workmanlike. Postmodernist work is astute and restricted; amateur work is unlettered, heartfelt and popular. Neither appeals to the other side very much, and literary scholars generally stay clear of both.

Hence many features of the poetry scene. One is the warfare between the poetry schools, with their continual rewriting of the apostolic succession from Modernism's founding fathers. Another is the striking absence of proper argument and reference in literary theory: these studies are written as Postmodernist poems, intentionally fragmentary and

hermetic. Older critics are missing the point to complain of specious scholarship, and perhaps are even deluding themselves. Postmodernists appreciate what the critics ignore: that language is treacherous, self-referencing and arbitrary. And that is true whether the language is of public utterances, science or of everyday affairs.

Postmodernists do not read widely enough. Their ignorance of history, mathematics, science, linguistics and philosophy, where the insoluble conundrums of Postmodernist language have been known for generations — not solved entirely, but understood, accommodated, worked with — is truly astonishing, as is their misapplication of scientific terminology in poetry. And can their stance be genuine? Poets are charged with providing a deeper insight into our fundamental human needs and realities. Once Kant had shown that reality itself was unknowable by rational thought, poets were obliged to find irrational routes to their spiritual powers. The Romantics drew their inspiration from Nature, which they attempted to harmonize with their mental and emotional intuitions. But as the nineteenth century wore on, and poets became more city-dwellers, that Nature began to show a darker side. Poverty, overcrowding and child exploitation of the new industrial society disclosed the shabby heart of the common man, and any special place in God's creation was undermined by the findings of geology and evolution. Ignored by society, poets began championing the aristocratic virtues of good form, irony and indifference to popular culture. A spiritual birthright had to be self-generated, made the sharper by opposition to the lumpenproletariat around them the great art of the past could still be a yardstick, but it was a yardstick appropriated and interpreted by other rules. Art did not represent reality, but created an independent reality given vitality and authenticity by its internal structure. What couldn't be contained by such devices was not suppressed, but purposely offered as a feature. A bric-a-brac of images, broken syntax and abstruse reveries gave readers a simulacrum of the strangeness of real life.

What Modernism crafted metaphorically in art forms, Surrealism and Dada took realistically. Theirs was an assault on the hypocrisies of bourgeois society and so, indirectly, on the ideals of high Modernism. The new movements realized

that the disconnected but undeniably powerful images of the unconscious could be re-invoked in hallucinatory collages of the everyday. And because dreams were beyond the dreamer's control, so these literary collages would escape the limited intentions or even understandings of their authors. World War Two brought an end to such experiments, and the poetry which followed seemed chastened if not spiritually impoverished.

Postmodernism came as breath of fresh air. It had many strengths — a protean and egalitarian nature, appeal to the young and disadvantaged, opportunities for columnists and academics. The difficulties arise when the arguments are examined in detail. Whatever theory might suppose, language does not wholly constrain our thought. A complicit language could not sustain the astonishingly wide range of scholarship today, in and outside academia. Nor could scientists debate rival theories. Or commerce and industry survive where figures and strategies need continually to be evaluated. The basic postulate of Postmodernism is false because truth does not lie with narrow argument from propositions, but with what people in a pluralist society actually say and do. Postmodernism's besetting sin is hubris. Like medieval scholasticism, it has convinced itself through argument from supposed authorities that certain things cannot be true, and will not go out into the world to see. Often the generalizations do not hold water, but are continually and retrospectively rewritten. Artists at any time are commonly unconscious of belonging to any movement, which makes any guiding influence somewhat invisible and perhaps suspect. Perhaps science could be blamed for a loss in spiritual faith in the nineteenth century, but the attack came on theology, not religion. Poets do not generally meddle in theology, and few may have been religious in any orthodox sense. What were Shakespeare's views on religion? We don't know.

Postmodernism is a diverse phenomenon, and its many heads cannot be defeated by brief analysis. Nor should anyone want them to be. Some of its issues are central to our thinking, and to any society where we'd wish to live. They cry out for debate, examination, field studies in their practical consequences.

8

What is Surrealism?

Introduction

Surrealism, artistic and literary movement that explored and celebrated the realm of dreams and the unconscious mind through the creation of visual art, poetry, and motion pictures. Surrealism was officially launched in Paris, France, in 1924, when French writer André Breton wrote the first surrealist manifesto, outlining the ambitions of the new movement. The movement soon spread to other parts of Europe and to North and South America. Among surrealism's most important contributions was the invention of new artistic techniques that tapped into the artist's unconscious mind.

Origins of Surrealism

Surrealism, in many respects, was an offshoot of an earlier art movement known as dada, which was founded during World War I (1914-1918). Disillusioned by the massive destruction and loss of life brought about by the war, the dadaists' motivations were profoundly political: to ridicule culture, reason, technology, even art. They believed that any faith in humanity's ability to improve itself through art and culture, especially after the unprecedented destruction of the war, was naive and unrealistic. As a result, the dadaists created works using accident, chance, and anything that underscored the irrationality of humanity: for example, making poems out of pieces of newspaper chosen at random, speaking nonsensical syllables out loud, and displaying everyday objects as art. The surrealist program grew out of dada, but it put a more positive spin on dada's essentially negative message.

The surrealists were heavily influenced by Sigmund Freud, the Austrian founder of psychoanalysis. They were especially receptive to his distinction between the *ego* and the

id—that is, between our primal instincts and desires (the id) and our more civilized and rational patterns of behavior (the ego). Since our primal urges and desires frequently run afoul of social expectations, Freud concluded that we repress our real desires into the unconscious part of our minds. For individuals to enjoy psychological health, he felt, they must bring these desires to the awareness of the conscious mind. Freud believed that despite the overwhelming urge to repress desires, the unconscious still reveals itself—particularly when the conscious mind relaxes its hold—in dreams, myths, odd patterns of behavior, slips of the tongue, accidents, and art. In seeking to gain access to the unconscious, the surrealists invented radical new art forms and techniques.

Dreams, Myths and Metamorphosis

Dreams, according to Freud, were the royal road to studying the unconscious, because it is in dreams that our unconscious, primal desires manifest themselves. The incongruities in dreams, Freud believed, result from a struggle for dominance of ego and id. In attempting to access the real workings of the mind, many surrealists sought to approximate the nonsensical quality of dreams. Chief among these artists were Salvador Dalí from Spain, and René Magritte and Paul Delvaux from Belgium.

To suggest the irrational quality of the dream state—and at times, to shock their audience as well—many surrealist painters used realistic representation, but juxtaposed objects and images in irrational ways. The metamorphosis of one object into another, popular with surrealist painters and filmmakers, was a device also used by surrealist sculptors.

Many surrealists became fascinated with mythology. According to Freud, myths revealed psychological fixations and desires that were latent in every human being. Swiss psychologist Carl Jung went on to argue that myths, regardless of their time period or geographic origin, displayed remarkable similarities. He explained these similarities through the existence of what he called *the collective unconscious,* a layer of the psyche that all of humanity somehow shares. Just as dreams displayed irrational images that revealed the psychology of the dreamer, myths revealed the psychology of all humanity.

Surrealist Techniques

One strategy the surrealists used to elicit imagery from the unconscious is called the "Exquisite Corpse." In this collaborative art form, a piece of paper was folded in four, and four different artists contributed to the representation of a figure without seeing the other artists' contributions. The first drew the head, folded the paper over and passed it on to the next, who drew the torso; the third drew the legs, and the fourth, the feet. The artists then unfolded the paper to study and interpret the combined figure.

Max Ernst, a German surrealist, invented another technique that used chance and accident: *frottage* (French for "rubbing"). By placing pieces of rough wood or metal underneath a canvas and then painting or penciling over the top, the artist transferred the textures of the underlying surfaces onto the finished work. In *Laocoön, Father and Sons* (1926, Menil Collection, Houston, Texas), Ernst incorporated chance textures through frottage, while also referring to the Greek myth of Laocoön, a Trojan priest who struggled with giant pythons.

Perhaps the most important technique used by the surrealists to elicit the unconscious is *automatism*. In painting, automatism consisted of allowing the hand to wander across the canvas surface without any interference from the conscious mind. The resulting marks, it was thought, would not be random or meaningless, but would be guided at every point by the functioning of the artist's unconscious mind, and not by rational thought or artistic training. In *The Kill* (1944, Museum of Modern Art, New York City), French painter André Masson implemented this technique, but he then used the improvised marks as a basis for elaboration. Whatever bore a resemblance to an actual object (in this case, a face or body part), he refined to make the connection more apparent. Because Masson had not determined the subject matter of the painting beforehand, the surrealists claimed that his later elaborations were motivated purely by his emotional state during the act of creation.

Some surrealists used a combination of techniques to suggest a dream state or to produce an abstract vocabulary of

forms. They are therefore difficult to pigeonhole in a single category. In Matta's *The Unknowing* (1951, Museum of Modern Art, Vienna, Austria) for example, the artist has created a three-dimensional space and objects that look solid. The objects, however, are so ambiguous that viewers can view them in any number of ways and impose their own interpretations on the painting. The same is the case with modern surrealistic poetry especially John Ashbery's.

Automatic Writing

Automatic writing was inspired by the Canadian abstract artists who painted automatically or spontaneously. The automatic painter begins each painting without a subject in mind, without even a definite idea about the composition. Rather, the subconscious guides the painter's brush. Upon completion, when a theme or idea can be discerned, the work can be titled. In 1941 Borduas completed his first example of automatic painting, *Green Abstraction* (Montréal Museum of Fine Arts). The automatic writing is the process in which unconscious approach to poetry is employed. The poetry is written without a definite subject or topic in mind. It is a brainstorming technique but the difference is that automatic writing produces results on the paper like a pen is being used. All this process is carried out automatically. *The Painter* of John Ashbery is impressed by the same technique.

Surrealist Literature

Although surrealism has had its most lasting impact in visual art, it began as a literary movement. According to André Breton, the first surrealist work was *Les champs magnétiques* (1920; *The Magnetic Fields,* 1985), a collection of automatist writings that he produced in collaboration with French writer Philippe Soupault. Other important surrealist writers include Frenchmen Louis Aragon, Jean Cocteau (who also made surrealist films), and Paul Éluard. Some surrealist writers produced accounts of dreams and, like surrealist painters, turned to automatism to access the unconscious. In automatist writing the surrealists allowed their thoughts to flow freely onto the page without attempting to edit or organize them. The resulting stream of words was often difficult to follow. Like surrealist painters, these writers later modified the pure

automatism of their early efforts by editing, often with a deliberate emphasis on symbolic imagery.

The surrealist writers revived interest in two 19th-century French poets whose work seemed to anticipate that of the surrealists: Arthur Rimbaud and Isidore Ducasse, whose pen name was Le Comte de Lautréamont. Breton adopted Lautréamont's phrase "beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella," as an example of the shocking, incongruous beauty that the surrealists hoped to reveal.

Dada and Surrealism

Dada, early 20th century art movement, whose members sought to ridicule the culture of their time through deliberately absurd performances, poetry, and visual art. Dadaists embraced the extraordinary, the irrational, and the contradictory largely in reaction to the unprecedented and incomprehensible brutality of World War I (1914-1918). Their work was driven in part by a belief that deep-seated European values—nationalism, militarism, and even the long tradition of rational philosophy—were implicated in the horrors of the war. Dada is often described as nihilistic—that is, rejecting all moral values; however, dadaists considered their movement an affirmation of life in the face of death.

Influence of Surrealism

Surrealism ranks among the most important and influential European art movements of the first half of the 20th century. Many surrealists, including Breton, Masson, Ernst, and Matta, spent time in the United States during World War II (1939-1945). Their presence proved pivotal to the artistic development of the American abstract expressionist painters, particularly to the work of Arshile Gorky, Robert Motherwell, and Jackson Pollock. Surrealism also had a lasting influence on the art of Latin America, in the works of artists such as Frida Kahlo of Mexico and Wifredo Lam of Cuba.

John Ashbery and Surrealism

In 1958 John Ashbery sailed for Paris to gather materials for a thesis he intended to write about Raymond Roussel, who at the time was an all-but-forgotten French poet, playwright

and novelist. Ashbery discovered Roussel in 1951, when his friend Kenneth Koch shared with him a souvenir from a yearlong sojourn in France. It was a faded copy of Roussel's *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* (1928), a poem comprising four cantos, each written in a single sentence that expands to an epic length through a system of nested parentheses. Not one of the cantos contains a single impression of Africa, which helps account for why, several years before taking his own life in 1933, Roussel had been called "the Proust of dreams." It was in part by immersing himself in those dreams that Ashbery learned to manufacture exotic realities in a matter-of-fact way. Ashbery's poem "The Instruction Manual," for instance, written in the mid-1950s, could very well have been titled "Nouvelles Impressions de Métal." The speaker of the poem is at his job and must write an instruction manual about the uses of a new metal; instead, he blithely conjures up a vivid and precise travelogue about Guadalajara, a place he has never visited.

Shortly before embarking for France, Ashbery informed Koch that he was reading Roussel's novel *Locus Solus*, which he found to be a revelation. "*Locus Solus*is the greatest thing I've read in years," he told his friend in a letter. "It's like a bouquet of cast-iron forget-me-nots." At the heart of that bouquet is a knot impossible to untangle, not least because the bouquet is an extravagant and mysterious image--what must we not forget? — that seems to have been gathered from Roussel's own scrupulously cultivated French garden. There's also the matter of cross-pollination. By the time Ashbery arrived in Paris in 1958, many American poets had already found in French poetry a grand license to experiment. The trail Ashbery followed had been blazed by William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane and other poets who had discovered Dada in American and British little magazines in the teens and traveled to Paris during the Roaring Twenties to plunge into the city's mélange of Cubist paintings and Surrealist poems.

But no predecessor was as important as T.S. Eliot, who was the first modern American poet to read French poetry critically, seeking not to mimic its styles but to absorb its lessons in order to rejuvenate poetry in English. As a young poet Eliot was captivated by the opening lines of Charles Baudelaire's "Les Sept vieillards," in which ghosts swarm a city

sidewalk and accost pedestrians in broad daylight: "Fourmillante cité, cité pleine de rêves,/Où le spectre en plein jour raccroche le passant." "I knew what that meant," Eliot recalled in 1950, "because I had lived it before I knew that I wanted to turn it into verse on my own account." From Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* Eliot learned how to transform the sordid streets of a modern metropolis into the stage of his own suffering. And from the little-known poet Jules Laforgue, Eliot learned how to create a confessional persona for that stage by amalgamating the voices of a mocking commentator and a droll sufferer. Impressions culled from the streets of Boston and London fill "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Preludes" and *The Waste Land*, but each poem's splenetic tone is French.

Eliot and Ashbery are among the American poets whose translations of French poems Paul Auster chose to include in *The Random House Book of Twentieth-Century French Poetry*. Until the appearance of Auster's book in 1982, American readers had to make do with a hodgepodge of anthologies of French poetry in translation--period collections like *French Poets Today* (1971), which focuses on poetry published since 1950, school primers like *Modern French Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology* (1975) and movement chronicles like *The Poetry of Surrealism: An Anthology* (1974) or *The Négritude Poets: An Anthology of Translations from the French* (1975). The convenience of having poems by Guillaume Apollinaire, Pierre Reverdy and Aimé Césaire in one volume was one of the strengths of Auster's anthology. Another was the inclusion of dozens of translations by American poets: Eliot, Pound, Williams, Ashbery, Wallace Stevens, Ron Padgett, Kenneth Rexroth, Denise Levertov, Richard Wilbur, Richard Howard, Keith Waldrop, Rosmarie Waldrop, W.S. Merwin, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, James Wright, Charles Simic, Clayton Eshleman, Michael Palmer and Auster himself. Auster's accomplishment was to dramatize, as no anthologist had before, how the histories of American and French poetry became intertwined during the twentieth century, growing into a knot impossible to untangle.

9

John Ashbery's Vision

Introduction

Among the contemporary American poets, John Ashbery is at once the most consistent and the most various. It is a mark of Ashbery's pervasive presence that so many of the poets he included in The Best American Poetry, 1988, which reprinted the hundred poems of the year that Ashbery most liked, sound like him, orthat is-like one of him. There is a meditative Ashbery, a formalist Ashbery, a comic Ashbery, a late-Romantic Ashbery, a Language poet Ashbery, and so on-even, as Charles Altieri shows us here, a love poet. No poet since Whitman has tapped into so many distinctly American voices and, at the same time, so preserved his utterance against the jangle of influences. Of course, as in an intricate Venn diagram, these Ashberys overlap; form inspires comedy and meditation. So Ashbery combines all the modern features of modern 20th century poetry.

The Tribe of John Ashbery

Harold Bloom, for many years Ashbery's chief promoter in the world of literary criticism, writes (typically), of "Ashbery's finest achievement to date; conversely, the New Formalist advocate Mark Jarman calls readers like Bloom "dishonest," the poetry "a kind of musical noise, something like the easy listening jazz of the Windham Hill productions." Even as perceptive and canny a critic as Charles Altieri, who sets Ashbery within the context of the 1970s in Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry (1984). falls back on the label "the major poet of our minor age". And Charles Molesworth, who goes some distance toward investigating the politics of Ashbery's reputation, believes that his reputation depends upon "a weariness with moral and political fervor in

poetry now that the 1960s are past. What stands behind Ashbery's rather sudden success is the triumph of a poetic mode," Molesworth argues. "A mode demands less aesthetic energy than a truly individual style but usually offers more gratification than the average school or "movement." So, Molesworth begins the important work of situating Ashbery within cultural and professional parameters but finally spends more energy in bemoaning Ashbery's mode than in explaining it.

Many Faces of Ashbery:

Both Bloom and Helen Vendier vaunt Ashbery not so much for himself but as the revisionist of a larger tradition; he is the latest link in a chain that includes Whitman and Stevens. (I do not intend to dismiss their crucial work to fit Ashbery into a genealogy of American poetry; instead, I wish to push that genealogy forward, to recontextualize Ashbery's work in a contemporary framework.) Bloom, especially, uses Ashbery's work toward his own ends, as the proof-texts for his own poetics of influence, first elaborated in his 1973 book *The Anxiety of Influence*: A Theory of Poetry; his criticism since that book's publication is often overtly personal. For example: "Ashbery's persona, at least since his great book *The Double Dream of Spring*, is what I remember describing once as a failed Orphic, perhaps even deliberately failed.' The critic's standard of judgment, then, is the critic's standard of judgment; Ashbery is great because Bloom claims that he is. Doubtless Bloom's criticism benefited Ashbery in the short term, giving him a name to put up against "Stevens" or "Crane" or "Whitman" or "Dickinson," but in the long term, this self-enclosed method denies Ashbery a "visionary company" among his peers and followers. He is pulled out of contemporary literary history, rather than being submerged in it.

Vendier, too, creates genealogies for Ashbery, noting in a 1981 New Yorker review of As We Know that, "in short, he comes from Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, Stevens, Eliot; his poems are about love, or time, or age. She then asserts, however, that "it is no service to Ashbery, on the whole, to group him with Stevens and Eliot; when he echoes them most compliantly, he is least himself." Like Ashbery, or like a good

lawyer, Vendler here makes a statement and then pulls it partway back; the suggestion of a genealogy remains, even as it is complicated by the notion that Ashbery is best when he is himself, whoever that is. Vendler's review bears the promising title "Understanding Ashbery" and undertakes the task of teaching a mode of reading that is not, like Bloom's, dependent on a knowledge of Ashbery's precursors. The virtue of Vendler's method (or lack of one) is that it is accessible to readers who are not also critics or academics. More than any other critic, Vendier has introduced and fought for Ashbery as a public poet, one who should be widely read as a barometer of contemporary language and "the moral life." But the problem with her strategy is that it is every bit as idiosyncratic as she conceives Ashbery to be. As she writes in her review of Flow Chart: "In my own case, by entering into some bizarrely tuned pitch inside myself, I can find myself on Ashbery's wavelength, where everything at the symbolic level makes sense." In other words, reading Ashbery is tantamount to being Ashbery (or being Vendier, who echoes Keats's definition of negative capability): "The irritating (and seductive) thing about this tuning in is that it can't be willed; I can't make it happen when I am tired or impatient. But when the frequencies meet, the effect on me is Ashbery's alone, and it is a form of trance." 9 Having made her effort, she comes to acknowledge that "it is discouraging to be Ashbery, because the very culture of which he is the linguistic recorder cannot read him, so densely woven is the web of his text." O Vendler's reviews are marvelous descriptions of Ashbery's poems and the process of reading them, but like Bloom's essays, they do not situate him in our time.

One might expect poet-critics to do better, as they tend to be more engaged with their own time than with anyone else's. For the most part, they do acknowledge-happily or not-Ashbery's importance. Much of their work is, however, more value-ridden than informative or analytical. Consider Mary Kinzie, who writes in The Cure of Poetry in an Age of Prose: Moral Essays on the Poet's Calling (I993): "Ashbery is the passive bard of a period in which the insipid has turned into the heavily toxic."" Mark Jarman, among other New Formalist critics, laments Ashbery's influence wherever he sees it; in a

recent review-essay in the Hudson Review, "The Curse of Discursiveness," he bases his harsh invective against Ann Lauterbach, Robert Creeley, and James Tate on their resemblances to Ashbery, in particular the Ashbery of Flow Chart. Where these poets go right, according to Jarman, they ignore Ashbery's mode entirely. The invective is so strong, one surmises, because Ashbery's presence is so large-Jarman even calls him "Emperor Ashbery" at one point, alluding to his nakedness, but also to his power. Jarman, like Irvin Ehrenpreis in 1975, allows that "there is room in our literature for John Ashbery"; he just wants to avoid that room and fears contamination of the rooms that he and his colleagues inhabit. That Ashbery is adept at using forms such as the sestina makes him even more dangerous to New Formalist critics; this may be the reason why John Gery here finds Ashbery's influence evident even in the fact that so many contemporary poets attempt to ignore him altogether.

Uniqueness of Ashbery:

David Lehman's important collection of essays on Ashbery's poetry, Beyond Amazement (iig8o), which includes work by poets and critics such as Douglas Crase, Marjorie Perloff, John Koethe, Lehman, and others, set out to refute the countercritics and argued against the notion of Ashbery's inaccessibility (and unteachability) by presenting cogent practical criticism of the poems. The ten contributors to the volume performed able close-readings that served as courtroom (or classroom) defenses of their client; Lehman calls the opposition the plaintiffs, which says a good deal about the polemical purpose of the collection." Lehman, who often traffics in such metaphors, sets out as the leader of the first expedition into unknown-but guessed at-territory: "If, however, the longitude and latitude of Ashbery's poetry are now thought to be known, the territory itself remains a dark continent."" Ashbery, Lehman contends, is misunderstood and even hated, but he finds some solace in the fact that at least Ashbery has hostile readers: "No other poet of our time has managed so-consistently to polarize his public, to arouse opposite reactions-as though there could be no middle road, as though it were impossible to respond to an Ashbery poem with a complacent

nod or shake of the head."" Lehman et al. rest their case on the positive side of the divide.

Lehman, recognizing that Ashbery's work largely defies our means of analyzing it, sent his contributors a series of questions intended to elicit a new kind of criticism, one that would do justice to Ashbery, rather than hang him by his poetic thumbs. Lehman's questions included the following, the strength of which lies in their simplicity: "Is there a method by which to extract the sense and flavor of an Ashbery poem?" "Does Ashbery's poetry yield meanings, or does it militate against the very possibility of articulating them?" "What mileage does he get out of his habit of rapidly shifting gears in a poem?" "With a poet as reluctant to repeat himself as Ashbery, what unifying principles, tactics, figures, or concerns are there in his poetic output?" The essays Lehman collected prove these questions to be valuable, and yet I'm struck by the way in which these "new" questions echo old ones posed by New Criticism, stressing as they do the "extraction" of meaning, the "unifying principles" that might exist behind Ashbery's seeming randomness, the coherent set of "concerns" that he might have, and so on. Aside from one question about the New York school of poets- "Of what use is the label 'the New York School of poetry' for understanding the very different writers ... frequently grouped under that heading?" – Ashbery remains a solitary figure. This question, in its very wording, suggests that the proper response of the critic is to find Ashbery poetically unattached, and that the label is an empty and useless one for poets so "very different" from one another.

We must, according to Lehman's subtext, take or leave Ashbery on his own terms; the collection is meant to defend him against detractors but not to put him in the New York school or any other context. While most of the essays are not New Critical in their method, they treat the poet himself as a well-wrought urn, reading him, like the good New Critical poem, only on "his own" terms. Even Keith Cohen, in his article "Ashbery's Dismantling of Bourgeois Discourse," ultimately resorts to a value- and personality-based criticism. In writing about Ashbery's Three Poems, which dismantles notions of the "poetic" by being in prose, Cohen asserts, "What is amazing in 'The System' . . . is that, taken phrase by phrase,

no other contemporary poem would seem so humdrum, so vapid. Each sentence seems another fatuous building block of a tiresome, transparent metaphysical argument."" Not only is this contention arguable in the extreme (I, for one, find the poems anything but humdrum or vapid, even taken sentence by sentence), Cohen has no ground on which to base his discussion of "bourgeois discourse" or poetic value. His criticism, therefore, becomes as idiosyncratic as Ashbery's poetry is thought to be, based on subjective criteria that are not self-conscious enough to frame the argument in the context of Ashbery's time, and ours. This strategy focuses Lehman's book nicely but also leaves the ground open for further investigations into Ashbery's relationship to his own time, and to the poets who follow him.

Normalizing John Ashbery

Harold Bloom's 1985 Chelsea House collection of essays on Ashbery doesn't so much build on Lehman's foundation as it adds more bricks to it; Bloom's stated purpose is to "address Ashbery's difficulty" and "to achieve a new balance and justice in the evaluation of Ashbery." Bloom's agenda is, as ever, to ensure Ashbery entrance into the Romantic, Bloomian canon. The contributors to the book are friendly to Bloom's thesis; they include Douglas Crase, Charles Berger, Helen Vendler, John Hollander, and Bloom himself (who contributes two essays along with his "Editor's Note" and "Introduction"). According to Bloom, "Ashbery has been misunderstood because of his association with the 'New York School' of Kenneth, Koch, Frank O'Hara and other comedians of the spirit" -in other words, with his peers.' His real place is with his precursor, Stevens: "Like his master, Stevens, Ashbery is essentially a ruminative poet, turning a few subjects over and over, knowing always that what counts is the mythology of self, blotched out beyond unblotching." In other words, Ashbery is alone in his time, and his work mythologizes that loneliness; there is "a clear descent from the major American tradition that began in Emerson," that other solitary singer." The strength of Bloom's approach is that he provides us with a narrative of influence-but that narrative works backward rather than forward onto the post-Ashbery landscape where we now are, to a certain extent. As Andrew Ross writes here, "Bloom, more than anyone, has

successfully written Ashbery into that kind of heroic story which explains all of the contradictions and discontinuities of a writer's work in terms of idiosyncrasy." But the idiosyncrasies in Ashbery's work-namely, The Tennis Court Oath, which Bloom calls peculiar," become embarrassing lapses from the tradition, rather than provocative additions to it. In this new volume, that peculiar work becomes key to a different understanding of Ashbery, an understanding that depends upon the use of his influence by members of the Language school of poets, in particular, Charles Bernstein. For them, ironically, everything not in The Tennis Court Oath is considered dubious-they like the discontinuity of discontinuity, whereas Bloom favors the continuity of discontinuity.

The aftermath of Bloom's collection was an important, if not frequently alluded to, turn in Ashbery criticism, namely, S.P. Mohanty and Jonathan Monroe's I987 review in diacritics of it and Ashbery's book A Wave. Rather than regard Ashbery as a solitary quest-hero, in the Bloom and Vendler mode, they claim that "the business of explaining Ashbery becomes a significant kind of cultural self-definition." Even more than that, and this is to raise the stakes considerably, "What is at stake in the criticism of Ashbery ... is the meaning and status of what it is to be 'American,' a charged index, if ever there was any." Moharity and Monroe seek nothing less than a recasting of Ashbery as a poet more interested in the social than in the private realm: "The central concern of Ashbery's poetic career can only be defined as the self-world relationship, with an investment in exploring the features of a social voice and identity as they can be genuinely available today." Or: "It may thus be suggested that all life is for Ashbery social life, the stuff of history. In stating their case this way, Mohanty and Monroe reaffirm another divide, that between "social" and "private" realms; perhaps for effect, they neglect the way in which the social is the private in Ashbery, the private profoundly social (hence the many competing voices in Three Poems). As they must, Mohanty and Monroe acknowledge and then argue against Bloom. While theirs is an important effort to call Bloom's assumptions about Ashbery into question and to open Ashbery to other modes of criticism, Mohanty and Monroe still find their "proof-texts" entirely in Ashbery's work and not in the

world that informs that work. They focus, for example, on Ashbery's use of clichés, which are social constructions (the macros of the masses), but they do not discuss the function of particular clichés in American culture. Nor do they explain what these clich6s do for Ashbery in his exploration of the social world. They are quite right and renovative in their claim that "to limit the question of memory in poetry to one of agonistic conflicts passed on within poetry from one generation to the next needlessly risks a further deepening of poetry's continuing isolation from other modes of discourse and from the public at large." But their counter-criticism is insufficient to make the case work; the review-essay format obviates from the start the possibility of development, though it opens the field for others.

Influence and Methodology in Ashbery

The Tribe of John Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry will take the criticism I've discussed thus far as a prolegomenon; the focus of these essays, however, is on Ashbery's work as context more than on his work as text. Not only does this collection open up the field of "Ashbery criticism" to other poets who have been influenced by him, but it also aims to break the safe of methods that have been employed in that criticism. Thus, for example, Stephen Paul Miller and Andrew Ross place Ashbery in his (and our) historical and cultural periods. Fred Moramarco traces Ashbery's own history and proposes his own "flow chart" of the poet's career. Each writer illuminates the poetry in a practical way, but the contributors also, at times quite contentiously, take on the goals and methods of the nascent Ashbery industry. Those critics who discuss influence do so with deft indirectness; they refuse to accept the models (especially the Bloomian one) by which we usually measure it. Their evasions (or swerves, to use Bloom's term) are telling and grow stronger as the volume goes on, culminating with Charles Bernstein's aside, found some distance into his long poem:

> *For the purpose*
> *Of your request I'm including this*
> *Sentence about the influence of John*
> *Ashbery.*

John Gery tropes Bloom, revising the "anxiety of influence" into "the anxiety of affluence." "Ashbery," Gery claims, "deconstructs the very tradition Bloom describes, thereby opening up the field of language for those poets who follow."

John Koethe, who bemoans Ashbery's lack of a good influence, writes below of Douglas Crase, whose work he thinks important: "What Crase does in a way is receive Ashbery into the body of American poetry that is the common property of all poets, rather than let his work remain the private preserve of those who feel a temperamental affinity with it, or have some special relation to it." Koethe's essay appeared in a special issue of Verse (Spring 1991), out of which this collection grew and ramified; many of the writers here (including Jonathan Morse and John Gery) have chosen to answer his article in these pages, rendering a portion of the book into a sometimes contentious dialogue between contributors. My hope is that such contention will serve to focus future discussions of Ashbery's influence, or lack thereof, even as it creates a book that is more dialogue than univocal statement.

Several contributors question the importance of influence in their thinking about Ashbery and contemporary poetry. James McCorkle writes of the relationship between Ashbery and Ann Lauterbach: "Rather than casting this relationship between Ashbery and Lauterbach within the dynamics of Harold Bloom's formulations of influence, Ashbery and Lauterbach share in a concern for the condition of the lyric moment.... Thus, Ashbery is part of our horizon of understanding, and any poetry now being written will implicitly respond to the poetics his poetry represents." This is to agree with Lauterbach herself, who remarked in an interview, "My affinities to Ashbery are certainly there, although I think of myself as more psychological in tone and perhaps more intent and intense; I do not have his laconic, Insouciant, inclusive temperament. As I think Ashbery is our great poet, it would be odd not to have learned from him, but as with all great presences, the question is: what part to learn?"" Perhaps the strongest attack on influence is John Ernest's; his essay is curious and provocative in the way it treats two poets-Ashbery and William Bronk-who begin from the same place but diverge radically on their way to very different destinations. Ernest

undertakes an anatomy of influence theories, only to declare "that narratives of influence colonize individual poets and poems, assuming critical authority over them in the name of conceptual manifest destiny." Our reading, according to Ernest, is necessarily historical, and influence is allegory not history; "by emphasizing the privacy of their separate enterprises," Ernest argues paradoxically, "they reemphasize the social nature of the poetic experience."

These essays do more than argue influence and methodology, however; they do the valuable, if old-fashioned, task of helping us to read poems, beginning with essays by Jonathan Morse and Charles Altieri on Ashbery's use of clich6s and on his little-noticed love poetry. Their means of doing so, however, are not old-fashioned; most of the criticism in this book could have been written only after deconstruction, which swept the profession in the late 1970s and early ig8os; the advent of intertextual criticism (which becomes a kind of influence study of texts on other texts); and of Language poetry, which attained its maturity in the ig8os and which-paradoxically-takes deconstruction as intention, seeking to unravel and deconstruct the syntax that confines us in a worldview characterized by consumerism and right-wing politics. Nowhere in these essays do we find a heroic Ashbery questing after the dark tower of canonicity; whatever heroism there is, is textual. As Andrew Ross writes, in an essay that puts Ashbery firmly in a cultural and art-historical context: "They [techniques of collage and montage] do not constitute a medium through which authors can transfigure their traditional role of alienated commentator ... authors lose the power to elevate themselves as source and origin of all the transformative impulses that inhabit the text." Ashbery's voice, in other words, triumphs not because it is a "voice" in the traditional sense of the term but because it is writing that is generated from other writing, "an incident of disturbance," as Donald Revell describes it here.

Even more radically, Ross and Shoptaw argue that Ashbery-the Tennis Court Ashbery, that is- "presents ... an alternative to the politics of content which would limit that kind of poetic commentary to a mere ethics of opinion." Ashbery shows us, in other words, how mediated and material language

is. Ross, for one, turns on its head the argument for Ashbery's idiosyncrasy; he argues that Ashbery's importance may be based less on his idiosyncrasies than on his conventionality. In Ross's work, as elsewhere, Ashbery enters his own age not so much as a prophet but as an apostle, or what Donald Revell once described to me in a letter as an "apostle of indeterminacy." As John Gery puts it, "It is essential to regard the 'acquiescence in indeterminacy' in Ashbery's work not only as characteristic of his poetic method but as inherent in his vision of experience, a vision that allows for a multiplicity of readings." Gery's readers and writers include Clark Coolidge, John Yau, Jorie Graham, and Marjorie Welish. Finally, as Jonathan Morse writes, he is "the lyricist of what in us is most typical of all."

Ashbery, more than any contemporary poet, has self-consciously examined the categories by which we define writing, whether poetry or prose, fiction or nonfiction, lyric or epic. James McCorkle, for one, suggests that we can still talk about the lyric, rather than arguing, like Charles Bernstein in A Poetics (1992), that there is no difference between poetry and prose. Yet his lyric is inclusive rather than exclusive, contains multitudes rather than moments of time; McCorkle writes: "Poetic language, for both Derrida and Ashbery, would arguably be able to saturate space.... To drench or saturate inscribes excess or the possibility of overflowing and invokes a libidinal energy no longer centered upon the self. This saturation and porousness begin a reconsideration of the lyric." That McCorkle's definition might apply more to prose than to lyric poetry is only appropriate in a discussion of a poet whose Three Poems were in prose and whose Flow Chart contains lines that dwarf Whitman's. Poetry, this anthology claims, can itself be criticism; the Foreword, by George Bradley, and the Afterword, by Charles Bernstein, are both essay-poems. The poetcritic, like Ashbery's wandering "Is" and "you's," can be the same person, and at the same time.

We are also thrown back on the notion of influence. As I reread the opening of this Introduction, I wonder if it isn't truer to claim that "influence," as a critical term, ought to be deflected from Ashbery's person or even his poetry onto the particular field of contemporary language that informs his work

more completely than it does any other poet of his generation. Ashbery's real importance may lie in the fact that we cannot separate his work from the language we use each time we think about the world -about its shopping malls, its movies, its art, its dreams of transcending itself, and even about our criticism of Ashbery (much of Flow Chart is devoted to a critique of the critics). This discovery may make it harder, though not I trust impossible, to write literary history, but it may also force us to think of such history as part of a larger concern, where poetry and history cannot be separated, as they so often are.

Ashbery's subject matter

Ashbery's subject matter is similar to that of his favorite poet, Wallace Stevens. Both poets write of the mind forming hypotheses about reality in general, about the ultimate truth or nature of things. Stevens took for granted that we cannot know reality in itself. Whether we conceive of it as a colorless, featureless continuum, like gray haze on a winter afternoon, or as a "jostling festival" of concrete, particular identities, like a morning in June full of birdsong, we are in either case forming an imagination of reality.

Ashbery dwells on the impossibility of credibly imagining any reality. Putting it another way, we might say that for both Stevens and Ashbery the imagination creates, destroys and immediately creates another vision of reality, but that in Ashbery the process is enormously speeded up. His envisionings of reality are not merely provisional; they transform themselves and disappear in the very process of being proposed, leaving, as he puts it, "Nothing but a bitter impression of absence."

Parodying Approach of Ashbery

In interviews Ashbery denies that he parodies, and if by the term we mean the echoing of a voice for the sake of ridiculing it, we may concede that his phrasing is seldom merely parodic. Like Eliot in *The Waste Land* and Pound in the *Cantos* he adopts or alludes to a style in order to invoke the tone of feeling associated with it, and in comparison with Eliot and Pound, he is less likely to bring to bear literary styles of the past, though he draws on these also. But more frequently he exhibits the modern colloquial voices of different types of

people and the styles of contemporary journalism, advertising, bureaucracy, business memos, scientific reports, newspapers, psychology textbooks, and the like. Since these styles are relatively graceless and inactive, we sense a certain irony as we encounter them in one of Ashbery's poems. The irony intensifies when the text shifts quickly from one style to another, exhibiting each in contrast while committing itself to none.

Stock Ideas and Phrases of Ashbery

A similar irony is present in Ashbery's deliberate use of stock ideas and phrases. This pervasive technique conveys, among other things, his fear that in all our thought and speech we are helplessly trapped in the ready-made. Our minds cannot get beyond the systems of convention that fill them, and these codes divorce us from reality. Hence every utterance must be spoken with recognition and apology that the words and concepts are to some degree clichés, and this is what we find in Ashbery's texts. But the degree of irony varies enormously.

Through all his volumes Ashbery elaborates the same fundamental insights. That his subject, moreover, is not doings in the world but in the mind means that his poetry, like that of Stevens, largely forgoes the interest that attaches to human character and fate. He grips us by the profundity of his premises and by the brio of his expression, but when his skill as a stylist fails, he is boring. But when Ashbery writes well, no living poet in English can rival him in fresh, apt, surprising phrases. His attitudes and emotions are indescribably gallant as he mingles humor with pathos, resignation and elegy with hope, and maintains his relaxed, equable, fluent, wonderfully imaginative speech despite premises that might have led to despair.

Contradiction in the Fundamental Logic of Ashbery

"If the motion of the world aimed at a final state, that state would have been reached," Nietzsche writes in *Will To Power*. To build a poetics upon that notion, as John Ashbery has done, is to insist upon its corollary, the notion of eternal return. It is to construct a poetry of 'paradoxes and oxymorons' (the original title for *Shadow Train*), a poetry whose figures of speech endlessly contradict themselves, qualify and redefine their own

meanings by returning to them with supplementary variations. This process of return defines the pacing and timing, the very impulse of Ashbery's rhythm, the way the poems project, emerge, as it were, out of their own pasts towards an open-ended future. It is more than curious, then, that the word 'paradox' comes from the Greek that means 'conflicting with expectation,' implying a sense of self-questioning movement towards a future. And the Greek ancestry of 'oxymoron' suggests a 'sharp foolishness,' the sense of the playfulness inherent in Ashbery's vision. The two words together suggest the blend of the serious and the comic, the visionary and the debunked, a Nietzschean vision really, that so defines Ashbery's work.

In *Three Poems* Ashbery describes coming to a fork in the road: "you begin to realize that the two branches were joined together again, farther ahead; that this place of joining was indeed the end, and that it was this very place you set out from, whose intolerable mixture of reality and fantasy had started you on the road which has now come full circle" (90). The result of this vision of the conflicting expectations of his poetics is that "we and everything around us are moving forward continually, and . . . we are being modified constantly by the speed at which we travel and the regions through which we pass, so that merely to think of ourselves as having arrived at some final resting place is a contradiction of fundamental logic" (74). Instead, as he says in "At Lotus Lodge" (*Shadow Train* 27), a sharply historical vision that shuffles fragments, pieces of conversation, blurred visions, cliches, metaphors of metaphors, produces "this singular tale of the past / And the thousand stories just like it." But the repetition is never perfectly exact, as Nietzsche, too, knew; there is always a difference, a strange otherness of the present moment that is "caught, way out in the distance," — "Some things are always left undecidable / And regroup, to reappear next year in a new light, / The light of change" ("Indelible, inedible," *ST* 44). It is in his two most recent books, *Shadow Train* and *A Wave*, that this dramatic tension between returning and going on is most intensified, made even more paradoxical.

Ashbery describes his technique most fully in "Description of a Masque," one of the centerprieces of *A Wave:*

"Then we all realized what should have been obvious from the start: that the setting would go on evolving eternally, rolling its waves across our vision like an ocean each one new yet recognizably a part of the same series, which was creation itself. Scenes from movies, plays, operas, television; decisive or little-known episodes from history; prenatal and other early memories from our own solitary, separate pasts; events yet to come to life or art; calamities or moments of relaxation; universal or personal tragedies; or little vignettes from daily life that you just had to stop and laugh at, they were so funny, like the dog chasing its tail on the living room rug" (27). This passage is an important one for illustrating Ashbery's desire to convert, as Parmenides did, the tragic into the comic by subsuming the "decisive," the "universal or personal tragedies" in an evolving catalogue of perspectives that wittily undercut each other. And there is also, by the very diverse nature of the list, an implicit desire to include everything in a Whitmanesque gesture that seems denied by the undertstated tone the passage projects on the surface. Yet the seriousness and the desire to be inclusive remain, however muted. The problem is that the speaker often exists like "an empty pair of parentheses" (*ST* 12); the narrator may become isolated, cut off even from his own history:

> *I keep thinking if I could get through you*
> *I'd get back to me at a further stage*
> *Of this journey, but the tent flaps fall,*
> *The parachute won't land, only drifts sideways,*
> *The carnival never ends; the apples,*
> *The land, are duly tucked away*
> *And we are left with only sensations of ourselves*
> *And the dry otherness, like a clenched fist*
> *Around the throttle as we go down, sideways and down.*

The range of emotion is astounding here: and it is given stylistically by the way in which the downward, sideways motion that defines each movement (nearly every verbal gesture) is disrupted by such contradictory connotations suggested by "carnival" and "clenched fist," self and other, passive drifting and the holding of the throttle. The simple, formal principle of containment that attempts to center the

poem in a certain direction of consciousness is exploded so that the passage seems to include more than it wanted or intended.

What stands out in this process is a radical decentering of the self, a gesture that may Ashbery poems make in addressing a "you" who is simultaneously the focus of the poem and the consciousness specifically excluded from its resolution. "Paradoxes and Oxymorons", for instance, begins by cajoling the reader:

> This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level.
>
> *Look at it talking to you.*
> *You look out a window*
> *Or pretend to fidget.*
> *You have it but you don't have it.*
> *You miss it, it misses you.*
> *You miss each other.*
> *The poem is sad because it wants to be yours, and cannot.*
> *What's a plain level? It is that and other things,*
> *Bringing a system of them into play. Play?*
> *Well, actually, yes, but I consider play to be*
> *A deeper outside thing, a dreamed role-pattern,*
> *As in the division of grace these long August days*
> *Without proof. Open-ended. And before you know*
> *It gets lost in the stream of the chatter of typewriters.*

The first stanza is intent upon a process of identification that climaxes in the last line of that stanza; the second stanza then begins a process of denial and questioning in which the "you" is nearly forgotten amidst the machinations of the "I," the identification of inner and outer. By the time the third stanza emerges, the self and other are lost in "the stream and chatter of typewriters." The last stanza is itself a sort of "tease" —

> It has been played once more.
> I think you exist only
> To tease me into doing it, on your level,
> and then you aren't there
> Or have adopted a different attitude.
> And the poem
> Has set me softly down beside you.
> The poem is you.

The repetition with a "different attitude," the frustration of being set down beside the other by a poem that is and is not that very other, produces an uncanny effect: self, other and poem all merge at the same time they disperse. "What attitude isn't then really yours?" Ashbery had asked in the previous poem.

In a recent interview, commenting on his own "confusing use of pronouns," Ashbery notes: "There are questions as to whether one character is actually the character he's supposed to be. I feel not too sure of who I am and that I might be somebody else, in a sense, at this very moment I am saying 'I'. But doesn't this open up a book and make it more available". As he goes on to say, "the maximum number of options" is the essential aim; the self must also include all potential others. The poet, then, must be able to keep the poem and the self as ongoing events, and to keep "rejoicing in my singular/Un-wholeness that keeps it an event to me" ("Here Everything is Still Floating,"). To be always riding the wave of an event is at once the comic triumph and the melancholy weight of Ashbery's vision; the poet is always in "another season, proposing a name and a distant resolution" ("The Ivory Tower,").

The Issue of SELF in Ashbery's Poetry

This decentering of the self, this projecting of the self towards a "distant resolution," and the discovery of the self in an essential otherness that is inherent in langauge ("The poem is you"), accounts for the discursive, often chatty quality of Ashbery's style. In *As We Known* this otherness was most manifest in "Litany," a parallel text in two columns spoken by "A" and "B." The two columns each have their own voices but are interdependent: narrator A mentions topic X before or after B does, or perhaps never mentions it at all. The white spaces between and within the two columns act like threatening silences, as if the speakers had to talk in order to exist. To remain quiet is to be content only with the self, to remain static with no sense of expanding horizons. *Shadow Train* follows *As We Know* and begins with an oblique glance back to "Litany"—

> *It came about that there was no way of passing*
> *Between the twin partitions that presented*

A unified facade, that of a suburban shopping mall
In April.

What Ashbery discovers in *Shadow Train* and *A Wave* is that the simultaneous columns actually enforce a stasis for they undercut a more progressive, more narrative movement; in critiquing the simple linearity of time, the columns subvert history, narrative, the evolution of the self.

In *Shadow Train* and especially *A Wave*, Ashbery's poetry becomes more novelistic — a novel whose characters, places, even plots, emerge from a collision of languages and parodies of languages. This explains, expecially in these latest two books, the increasing allusions to plot and character, the increasing flirtation with narrative. Though the tone is radically different, Dostoevsky's method of allowing his characters their say, however it contradicts him or others, is a useful model for the dialectic between narrator and narrative in Ashbery. "The Path To The White Moon," for instance, in *A Wave* (31-32), originates in a story fragment that includes something that "looked like farmhouses yes" and proceeds to tell not a story *per se* but a narrative of the speaker's attempts to discover a plot, a series of propositions, possibilities, with references to probable pasts. As the setting expands geographically, the "you" grows in consciousness: "And then the space of this behavior, the air,/Has suddenly doubled/And you have grown to fill the extra place." The drama involves the "you's" desire not to repeat things: "once you have seen a thing you have to move on." In this context, "time unfolds like music trapped on the page/Unable to tell the story again." But the poem does not hold out a specific teleology; the "you" and so the "we" (self and other-you) can only move away from an origin, can only fragment itself. The result is that the resolution of time, history and the self, as well as the resolution of the whole poem, become a sort of fraying of the narrative and dialogic threads:

We know what is coming, that we are moving
Dangerously and gracefully
Toward the resolution of time
Blurred but alive with many separate meanings
Inside this conversation.

"This best describes how I experience life, as a unity constantly separating," Ashbery says.

Actually, the first poem in *A Wave*, "At North Farm," introduces the importance of the kind of Other encountered here. It begins, "Somewhere someone is traveling furiously toward you" and the rest of the poem, indeed the rest of the book, can be seen as a sequence of gradual, cumulating definitions of the other, always tentative. The poem ends by suggesting that a specific identification may not be as important as the effect the other has on the self:

> *Is it enough*
> *That the dish of milk's set out at night*
> *That we think of him sometimes,*
> *Sometimes and always, with mixed feelings?*

This focus on the paradigmatic rather than the specific—a mythic impulse, really—emphasizes *narrative* (the author's evolving relation to the unfolding text, tone, nuances of meaning) rather than *plot* (the scheme of action of the characters), or *story* (the bottom line of what occurs in plot).

> *And the serial continues:*
> *Pain, expiation, delight, more pain,*
> *A frieze that lengthens continually, in the happy way*
> *Friezes do, and no plot is produced,*
> *Nothing you could hang an identifying question on.*
> ("Darlene's Hospital,")

We are left, then, not with the facts of our lives, or the fact of another, but with what Wallace Stevens called "supreme fictions." In "The Vegetarians," which closes *Shadow Train*, Ashbery describes the way we want to have our lives translated into something else, and how this translation "resembles what you want to do/No more than black tree trunks do." So, he says, referring to and building from the notion of dialogue — "Therefore our legends always came around to seeming legendary,/A path decorated with our comings and goings. Or so I've been told." On a larger scale, as he says in "Shadow-Train," our cultural histories become even more puzzling and the self seems lost, or worse, bored by an otherness too vague to come to grips with. The ultimate danger is boredom in that it signals stasis, and these poems explore the possibility that

stasis comes not only from lack of movement, but from movement involving an other who is so general and large that the emotional evolution is hardly noticed —

> *Who can say*
> *What it means, or whether it protects? Yet it is clear*
> *That history merely stretches today into one's private guignol.*
> *The violence dreams. You are half asleep at your instrument table.*

Isolation and Boredom in Ashbery

So what is the cure for this entropy, this boredom, really, that Ashbery sees threatening our vision? Obviously, first of all, the verbal pyrotechnicians that use wild, zany connections (and now, perhaps more clearly, the desperate motivation, the seriousness of his comic vision, becomes more apparent). The point is always to subvert simple linearity, simple logic. In *Shadow Train*, the surface *format* itself becomes the static frame, the sense of simple return that the progression of thought and language, the underlying *form* disrupts. In a recent interview he says — "To me, it's a kind of antiform, really, a lining up of four stanzas of four lines each. It looks sensible on the page but, in fact, it lacks the 'meaningfulness' of the sonnet, a logical form . . . . I was aware, as I was writing, of the great irregularity of length of thought. One line would contain barely an idea while the next line would have six or seven slapped together" (*Acts* 75-76). The provisional solutions of *Shadow Train* rest exactly with this false formal sense of closure; the doubleness comes from the disruption of order and finality, of simple presence and simple self.

In *A Wave* this dialectic becomes more expansive. It is as if Ashbery heeded the warning of "Drunken Americans" where he realizes "all/Moments are like this: Thin, unsatisfactory/As gruel, worn away more each time you return to them". Unsatisfactory, that is, "Until one day you rip the canvas from its frame." In the title poem of the book the canvas, torn from its frame, becomes itself a frame, another system:

> *By so many systems*
> *As we are involved in, by just so many*

> *Are we set free on an ocean of language that comes to be*
> *Part of us, as though we could ever get away.*

The drama for the speaker here is to "get back to that raw state/Of feeling", to return to an origin but not so as to "force" ideas "into meanings that don't concern us/And so leave us behind". It is a variation of the Romantic quest for feeling that must avoid the weight of a past that threatens to overdetermine our modes of feeling even as we return to that past — "So the voluminous past/Accepts, recycles our claims to present consideration/And the urban landscape is once again untroubled". If we are not careful, "The past absconds/With our fortunes". In this context the drama of ideas always questions itself as part of an ongoing dialogue — "a luminous backdrop to over-repeated/Features, having no life of their own, but only echoing/The suspicions of their possessor". "So we are set free on an ocean of language that comes to be/Part of us" and in time becomes "a sculpture/Of moments, thoughts added on". The search extends for newness, novelty — "a new weather/ Nobody can imagine". Thus he asks — "is there something new to see, to speculate on?" Finally, then, the dialogue in Ashbery is with the future one sees projected from a past, an attempt to avoid the simple levellings of repeating the past. What "A Wave" fights against — and its dramatic, narrative power comes from its novelistic sense of triumphs and failures, hopes and despairs — is the simple repetition that has threatened his narrators from the beginning — "And then it all happens blendingly, over and over/In a continuous, vivid present that wasn't there before". He must avoid simple ends "Dreamed into their beginnings".

At the end of the poem he regains a faith that things will change, but the reason lies not in things themselves, rather in the narrator's language — "it is finally we who break it off," call the poem closed, though "We'll/Stay in touch". Format becomes, as he notes with respect to the poems in *Shadow Train*, something arbitrary, but something also for form to react to, to enter into dialogue with. Form, on the other hand, becomes the shape of history, from the personal to the cultural, where we become "conscious of each other/Until the day when war absolves us of our differences." In the end, the narrator finds a personal "peace" that counteracts this larger threat of

war. The narrator's "thirst" remains the same, but "the walls, like veils, are never the same" because he sees them differently each time he returns in the poem to the history of his unfolding double-consciousness. In the end, it is the dialogic principle that is the saving procedure, that overrides the threat of boredom, which on a deeper metaphysical level has become the threat stasis, of death, which is to say, the death in life of a single self unremembered and unnoticed by an Other:

> *I feel at peace with the parts of myself*
> *That questioned this other, easygoing side, chafed it*
> *To a knotted rope of guesswork looming out of storms*
> *And darkness proceeding on its way to nowhere*
> *Barely muttering.*

10

Obscurity and Paradoxes in Ashbery

The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception, because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. – Shklovsky, "Art as Technique", 1917.

Why are some poems 'difficult'? There are many reasons, lack of control or concern by the writer amongst them. Here I'd like to concentrate on some of the more legitimate reasons for obscurity, borrowing some ideas from maths and the visual arts.

Though poetry may aspire to music, it shares many inherent problems with painting. The discovery of perspective in the middle ages provided a rigorous method of transforming 3 dimensions into 2. We have little difficulty in restoring the lost dimension ourselves. In poetry the loss is more extreme and the restoration more problematic. A poem is, after all, just a long line of characters concertina'd to fit onto the page, a one dimensional thread that began as an idea in time and space. Whenever dimensions are collapsed there's a risk that information will be lost or distorted. In fact, there's a topological theorem (The "Flower Pressing Theorem") which states that 2 effects are likely

1. some points which were close become separated
2. previously distinct points become superimposed

These traits (discontinuity and ambiguity) become more pronounced the more dimensions that are compressed, and modern poetry in particular is susceptible. How does it compensate?

Each kind of representation engenders new art forms and new ways of thinking. Flat patches of paint have interactions missing from the objects they represent. When thought is put

into language, the characteristics of the medium, (rhyme, meter, etc) are emphasised by some wordsmiths, just as Matisse, for example, flattened the picture space to emphasise shape and colour until representationalism was all but lost. Look at Picasso's Les Damoiselles d'Avignon or Guernica and you will see flatness and depth on the very same canvas, making the observer's mind change its "focal depth" as it roams. With poetry the shifts aren't so clearly signposted. In The Waste Land attention switches between the symbolic, the declamatory, the prosaic and the oracular so quickly that anyone with conceptual astigmatism is unlikely to get the most from the poem. Some words, like some paintings, aren't meant to be "seen through"; trying will end in bewilderment. Language is not a window upon reality, but stained glass at best, with a glory and interest of its own. Indeed, philosophers like Barthes go further, saying that the lucidity of language is a delusion borne of familiarity.

Even if obscurity and ambiguity were avoidable, they are still useful to the poet. Music is hardly ever representational. Poetry can struggle against it by exploiting obscurity - the more difficult the poem, the less likely is it to be read linearly; the reader is forced to backtrace, to keep the whole poem in mind at once. Discontinuity and sudden switches dislocate the flow, forcing the reader to find other relationships between the parts than linearity, adding depth so that the shapes formed in the mind by the poem aren't restricted by the order the components are presented in. We can roam over the text as one might a painting.

However, the conventions (because that is all they are) that help us restore solidity to a painting can be played upon. Escher's etchings frustrate our expectations, unsettling us with flat images of worlds that cannot exist in just 3 dimensions. Similarly some poems resist interpretation as representations of our familiar surroundings, making new shapes inside us that could not be produced other than by words, and the elbow room to subvert the analogy between the world and words is greater than painters have. As a final example from the visual arts, look at any stereogram. It contains an image if you focus beyond the page. Striking when you see it (and, like some poetry, infuriating if you can't and others can), but the depth can only exist if the surface remains "obscure".

Obscurity may sometimes shield the charlatan but without it we might lose a valuable opportunity to transcend words, a loss we can't afford.

Obscurity and Paradox

A literary critic must be prepared to say, "This is good, though I don't know why; not yet anyhow"; indeed his more formative opinions are nearly always like that.

—William Empson

"I live with this paradox; on the one hand, I am an important poet, read by younger writers, and on the other hand, nobody understands me. I am often asked to account for this state of affairs, but I can't." This self-assessment by the American poet John Ashbery is fair and succinct. Much admired, winner of many prizes, stylistically over-influential, Ashbery has nonetheless provoked hostility and scepticism from uncomprehending readers. His poems slide through a variety of voices and styles with quickfire cuts between sensations, comments and events; sometimes the disruption of expectation is so frequent that it becomes easy for a sceptical or lazy reader to feel that the poems are nothing more than a random agglomeration of words, images, quotations and phrases.

On a more sympathetic reading, what is sometimes perceived as a contempt for readers is arguably a generosity towards them. Ashbery, who frequently seems baffled, hurt or pissed off at the accusation that he does not communicate, once said: "If my poetry is oblique, it's because I want to slant it at as wide an audience as possible, odd as it may come out in practice. Therefore, if I'm writing a love poem it won't talk about specifics, but just about the general feeling which anybody might conceivably be able to share."

David Herd's fine study, John Ashbery and American Poetry, argues for this way of reading Ashbery while, valuably, sharing some of the entranced bafflement felt by Ashbery readers. In discussing "Europe", the most challenging poem in The Tennis Court Oath, Ashbery's most "difficult" book, Herd quotes the lines "We are not loved more than now/The newspaper is ruining your eyes", drolly noting that: "Addressing a cultural condition which it thought damag ing to the reader's wellbeing, [the poem] was serious when it

suggested . . . that they were never 'loved more than now'. The trouble was it had a funny way of showing it."

But an Ashbery poem, read at the right moment, in the right frame of mind (I like reading him on trains, and when I'm not too tired), can be an extraordinary thing: thought-provoking, mood-capturing, witty, political, camp, humane, inspirational. It is harder to say how the poetry works, and Herd's book starts from this very mixture of scepticism and sympathy, before placing Ashbery in various traditions and teasing out allusions, influences and developments. He discusses his early collaborations in the 1950s with the so-called New York School (a category that includes Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch and James Shuyler), and explains these writers' desire to escape the overbearing influence of Robert Lowell, and their enthusiastic participation in the avant-garde of their time.

In doing so, he articulates with admirable clarity the dilemmas of any avant-garde art: the need to move on and away from tradition, and therefore to be difficult and unpopular, while still requiring a community of readers and critics to preserve and ultimately popularise the work as it comes into its own. The avant-garde artist strives for fresh ways of seeing in order to counter the homogenised, consumerist world offered by the media, while remaining wary of these fresh ways of seeing becoming merely another homogenised orthodoxy. As Ashbery himself wrote: "Is there nothing then . . . between an avant-garde that has become a tradition and a tradition which is no longer one?"

Herd concentrates on Ashbery's idea that each poem arises out of, and includes, the occasion of its making. No detail is too grand or lowly, no style of speech too lofty or base, to be included. Everything is poeticised: the shared details of our social, economic and cultural lives freely mix, and through the poems we are persuaded to view them with fresh eyes. In this way, Ashbery's attention to every detail of existence is both generous and humble. It is political in the widest sense of the word - democratic, anti-consumerist, empowering. In Ashbery's poetry one frequently gets the sense of an alert citizen sharing his passion, stoicism, amusement or anger without ever hectoring or lecturing. It is a poetry of such radical scepticism

that, while it can provoke as many readings as it has readers, none of them can remain settled or sustained across the oeuvre. More than anything, it is a poetry that gives readers room to think and feel for themselves.

At the same time, Herd's erudition is enormously helpful in providing a framework for those responses. Pasternak has always been a declared influence; Herd carefully explains how and where this affects Ashbery's use of (often bizarre) metaphor and simile. Likewise, he takes us into "Three Poems" by teasing out its argument with Pascal and Auden. In tracing allusions and influences, as well as the political, personal and poetic contexts in which Ashbery produced his various volumes, Herd provides points of access for the reader. He does so with an enthusiasm and humour that courteously match his subject's own.

Herd also makes much of the paradox of Ashbery's sudden success, when he wrote Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror and found himself transformed overnight from outsider into national institution. Ashbery himself has noted the danger that an artist can "pass from unacceptability to acceptance without an intervening period of appreciation", and his later career is thus plausibly seen by Herd as a constant negotiation towards further fresh starts. Ashbery's work, for himself and for everyone, is precisely about an attentiveness to one's own situation and potentiality, not a substitution of someone else's. Charmingly, in riposte to accusations of obscurity, Ashbery has stated that "a poem that communicates something that's already known to a reader is not really communicating anything to him, and in fact shows a lack of respect". Or, more strongly: "It's a veiled insult to the reader."

In this spirit, what Herd offers is not a reading of Ashbery but a way of reading Ashbery, and a critical language more appropriate to Ashbery's peculiarities than pre-packaged approaches, which merely make Ashbery reflect their own concerns. This is one of the most entertaining, lucid, witty, generous and hospitable works of criticism I have had the pleasure of reading. Like all good critics, Herd sends us back to the poems; prepared for the adventurous journey ahead, but not saddled with someone else's luggage.

11

John Ashbery and Language Poetry

What is Language poetry?

In George Hartley's Textual Politics and Language Poets, he makes clear that the term "Language poetry" is a label that's meaning may vary depending on who is defining it. He however lists several poets who are widely considered Language poets since they have appeared in Language anthologies published between the years 1973 and 1987, as well as critical essays and particular poetry magazines.

Hartley states in his preface that "Specifically, what has come to be known as Language Poetry is held out to be one of those poetic modes of the present moment...which functions as such a critique (of a capitalist society)". Hartley avoids generalizing the political motives and writing styles of these poets, and suggests more simply that "what connects these writers...is a 'community of concern for language as the center of whatever activity poems might be'". Hartley assumes that Language poets, in their work, attempt to challenge the model of communication that the conventional "voice" poem depends on. As a result, most Language poets reject traditional forms of writing, such as the linear, autobiographical, chronological narrative, and "attempt to remind us of the socially contrived basis of any writing." They do this by "drawing the reader into the production process by leaving the connections between various elements open, thus allowing the reader to produce the connections between those elements. In this way, presumably, the reader recognizes his or her part in the social process of production", and this may function as a critique of a capitalist society. In this form of writing, the conventional, hierarchical relationship between the writer and reader changes; the writer no longer commands the reader how to read or think, but

allows the reader to become active in the poetic process itself by giving the reader the freedom of interpretation. A further goal of Language writing and its often ambiguous structure is to make the reader aware of the process of ideological framing. In this way, Hartley ascertains that Language poets' challenges to conventional poetic structures encourage the reader to consider and challenge the "socially-determined frames" in which he/she is accustomed to viewing the world, and therefore Language poetry is a form of ideology critique.

Ashbery as the precursor to Language Poetry

Ashbery seems a precursor to Language poetry in many ways; Hartley determines The Tennis Court Oath as the most influential Ashbery text on the Language poets. The book demands, in the words of Language poet Bruce Andrews, "Behavioral reading, rather than hermeneutic ones", through its inconsistencies of tone and syntax, and its fragmented imagery. Hartley asserts that the Language poets focus on "the essential insight of Ashbery's work—the social production of meaning… in an examination of the politics of the use of language". They leave out Ashbery's "tortured meditation on perception and representation" and use irony rather as "a guard against ideological contamination" than "a questioning of language".

Ashbery's Influence

Bob Perelman, an English professor here at Penn as well as an established poet and critic, exclaimed "Of course Ashbery has influenced me: he's written some of the best, most provocative, most formally interesting poems of the recent period." Perelman mentioned The Tennis Court Oath as "hugely influential on the early work of the Language writers (and the fact that Harold Bloom, representing normative academic appropriation of JA, called that book a mistake boosted its cachet with us)." Hartley quotes the critic Harold Bloom as calling The Tennis Court Oath "'the outrageously disjunctive volume,' flawed because Ashbery 'attempted too massive a swerve away from the ruminative continuities of Stevens and Whitman'". Yet, as Perelman suggests, Hartley attributes the book's influential role in contemporary poetry to this "swerve." Perelman comments on the influence of

Ashbery's later books as well. "Three Poems, long prose poems, was a great invitation to many: the most normal, low-key prose could add up to something tremendously complex and uncategorizable," he says, referring to the book's influence on many Language poets' (including his own) attempts at prose poetry. Perelman considers Ashbery's later poetry as having "an analogous impact [as his prose poems]. Ashbery throws the most interesting monkeywrenches into the increasingly banal distinction between 'innovative' and everyday language." Perelman has not deliberately tried to copy Ashbery, but admits "I suppose it is true, at whatever level of generality, that the prior and ongoing example of Ashbery helped me imagine the formal potentials of detaching the most ordinary speech in poems like 'Chronic Meanings,' 'Confession,' and 'China,' among others." In considering the rest of the New York School's influence on his work, Perelman says that O'Hara has been "a more vivid influence" on him than Ashbery, especially his "younger self." Perelman mentions a likely Ashberian influence on his current work, judging that "I think the ekphrastic Ashbery (poet who writes to painting, on paintings, at paintings) has something major to do with my just-finished collaboration with painter Francie Shaw: Playing Bodies, 52 poems to her set of 52 paintings." The collaboration is not published until next year, but was shown recently at the Institute of Contemporary Art.

Ron Silliman, a friend of Perelman's, is the author of several volumes of poetry and a book of criticism, has edited several issues of literary magazines, and has also received many honors from the year 1970 to his most recent fellowship from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts in 2002. In his comments on Ashbery, he seems to rather appreciate and admire his poetry than admit a strong influence. In regards to the New York School, Silliman says "I think that Schuyler has had a more direct influence on me because of his great capabilities as a descriptive poet, which is my own personal inclination as well. And Frank O'Hara, because he comes so heavily out of [William Carlos] Williams' work, as do I." I had asked Silliman if Ashbery's use of language has affected his own, and he responded that "I don't think, actually, that Ashbery had any great influence on my sense of language, in

part because I've read so much linguistics over the years that Ashbery's work has tended to serve as verification rather than theory when I've read it."

Silliman does trace his impressions of Ashbery over the years, and how Ashbery's work influenced him to think about his own. Silliman had first read Ashbery around 1965 in the Donald Allen anthology, The New American Poetry. Although he was "more taken with the writing of projectivist poets," he liked Ashbery's work there and bought Some Trees and The Tennis Court Oath: the only available Ashberian texts at that time. Silliman remembers "I really liked the Oath, which seemed radical and strange, but I was surprised and disappointed to some degree at the conservativism (really caution) of Some Trees. So in those years of the late 1960s, when I was a teen and in my early twenties, I paid attention, but generally kept his work in the back of my mind, not at the forefront." However, after Silliman read Three Poems his "'back of mind attitude' changed." He had already begun writing his own book-length prose poem, Ketjak, but then saw Three Poems as "a remarkably brave piece of writing that truly achieved something that had not been done before better elsewhere." Silliman believes that "Ashbery's sense of the sentence is very different from my own, the way he slides and glides around it, but it is always wonderful to read." He declares Three Poems "one of the great books of poetry in American history."

When Ashbery's Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror was published, Silliman remembers feeling "amused, because I could see - as a primary level in the text - its satire of a certain sort of academic book, with one lengthier piece surrounded by shorter lyrics." As a result, poets wrote similar satires in the 1970s and early 1980s, and Silliman thought "the joke wore very thin, especially as the academic poetry scene, always anemic, pretty much dissolved in its influence altogether." He concludes that "By the end of that period, the only significant example of that kind of book seemed to be Ashbery's."

Silliman read Ashbery's Flow Chart "utterly enchanted"; "It was again a completely different kind of writing from any of his peers, either in the New York School or elsewhere."

Silliman declares that "After Three Poems, it's my favorite writing of his. Since then, I've read everything [of Ashbery's] and liked most of it."

Rae Armantrout teaches poetry writing at the University of California in San Diego, and has written several books of poetry. In response to my question, she said "Has Ashbery been an influence on me? Not directly. But there is something about the way he says a thing while also somehow unsaying it that I feel close to." She mentions Three Poems in particular, the Ashberian work that made the greatest impression on her. "The grasping at experience began to seem almost a faux grasping (if you can picture that). Reading Three Poems you're bound to realize, at some point, that you're being teased, that you'll never get 'it' because there is no 'it.' Now if I could only learn that lesson in real life!"

Armantrout also muses that "Maybe there was something in [Ashbery's] style that gave me permission." Many of her poems are prose poems or have prosaic qualities, and in a 1998 interview conducted as part of a series by Daniel Kane, she admits that she can think of "no good reason to go to prose." Often her decision has to do with vocabulary; "long clunky-sounding words - essay words - would look silly in skinny little lines." She also thinks it would seem "ridiculous" to break prosaic sentences or dialogue into lines. In this way, her writing of prose poems seems a natural inclination, rather than a decision influenced directly by Ashbery's example.

Charles Bernstein is the director of the Poetics Program and teaches at the State University of New York in Buffalo. He has authored several volumes of poetry, two books of critical essays, has edited several books and volumes of literary magazines, and has received many honors from the year of 1972 to his most recent, the Roy Harvey Pearce/Archive for New Poetry Prize of the University of California, San Diego for a lifetime contribution to poetry and scholarship in 1999. In response to my questions, Bernstein states "I am not so much interested in influence...I greatly admire the work of James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, and Frank O'Hara and each of them have been crucial for me in different ways in my reading, writing, and thinking about poetry. I often teach their work."

Ashbery had a profound effect on him when he first read his work. For his own writing, Bernstein says, "Rivers and Mountains, especially 'The Skaters,' and Three Poems would be the most crucial early influences, along with, though more conceptually, The Tennis Court Oath." He views The Tennis Court Oath as "one of Ashbery's most important books from the point of view of the poetics. Interestingly enough, Hartley pinpoints Charles Bernstein as "one contemporary poet to benefit from Ashbery's 'swerve' from Stevens and Whitman" in The Tennis Court Oath; "The disjunct syntax, the incomplete statements, and the radical shifts of imagery [in Bernstein's poetry] all recall Ashbery's early work", Hartley states. Judging from Bernstein's response however, Ashbery's influence on him was more subtle than direct.

The varied responses I received from these four Language poets suggest that Ashbery has influenced their work, if to a lesser degree for Silliman and Bernstein than for Perelman and Armantrout. They certainly view his work as important; I think Perelman articulated quite well the general sense of these poets' responses when he said, "I suppose it is true, at whatever level of generality, that the prior and ongoing example of Ashbery helped me imagine the formal potentials of detaching the most ordinary speech…" In short, Ashbery's innovative work that often challenges convention seems to set the example of possibility for Language poets in their own work as they too challenge convention in creative, new ways.

12

Style, Themes and Technique of John Ashbery's Poetry

Introduction

Poet and critic, who has deeply influenced American poetry from the 1970s, Ashbery is the best-known poet of the "New York School." The label was coined by John Bernard Mayers in 1961 in an article he wrote for the magazine *Nomad*. Ashbery's first volume, *Turandot and Other Poems*, appeared in 1953. His work is characterized by originality, impressionistic elegance, and dark themes of death and terror. In 'Self-Portrait' he wrote:

The locking into place is "death itself,"
As Berg said of a phrase in Mahler's Ninth;
Or, to quote Imogen in Cymbaline, "There cannot
Be a pinch in death more sharp than this," for,
Though only exercise or tactic, it carries
The momentum of a conviction that had been building.

In the 1950s Ashbery adopted to his poetry techniques used by such abstract painters as Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock. In 'The Painter' (1956) he wrote:

"Sitting between the sea and the buildings
He enjoyed painting the sea's portrait.
But just as children imagine a prayer
Is merely silence, he expected his subject
To rush up the sand, and, seizing a brush,
Plaster its own portrait on the canvas."

He also was interested in the music of John Cage and Anton Webern and the writings of the French surrealist Raymond Roussel. Ashbery formed with his friends Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch the nucleus of a group of artists known as the

"New York school" of poets. It lasted into the early 1970s - Ashbery himself has doubted that there ever was a shool. His uncompromising avant-gardism was first greeted with puzzlement - critics and readers considered his poetry obscure and difficult. Some critics have said that his poems are like abstract paintings in words. Ashbery himself has said, that he aims "to record a kind of generalized transcript of what's really going on in our minds all day long." He has also denied that there are allegorical - "In think my poems mean what they say, and whatever might be implicit within a particular passage, but there is no message, nothing I want to tell the world particularly except what I am thinking when I am writing." (from *Writers at Work*, ed. by Geroge Plimpton, 1986)

From the beginning of his career, Ashebery has tried to find new ways and rules of expressions. His poems are formally innovative. He often lets his text flow in paragraph-length-associative structures, which penetrate layer after layer deeper into anxieties, doubts, and false beliefs.

"*Later one protest: How did we get here*
This way, unable to stop communicating?
And is it all right for the children to listen,
For the weeds slanting inward, for the cold mice
Until dawn? Now every yard has its tree,
Every heart its valentine, and only we
Don't know how to occupy the tent of night
So that what must come to pass shall pass."

(from 'Brute Image', 1992)

In *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) Ashbery reached the peak of his experimental phase. The work was considered by some critics impenetrable. Ashbery do not hide his vast and deeply cultured learning - the title of the book referred to the sketch by the French artist Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825), which portrays a key moment before the French revolution. David planned to paint a mammoth canvas based on *The Oath*, but he never completed the work - this must have attracted Ashebery, who seems to rely more on first impressions and freshness of perception than academic perfection. In *Rivers and Mountains* (1966) Ashebery abandoned his fragmented expression and turned to his reader with the pleading words: "And I sing amid

despair and isolation/Of the chance to know you, to sing of me/ Which are you." *Chinese Whispers: Poems* (2002) returned to the theme of interpretation and misunderstanding, trials and errors of a writer. The title of the book refers to a children's game, in which a message is whispered from ear to ear around a circle of people, inevitably changing along the way.

The success of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975) made Ashbery one of America's foremost poets. It won The National Book Critics Circle Prize, the National Book Award for Poetry, and the Pulitzer Prize. The critic John Russel has called its title poem "one of the finest long poems of our period." Ashbery's only novel, *A Nest of Ninnies* (1969), written in collaboration with James Schuyler, was a satire on literary life. The author has also written plays and *Girls on the Run* (1999), a surrealistic poem based on the illustrations of Henry Darger. "His poetry appeals not because it offers wisdom in a packaged form, but because the elusiveness and mysterious promise of his lines remind us that we always have a future and a condition of meaningfulness to start out toward."

An outline of John Ashbery's Technique and Themes

1. His work is characterized by originality, impressionistic elegance, dark themes of death and terror.
2. He adapted his poetry techniques used by such abstract painters as Williem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock as revealed in the Painter.
3. His poems are innovative. He lets his text flow in a paragraph-length associative structures, which penetrate layer after layer deeper into anxieties, doubts, and false beliefs
4. Technically one of the most gifted of all poets, Ashbery has always suffered from a lack of purpose. His technical accomplishment is not merely a matter of dexterity, it is solid and profound that it assimilates to itself some of the traits associated with genius.
5. Like Spenser, Pope and Tennyson in English literature, John Ashbery is chiefly known for the artistic perfection of his poetry. He is remarkable for

his simple colloquial diction. With colloquial diction, it is not sometimes easy to be exact in expression but Ashbery has the gift of being exact even with this sort of casual diction. His poetry has a natural flow, varying in sound and effect according to the idea or situation that he writes of.

6. We may say that Ashbery wishes nature – the real objects, people or situations – to appear on the paper not mere words attempting to convey the images. Not just that, he even wished ideas to appear in solid visible form. It is evident that Ashbery paints accurate lifelike pictures of his subjects. As for any message or lesson, he bluntly rejects it.
7. As a bird sings for its own pleasure so does Ashbery writes to satisfy his own urge for putting his observation and experience on the paper.
8. The selection highlights three major themes or questions running through Ashbery's work: (1) the problem of subjective identity--Whose consciousness informs the poem? (2) the relationship between language and subjectivity--Whose language do I speak or does the language have a mind of its own? (3) the connection between subjectivity, language, and place--What does it mean to be an American poet?
9. Ashbery has long been interested in French art, especially dada and surrealism. Such interests have merged with an equally strong concern for poetic form and structure, as evinced by the sestina of "Farm Implements" and the 4 x 4 structure (four stanzas each of four lines) of "Paradoxes and Oxymorons," a structure he uses through *Shadow Train*, the volume from which the poem was taken. Ashbery's combination of surrealism and formalism typifies a certain strain of postmodernism.
10. Obviously Ashbery is writing for a highly sophisticated contemporary audience. The decade he spent in France provided him with an international perspective.

13

Resolving Contradictions in John Ashbery's Poetry

Artists are no fun once they have been discovered.
—John Ashbery, "The Invisible Avant-Garde" (1968)

Introduction

Has success spoiled John Ashbery? By no means, if we are talking about such recent volumes as *Can You Hear, Bird* (1995). But the current discourse on Ashbery's work is something else again. Now that academic critics, who, not so long ago, dismissed Ashbery's poems as so much obscurantist doubletalk, have been forced to concede that the Ashberyan mode doesn't seem to be going away, that, on the contrary, its particular modulation of voices and performative registers speaks to poetry audiences from Austria to Australia, a new explanatory narrative is in the making. According to this account, there's nothing so unusual about Ashbery, who, so it now seems, has all along written under the sign of Eliot or Stevens, leaving Modernism firmly intact as the movement or epoch of choice, the movement from which no later twentieth-century poet (not even Ashbery) can actually deviate.

A recent example of this "business as usual" narrative is James Longenbach's essay "Ashbery and the Individual Talent," published in American Literary History (Spring 1997) and reprinted in Longenbach's Modern Poetry After Modernism (Oxford, 1997). One of this essay's chief aims is to dismantle the "breakthrough narratives" critics like myself have misguidedly perpetuated--narratives, that is to say, that claim that there is, for better a worse, a genuine difference between modernist and postmodernist poetics. Ashbery, Longenbach argues, is "the least oppositional of poets." And again, "However distinctive his own poems have seemed, Ashbery has

stayed resolutely in motion, refusing to choose sides in the debates that preoccupied so many American poets [e.g., Olson, Ginsberg] after modernism". Unlike Olson, for example, Ashbery did not reject "closed verse," often using such elaborate traditional metrical forms as the sestina and the pantoum.

"To make the case for any sort of Ashbery "breakthrough" (and, in a larger sense, postmodernist breakthrough) Longenbach argues, can result only from positing a "weak modernism," a modernism whose poetics are more coherent, explicable, and accessible than Ashbery's curiously opaque and resistant structures. But modernism, far from being thus "weak," Longenbach reminds us, was itself enormously oblique and complex, and conversely, Ashbery's poems--at least some of them--are more unified and amenable to normal explication than the poet's early defenders had claimed. Indeed, Ashbery's poetic is best understood as what he himself called, in the poem "Clouds" from The Double Dream of Spring, a "worried continuing". True, many of his poems, especially in the notorious Tennis Court Oath (1962) but also in the case of the often "tedious" Flow Chart, resist interpretation: of "Leaving the Atocha Station," Longenbach writes: "The power of the poem stems from the fact that, like a Jackson Pollock painting, it is basically unacceptable. For all of its aura of the prodigious feat, "Leaving the Atocha Station" might be the warped but inevitable conclusion of a debased New Critical aesthetic: the poem that does not mean, but is". But, much to Longenbach's relief, there are Ashbery poems like "Decoy" that make fairly straightforward sense. He admits that "Ashbery himself is oddly resistant to any preference for his more explicable poems", but this is not to say that the reader can't prefer those that are, as Longenbach himself so evidently does.

Difficulty of Ashbery's Poetry

A related argument about Ashbery, but one that does acknowledge the poet's "difficulty", is Vernon Shetley's essay in a book ominously called After the Death of Poetry: Poetry and Audience in Contemporary America (1993). In Shetley's scheme of things, the three significant American postwar poets are Ashbery, Bishop, and Merrill; he has no use for "language

poets" on the one hand, "new formalists," on the other, and, among contemporaries, finds little to praise beyond scattered lyrics by such poets as Robert Hass, David Ferry, and Alan Shapiro. Given these parameters, he is forced to conclude that "Poetry is dead. With that judgment I have no interest in arguing, if what it means is that poetry is unlikely in any foreseeable future to regain an audience like the one enjoyed by Tennyson, or even by Frost. But it seems to me that poetry still has an enormous job of work to do, posthumously, as it were. If nothing else, poetry's death should haunt the rest of the culture."

But why, in this depressing narrative of poetic loss, is Ashbery given a whole chapter? Like Longenbach, Shetley is relieved to find that "Even though Ashbery shared with the Beat and Projectivist camps a disaffection from the reigning academic modernism, he rejected both the progessive model of literary change they espoused and the heroic self-image they cultivated". The reference here is again to verse form--Ashbery's writing of sonnet, sestina, cento, pantoum, etc. Indeed, Shetley notes with some satisfaction, "Ashbery did not appear in the leading antiformalist anthology, Donald Allen's The New American Poetry".

This last sentence, I must admit, took my breath away when I read it because it is of course incorrect. Ashbery is very much included in Allen's anthology (he gets ten pages), even though in 1959, when The New American Poetry was put together, he had published only one book, Some Trees (1956). Far from being a casual error, Shetley's is highly revealing: it indicates that he has never so much as leafed through Allen's groundbreaking anthology. What this particular clinamen tells us is that, like Longenbach, Shetley can only deal with an Ashbery safely sanitized and removed from his own poetic milieu.

And yet, as Shetley, unlike Longenbach admits, there is that nagging "difficulty." How to account for that? "The difficulty of [Ashbery's] poetry," Shetley explains, "arises in great measure from [the] decision not to write the sort of poem [Robert] Lowell was writing, not to produce within the paradigms offered by the New Criticism." Again, a curious

account of poetic evolution, implying as it does that one can simply decide, as an act of will, to write a certain kind of poem. Ashbery, I would posit, could no more have written a Lowell poem than, say, a Mayakovsky one, his sensibility, ethos, and culture being so different. There is, to begin with, the issue of Ashbery's particular gay sensibility, which would hardly have been at ease in the documentary confessional mode of Life Studies. But since Ashbery's problem was "that of finding an audience at all", he evidently decided to begin (again, a conscious choice is posited) "in the earlier avant-garde fashion of assembling a coterie". Fortunately, he soon moved beyond that coterie, returning, at least in some of his poems like "Soonest Mended," to a more assimilable romantic lyric mode. But, Shetley admits, not entirely assimilable: "Ashbery's romanticism remains tempered by the presence in his poetry of all those moments that trouble and question the pure voice of the lyric singer. The poetry becomes, then, imbued with a kind of second-order pathos, in which its difficulty--its moments of fragmentation and opacity--reads as an index of the frustrations of the poet's situation". And there it is--the rueful recognition that, as Longenbach argues, postmodernist poetry, far from being any sort of breakthrough, is an attenuated modernism--sometimes, as in Ashbery's more accessible poems, quite successful and moving, but more often "frustrating" in its index to the larger poetic failure of the late twentieth century.

The critique of "breakthrough" narratives of postmodernism --now quite common in academic discussions of twentieth-century poetics--strikes me as curiously a historical. It is, to begin with, impossible to write sympathetically about one's own moment in poetry without positing a "breakthrough" of sorts. When Pound first praised "Prufrock" and campaigned for The Waste Land, of course he exaggerated the poems' novelty: fifty years after the fact, scholars can find many connections between Eliot and Tennyson just as there are important links between Pound and Browning. Within fifty years of Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads of 1798, readers noted that in fact the poetic language of Wordsworth's later poems was not all that different from the despised "poetic diction" of Thomas Gray and other later eighteenth century poets. And now that language poetry has been around for

twenty years, we can see that the call for the elimination of the lyrical ego must be understood as a reaction to the "tell it like it is" mode of the seventies' workshop poem rather than as a rejection of "voice" as such.

Thus, when Longenbach urbanely argues that, after all, Ashbery is very much a poet in the Eliot tradition, he is ignoring the plain fact that he himself did not come to Ashbery until quite recently. Indeed, Ashbery attained almost no recognition prior to the publication of Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror, published in 1976 when the poet was fifty. It was only after the relatively accessible title poem of this volume became well-known, that the Establishment started to come around. And even then, it had to do so by erasing such troubling volumes as The Tennis Court Oath (1962), and, in Longenbach's case, As We Know (1979), Shadow Train (1981), and that loose baggy monster Flow Chart (1991). Indeed, the "acceptable" poems, both for Longenbach and Shetley almost always come from The Double Dream of Spring (1970), which contains the lyrics like "Soonest Mended," most readily assimilable to a Modernist poetic.

Breakthrough narratives, it is true, are always forced to simplify the work of the past from which the new text deviates. I plead guilty to this charge in my own references to Eliot or Stevens in The Poetics of Indeterminacy (1981). Of course the symbolic structure of The Waste Land is not as easily understood as I implied in that study, but I stand by my original distinction between the "logic of metaphor" (Eliot's phrase for St. John Perse) of The Waste Land and the much greater indeterminacy of the Ashbery lyric in question, "These Lacustrine Cities" from Rivers and Mountains (1966). Indeed, however great the debt Ashbery owes to the "modernism" of Eliot, one would never, as I suggested in my book, mistake an Ashbery poem for an Eliot one. Nor can one take short extracts from a given Ashbery poem (Longenbach does this with reference to passages about poetry like the lines from "Syringa" that begin "Its subject / Matters too much and not enough") and treat these extracts as containing within themselves the "meaning" of the poem in question.

Comparing T.S. Eliot and Ashbery

Take one index to the difference between Ashbery and Eliot: the use of citation. In Eliot's case, we know (or can find out) where the citations come from; we can assess the degree of irony in the poet's use of Nerval's "Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie" or in "The Game of Chess's" version of Ovid's tale of Philomela. But in Ashbery's poetry, it is usually impossible to identify the citation, and, even when we do, such identification doesn't necessarily help us to understand the poem. For example, even when we know that the source for "Daffy Duck in Hollywood" is Chuck Jones's cartoon Duck Amuck of 1953 (see Shetley 125), the poet's attitude to that cartoon world is by no means clear or consistent. Indeed, in Ashbery, almost everything sounds like a citation, sounds like something we've heard before or read somewhere--but where? And that is of course one of the main features of Ashbery's poetic: living at a moment when one's language is so wholly permeated by the discourses that endlessly impinge on it, a Keatsian image complex, or even an Eliotic distinction between citation and invention--the distinction, say, between the Dantean epigraph ("S'io credesse. . .") of "Prufrock" and the later reference to those lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows"--is felt to be no longer possible.

Consider the opening poem in Ashbery's most recent volume, *Can You Hear, Bird?* (New York: Farrar Straus, 1995):

A Day at the Gate
A loose and dispiriting
wind took over from the grinding of traffic.
Clouds from the distillery
blotted out the sky. Ocarina sales plummeted.
Believe you me it was a situation
Aladdin's lamp might have ameliorated. And where was I?
Among architecture, magazines, recycled fish,
waiting for the wear and tear
to show up on my chart. Good luck,
bonne chance. Remember me to the zithers
and their friends, the ondes martenot.
Only I say: What comes this way withers
automatically. And the fog, drastically.

As one mercurial teardrop glozes
an empire's classified documents, so
other softnesses decline the angles
of the waiting. Tall, pissed-off,
dressed in this day's clothes,
holding its umbrella, he half turned away
with a shooshing sound. Said he needed us.
Said the sky shall be kelly green tonight. (p. 3)

Is this an example of the "worried continuing" Longenbach finds the trademark of postmodern poetry? Are the references to omens, signs, and horoscopes a belated version of the Madame Sosostris sequence in The Waste Land? Or might "A Day at the Gate" more properly read in the context of other poems of the nineties — Charles Bernstein's "Dark City," say, "or Clark Coolidge's At Egypt?

Ashbery's "poem beginning with 'A'" (the lyrics in Can You Hear, Bird are arranged in alphabetical sequence by title) displays Ashbery's characteristic mix of the casual and the ominous: "A Day at the Gate" recalls titles like "A Day in the Country," or "A Day at the Farm." But "a day at the gate" more specifically invokes the gates of heaven or hell--at the least, some sort of threshold experience, a waiting period that marks the entrance to something else or a period of supplicancy, of hoping to enter an unspecified realm. The "loose and dispiriting / wind" of the opening lines is, Longenbach might say, a familiar enough Romantic image, but here nature and culture are in conspiracy, the wind taking over "from the grinding of traffic" and blowing in "clouds" of polluted air "from the distillery." The omens now become increasingly absurd: "Ocarina sales plummeted," the poet tells us as if he were reporting a major Wall Street disaster. But the ocarina, an inexpensive musical wind instrument otherwise known as "sweet potato" because of its shape, is hardly a sales item to be reckoned with in the financial pages.

What is the tone of this stanza? In Eliot, interpretive possibilities are enormous but I don't think anyone would argue that the The Waste Land valorizes the "heap of broken images, where the sun beats, / And the dead tree gives no shelter," or that the poet is on the side of the "young man carbuncular . . .

A small house-agent's clerk, with one bold stare." But in Ashbery, parody is so thorough-going that one cannot be sure how the speaker (and hence the reader) positions himself vis-à-vis those ominous signs. The landscape seems at once frightening and funny and one pictures the poet telling a friend what a crazy day he's just had, without being overly upset about it. "Believe you me it was a situation / Aladdin's lamp might have ameliorated": the poet laughs at himself, wishing he could get out of whatever it is he has to do. The next three lines invoke a scene in the physician's waiting-room. We all know the picture: the view of high-rises outside the window (architecture), the magazines and dusty tanks of "recycled fish," the apprehension of waiting to find out about one's electrocardiogram or CAT-scan (waiting the wear and tear / to show up on my chart"). "Good luck": it's what we tell ourselves In the waiting-room.

But here further clowning takes place. Good luck" modulates into the French bonne chance and the absurdity of "Remember me to the zithers / and their friends, the ondes martenot." "Zithers" recalls such names as "Smithers"; metonymically, moreover, zither sounds fit nicely with those operatic "ondes martenot." And then "Only I say" presents the poet in the posture of cartoon Tiresias, a prophet who declaims bathetically: "What comes this way withers / automatically," the rhyme "zithers"/ "withers" underscoring the futility of grand pronouncements. For what is it that is prophesied in the midst of this fog? The charts (medical charts? horoscopes?) now transform into "an empire's classified documents": perhaps the waiting room is really at the C.I.A. or other spy agency. Signs continue to be taken for wonders like that "one mercurical teardrop." The "angles of waiting," in any case, are finally interrupted by the appearance of a "he" – "Tall, pissed-off, / dressed in this day's clothes, / holding its umbrella, he half turned away with a shooshing sound." The adjective sequence "Tall, pissed-off" is an Ashbery signature: the conjunction of neutral description with colloquial characterization, the shift of linguistic codes further compounded by the curious use of "its" where we would expect "his," the umbrella thus belonging to the day, not the person. And it is also characteristic of Ashbery that there is no way of knowing who the "tall, pissed-off" man

with the umbrella, who "half turned away / with a shooshing sound" might be. "Said he needed us. / Said the sky shall be kelly green tonight." Something, it seems, is about to happen, but the adjectives "shooshing" and "kelly green" undercut the line's ominous potential.

"A Day at the Gate" is vintage Ashbery in its refusal to make clear whether its "theme" is serious or comic or both. And that, the poet--a poet whose skepticism is finally much more radical than was Eliot's-- suggests is how life is. True to its title, "A Day at the Gate" doesn't comment on the disclosure that occurs or doesn't occur on the day in question; rather, it presents what such a paradigmatic day feels like. The poem taps into our own experience, allowing us to fill in the blanks in a variety of ways. Which is not at all to say that this poem doesn't mean but is.

Let's come back a moment to that rhyme "zithers" / "withers" in the third stanza. Both Longenbach and Shetley argue that Ashbery is more "traditional" (and hence, in their view, superior) to his "open form" counterparts represented in Donald Allen's New American Poetry. But the one-time rhyme, embedded in the internally rhyming and alliterating "Only I say: What comes this way. . ." is designedly comic and parodic, just as are Ashbery's centos, pantoums, and sestinas. Indeed, the poems in Can You Hear, Bird are closer in tone to Alfred Jarry, Ronald Firbank, and the early Auden than to Eliot or Stevens or the Romantics.

Ashbery and Elizabeth Bishop

In criticizing the "contingency" of Ashbery's more disjunctive poems (e.g., in The Tennis Court Oath), Longenbach compares Ashbery to Elizabeth Bishop:

"In Bishop's 'In the Waiting Room' a child realizes for the first time that selfhood is an arbitrary social construction, that experience as it comes to her has no coherent order or meaning. Bishop does not embody this realization in a poem that is 'consequently' incoherent or arbitrary: she remains perfectly comfortable with a simple narrative, aware that its shape is, like all systems of meaning, arbitrary but nevertheless useful".

And Longenbach contrasts that “usefulness” to the “potential danger...an aesthetic of embodiment rather than description” poses for Ashbery. But “useful” for what purpose? My own sense is that Bishop’s waiting room, where the child, coming upon the photographs of “black, naked women” with “horrifying” hanging breasts in the pages of the National Geographic, comes to the recognition that “you are an I, / you are an Elizabeth, / you are one of them”), is not nearly as interesting or suggestive as Ashbery’s, with its recycled fish and fear of unknown “charts.” Bishop’s drive, in this case at least, toward meaningful statement is characteristic of modernism in its late phase. But Ashbery’s poem is doing something else--establishing, for one thing, a different relationship between writer and reader, a relationship that looks ahead to the poetics of “embodiment” as practiced by such later poets as Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews, Maggie O’Sullivan and Karen MacCormack. Ashbery’s is thus less a “worried continuing” than the recognition that, in the words of “Syringa,” “All other things must change too.”

14

Ashbery's Selected Poems

With Introduction, Notes, Paraphrase and Comprehensive Critical Appraisals

1. THE PAINTER

Introduction and Theme of the poem

Ashbery's interest in painting led him to write this poem. The painter is fully representative of Ashbery's poetry. Ashbery uses a persona to reveal his poetic urge. The Painter is the mouthpiece of Ashbery. The poet uses cinematic images in the poem to make it as dynamic and visual as possible. The poem tells us that the painter is sitting between the sea and the tall buildings. He is attempting to create something impossible but remains unsuccessful. The people in the building encourage him to write common subject. He uses his wife as subject of his painting. He does it so exquisitely but again turns to his previous subject of sea. His efforts to paint the sea automatically are not realized and he is mocked by the people in the tall buildings. The painter is crucified by his subject. His desire of innovative and futuristic art remains only a prayer and longing. He is not able to achieve the extraordinary because of the ordinary demands of the audience.

The main theme of the poem is that innovator, modern and creative artists are crucified by the traditional and conventional people. This is not the only theme because the poem is to be understood at many different levels.

TEXT

Sitting between the sea and the buildings
He enjoyed painting the seas portrait.
But just as children imagine[1] a prayer
Is merely silence, he expected[2] his subject
To rush up the sand, and, seizing a brush,
Plaster[3] its own portrait on the canvas[4]. 6

So there was never any paint on his canvas
Until the people who lived in the buildings
Put[5] him to work: and try using the brush
As a means[6] to an end. Select, for a portrait,
Something less angry and large, and more subject
To a painter's moods, or, perhaps, to a prayer 12

How could he explain to them his prayer
That nature, not art, might usurp[7] the canvas? 14

He chose his wife for a new subject,
Making her vast, like ruined[8] buildings,
As if, forgetting itself, the portrait
Had expressed[9] itself without a brush. 18

---

1. feel
2. conceive
3. Create, make
4. A strong unbleached cloth of flax, or other coarse yarn, used for painting
5. urged
6. to accomplish
7. take hold of or paint the canvas
8. destroyed
9. appeared

PARAPHRASE

Lines 1-6

The painter was sitting between the sea and the buildings. He was an innovator so he enjoyed painting the sea's portrait. His approach to the painting was childlike. He was conceiving his subject as children imagine a prayer in silence. He was expecting his subject similarly. He wanted the sand to catch the brush and paint the portrait without any effort on his part. The painter believed in the unconscious nature of art.

The real painter enjoys his work. He conceives silently because can hear the prayer made in silence. The nature of his prayer is different from those of children and it is fake.

Lines 7-12

The result of the approach was that there was no paint or portrait on the canvass so the people in the buildings told the painter to use the brush so some end (for the poet had not achieved any thing from the brush so far) and choose a less complex and ordinary subject to work on which becomes of a painter's temperament and prayer (but the subject should not be one that will cross the demand and expectations of a common audience). *Note the objectivity of the painter's art*. *The poet wants to give his creative vision a solid reality. The artist should not be imaginative, but relevant to society.*

Line 13-14

The poet was unable to explain to the people that nature, rather than art, should paint on the canvass. *Nature should not be bound by art*.

Line 15-18

Rather than convincing the people, the painter agreed with them and chose his wife as his subject. He painted her as vast and important as old ruined buildings. His wife's picture automatically appeared on the canvas without the painter's conscious efforts. She was as realistically painted as the ruined buildings. *Note the mystery of the ruined buildings like the mystery of women*.

Slightly encouraged, he dipped his brush
In the sea, murmuring[1] a heartfelt prayer:
My soul, when I paint this next portrait
Let it be you who wrecks[2] the canvas. 22

The news spread like wildfire through the buildings:
He had gone back to the sea for his subject. 24

Imagine a painter crucified[3] by his subject!
Too exhausted even to lift his brush,
He provoked some artists leaning from the buildings
To malicious[4] mirth[5]: We haven't a prayer
Now, of putting ourselves on canvas,
Or getting the sea to sit for a portrait! 30

Others declared it a self-portrait.
Finally all indications of a subject
Began to fade[6], leaving the canvas
Perfectly white. He put down the brush. 34

At once a howl[7], that was also a prayer,
Arose from the overcrowded buildings.
They tossed[8] him, the portrait, from the tallest of the buildings;
And the sea devoured[9] the canvas and the brush
As though his subject had decided to remain a prayer. 39

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1. speaking softly or indistinctly
2. spread or paint
3. kill by nailing onto a cross or annoy constantly
4. characterized by wickedness
5. merriment
6. disappear
7. a long loud emotional utterance
8. cast away or reject
9. destroy

Line 19-22

He was immensely encouraged by this experiment and he again dipped the brush in the sea and imagining a prayer as previously. This time he addressed his soul so that it should spread on the canvas when I paint the next portrait and the sea is ready. *The poet was encouraged by the traditional themes and returned to his original vision.*

Line 23-24

This news spread everywhere that the painter attended to the sea for the subject once again. *The painter's return to the sea was a threat to the classical forms and standards*.

Line 25-30

The painter was puzzled and confused by his own subject and he was too tired to carry on with the brush for any new subject. He excited the people who were leaning from the buildings to contemptible delight. They said that painter was neither able to paint the objects nor the living beings accurately so they jeered at the painter (who took much time and thought to paint something inaccurately i.e. the people are neither interested in their own portrait nor that of the sea so they made fun of the painter who thought much and did little). *The painter was crucified at the hands of his creative vision. Because mere creative vision doesn't help the process of creation. Creation must require a medium*.

Line 31-34

Some other people concluded that it should be the painter's own portrait, but the conclusions about the subject of painting remained undecided. *What is undesirable for the traditional is approved by the modernists*.

Line 35-39

The painter made another prayer by making a loud cry. The people threw his painting and the sea took in the brush and the portrait. The painter could not achieve his goal and his subject remained nothing but an innovator's longing. *The theme of the painter couldn't be materialized in a traditional way. It required avant-garde approach.*

A CRITIQUE OF *THE PAINTER*

Ashbery's poems are abstract paintings in words.

Introduction

John Ashbery uses painter as persona to present before us his conception of poetry. The painter like Ashbery is innovator and wants to capture the vitality of life rather than the mere surface transmit beauty of the same. *The painter* is the most representative of Ashbery's poems and it is a key to understanding Ashbery both as and poet and artist. The painter breaks down the traditional and orthodox restrictions on the art laid by the classicists and wants to steal the essence of art. Ashbery is no moralist and conceives the art for its own sake. As the bird sings for its own sake, Ashbery writes in the same fashion. The poem has been composed in Sestina. A Sestina is a form of rhymed or unrhymed poem of six stanzas of six lines and a concluding triplet in which the same six words at the line-ends occur in each stanza in six different sequences, apart from the final triplet, in which each line contains two of these words, one at the middle and one at the end.

There are many salient features of the poem that we can analyze as under.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THOUGHT

Symbolic elements

The poem is highly symbolic and packed with symbols that it seems like an allegory. The poem is not imaginative rather it is concrete pregnant with symbolic allusions:

Sitting between the sea and the buildings
He enjoyed painting the seas portrait.
But just as children imagine a prayer
Is merely silence, he expected his subject

The sea is a symbol of creativity ad the unexplored depths of human consciousness. It also resents the vitality and essence or life, which has been long ignored. The buildings and their architecture are the explored and achieved conditions of art. The painter symbolizes the creative and modern urge and the people in the buildings are traditional critics who fail to understand the philosophy of art.

Symbolically, the poem shows the condition of the artist sandwiched between two contrasting forces behind art; conventional, traditional and superficial approach on the one hand and modern, creative, experimental and innovative on the other. The modern artist is not restricted by the limited and restrictive view of life. He is the controller of his art and defines its parameters. He believes that art is all-powerful and vast and it cannot be conceived in a traditional narrow thinking. His analogy is child's prayer is not analogy only rather through it, he presents a philosophy of art. The artist should be a meditator and start art like a prayer. Ashbery knows;

To rush up the sand, and, seizing a brush,
Plaster its own portrait on the canvas.

is insane and even a common mind cannot entertain such an idea. So such conception of art in reality can be achieved only through prayer in silence. The difference between artificial art and vital art is presented by the artist with his back to the buildings and the face to the sea.

Subjectivity and Objectivity

There was no paint on the canvas

Objective art is difficult to attain but it lends realism and universality to the artist's masterpiece and the objective art is not bound by the artist, his consciousness or his artistic ability, so the painter meditated for long but nothing appeared on the canvas. The painter wanted either to paint objectively or nothing at all. He was an iconoclast, his representation of art must be perfect other wise; he will be just another artist in the echoes of the millions of artists in the world. But the people in the were urging the artist to

Try using the brush
As a means to an end. Select, for a portrait,
Something less angry and large, and more subject
To a painter's moods, or, perhaps, to a prayer

Because they were the upholders of the traditional art of subjectivity which was delimited by the artist's mind and couldn't survive in the limitless regions of the vast universe. This is the reaction of the traditional artists to the experimental nature of the modern artists.

Definition of Art

The painter responds to the rationalists with a true conviction of a perfect artist in the following lines;

How could he explain to them his prayer
That nature, not art, might usurp the canvas?

The painter's conception of art is like that of a child's prayer which is a direct relationship between the artist and the art like that of a prayee to God. This concept cannot be materialized and explained to the traditionalists, for they cannot understand the artist's avant-garde approach. The painter's definition of artist that objective representation of reality must be the basis of art, the art confined by the artist's feelings and emotions is not true and genuine. Soul, spirit, vitality of life, the essence of reality are the features which the painter is aspiring in his portrait. The painter further asserts:

My soul, when I paint this next portrait
Let it be you who wrecks the canvas.

Political and Religious Allegory

Allegory is fictional literary narrative or artistic expression that conveys a symbolic meaning parallel to but distinct from, and more important than, the literal meaning. The Painter is both a political and religious allegory. The pathetic state of the painter lends political and social interpretations of the poem. The Communist Manifesto, the Puritan Theocracy, The Martial Laws and Hitlarian and Fascistic authorities all crucify the innovators and curb freedom of expression of those who champion a new cause for the welfare of humanity or art. The line:

Try using the brush for a means to an end

Shows the selfishness of the political gains. The writer should be a representative of a political party as well as was the case in Russia which demanded the Socialist Realism[1]. The painter was a genuine artist who opposed these political and Hitlarian manifestos and their restrictions on art. He was a free

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[1]. The official theory of art and literature of the former Soviet Communist Party, by which an artist's or writer's work should reflect and promote (the ideals of) socialist society.

agent and wanted freedom in his art, so he could easily attempt his poetic vision, but this freedom is not allowed as Ashbery depicts:

> *The news spread like a wild fire thought the buildings*
> *He had gone back to the sea for his subject*
> *Imagine a painter crucified by his subject*.

The visionary painter was crucified by the so called custodians of political beliefs who never allowed a novelty or change which will pose a danger to their established government and systems. The poem was written in 1956—a period of tussle in which the freedom of action and thought was restrained by the Russian Communists. The poem tells a story of a painter who was a visionary and pioneer of a new approach in art which practically meant an opposition to the existing system or order so he was crucified or burnt at the stakes by the politicians.

The word 'crucify' has religious connotation so the poem becomes a religious allegory too. And reminds us of the story of Christ who brought a system of theocracy as a welfare to humanity but was rejected by the selfish so called chiefs of Judaism and was commanded by Pontius Pilate to be crucified for the political gains of Roman Empire. In this way, the innovates are punished in a society of selfishness, greed and power which denies welfare to humanity.

Tragic Elements in the Painter

Ashbery is very akin to T.S. Eliot and Robert Frost. Most of his poems are like theirs speaking of sense of uncertainty, the looming fear, gloom and loneliness.

The atmosphere of fear, gloom and loneliness is also visible. The painter is alone with sense of gloomy uncertainty in his art for perfection. The sea symbolizes loneliness too. The people in the buildings have alienated the painter for his self-chosen seemingly impossible task rather than supporting him in his quest for the objective representation of reality. The painter is the protagonist feeling conflict sandwiched between traditions and modernity. All modern tragedies show conflict of the protagonist with society and its established norms and tragically doomed for this Hamartia that the protagonist bears. The painter is the protagonist working as opposed to the

demands and conventions of society. The society may accept him if he becomes rational enough to understand the mere creative vision doesn't suffice the creation. His Hamartia causes his crucifixion and ends the poem with tragic touches and a bit of Catharsis.

Style, Technique and Imagery

The poem has been composed in an arresting and forceful. His technique to the poem is one such as employed by the abstract painters. So Ashbery's rightly gives the concept of his poetry in the following words, '*My poems are paintings in words.''*

His approach in the poem is objective rather than subjective. The diction is simple and relevant to the subject. John Ashbery is a perfect craftsman like Alexander Pope, Spenser, Tennyson and Surrey-Wyatt, the American examples being Richard Wilbur and Robert Frost. He is renowned for artistic galore in his poetry. His diction is simple and colloquial and must conform to the themes and ideas presented in the poem. The painter is no exception. All these stylistic features are perfectly applicable to the poem. All the key words which point to the main theme of the poem have been wrapped at the end to give them extra significance.

The imagery is fresh and startling. The images of sea, canvas, portrait and prayer all contribute to the thematic development of the poem.

Conclusion

The Painter is perfectly a representative of John Ashbery's poems and a key to understanding his concepts regarding poetry. In Painter, Ashbery achieves artistic perfection with simplicity of diction. The painter can be interpreted at many different levels of understanding that is the beauty and charm of the poem. The language, themes, imagery and style make the poem an exquisite piece of literature. The title of the poem is also radically, very few poems would have been written with such titles. Ashbery combines surrealistic techniques of painting with poetic grandeur.

Critical Points to Remember

1. Ashbery believes in the objective representative of art and not subjective representation of the same.
2. The paint's canvas and the sea are both vast and difficult to capture. But the innovator and modern painter is bent upon this mission.
3. The view that art should be over powered and inspired by the force of reality is opposed by the people in the buildings. So the painter is post modernist and the people are traditional artists and a conflict between the two is apparent.
4. The painter believes that the artist should be in control of his art and dictate all its terms and conditions of the creation of act.
5. The people in the building are the critics who believe that act should be a direct reflection of the artist's limited personal view.
6. Painting the sea becomes and metaphor for creating life. The act of any type. He paints his wife for a part of painting she will not be a challenge for him.
7. He was surprised to discover the mystery of womanhood and the unfathomable depth of humanity – painting her was an unexpected and shocking experience explaining ruined buildings. The image of the ruined buildings suggests both familiarity and mystery.

2. MELODIC TRAINS

Introduction and Main Theme

Life is a perpetual journey into the unconscious regions of human mind, which brings up a new perspective each time an activity is stirred.

The poem shows the poet sitting in a train heading towards a destination. He is not alone. There is a little girl who attracts his attention but only for a short time because later the people and scenes in and around the train capture his imagination. He feels in relation to the every thing around him.

According to Ashbery, '*Life is in motion*'. We spend our time in trains, boats and buses and time is fleeting like these four wheelers. Time is precious and unique. Melodic Trains is a journey of time. We come across various destinations, fall into confusions which have repercussions on our memories. We often reach destinations, not desired by us. Melodic Trains becomes a journey of life, the faces of passengers and what all the time is goes in their minds.

The poem is a nice piece of poetry full of thought provoking ideas. It is a realistic presentation of town life. It is a fine blend of subjective and objective views. It is just a poem but has been presented before us in such cinematic approach before our eyes that we feel a part of the whole train experience physically and spiritually. The poet has taken watch, travel, pipe, taxi and destinations as the raw material for the production of the poem and conveys humdrum routine of the town dwellers in many perspectives.

TEXT

A little girl with scarlet[1] enameled[2] fingernails
Asks me what time it is—evidently that's a toy wristwatch
She's wearing, for fun. And it is fun to wear other
Odd things, like this briar pipe[3] and tweed[4] coat 4

Like date-colored sierras[5] with the lines of seams[6]
Sketched[7] in and plunging[8] now and then into unfathomable[9]
Valleys that can't be deduced[10] by the shape of the person
Sitting inside it—me, and just as our way is flat across
Dales[11] and gulches[12], as though our train were a pencil 9

Guided by a ruler held against a photomural[13] of the Alps[14]
We both come to see distance as something unofficial
And impersonal yet not without its curious [15]justification[16]
Like the time of a stopped watch—right twice a day. 13

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1. Red color with an orange tinge
2. Covered with or as if with a glossy and usually brightly colored coating
3. A pipe made from the root (briarroot) of the tree heath
4. Thick woolen fabric used for clothing; originated in Scotland
5. A range of mountains (usually with jagged peaks and irregular outline)
6. Line formed by joining two pieces
7. roughly described
8 Drop steeply
9. immeasurable depth
10. Conclude by reasoning
11. an open valley near a hilly area
12. A narrow pass with a stream running through it
13. A painting that is applied to a wall surface. A type of wall painting
14. A large mountain range in south-central Europe; scenic beauty and winter sports make them a popular tourist attraction
15. unexpected
16. A statement in explanation of some action or belief

PARAPHRASE

Lines 1-4

(In the train) a girl who has polished her nails red asks me what time it is. Though she herself is wearing a wristwatch yet it is but a toy watch. She is wearing the toy watch just for fun as I am wearing a tweed coat for fun and people wear many such things for fun. It is a common psychology.

The poet presents child psychology, which is similar to the grown-ups.

Lines 5-9

The seams of my coat resemble the mountain chain, which is dark brown color (the color of dates). The mountain has jagged peaks. At some point, they form deep valleys. The person sitting in the train cannot deduct the shape of the mountains, which fills the poet with vision. The seams are much like the roads of the train journey which runs through different valleys and ravines. The train is moving so smoothly that the train seems like a pencil spread along a ruler.

The person in train cannot judge the depth of those valleys. The images of pencil and ruler is exquisitely metaphysical. The poet jumps from the artificial images of toys and briar pipe to the natural images, which is common feature of American poetry.

Lines 10-13

The train like a pencil is held against a large wall painting in the great Alps (the train is running like a pencil on a large and great wall painting on the Alps). The distance between the girl and I seems impersonal and unofficial. Still like stopwatch has a justification which may give time may be twice a day, our relation too has justification.

As watch is subjective personal only when it gives time right time so the train also becomes personal and subjective when it relates to the passenger. Other wise it is unimportant and impersonal. The word 'both' shows the poet's concern for the little girl.

Only the wait in stations is vague[1] and
Dimensionless[2], like oneself. How do they decide how much
Time to spend in each? One beings to suspect there's no
Rule or that it's applied haphazardly[3]. 17

Sadness of the faces of children on the platform,
Concern of the grownups for connections[4], for the chances
Of getting a taxi, since these have no timetable. 20

You get one if you can find one though in principle
You can always find one, but the segment[5] of chance
In the circle of certainty is what gives these leaning
Tower of Pisa[6] figures their aspect of dogged[7]
Impatience, banking forward[8] into the wind. 25

In short any stop before the final one creates
Clouds of anxiety, of sad, regretful impatience
With ourselves, our lives, the way we have been dealing
With other people up until now. Why couldn't
We have been more considerate[9]? These figures leaving 30

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1. Not clearly understood or expressed
2. Having no spatial extent; extremely minute. Measureless
3. Casually, at random
4. A relation between things or events/ The scheduled meeting of one train
5. A bit of chance
6. A tall round tower in Pisa, Italy, which does not stand straight, but leans to one side. It was built in the 12th century and is popular with tourists.
7. Go after with the intent to catch/ stubbornly unyielding
8. Have confidence or faith in
9. Showing concern for the rights and feelings of others

Lines 14-17

The act of waiting at the platform is unclear, vague and dimensionless. Their destinations are not defined. No body is sure how long they have to wait at the stop and when timetables will be changed. The suspicion arises that there is no rule and even of there is its application is haphazard and puzzling. *The poet stresses the vagueness and dimensionlessness of waiting at platforms and the uncertainty about the rules and regulations in life.*

Lines 18-20

The children are sad, the grown ups are concerned about various means of transport which can carry them home. They are perplexed whether they will get a taxi, ticket or a seat because there is no regularity in this traffic system. *Only these three lines give us a realistic picture of a platform or a taxi stand in which the children look sad and the young ones are hurrying towards their destinations*.

Lines 21-25

Normally you can get a taxi in principle. It is a chance of getting taxi that perplexes the minds of the waiting people. They are leaning forward like the Tower of Pisa against the strong wind in waiting for a taxi. *The winds of doubts are so strong that they bend their mind to one side of anxiety as the Tower of Pisa is bent. The chances of getting a taxi are uncertain. the comparison of the waiting people with Tower of Pisa gives the stanza a metaphysical touch.*

Lines 26-30

Anyhow, the fact is that before you reach your destination, there are clouds of anxiety with sad and regretful impatience, which envelop us. We become reckless and feel troubled at why we have not shown more considerate attitude to all people around us so we feel dissatisfied with our life. *You remain seated, but people aboard and get off. These people create anxiety. This makes us think about our attitude to our dear ones. Our identification with the people is so common*.

The platform or waiting to board the train are my brothers
In a way that really wants to tell me whey there is so little
Panic[1] and disorder[2] in the world, and so much unhappiness.
If I were to get down now to stretch, take a few steps 34

In the wearying[3] and world-weary clouds of steam like great
White apples, might I just through proximity[4] and aping[5]
Of postures[6] and attitudes communicate this concern of mine
To them?
That their jagged[7] attitudes correspond to mine,
That their beefing[8] strikes[9] answering silver bells within
My own chest, and that I know, as they do, how the last
Stop is the most anxious one of all, though it means
Getting home at last, to the pleasures and dissatisfactions
of home? 44

It's as though a visible chorus[10] called up the different
Stages of the journey, singing about them and being them:
Not the people in the station, not the child opposite me
With currant[11] fingernails, but the windows, seen through, 48

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1. An overwhelming feeling of fear and anxiety
2. A disturbance of the peace or of public order
3. Exhaust or tire though overuse or great strain or stress
4. The region close around a person or thing
5. Imitate in behavior or appearance
6. Position or arrangement of the body and its limbs/ A rationalized mental attitude
7. Drunk, intoxicated by alcohol/ irregular and sharp
8. A deep-red cooking apple cultivated/ complain
9. Cause to experience
10. A group of people assembled to sing together
11. tart red

Lines 31-34

The people boarding or leaving the train are like my brothers. If we are all bound by oneness of relations, I feel there is so little fear and disorder in the world then why we bear much unhappiness. *The poet and people all around are united in one brotherhood. Though there is little chaos but it is our own attitude to life and our hurry that makes us more unhappy. The stream of people compared with big apples is rather strange.*

Lines 35-44

I want to leave the train to stretch myself leisurely and walk a few steps of comfort in this world which otherwise is full of wearing problems. By sitting outside the train on those benches, by copying their postures, I want to convey to them my concern and we should fall into one relation of mankind, I want to tell them there anxious attitude, much like mine. We are in the same relation to one another in this journey life. After all why are we anxious for the last stop that means reaching home which itself is an abode of both pleasures and tensions. *Though the poet may be comfortable sitting in the train but he feels the anxiety of the people outside whom he calls for brothers and associate himself with them.*

Lines 45-48

It seemed that a visible chorus called upon people different stages of their journey amusing them and merging with them. The chorus was linked to me, the girl with scarlet painted nails and also the windows through which they see their respective rooms. *As the chorus links characters, situations and intermediate different events, the chorus is also representing the characters in and outside the train*.

Reflecting imperfectly, ruthlessly splitting open the bluish
Vague landscape like a zipper[1]. Each voice has its own
Descending scale to put one in one's place at every stage;
One need never not know where one is
Unless one give up listening, sleeping, approaching a small
Western town that is nothing but a windmill[2]. Then 54

The great fury[3] of the end can drop as the solo[4]
Voices tell about it, wreathing[5] it somehow with an aura[6]
Of good fortune and colossal[7] welcomes from the mayor and
Citizens' committees tossing[8] their hats into the air.
To hear them singing you'd think it had already happened
And we had focused back on the furniture[9] of the air. 61

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1. A Pants zip/ A device for locking together two toothed edges by means of a sliding tab
2. A mill that is powered by the wind
3. violent mental agitation
4. A musical composition for one performer
5. Decorate or deck with wreathes/ interlined flowers
6. a quality or feeling that seems to surround or come from a person or a place
7. So great in size or force or extent as to elicit awe
8. Throw or toss with a light motion
9. The condition of being equipped or prepared in body or mind

Lines 49-54

The opening of the scenes at the landscape is like opening a zipper which brings before us something ruthless and imperfect in a magical exposure of a landscape. Each and every voice in the chorus has its particular rise and fall, which makes one conscious of his position. One readily identifies him where he is sitting. The passengers reach a town where the most visible and prominent point is a windmill. *The diverse voices strike the poet that his destination ahs come there is a change in the atmosphere which unites him with the common lot of people.*

Lines 55-61

The poet becomes conscious that his journey has ended because the people are hailing him with voices and ready to receive him with garlands. Even the mayor of the town is there for whom the people fly off their hats in happiness. When this happens you feel that this has previously happened in your life and you reach the past to find similarity. *It is only a work of imagination that makes him feel all these perfect joys*.

A CRITIQUE OF *MELODIC TRAINS*

Introduction

The poem shows melodically sounding related series of thoughts that are developing in your mind. They are called Melodic trains for they have the power to transform the minds of people from some ordinary experience to some particular. The poem is a fine example of stream of consciousness technique.

The poem shows the complexity of thoughts as they pass through a sensitive mind of a poet. A poetic mind has a great capacity for associating this similar and distinct thought. That is why; the poem has more than one layer of meaning. The title itself suggests the thought process growing on within the poet's mind. The outer journey in her real train is paralleled by a symbolic train of thoughts and melodies, poetic ideas running through the mind.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THOUGHT

Vanities expressed through appearances

The first thought or theme present in the poem is the expression of vanities through appearances, when the little girl in the stanza asks the poet what time it is:

A little girl with scarlet enameled fingernails
Asks me what time it is—evidently that's a toy wristwatch
She's wearing, for fun. And it is fun to wear other
Odd things, like this briar pipe and tweed coat

It is surprising how children satisfy their vanity with toys and fake objects, which cannot fulfill their need. The toy watch doesn't tell the time. It is not only children but adults also do the same and are caught up in vanities and appearances. The poet discovers that the color of his overcoat resembles the color of brown mountains; in fact the seams of his coat actually look like the white paths running down the slopes of the mountains. His thoughts drifting to his clothes suddenly discover that clothes are like a mask hiding the reality. Just as one cannot find out the reality under the clothes, we cannot find the reality of the appearances. The theme of appearance and reality and the vanities to satisfy one's self on fake foundations starts right from the beginning. Delight in seemingly beautiful objects

without any special unity is what associates the elders with the youngers because psychologically, they are the same. Basic instinct, at all levels, remains the same all over the world regardless of race, age, region or nation. But it is very difficult to understand human psychology only by appearances. As far as the appearances are concerned, we are all children. This is only one of the ideas and feelings that the poet experiences while traveling in the train.

The process of meditation and Meaning in Life

Though Melodic Trains is Ashbery's secondary work, yet it was hailed as '*Marvelous'* by David Bromwich and '*great'* by Hollander. The poem is highly personal and in the words of Huybernsz, '*throws the reader out of the poem*'. According to one critic, the poem suggests '*the premise of this marvelous poem is a journey around New York City*.' The opening metaphor is that of music which sets the poet in meditation and find meanings in life. The main purpose in life seems, *how to live and what to do*?

This process of meditation begins when a little girl asks the poet time. The poet is attracted towards the jagged peaks of the mountains by the seams of his coat and later caught up in the humdrum of every day life. Rather than a meaning, the poet finds confusion, crowds and tensions everywhere. A sense of entrapment encapsulates us, we find surrounded by troubles all around us and find no way out. The Pisa figures ultimately end this process of mediation and life seems a perpetual struggle against the odds of society. We keep oscillating between the complex beginning and peaceful end and sometimes, peaceful begging and complex and disturbing end.

Symbolic Elements – Melodic Trains as drama of life

> *Only the wait in stations is vague and*
> *Dimensionless, like oneself. How do they decide how much*
> *Time to spend in each? One beings to suspect there's no*
> *Rule or that it's applied haphazardly.*

Next the train takes turns like a pencil and the poet experiences that life too is like a train full of complexity and running to its destination – death. As in an ordinary journey, the strain stops at various stations for brief moments. We also

pause at some state of life before turning into a new direction. The faces of the passengers standing outside the platforms of different stations melt into the faces of those million faces, the poet reads different expressions. Some carry on eternal sadness. Some reflect disillusionment with life and its receptive appearance; some show anxiety about the future. There are questions in every mind. Will the taxi be available; will some one come to welcome me? These and many others perplex the mind of travelers. As the following lines show:

Sadness of the faces of children on the platform,
Concern of the grownups for connections, for the chances
Of getting a taxi, since these have no timetable.
You get one if you can find one though in principle

These questions asked in ordinary life reflect those questions in the next world. The poet contemplates some spiritual and metaphysical issues at this point. The complexities of the world symbolize those of the hereafter and regarding the future of man in the next world. The is haphazard dimension in life which disturbs all routines and the same is to be found on the Day the Judgment when this haphazardness blends into a unique Death which rampages every thing on the earth.

One of these issues is the role of chance in the course of life. Although, chance is just a segment of the total certainty, but chance govern a large part of our existence. The total existence of human activity is controlled by chance, which may be termed as Fate.

Chance, fate, stages of journey and chorus lets us enter into the drama of life which is more visible in the following remarkable lines:

It's as though a visible chorus called up the different
Stages of the journey, singing about them and being them

The train journey becomes a semblance to the drama in real life. As the play has acts and chorus as the character, so is the situation here. Every man and woman along with their family members act as chorus throughout all the stages of their life – tragic or comic may be.

Oneness and Identification

The platform or waiting to board the train are my brothers
In a way that really wants to tell me whey there is so little
Panic and disorder in the world, and so much unhappiness.
If I were to get down now to stretch, take a few steps

Realizing the basic anxieties of the heart, the poet feels complete oneness and identification with the fellow travelers. Since this journey symbolizes life. It is a moment of human unity which the poet experiences. He wonders whether complete communication between the individual and community is possible. The journey of train is taken lightly by the little girl and the likes, but for the poet is a serious activity, perhaps a moment of contemplation which he identifies himself with the fellow travelers who also share the same problems and who are also human beings like himself. They are like brothers, as poet calls them and require our perfect sympathy and attention. And we need to convince each other because if there is little panic and disorder, why are we creating for ourselves. Sometimes, it is our attitude that makes us tense rather than the tension itself. The gap that exists between one man and the other in the modern period can be only bridged if communication barriers, such as alienation, estrangement and personal entrapment are removed.

The symbolic journey of the train ends when the poet receives a warm welcome and as the journey of the train stops, the melodic trains of his mind also stop as depicted in the following lines:

Of good fortune and colossal welcomes from the mayor and
Citizens' committees tossing their hats into the air

Style, Imagery and Technique

The poet employs a traditional image of train journey to denote life and its non-stop voyage. There are also associated images such as station, marking a temporary stopover and passengers representing fellow human beings. The images of toy and enameled nails signify the theme of false appearances and deceptions. This idea is further enhanced by the Big White Apples or the fumes of the train covering up the plat farm. The poem is a good example of stream of consciousness technique

the poem's start immediately by the little girl's question about time began to express might issues like mortality, chance and time.

The poem is perfectly a representative of modern American Sensibility. The striking images of tweed coat and its seams and the enameled nails of the little girl are such powerful images that they transpose us to the very place in whose imagination, the poem was written. The natural imagery of date-palm trees and the Alps lend freshness to poem in contrast to the artificial imagery of tweed coat and enameled nails. The image of Pisa Tower is a true reflective the modern man's psychological complexities. Melodic trains, in terms of images, techniques, symbols and style is a modern piece of poetry.

Conclusion

Melodic Trains is a fine piece of poetry in which the poet addresses a number of issues, political, social, familial and psychological. It is a journey of life and the end of the journey ends in optimism and happiness on the typical note of 'Welcome Home!' Even then the complexities of life surround us because home introduces new problems for us, the end of the poem is only a temporary happy moment of life.

The poem imparts a deep philosophy of life. Life is full of restlessness, tensions and discontentment, but it is also true that most of the problems in life are caused by the insane attitude of modern man.

Clouds of anxiety, of sad, regretful impatience
With ourselves, our lives, the way we have been dealing
With other people up until now. Why couldn't
We have been more considerate?

Clouds of anxiety are scattered everywhere, at each stop. During these anxious moments, we create more trouble for other people and forget that there are also humans like us and demand our full sympathy and respect. The poet raises the issue of sympathy and its importance in every day life. Haste and race has spread panic and disorder in our mechanical life. The hurry to reach home makes life only complex rather than solve any practical issue.

Critical Points to Remember

1. Melodic Trains is the journey of life in which the ordinary journey has been woven together.
2. Melodic Trains also symbolically reflect the thought process of the poet's mind in which poetic ideas keep jumping from one issue to the other.
3. An ordinary mind will take the train journey as one of like many others, but a poet is sensitive and takes this common experience of life seriously, which binds him to the rest of humanity in terms of his brotherly relationship with it.
4. Poet presents the drama of life through the train journey realistically and effectively.
5. Ashbery's style is in the poet is illustrative like that of a painter.
6. The issues raised by the poet are quite significant and command our attention hurriedly as they command the poet's attention too soon through the images of toy watch, briar pipe and seams of his coat.
7. Melodic Trains has been so associatively and allusively written that it transposes the reader to the situations observed by the poet and respond to the problems felt by him.

15

Selected Literary Criticism

John Ashbery's Technique

"John Ashbery's dazzling orchestrations of language open up whole areas of consciousness no other American poet has even begun to explore," (*The New York Times*) and he "throws caution to the winds in pursuit of things unattempted yet in poetry or rhyme. The results are exhilarating." (*Newsweek*) "This is a world of linguistic brilliance, draining the resources of the English language and widening the boundaries of modern poetry." (*Kirkus Reviews*) "Ashbery has created a language that restores newness as you read, a language that is always cresting with potential;" (*The Nation*) "no other poet is as daring ... none inhabits such a Versailles of the imagination." (*Vanity Fair*) "Ashbery's poems do not evade the real; they deny it the power to prevent other realities from being conceived." (*Time*) "On both sides of the Atlantic a substantial and increasingly coherent body of opinion accepts that he is quite simply the finest poet in English of his generation," (*The Times* [London]) and that he "is likely to be seen as the defining voice of his nation and time."

(Poetry Review)

John Ashbery on Himself

1. A perfect example of the new republic's urge to drape itself with the togas of classical respectability.
2. I don't look on poetry as closed works. I feel they're going on all the time in my head and I occasionally snip off a length.
3. I don't want to read what is going to slide down easily; there has to be some crunch, a certain amount of resilience.

4. I like poems you can tack all over with a hammer and there are no hollow places.
5. I write with experiences in mind, but I don't write about them, I write out of them.
6. I aim to record a kind of generalized transcript of what is really going on in our minds all day long. *Ashbery (Writers at Work by George Plimpton)*
7. I think my poems mean what they say, and what ever might be implicit within a particular passage, but there is no message, nothing I want to tell the world particularly except what I am thinking when I am writing.

—John Ashbery from Writers at Work by George Plimpton

Book Reviews on Ashbery

1. Reticent, shy, unfailingly modern, Ashbery is as unorthodox as any of the great twentieth-century creators: Breton, Stravinsky, Picasso. We are privileged to be around at a time when he is writing. *Jeremy Reed, Poetry Review (UK).*
2. This is what real achievement in a contemporary poet consists of: he has laid down guidelines and made his mark on the language of the tribe. *John Bayley, New York Review of Books*
3. His logic is sometimes the logic of dreams; sometimes it is the logic of logic ... the result can be as beautiful as anything written this century. *Alan Jenkins, Sunday Times*
4. His poetry is obscure and difficult. His poems are abstract paintings in words.

Different Critics

Various Critics on Ashbery

1. Ashbery doesn't hide his vast and deeply cultured learning The title poem of Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror is one of the finest long poems of our period.

John Russell

2. His poetry appeals not because it offers wisdom in a packaged form, but because the elusiveness and mysterious promise of his lines remind us that we always have future and a condition of meaningfulness to start out toward.

   Nicholas Jenkins in the New York Times

3. Ashbery is the least oppositional of poets. However, distinct his own poems have seemed, Ashbery has stayed resolutely in motion, refusing to choose sides in the debates that preoccupied so many American poets.

   Longenbach

4. I am forced to conclude that poetry is dead. With that judgment I have no interest in arguing, if what it means that poetry is unlikely in any foreseeable future to regain an audience like the one enjoyed by Tennyson, or even by Frost. But it seems to me that poetry still has an enormous job of work to do, posthumously, as it were. If, nothing else, poetry's death should haunt the rest of the culture.

   Vernon Shetley in After the Death of Poetry

5. The difficulty of Ashbery's poetry arises in great measure from the decision not to write the sort of poem Robert Lowell was writing, not to produce within the paradigms offered by the New Criticism.

   Vernon Shetley

6. Ashbery's romanticism remains tempered by the presence in his poetry of all those moments that trouble and question the pure voice of the lyric singer. The poetry becomes, then, imbued with a kind of second-order pathos, in which its difficult – its moments of fragmentation and opacity – reads as an index of the frustrations of the poet's situation.

   Vernon Shetley

7. Ashbery is a very much a poet in the Eliot Tradition.

   Longenbach

8. In Ashbery, the greater part of the sweetness invariably dies when it turns to life.

   Irving Massey

MAJOR WORKS ON ASHBERY

Vernon Shetley on Ashbery's Difficulty

John Ashbery came of age as a poet in a literary world shaped by the aftermath of the modernist "revolution." To a poet starting out in the late 1940s and early 1950s, that revolution would have appeared not only in the form of the existing monuments of high modernist writing but also in the body of criticism designed to make the difficult poetry of the modernists accessible. I refer, of course, to what has been called, by its own practitioners and by literary historians, the New Criticism. The New Critics devised a set of reading strategies that helped make the dense, allusive, and elliptical styles of modernism legible to a broad reading public, and, by no means coincidentally, they consolidated the cultural authority of modernism by installing it (and themselves) within the academy. Those developments made the universities sites for producing readers conversant with the techniques and sympathetic to the values of modernism, and so prepared an audience for Robert Lowell and other 1950s poets, like Richard Wilbur, John Berryman, and Anthony Hecht, who began their careers under the spell of Eliot. Indeed, the criticism shaped the poetry as well as the audience; Lowell, for instance, describes his own excited reading of critical essays when he was a young poet: "When I was twenty and learning to write, Allen Tate, Eliot, Blackmur, and Winters, and all those people were very much news. You waited for their essays, and when a good critical essay came out it had the excitement of a new imaginative work" (237). For Ashbery, however, Lowell's rise, and the synergy between academic criticism and poetry it repre-sented, felt stifling rather than invigorating. In an interview with John Koethe, Ashbery describes his sense of alienation from the critical climate that fostered Lowell's work:

> *Koethe*: What was it then that made people like you, Frank O'Hara, and Kenneth Koch more comfortable with people in the music and art worlds than with people in university or literary circles?
>
> Ashbery: I think around 1950, with the rise of Robert Lowell, everything became much more codified and academicized. It seems that the fifties were stricter

> and more structured than the forties and thirties. Randall Jarrell said in an essay I once read that "in this post-Auden climate, it seems that a coat hanger could write a marvelous poem about the delights and torments of being a college professor."
>
> [Koethe] Ashbery forgoes the conventions, and thus to some extent the audience, generated by the academic appropriation of modernism. The difficulty of his poetry arises in great measure from this decision not to write the sort of poem Lowell was writing, not to produce within the paradigms offered by the New Criticism. But Ashbery's reaction to the academic poetic and critical establishment of the 1950s and 1960s is complicated by that establishment's identification with an experimentalist aesthetic. Confronting an avant-garde that has become an establishment, Ashbery knows, is vastly different from confronting an establishment plain and simple, and this awareness runs through the often absurdist logic of "The Invisible Avant-Garde," a lecture he delivered at the Yale Art School in 1968. In it, the poet seems at times positively nostalgic for the good old days when the experimental artist was ignored, rejected, or denounced as a lunatic. In the early modernist period, Ashbery implies, the job of the avant-garde artist, though hard, was essentially simple: one knew where the cutting edge was and what it might take to be on it, and the outrage of the public provided a reliable index to one's success in extending the boundaries of art.

James Longenbach on John Ashbery's Individual Talent

After the accidental death of Frank O'Hara in 1966, John Ashbery wrote several commemorative essays about his friend. Ashbery was at the time the author of three relatively unknown books of poetry; he had recently returned to New York after a decade of living in Paris--a city Ashbery praised (in contrast to any American city) for providing a "neutral climate in which one can work pretty much as one chooses." Although his poetry had been included in Donald Allen's partisan anthology, *The New American* poetry, Ashbery's allegiances in the wartorn world of American poetry were not

clear. O'Hara's early death occurred at a precarious moment in Ashbery's own life, and the loss inevitably became an occasion as much for self-examination as for commemoration. In "Frank O'Hara's Question," Ashbery championed O'Hara's independence from both the mainstream and the avant-garde at a time in America when "the loyalty-oath mentality has pervaded outer Bohemia." The very distinction between a mainstream and an avant-garde-- between the academics and the beats, the New Critical and the confessional--seemed meaningless to Ashbery in the mid-sixties: "Like most truly original artists today, when tradition menaces the individual talent in ways undreamed by T. S. Eliot, O'Hara and his achievement are caught between opposing power blocs." The reason for O'Hara's singular position, Ashbery explained, was his blithe disregard for the exigencies of American politics.

Frank O'Hara's poetry *has no program and therefore cannot be joined. It does not advocate sex and dope as a panacea for the ills of modern society; it does not speak out against the war in Viet Nam or in favor of civil rights; it does not paint gothic vignettes of the post-Atomic Age; in a word, it does not attack the establishment. It merely ignores its right to exist, and is thus a source of annoyance for partisans of every stripe.*

Ashbery did not mean, in a debased New Critical sense, that poetry had no relationship to social concerns; his appropriation of the language of the House Committee on Un-American Activities ("the loyalty-oath mentality") suggests otherwise. But Ashbery was suspicious of claims that were being made for poetry political power, on both the right and the left. To Ashbery, O'Hara's flagrantly uncommitted poems seemed to carry more clout than poems pledging their allegiance to social protest: "unlike the 'message' of committed poetry it incites one to all the programs of commitment as well as to every other form of self- realization--interpersonal, Dionysian, occult, or abstract."

Coming in the midst of the Vietnam War, this was a dangerously subtle argument; Ashbery must have known that (like the O'Hara he celebrated) his comments were likely to please nobody. Louis Simpson grabbed the bait. Writing for a

symposium on poetry in the *Nation*, Simpson argued that poets like Robert Bly, Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, W. S. Merwin, Gary Synder, and presumably Simpson himself belonged to no school but were linked by their common opposition to the war. More importantly, these poets were also linked by their stylistic choices; the sternly antiwar Wilbur had no place in this brotherhood because (unlike Simpson) he continued to work in traditional meters and forms. Ashbery's style might have given him a place, but (again, unlike Simpson) Ashbery did not put any stock in the "breakthrough" narrative's association of stylistic rebellion and political rotest. " John Ashbery," Simpson concluded, ". . . complimented [O'Hara] on not having written poetry about the war. This struck me as a new concept of merit--praising a man for things he has not written. But it was not amusing to see a poet sneering at the conscience of other poets."

These words forced Ashbery to make an uncharacteristically explicit gesture of self-defense. In two letters to the Nation he quoted his original remarks about O'Hara and then responded to Simpson's charges: "All poetry is against war and in favor of life, or else it isn't poetry, and it stops being poetry when it is forced into the mold of a particular program. poetry is poetry. Protest is protest. I believe in both forms of action." Especially since Ashbery's disjunctive poetry has often been justified in political terms (the poems disrupt the reified terms of cultural...

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University Questions with Answers

Q. 1. Critically evaluate the poem, *Melodic Trains* by John Ashbery. (P.U. 2003, 2005).

Or

Discuss *Melodic Trains* as a poem of music and thinking/musings.

Or

Discuss paradoxes & metaphors in *Melodic Trains.*

Or

Critically evaluate the title of the poem *"Melodic Trains"*.

Ans. *Melodic Trains* is a poem of music and musings. It captures its metaphors and symbols from the experience of traveling by train. Ashbery compares this to the journey of life and tries to establish that common worries consume too much of our energies and leave us little time to see that others have similar problems which we can share and lessen. The corner stone of his poem is the question that occurs in the middle of the poem: "Why couldn't/We have been more considerate?"

The title of the poem sets a tone of harmony and concord. The trains are melodic not because the round of the wheels is so rhythmic, but because Ashbery sees all passengers as his brothers. He empathises with them and feels that on our individual journey of life we must share each others' experiences and together establish a world more in harmony with love, happiness, and brotherhood. This is possible only if everyone hears and shares the music of life. Thus all the complaints of his fellow passengers "strikes silver bells" in his heart.

The poem has the form of a reverine started by a little girl's asking the poet what time it is the poet muses that the watch she is wearing is a toy, which she is wearing to show that she is

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grown up. This starts a chain of musings in which the poet thinks that the "tweed" coat and pipe he has put on establish him only as an actor playing a serious role. These clothes hardly show what kind of person is hidden inside. This helps Ashbery bring the comparison of people as "unfathomable valleys" that must be explored. They live before the background of huge mountains.

Ashbery equates the train to a "pencil guided by a ruler" to show that life seems certain and planned and the way seems "flat" and smooth against the "photomural of the Alps". On this journey the distances between stations and those between passengers intrigue the poet. In his typical way of paradoxical statements Ashbery thinks that personal distances may be something "unofficial and impersonal" though they may sometime be correct like a stopped watch "right twice a day".

Against this background of train journey as life, Ashbery paints the picture of wait and worry at the stations. This brings in the theme of the poem in clearer perspective. The "clouds of anxiety, of sad regretful impatience" picture the problems of life and the poet feels that the panic and disorder of the work is so little at the cost of so much unhappiness. This journey does not allow us to see the people with us and the only memory of the journey is of what we saw outside the train. The journey will end happily but people do not know that and keep pushing with dogged impatience.

This poem of music and musings is typical of Ashbery's method of paradoxes and metaphors. His comparisons and metaphors are always based on his maxim that "Artists are no fun once they have been discovered". The poem therefore presents several surprising metaphors. The train journey is set against the photomural of the Alps and the train is a pencil guided by a ruler. The thick white clouds of steam look like "great white apples" and seem to be wearying and world-weary. Such figures may still be easy to understand and lead to an artistic appreciation of the poem but the final description of citizen's committee headed by the mayor hardly brings home to us if Ashbery is referring to a happy end of life or of a simple journey. We are led to agree with David Lehman writing in *Beyond Amazement* when he asks: "Does Ashbery's poetry

view meanings, or does it militate against the very possibility of articulating them?"

Ashbery draws his metaphors from many sources. Sometimes they are from Greek notions of perfectness of the circles as when he refers to the *segment of chance in the circle of certainty.* Similarly *last stop* means getting home, Ashbery relates this to life and the end of life but how getting home is related to the *visible chorus* evades us completely.

Equally ambiguous is the figure of the *zipper* which is related to eh earlier image of dress but how it opens the scenery is quite far fetched. The passengers' voices have *descending scales* the town being nothing but a windmill and the welcome at the last stop with the *furniture of the air* can hardly be taken as embellishment of the poem.

The poem is quite musical as the title suggested and Ashbery's frequent use of sonorous words adds to the music. He creates this effect of melody with assonance and consonance repeated in every line. The verse paragraphs follow one after the other like the scenes and acts of a drama reaching its natural finale. On the whole the poem is a good example of optimistic and sunny side of 20th century literature.

Q. 2. Critically evaluate the poem, *The Painter* by John Ashbery. (P.U. 2006).

Or

Discuss imitative art in *The Painter*.

Or

Write a comprehensive note on Ashbery's concept of art in *The Painter*.

Or

Discuss *The Painter* as a critic of the 20th Century.

Ans. In *The Painter*, Ashbery touches upon some of the basic concepts in imitative arts. He does not attempt a poetic reconciliation of the warring schools of criticism. Rather he presents a situation in which the artistic creativity may come in direct conflict with the demands of modern society. The poem presents the situation of an artist who wants to paint the sea. His ambition is to present the sea rather than paint it. He wants that "nature, not art, might usurp the canvas". Ashbery concludes that such an ambition would result in a total denial

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of modern urban values and would be met with violent rejection.

Ashbery establishes a relation between the sea and the buildings in the very beginning of the poem. The artist sits between the symbols of nature and the urban jungle of cement and steel. He was enjoying his work and expected that his subject would easily yield to creative reproduction, but his expectations were thwarted. Reality refused to be captured so easily by art. Ashbery compares his ambition to children's view of prayer showing the simplicity of his desire. Ashbery contrasts the artist's expectation to realistic theory of art asserting that even the most naturalistic presentation of life is still not nature as it exists in a different medium which changes its attributes. The artist with this realization is unable to present reality and so "there was never any paint on the canvas".

Ashbery contrasts the artist with the people in the buildings. He emphasizes the basic difference between their modes of thinking. They want to "put him to work" desiring him to paint something less "angry and large", something "more subject to a painter's mood". It is obvious that they consider art to be an imitative skill in the service of urban, commercial interests. It is "more subject to…a prayer" or as one may say 'an order'. The concept of presentation of reality in the sense that reality may actually "usurp" the canvas is alien to them.

The artist's choosing his wife for a subject and making her "vast" is Ashbery's way of defining bathos. Ashbery being a gay poet could hardly have expressed matrimonial love in any other way. However this time it was as if the portrait "Had expressed itself without a brush". With this encouragement the artist now arises to paint with seawater, letting the medium of reality to be the medium of artistic expression. This was as if the artistic creation would "wreck the canvas", putting an end to the illusion of presentation and letting the reality to be expressed without any alien medium of expression.

This new mode of creation in which the artist is overtaken by his subject is blasphemous to the people in the buildings who consider it to be the case of "a painter crucified by his subject". Others declare it to be the egotistical expression of the artist's self and not presentation of reality.

The work of the artist is such that "all indication of subject began to fade". Immaculate reality untouched with art is the final expression and provokes a destructive violent response form the people of the buildings. The portrait is tossed into the sea where it becomes one with its subject and thus the expression of the subject remains a prayer.

The poem presents many contrasting views related to art and its relation to reality and society. Ashbery finds an appropriate locale for the presentation of ideological discord. The artist sits between the sea and the buildings, i.e., between nature and the urban civilization. The buildings are tall and overcrowded, apt representation of overpopulated urban scene. The tallness of the buildings also reflects the way the people look down upon the artist. But the artist has his back to the buildings. His independence of thought is met with advice from the buildings. People want to "put him to work". Ashbery with his usual figurative way of presentation makes the artist paint his wife whom he makes "vast, like ruined buildings". He very cleverly hides whether the portrait of the wife was made in paint on the canvas or if it was a real-life portrait.

The poem makes use of figurative language throughout thus making every simple detail stand for a more complex thought related with theory of art. Phrases like "*sea's portrait, plaster its own portrait on the canvas, the brush as means to an end, usurp the canvas. As if forgetting itself the portrait, had expressed itself without a brush, wrecks the canvas, crucified by his subject, all indications of a subject began to fade, to howl, that was also a prayer, the sea devoured the canvas and the brush",* all have figurative meanings expressing or reflecting significant artistic concepts. Ashbery uses the word prayer several times, in this poem every time meaning something different. The artist's prayer and the people's howl which was also a prayer have contrasted meanings and so Ashbery uses the same word to mean different things to show how reality can be seen from many different perspectives.

Q. 3. Ashbery's poems are abstract paintings in words. Discuss this statement with reference to the poems included in your syllabus.

Or

The Painter as a representative of avant-garde views. Discuss.

Or

The Painter is written in the perspective of theoretical and critical approaches towards modern paintings and poetry, how far do you agree?

Or

John Ashbery adopts surrealistic approaches to the Painter, Justify or Refute this statement.

Ans. Ashbery is the most creative of all avant-gardes. His poems justify what he advocates in his prose or theoretical criticism. His theories about language are those most popularly practiced in not his own but the poems of his younger generation. In fact Ashbery's efforts were to unite the techniques of poetry and painting. While doing so he has to explain the similarities in these arts to their procedural out puts. In his view the practice of a painter is quite akin to a poet's. The movements in painting therefore had their special link to the movements in poetry.

The Pinter is written in the light of his theories for surrealist art.

Sitting between the sea and the buildings
He enjoyed painting the sea's portrait.

The touch of abstractism is seen in the painting of sea but in a poetic abstract way. What the painter wants to paint about sea is attempted by poets like Shelley in poetry. But the difference lies in the fact that the painting concerns our sense of seeing whereas poetry hearing and feeling.

But just as children imagine a prayer
Is merely silence, he expected his subject
To rush up the sand, and, seizing a brush,
Plaster its own portrait on the canvas.

It was surrealism the painter was trying to adopt as a theory. The most controversial of all surrealist aspects is it aspect of automatism. Ashbery in these lines gives a view of painter's conception of this aspect. He wants the sea to rush up the sand and plaster its own portrait on the canvas. What comes next is in fact Ashbery's rejection of this view.

So there was never any paint on his canvas

For him the possibility of automatism lies in its adopting some means. The canvas and brush are the means a painter adopts in painting. The means for a poet are the emotional overflow and conscious indulgence. What the people living in buildings advise him to do is the same Ashbery himself suppots. He seems, in this way, on the side of the people living in buildings.

> Until the people who lived in the buildings
> Put him to work: "Try using the brush
> As a means to an end. Select, for a portrait,
> Something less angry and large, and more subject
> To a painter's mood, or, perhaps, to prayer."

All poems are subject to automatism. But the automatism Ashbery defines is totally different from one the poets of generations have been practising. In his view the selection of subject at least should not fall prey to automatism. The poet and the painter both should try to choose something intimate to their feelings and bents. The inability to choose such a subject is expressed in painter's inability to explain his choice to the people.

> How could he explain to them his prayer
> That nature, not art, might usurp the canvas?

But to show the approach of the critics as genuine and practical, Ashbery presents his painter acting upon their suggestion.

> He chose his wife for a new subject,
> Making her vast, like ruined buildings.

The success this time though unexpected comes to the painter and the portrait gets appreciated by the critics.

> As if forgetting itself, the portrait
> Had expressed itself without a brush.

It is in fact the practicability of theory that Ashbery wants to express. Surrealism in itself is not the genuine thing. If the painter or poet has mixed it with the artistic conscience it becomes genuine or practicable. The artistic conscience from art therefore should not be absent. All arts should be artistic in nature, and all artists should be artistical.

Ashbery's avantgarde approach is in this way quite clear. All experimental and innovational work should not cease to artistic, at least. Surrealist conceptions are in fact the initial

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stages of all conceptions. It is the genius of an artist that makes them different from the conceptions of a common person. The artistic efforts in all works of art should always be there. It is the artistic effort that gives some idea or vision an artistic genre. All conception before being adopted in form or medium may look same. But it is the artistic effort that gives them form or medium. Further, the form or medium should not be considered enough to give some conception its artistic identity. Colours and canvas should not be considered enough to make some idea a portrait or sketch. It should be the approach of painter that should help make it painterly.

The painter in The Painter forgot to understand this point and tried to paint the portrait of sea again.

> Slightly encouraged, he dipped his brush
> In the sea, murmuring a heartfelt prayer:

In fact he forgot to understand that the portrait praised by the critics was painted up to the requirements of the medium. It was not the subject but the medium they had stressed upon. The sea is not less angry and large a subject. The sea is a subject, but to be less and large deals with the particularities of medium. So it was the medium they in fact talked about. The painter took it for subject and theory and started painted the portrait of sea again. The mode and attitude he adopted was again surrealist.

> "My soul, when I paint this portrait
> let it be you who wrecks the canvas."

Ashbery in fact wants to convey to us the real sense of surrealism. Medium and attitude are the soul of theories. No art is possible without medium. It is not the theory but the medium and attitude of the artist that makes one different from the other. All conceptions at the initial level are the same. It is always the medium that divides them in painting, music, dance, poetry etc.

> The news spread like wildfire through the building,
> He had gone back to the sea for his subject.

If the news of his painting an old subject spreads like a wildfire, it is because of painter's inability to understand the true spirit of a theory or technique. When he came to his old angry and large subject, he had to be disappointed again. The disappointment had become his ultimate fate.

Imagine a painter crucified by his subject.

It simply means that the subject should not dominate and overcome the true spirit of an art. The medium and attitudes should always be accepted as true spirit of some art. Ashbery's avantgarde views therefore are not totally strange for art. What Eliot says about the importance of individual talent in the supremacy of tradition is proved completely true. Tradition does not mean in the sense of modes and attitudes. It should also be meant in the sense of medium. Canvas, brush and paint are the media of painting. An artist should not transcend his media. It shall simply mean that he is misled in his conceptions. If the painter had not been too exhausted to lift his brush, he might have painted something up to the requirements of theory and criticism. But alas!

> Too exhausted even to lift his brush,
> He provoked some artists leaning from the buildings
> To malicious mirth: "We haven't a prayer
> Now, of putting ourselves on canvas,
> Or getting the sea to sit for a portrait!"

The theorists and critics refused to accept his efforts. They simply thought it non-professional and non-artistic. To remain and survive in the limits of art is the first requirement of art. If the artist breaks these limits and gets out of art he will never, never be accepted. The recognition and time does not mean any sense here. The acceptance and rejection of critics are also subordinates here. He will simply be thought as a fool and mad.

Of course, we do not understand the most intelligent and the most foolish. But we can understand the most intelligent somewhere or sometime in our life. The most foolish will never be understood. He is simply to be discarded and forgotten. To be out of art is too be foolish and to be mad.

> Others declared it a self-portrait.
> Finally all indications of a subject
> Began to fade, leaving the canvas
> Perfectly white.

The fate of to be out of art is to be dead in art. Our mind has some communicating waves. When an artist gets out of art he is electrocuted by these waves. He is simply dead.

> He put down the brush.
> At once a howl, that was also a prayer,

Arose from the over-crowded buildings.
They tossed him, the portrait, from the tallest of the buildings;
And the sea devoured the canvas and the brush
As though his subject had decided to remain a prayer.

The sea devoured the canvas and the brush means the subject needs some medium. When the artist refuses to adopt any medium the subject remains unidentified. The unidentifiedness of subject is in fact the hidden condition of means to perform that subject.

Q. 4. How do you analyze John Ashbery in the contemporary American Poetry?

Or

What are some of the dominant features of 20th century American Poetry that are reflected in the work of John Ashbery (P.U. 2004)

Ans. Charles Altieri, in *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry,* labels Ashbery "the major poet of our minor age". But as Susan Schultz points out: "Ashbery criticism has also failed to catch up with its subject, generating itself out of a value-ridden set of terms". While criticism of Ashbery's poetry has tried to fit him into a tradition and to find a method or system in his poetry he remains quite elusive. In *The Invisible Avant-Garde,* Ashbery commented that "Artists are no fun once they have been discovered" and it seems that his poetry is an attempt to elude what Eliot called "the lemon squeezing school of criticism".

Elusiveness perhaps best describes Ashbery's poetry. His poems are difficult reading for those weaned in the early 20th century poetry. David Lehman writing in *Beyond Amazement* asks: "Does Ashbery's poetry yield meanings, or does it militate against the very possibility of articulating them? Landscapes dominate Ashbery's poems. His pictures are always liad against the backdrops of vast landscapes, as the train is against the photomural of the Alps in *Melodic Trains*. As Lehman commented, "If, however, the longitude and latitude of Ashbery's poetry are now thought to be known, the territory itself remains a dark continent". But Ashbery suggested finding a path in that field by closing one's eyes, and then what we get is *"a thin vertical path".* It is this thin vertical path leading to

the skies of the imagination which is the thought as well as the form of Ashbery's poetry.

A similar technique is a deliberate avoidance of technique of system. Ashbery attempts to write without taking a firm stance anywhere in the field of poetics. His poetry therefore alludes to a poetic. Marjorie Perloff calls this *The poetics of Indeterminacy* in the book of the same title. Susan M. Schultz in *The Tribe of John Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry* points out: "There is a meditative Ashbery, a formalist Ashbery, a comic Ashbery, a late-Romantic Ashbery, a Language poet Ashbery, and...even a love poet." She sums up saying: "No poet since Whitman has tapped into so many distinctly American voices and, at the same time, so preserved his utterance against the jangle of influences". It is to this that Charles Molesworth points when he says: "What stands behind Ashbery's rather sudden success is the triumph of a poetic mode".

Ashbery often writes by assuming a persona i.e. a character who narrates the story but who is distinctly not the poet. As a result we have many different personalities talking to us in his poetry and none of them can be confidently attributed to the poet himself. Harold bloom's comments that "Ashbery is essentially a ruminative poet, turning a few subjects over and over, knowing always that what counts is the mythology of self." We have a good example of this in the traveller in a tweed coat and holding a briar pipe in *Melodic Trains* who may be Ashbery but he is soon lost in a multitude. By assuming this persona, Ashbery is able to bring in all the social voices he needs to paint the landscape of experience in American society. Ashbery substantiated this when he said. "Poetry includes anything and everything". It is very difficult to categorize either Ashbery himself or his poems. He stands unique in the vast realms of poetic creations. Though Ashbery is a 20th Century Post-modernist yet we find so much diversity in respect of his technique and subject-matter that at one end, he seems classic like Elizabethans and at another, he seems much like romanticists such as Wordsworth and Coleridge. But we can label Ashbery for his anachromatistic technique and futuristic ideas as Avant-Garde (again a new form of post-modernist). Below we study various aspects of his poetry which establish Ashbery's reputation as post-modernist.

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Another technique used by Ashbery is to echo other poets, to borrow their style, phrases or images to establish a link or to draw an ironical relation between their and his point of view. He has been known to echo Stevens, Eliot, Pound, and the Romantics. With Stevens he raises questions about reality, the power of the imagination to capture reality and of the art to portray it. As David Perkins points out in *On Ashbery's Predecessors* "for both Stevens and Ashbery the imagination creates, destroys and immediately creates another vision of reality". We see this in *the painter* where the version of reality of the sea can not be conveyed in paints and the artist needs a different medium to do that while his concern is that nature and not art might usurp the canvas.

Ashbery's subjects are "not doings in the world but in the mind" In *Melodic Trains* the journey exists in the poet's mind and he mingles humour with pathos, resignation with hope, and maintains his relaxed, and wonderfully imaginative, speech despite premises that might have led to despair. The anguish of the passengers of the train is shared by the poet but their anxiety and "dogged impatience lead the poet to say "*These figures leaving/The platform or waiting to board the train are my brothers....*" The way he describes his passengers has been described by Marjorie Perloff as neutral description with colloquial characterization.

Ashbery's poetry brings us to strange metaphors and shifts in descriptions. The clouds of smoke in *Melodic Trains* are '*wearying and world weary'* and look like '*great white apples'*. The tweed coat with its pattern is likened to '*date-coloured Sierras'* while the lines of seams plunge into *'unfathomable Valleys'*. The figures may not always be this difficult as the anxiety-laden passengers on the platform look like Tower of Pisa figures though their 'dogged impatience' makes them look like determined birds '*banking forward into the wind'*. In *The Painter*, the artist chooses his wife as a subject and makes her "*vast like ruined buildings".*

Sometimes Ashbery uses voices of other poets. David Perkins points out "he adopts or alludes to a style in order to invoke the tone of feeling associated with it....he exhibits the modern colloquial voices of different types of people". As Marjorie Perloff says: "in Ashbery, almost everything *sounds*

like a citation, sounds like something we've heard before or read somewhere." Andrew Ross calls it "the technique of collage and montage". *The Painter* thus seems to be a direct echo from Browning's many poems on the subject of art. We have echoes here of *Fra Lippo Lippi* when the protagonist was criticised for finding his subjects in real life and was asked to make his portraits reflect the soul and not the body.

Music is another quality of Ashbery's poetry. The optimistic tone of his poetry makes even trains to be melodic. This makes Jonathan Morse say "he is the lyricist of what in us is most typical of all." *Melodic Trains* describes the anguish and anxiety of the journey in musical notes which end at a fanfare of celebration with music of human voices and clapping and all that.

Ashbery remains a difficult poet whose full scope and measure can only be known by keeping track of his voice, style and poetics over longer periods of his production. David Lehman says in *Beyond Amazement*. "If, however, the longitude and latitude of Ashbery's poetry are now thought to be known, the territory itself remains a dark continent" and then he echoes the student in desperation. What mileage does he get out of his habit of rapidily shifting gears in a poem?" Even then, themes like music, rebellion, art, habit of wrapping lines into long paragraph-like stanza is also a recent invention which makes Ashbery a post modern poet and establish him as a poet on sure foundations of contemporary American poetry.

Q. 5. Give a detailed analysis of the poem Melodic Trains.

Or

Discuss the Melodic Trains in it social perspective.

Or

Point out the qualities of Melodic Trains as modern or post-modern.

Or

Melodic Trains by Ashbery reflects the complexities of urban life. How far do you agree?

Or

In Melodic Trains, social issues of modern man have been brought under discussion, justify or refute!

Or

***John Ashbery traces the factors which directly influence and alter attitude of the modern man in day to day situations*. How far this statement is applicable to Melodic Trains?**

Ans. John Ashbery traces the factors, which directly influence and alter attitude of the modern man in day-to-day situations. Thus Ashbery brings before us the complexities of urban life, discussing the social, political and psychological issues along with personal trains of feelings of the poet.

The Melodic Trains is written in the perspective of modern American society. The social aspects are discussed on an emotional scale. The temperament, attitude and behaviour of modern man are dependent on circumstances and transubstantiations. The feelings of poet remain else-oriented. He does not feel anything irrelevant to his surrounding. The self is replaced by else all the time.

The first feelings he gives while sitting in the train are about the girl wearing enamelled finger nails.

A little girl with scarlet enameled fingernails
Asks me what time it is—evidently that's a toy wristwatch
She's wearing for fun. And it is fun to wear other
Odd things, like this briar pipe and tweed coat
Like date-coloured Sierras with the lines of seams
Sketched in and plunging now and then into unfathomable
Valleys that can't be deduced by the shape of the person
Sitting inside it—me,

What he feels about or for this girl is totally social or impersonal. He reckons his look and position from outside. The girl is not funny in herself. Likewise the poet is not funny in himself. He is funny for other people – and that too with respect to their own judgement. The way and the comparison he uses to convey his opinion about himself is however quite modern. In nature anyhow they are too American to be global. We can say that these are not the feelings of a common man. But they are expressed in so impersonal a way that they look familiar enough to be of a common man. The artistic involvement of the poet in the expression of these feelings makes them poetic and general.

The concept of distance however is dealt with a philosophical touch. It is also enhanced by a brisk comparison.

and just as our way is flat across
Dales and gulches, as though our train were a pencil
Guided by a ruler held against a photomural of the Alps
We both come to see distance as something unofficial
And impersonal yet not without its curious justification
Like the time of a stop watch

The distance is not without its curious justification yet it is unofficial and impersonal because the poet and the girl are not in their usual mood and behaviour. The words 'unofficial' and 'impersonal', however, seem opposites of each other. How one can be unofficial and impersonal at the same time? This is the question that we feel ourselves unable to solve. But this what the poet has taken as a model theme for his poem. The dilemma of a modern man is to be unofficial and impersonal at the same time. The people sitting in the train are unofficial because they are not on their usual places. And they are impersonal because they are involved with the other people going to their particular journeys separately. The distance or journey is like the time of a stop watch – right twice a day. It temporary and momentary. It makes one unofficial and impersonal at the same time. As the distance has a curious justification it is not dimensionless.

Only the wait in stations is vague and
Dimensionless, like oneself.

The wait in the stations on the other hand is vague and dimensionless. It is so because it was not calculated and perhaps is never calculated.

How do they decide how much
Time to spend in each? One begins to suspect there's no
Rule or that it's applied haphazardly.

The dimensionlessness of this wait is conveyed through the extrovert social behaviour of the people. One thinks about others when one is in trouble.

Thematically the poet has shifted himself from relaxed to tense feelings. This is what the modern poets practice very commonly. The themes are mostly sense, emotion and feeling oriented. These elements were there in the old poets also. But they had not made them the bases of their poems. Theirs were mostly thought oriented. It was the poetic thought that inspired them to write not the poetic feelings. The poetic thoughts aroused in them the poetic feelings and they wrote in a

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spontaneous over flow of powerful feelings. But it used to be thoughts they wrote not feelings. With the modern poets the things are different a little bit. Their feelings inspire them to write. These are the feelings they experience first not the thoughts. This is why the reader of a modern poetry will feel himself sensitively mature not thought wise. The theme of this poem is therefore the feelings of a modern man or so many modern men. The poet has conveyed their feelings through feelings not through thoughts.

> Sadness of the faces of children on the platform,
> Concern of the grownups for connections, for the chances
> Of getting a taxi, since these have no timetable.

It is not the thought that the taxis have no timetable but a feeling. The taxis of course have their timetable but the person speaking this thought is in a state of mind that suffices to convert his thoughts into feelings.

This approach towards themes and topics is very common in modern poets. What makes this approach truly American is the logical way they convey it to you.

> You get one if you can find one though in principle
> You can always find one,

This is further the style they convey their feelings and thoughts through. The interference of thoughts in the depiction of feelings however is imperceptibly constant. What Ashbery gives as a logical explanation of his feelings is felt as a piece of philosophy.

> but the segment of chance
> In the circle of certainty is what gives these leaning
> Tower of Pisa figures their aspect of dogged
> Impatience, banking forward into the wind.

We can say the style has rendered simple poetic feelings and thoughts to those of philosophical ones. But this is not true. One becomes philosophical when one feels and thinks so deeply. It is in fact the depth of feelings that is conveyed in so philosophical a mode not the philosophy itself.

> In short any stop before the final one creates
> Clouds of anxiety, of sad, regretful impatience
> With ourselves, our lives, the way we have been dealing

With other people up until now. Why couldn't
We have been more considerate?

The outcome of deep feelings at the level of expression or thinking is philosophy. But at the level of feelings it is anxiety. The deeper we feel the more anxious we become.

The anxiety, however, results in an expression of modern attitude towards various directions. It seems as if the modern people are always ready to be annoyed and worried. The variance in thoughts and feelings has made them impatient with their surroundings. They seem no more tolerant and considerate. But actually it has become their second nature. It has become a part of their feelings and expressions. The sooner they get anxious the less latter they get relaxed.

These figures leaving
The platform or waiting to board the train are my brothers
In a way that really wants to tell me why there is so little

Panic and disorder in the world, and so much unhappiness.

The lines though thematic in nature yet indicate the feelings of a person who see these people in such a tense condition. They are not philosophic in any way. They result from the complex interplay of feelings the modern poets are so adept in. This is what Ashbery wants to say – the complexity of modern mind at the level of sensitive sights. It seems as if the modern man starts thinking when gets tense and confused. In the same way the other men start feelings when they see tension and confusion. The problem is not of identity but of individuality. They do not know where they become different from others and similar to them. Why does the poet feel different from what the people at platform do? Because he is sitting in the train and the others are standing outside at the platforms. The difference in their resulted thoughts is the difference in their identity. What the poet feels in the above and the following lines is the crisis of identity. In the first stage he feels them unjustified. But in the second desirous to be one of them.

If I were to get down now to stretch, take a few steps
In the wearying and world-weary clouds of stream like great
White apples, might I just through proximity and aping
Of postures and attitudes communicate this concern of
mine to them?

The poet's concern to the people is not of individuality but of identity – identity in the sense of similarity. But he is so much conscious of his position that he seems failed to find out any similarity. What he will do to them shall be a kind of aping. The description of the way he will get down and reach the people is however American. This attitude is symbolic of the attitude of whole nation – and perhaps of the whole modern community. The points of concern he wants to communicate are however very individualistic.

> That their jagged attitudes correspond to mine,
> That their beefing strikes answering silver bells within
> My own chest, and that I know, as they do, how the last
> Stop is the most anxious one of all, though it means

Getting home at last, to the pleasures and dissatisfactions of home?

These are the similarities that strengthen the individualities.

> It's as though a visible chorus called up the different
> Stages of the journey, singing about them and being them:

The visible chorus in the different stages of journey is not only particular about itself but also about the others. The members of chorus are different and similar at the same time.

> Not the people in the station, not the child opposite me
> With currant fingernails, but the windows, seen through,
> Reflecting imperfectly, ruthlessly splitting open the bluish
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The difference is not that of the position but of scenic background the people sitting in train are covered in and the people waiting at platforms are not.

> Each voice has its own
> Descending scale to put one in one's place at every stage:
> One need never know where one is
> Unless one give up listening, sleeping, approaching a small
> Western town that is nothing but a windmill.

This is how the people sitting in the train and those waiting at the platforms are the same. Their voices put them in one another's place and one loses ones identity in the clouds of anxiety.

Then
The great fury of the end can drop as a solo
Voices tell about it, wreathing it somehow with an aura
Of good fortune and colossal welcomes from the mayor and
Citizen's tossing their hats into the air.
To hear them singing you'd think it had already happened
And we had focused back on the furniture of the air.

In this perspective it looks very strange that the difference remained only up to the difference in position. As soon as the passengers get down they forget all their anxieties and worries. A new situation seems waiting to devour them. With the change in positions the people are transformed from one set of feelings to another – from one set of differences to another, from one set of similarities to another. Things seem taking place at momentary scales. The identities and individualities are but momentary. They seem depending on some particular sets of conditions and situations. The advantages and disadvantages are but timely. Change the positions and get the newer sets of identities. What the poet is in the beginning remains no more so in the middle and end. It simply means the people sitting beside in the train and waiting at the platforms will also be different from their present ones.

The poem is so perfect in theme and treatment that it seems dealing with nearly all the modern problems and issues. The life of a modern man is hinted from all sides. The canvas though social in extension yet outlines with domestic contrasts.

Q.6. Melodic Trains by Ashbery reflects the complexities of urban life. How far do you agree?

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Q.7. What are some of the dominant features of 20th century American Poetry that are reflected in the work of John Ashbery (P.U. 2004)

Ans. Charles Altieri, in Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry, labels Ashbery "the major poet of our minor age". But as Susan Schultz points out: "Ashbery criticism has also failed to catch up with its subject, generating itself out of a value-ridden set of terms". While criticism of Ashbery's poetry has tried to fit him into a tradition and to find a method or system in his poetry he remains quite elusive. In The Invisible Avant-Garde, Ashbery commented that "Artists are no fun once they have been discovered" and it seems that his poetry is an attempt to elude what Eliot called "the lemon squeezing school of criticism".

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A similar technique is a deliberate avoidance of technique of system. Ashbery attempts to write without taking a firm stance anywhere in the field of poetics. His poetry therefore alludes to a poetic. Marjorie Perloff calls this The poetics of Indeterminacy in the book of the same title. Susan M. Schultz

in The Tribe of John Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry points out: "There is a meditative Ashbery, a formalist Ashbery, a comic Ashbery, a late-Romantic Ashbery, a Language poet Ashbery, and...even a love poet." She sums up saying: "No poet since Whitman has tapped into so many distinctly American voices and, at the same time, so preserved his utterance against the jangle of influences". It is to this that Charles Molesworth points when he says: "What stands behind Ashbery's rather sudden success is the triumph of a poetic mode".

Ashbery often writes by assuming a persona i.e. a character who narrates the story but who is distinctly not the poet. As a result we have many different personalities talking to us in his poetry and none of them can be confidently attributed to the poet himself. Harold bloom's comments that "Ashbery is essentially a ruminative poet, turning a few subjects over and over, knowing always that what counts is the mythology of self." We have a good example of this in the traveller in a tweed coat and holding a briar pipe in Melodic Trains who may be Ashbery but he is soon lost in a multitude. By assuming this persona, Ashbery is able to bring in all the social voices he needs to paint the landscape of experience in American society. Ashbery substantiated this when he said. "Poetry includes anything and everything". It is very difficult to categorize either Ashbery himself or his poems. He stands unique in the vast realms of poetic creations. Though Ashbery is a 20th Century Post-modernist yet we find so much diversity in respect of his technique and subject-matter that at one end, he seems classic like Elizabethans and at another, he seems much like romanticists such as Wordsworth and Coleridge. But we can label Ashbery for his anachromatistic technique and futuristic ideas as Avant-Garde (again a new form of post-modernist). Below we study various aspects of his poetry which establish Ashbery's reputation as post-modernist.

Another technique used by Ashbery is to echo other poets, to borrow their style, phrases or images to establish a link or to draw an ironical relation between their and his point of view. He has been known to echo Stevens, Eliot, Pound, and the Romantics. With Stevens he raises questions about reality, the power of the imagination to capture reality and of the art to portray it. As David Perkins points out in On Ashbery's

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Predecessors "for both Stevens and Ashbery the imagination creates, destroys and immediately creates another vision of reality". We see this in the painter where the version of reality of the sea can not be conveyed in paints and the artist needs a different medium to do that while his concern is that nature and not art might usurp the canvas.

Ashbery's subjects are "not doings in the world but in the mind" In Melodic Trains the journey exists in the poet's mind and he mingles humour with pathos, resignation with hope, and maintains his relaxed, and wonderfully imaginative, speech despite premises that might have led to despair. The anguish of the passengers of the train is shared by the poet but their anxiety and "dogged impatience lead the poet to say "These figures leaving/The platform or waiting to board the train are my brothers...." The way he describes his passengers has been described by Marjorie Perloff as neutral description with colloquial characterization.

Ashbery's poetry brings us to strange metaphors and shifts in descriptions. The clouds of smoke in Melodic Trains are 'wearying and world weary' and look like 'great white apples'. The tweed coat with its pattern is likened to 'date-coloured Sierras' while the lines of seams plunge into 'unfathomable Valleys'. The figures may not always be this difficult as the anxiety-laden passengers on the platform look like Tower of Pisa figures though their 'dogged impatience' makes them look like determined birds 'banking forward into the wind'. In The Painter, the artist chooses his wife as a subject and makes her "vast like ruined buildings".

Sometimes Ashbery uses voices of other poets. David Perkins points out "he adopts or alludes to a style in order to invoke the tone of feeling associated with it....he exhibits the modern colloquial voices of different types of people". As Marjorie Perloff says: "in Ashbery, almost everything sounds like a citation, sounds like something we've heard before or read somewhere." Andrew Ross calls it "the technique of collage and montage". The Painter thus seems to be a direct echo from Browning's many poems on the subject of art. We have echoes here of Fra Lippo Lippi when the protagonist was criticised for finding his subjects in real life and was asked to make his portraits reflect the soul and not the body.

Music is another quality of Ashbery's poetry. The optimistic tone of his poetry makes even trains to be melodic. This makes Jonathan Morse say "he is the lyricist of what in us is most typical of all." Melodic Trains describes the anguish and anxiety of the journey in musical notes which end at a fanfare of celebration with music of human voices and clapping and all that.

Ashbery remains a difficult poet whose full scope and measure can only be known by keeping track of his voice, style and poetics over longer periods of his production. David Lehman says in Beyond Amazement. "If, however, the longitude and latitude of Ashbery's poetry are now thought to be known, the territory itself remains a dark continent" and then he echoes the student in desperation. What mileage does he get out of his habit of rapidily shifting gears in a poem?" Even then, themes like music, rebellion, art, habit of wrapping lines into long paragraph-like stanza is also a recent invention which makes Ashbery a post modern poet and establish him as a poet on sure foundations of contemporary American poetry.

Q.8. The Painter as a representative of avant-garde views. Discuss.

Ans. Ashbery is the most creative of all avant-gardes. His poems justify what he advocates in his prose or theoretical criticism. His theories about language are those most popularly practiced in not his own but the poems of his younger generation. In fact Ashbery's efforts were to unite the techniques of poetry and painting. While doing so he has to explain the similarities in these arts to their procedural out puts. In his view the practice of a painter is quite akin to a poet's. The movements in painting therefore had their special link to the movements in poetry.

The Painter is written in the light of his theories for surrealist art.

Sitting between the sea and the buildings
He enjoyed painting the sea's portrait.

The touch of abstractism is seen in the painting of sea but in a poetic abstract way. What the painter wants to paint about sea is attempted by poets like Shelley in poetry. But the difference lies in the fact that the painting concerns our sense of seeing whereas poetry hearing and feeling.

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But just as children imagine a prayer
Is merely silence, he expected his subject
To rush up the sand, and, seizing a brush,
Plaster its own portrait on the canvas.

It was surrealism the painter was trying to adopt as a theory. The most controversial of all surrealist aspects is it aspect of automatism. Ashbery in these lines gives a view of painter's conception of this aspect. He wants the sea to rush up the sand and plaster its own portrait on the canvas. What comes next is in fact Ashbery's rejection of this view.

So there was never any paint on his canvas

For him the possibility of automatism lies in its adopting some means. The canvas and brush are the means a painter adopts in painting. The means for a poet are the emotional overflow and conscious indulgence. What the people living in buildings advise him to do is the same Ashbery himself suppots. He seems, in this way, on the side of the people living in buildings.

Until the people who lived in the buildings
Put him to work: "Try using the brush
As a means to an end. Select, for a portrait,
Something less angry and large, and more subject
To a painter's mood, or, perhaps, to prayer."

All poems are subject to automatism. But the automatism Ashbery defines is totally different from one the poets of generations have been practising. In his view the selection of subject at least should not fall prey to automatism. The poet and the painter both should try to choose something intimate to their feelings and bents. The inability to choose such a subject is expressed in painter's inability to explain his choice to the people.

How could he explain to them his prayer
That nature, not art, might usurp the canvas?

But to show the approach of the critics as genuine and practical, Ashbery presents his painter acting upon their suggestion.

He chose his wife for a new subject,
Making her vast, like ruined buildings.

The success this time though unexpected comes to the painter and the portrait gets appreciated by the critics.

As if forgetting itself, the portrait
Had expressed itself without a brush.

It is in fact the practicability of theory that Ashbery wants to express. Surrealism in itself is not the genuine thing. If the painter or poet has mixed it with the artistic conscience it becomes genuine or practicable. The artistic conscience from art therefore should not be absent. All arts should be artistic in nature, and all artists should be artistical.

Ashbery's avantgarde approach is in this way quite clear. All experimental and innovational work should not cease to artistic, at least. Surrealist conceptions are in fact the initial stages of all conceptions. It is the genius of an artist that makes them different from the conceptions of a common person. The artistic efforts in all works of art should always be there. It is the artistic effort that gives some idea or vision an artistic genre. All conception before being adopted in form or medium may look same. But it is the artistic effort that gives them form or medium. Further, the form or medium should not be considered enough to give some conception its artistic identity. Colours and canvas should not be considered enough to make some idea a portrait or sketch. It should be the approach of painter that should help make it painterly.

The painter in The Painter forgot to understand this point and tried to paint the portrait of sea again.

Slightly encouraged, he dipped his brush
In the sea, murmuring a heartfelt prayer:

In fact he forgot to understand that the portrait praised by the critics was painted up to the requirements of the medium. It was not the subject but the medium they had stressed upon. The sea is not less angry and large a subject. The sea is a subject, but to be less and large deals with the particularities of medium. So it was the medium they in fact talked about. The painter took it for subject and theory and started painted the portrait of sea again. The mode and attitude he adopted was again surrealist.

"My soul, when I paint this portrait
let it be you who wrecks the canvas."

Ashbery in fact wants to convey to us the real sense of surrealism. Medium and attitude are the soul of theories. No art is possible without medium. It is not the theory but the medium and attitude of the artist that makes one different from the other. All conceptions at the initial level are the same. It is always the medium that divides them in painting, music, dance, poetry etc.

The news spread like wildfire through the building,
He had gone back to the sea for his subject.

If the news of his painting an old subject spreads like a wildfire, it is because of painter's inability to understand the true spirit of a theory or technique. When he came to his old angry and large subject, he had to be disappointed again. The disappointment had become his ultimate fate.

Imagine a painter crucified by his subject.

It simply means that the subject should not dominate and overcome the true spirit of an art. The medium and attitudes should always be accepted as true spirit of some art. Ashbery's avantgarde views therefore are not totally strange for art. What Eliot says about the importance of individual talent in the supremacy of tradition is proved completely true. Tradition does not mean in the sense of modes and attitudes. It should also be meant in the sense of medium. Canvas, brush and paint are the media of painting. An artist should not transcend his media. It shall simply mean that he is misled in his conceptions. If the painter had not been too exhausted to lift his brush, he might have painted something up to the requirements of theory and criticism. But alas!

Too exhausted even to lift his brush,
He provoked some artists leaning from the buildings
To malicious mirth: "We haven't a prayer
Now, of putting ourselves on canvas,
Or getting the sea to sit for a portrait!"

The theorists and critics refused to accept his efforts. They simply thought it non-professional and non-artistic. To remain and survive in the limits of art is the first requirement of art. If the artist breaks these limits and gets out of art he will never, never be accepted. The recognition and time does not mean any sense here. The acceptance and rejection of critics are also subordinates here. He will simply be thought as a fool and mad.

Of course, we do not understand the most intelligent and the most foolish. But we can understand the most intelligent somewhere or sometime in our life. The most foolish will never be understood. He is simply to be discarded and forgotten. To be out of art is too be foolish and to be mad.

Others declared it a self-portrait.
Finally all indications of a subject
Began to fade, leaving the canvas
Perfectly white.

The fate of to be out of art is to be dead in art. Our mind has some communicating waves. When an artist gets out of art he is electrocuted by these waves. He is simply dead.

He put down the brush.
At once a howl, that was also a prayer,
Arose from the over-crowded buildings. They tossed him, the portrait, from the tallest of the buildings; And the sea devoured the canvas and the brush
As though his subject had decided to remain a prayer.

The sea devoured the canvas and the brush means the subject needs some medium. When the artist refuses to adopt any medium the subject remains unidentified. The unidentifiedness of subject is in fact the hidden condition of means to perform that subject.

Q.9. Critically evaluate the poem, The Painter by John Ashbery. (P.U. 2006)

Ans. In *The Painter*, Ashbery touches upon some of the basic concepts in imitative arts. He does not attempt a poetic reconciliation of the warring schools of criticism. Rather he presents a situation in which the artistic creativity may come in direct conflict with the demands of modern society. The poem presents the situation of an artist who wants to paint the sea. His ambition is to present the sea rather than paint it. He wants that "nature, not art, might usurp the canvas". Ashbery concludes that such an ambition would result in a total denial of modern urban values and would be met with violent rejection.

Ashbery establishes a relation between the sea and the buildings in the very beginning of the poem. The artist sits between the symbols of nature and the urban jungle of cement

and steel. He was enjoying his work and expected that his subject would easily yield to creative reproduction, but his expectations were thwarted. Reality refused to be captured so easily by art. Ashbery compares his ambition to children's view of prayer showing the simplicity of his desire. Ashbery contrasts the artist's expectation to realistic theory of art asserting that even the most naturalistic presentation of life is still not nature as it exists in a different medium which changes its attributes. The artist with this realization is unable to present reality and so "there was never any paint on the canvas".

Ashbery contrasts the artist with the people in the buildings. He emphasizes the basic difference between their modes of thinking. They want to "put him to work" desiring him to paint something less "angry and large", something "more subject to a painter's mood". It is obvious that they consider art to be an imitative skill in the service of urban, commercial interests. It is "more subject to…a prayer" or as one may say 'an order'. The concept of presentation of reality in the sense that reality may actually "usurp" the canvas is alien to them.

The artist's choosing his wife for a subject and making her "vast" is Ashbery's way of defining bathos. Ashbery being a gay poet could hardly have expressed matrimonial love in any other way. However this time it was as if the portrait "Had expressed itself without a brush". With this encouragement the artist now arises to paint with seawater, letting the medium of reality to be the medium of artistic expression. This was as if the artistic creation would "wreck the canvas", putting an end to the illusion of presentation and letting the reality to be expressed without any alien medium of expression.

This new mode of creation in which the artist is overtaken by his subject is blasphemous to the people in the buildings who consider it to be the case of "a painter crucified by his subject". Others declare it to be the egotistical expression of the artist's self and not presentation of reality.

The work of the artist is such that "all indication of subject began to fade". Immaculate reality untouched with art is the final expression and provokes a destructive violent response form the people of the buildings. The portrait is tossed into the

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sea where it becomes one with its subject and thus the expression of the subject remains a prayer.

The poem presents many contrasting views related to art and its relation to reality and society. Ashbery finds an appropriate locale for the presentation of ideological discord. The artist sits between the sea and the buildings, i.e., between nature and the urban civilization. The buildings are tall and overcrowded, apt representation of overpopulated urban scene. The tallness of the buildings also reflects the way the people look down upon the artist. But the artist has his back to the buildings. His independence of thought is met with advice from the buildings. People want to "put him to work". Ashbery with his usual figurative way of presentation makes the artist paint his wife whom he makes "vast, like ruined buildings". He very cleverly hides whether the portrait of the wife was made in paint on the canvas or if it was a real-life portrait.

The poem makes use of figurative language throughout thus making every simple detail stand for a more complex thought related with theory of art. Phrases like "*sea's portrait, plaster its own portrait on the canvas, the brush as means to an end, usurp the canvas. As if forgetting itself the portrait, had expressed itself without a brush, wrecks the canvas, crucified by his subject, all indications of a subject began to fade, to howl, that was also a prayer, the sea devoured the canvas and the brush",* all have figurative meanings expressing or reflecting significant artistic concepts. Ashbery uses the word prayer several times, in this poem every time meaning something different. The artist's prayer and the people's howl which was also a prayer have contrasted meanings and so Ashbery uses the same word to mean different things to show how reality can be seen from many different perspectives.

Q.10. Critically evaluate the poem, Melodic Trains by John Ashbery. (P.U. 2003, 2005)

Ans. *Melodic Trains* is a poem of music and musings. It captures its metaphors and symbols from the experience of traveling by train. Ashbery compares this to the journey of life and tries to establish that common worries consume too much of our energies and leave us little time to see that others have similar problems which we can share and lessen. The corner

stone of his poem is the question that occurs in the middle of the poem: “Why couldn’t/We have been more considerate?”

The title of the poem sets a tone of harmony and concord. The trains are melodic not because the round of the wheels is so rhythmic, but because Ashbery sees all passengers as his brothers. He empathises with them and feels that on our individual journey of life we must share each others’ experiences and together establish a world more in harmony with love, happiness, and brotherhood. This is possible only if everyone hears and shares the music of life. Thus all the complaints of his fellow passengers “strikes silver bells” in his heart.

The poem has the form of a reverine started by a little girl’s asking the poet what time it is the poet muses that the watch she is wearing is a toy, which she is wearing to show that she is grown up. This starts a chain of musings in which the poet thinks that the “tweed” coat and pipe he has put on establish him only as an actor playing a serious role. These clothes hardly show what kind of person is hidden inside. This helps Ashbery bring the comparison of people as “unfathomable valleys” that must be explored. They live before the background of huge mountains.

Ashbery equates the train to a “pencil guided by a ruler” to show that life seems certain and planned and the way seems “flat” and smooth against the “photomural of the Alps”. On this journey the distances between stations and those between passengers intrigue the poet. In his typical way of paradoxical statements Ashbery thinks that personal distances may be something “unofficial and impersonal” though they may sometime be correct like a stopped watch “right twice a day”.

Against this background of train journey as life, Ashbery paints the picture of wait and worry at the stations. This brings in the theme of the poem in clearer perspective. The “clouds of anxiety, of sad regretful impatience” picture the problems of life and the poet feels that the panic and disorder of the work is so little at the cost of so much unhappiness. This journey does not allow us to see the people with us and the only memory of the journey is of what we saw outside the train. The journey will end happily but people do not know that and keep pushing with dogged impatience.

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This poem of music and musings is typical of Ashbery's method of paradoxes and metaphors. His comparisons and metaphors are always based on his maxim that "Artists are no fun once they have been discovered". The poem therefore presents several surprising metaphors. The train journey is set against the photomural of the Alps and the train is a pencil guided by a ruler. The thick white clouds of steam look like "great white apples" and seem to be wearying and world-weary. Such figures may still be easy to understand and lead to an artistic appreciation of the poem but the final description of citizen's committee headed by the mayor hardly brings home to us if Ashbery is referring to a happy end of life or of a simple journey. We are led to agree with David Lehman writing in *Beyond Amazement* when he asks: "Does Ashbery's poetry view meanings, or does it militate against the very possibility of articulating them?"

Ashbery draws his metaphors from many sources. Sometimes they are from Greek notions of perfectness of the circles as when he refers to the *segment of chance in the circle of certainty.* Similarly *last stop* means getting home, Ashbery relates this to life and the end of life but how getting home is related to the *visible chorus* evades us completely.

Equally ambiguous is the figure of the *zipper* which is related to eh earlier image of dress but how it opens the scenery is quite far fetched. The passengers' voices have *descending scales* the town being nothing but a windmill and the welcome at the last stop with the *furniture of the air* can hardly be taken as embellishment of the poem.

The poem is quite musical as the title suggested and Ashbery's frequent use of sonorous words adds to the music. He creates this effect of melody with assonance and consonance repeated in every line. The verse paragraphs follow one after the other like the scenes and acts of a drama reaching its natural finale. On the whole the poem is a good example of optimistic and sunny side of 20th century literature.

17

Short Questions with Answers

Q.1. Give a brief biographical information about Ashbery.

Ashbery was born in Rochester, New York His father was a fruit farmer and his mother a former high school biology teacher.

Q.2. Write a note on the educational background of Ashbery.

He graduated from Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts in 1945, Ashbery enrolled at Harvard University, where he majored in English literature, completed a senior thesis on W. H. Auden, and befriended poets Kenneth Koch and Frank O'Hara. After finishing his undergraduate degree at Harvard in 1949, Ashbery moved to New York City to begin study at Columbia University, where he earned a masters degree in French literature in 1951.

Q.3. What were the chief interests of Ashbery in his youth time?

He was initially interested in painting and later he took to music. Ashbery began writing poetry as a child.

Q.4. What are the achievements of John Ashbery?

John Ashbery is the most gifted and talented figure of the 20th century. His work has been translated in many languages. A lot of critical research work ahs been produced on his art. He has been awarded with Robert Frost Medal, Ruth Lilly Award from American Council and in 1996 he was the first English-language poet to win the Biennial International Grand Prize for Poetry, awarded by the Maison Internationale de la Poésie in Brussels. He served as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets from 1988-1999, and in 2001 he was awarded the Signet Medal for Achievement in the Arts by the Signet Associates of Harvard University.

Q.5. What are the qualities for which Ashbery is best known?

He is best known for his radically original poetry, which is firmly rooted in both classical tradition and American popular culture.

Q.6. How did Ashbery's literary career start?

In 1955 Anglo-American poet W. H. Auden chose Ashbery's first collection of poetry, Some Trees (1956), for publication in the Yale Series of Younger Poets. The same year, Ashbery received a Fulbright Fellowship and moved to Paris. He stayed in France until 1965, working as an art and literature critic for the European edition of the New York Herald Tribune and as a correspondent for the American art magazine Art News. Upon his return to New York City, Ashbery served as the executive editor for Art News until 1972. From 1974 to 1990 he taught English at Brooklyn College and Bard College, both in New York state. This is how his literary career started.

Q.7. How was Ashbery critically acclaimed in the literary circles?

Ashbery was highly acclaimed in the critical circles. Some critics hail him as the most important poet after Robert Frost, Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens, They also seek their influence on him. Ashbery's

Q.8. What are the chief literary works produced by Ashbery?

Ashbery is a prolific writer. Ashbery's early works include The Tennis Court Oath (1962), Rivers and Mountains (1966), and Sunrise in Suburbia (1968). His later works include As We Know (1979), Shadow Train (1981) And the Stars Were Shining (1994), Can You Hear, Bird (1995), and Wakefulness (1998). In 1997 the anthology The Mooring of Starting Out: The First Five Books of Poetry was published. With James Schuyler, Ashbery coauthored the novel A Nest of Ninnies (1969), a parody of suburban American life as seen through the lives of two families. He also published a collection of plays, Three Plays (1978), and his art criticism is collected in Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles, 1987 (published 1989). So Ashbery has made huge contribution to the literary society of America in particular and the world at large.

Q.9. What is Ashbery's first major work?

Some Trees is Ashbery's first major publication which displays his technical skill as well as early attempts to articulate

multiple levels of reality in flights of imagination and word play.

Q.10. How do you comment on the various dimensions of Ashbery's personality?

Despite being a poetic artist, Ashbery also has had a remarkable career as an editor, critic, translator and teacher. He writes astutely on a wide variety of subjects (music, film, literature, the visual arts, and the cultural world in general), and as an editor has shaped significant publications both in America and Europe.

Q.11. What is reaction of most critics to Ashbery's work?

Scholars and critics have found it difficult to quantify and discuss Ashbery's writing in conventional terms. This situation has led many to approach the work as almost another art form unto itself, viewed in relation to music, philosophy and the visual arts; it has provoked the development of a new type of literary criticism as well.

Q.12. What do you know about New York School of Poetry?

The New York School is a group of artists, writers, and musicians in which John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara represented poetry. Ashbery and O'Hara wrote wildly experimental poetry that derived from dada and from an embrace of Whitman's open-road aesthetic—namely a desire to keep moving and to celebrate change, instability, and chance. The resulting poems provide verbal trips through landscapes of shifting discourse with no center and no fixed voice: modes of speech alternate rapidly, high diction is mixed with street slang, and moments from different realms of experience are juxtaposed.

Q.13. What is Modernism?

The methods, style, or attitude of modern artists, writers, architects, composers, etc, especially a style of painting etc. rejecting classical and traditional methods of expression.

Q.14. What is Post-Modernism?

The word, post-modernism was first used in 1980 with disputed meaning and value because it relates to both the intellectual concepts and style. Modernism broke with the artistic traditions and conventions that had prevailed for many centuries. But in time, the experiments of modernism itself came to look familiar and even conventional and often to

endorse very traditional attitudes to society under the guise of experimental forms. Experiment, magical realism, phantasy and extreme subjectivity when combined make up Postmodernism and the poetry which involves some of these elements is called Post-modern poetry.

Q.15. What is DADA?

An international movement in art and literature about 1915-20, which repudiated conventions and reason and intended to shock.

Q.16. What is Surrealism?

A 20th-cent. movement in art and literature seeking to express the subconscious mind by various techniques including the irrational juxtaposition of images, the creation of mysterious symbols, and automatism; art or literature produced by or reminiscent of this movement.

Q.17. What are Ashbery's views on art?

According to Ashbery, to create a work of art that the critic cannot even talk about ought to be the artists chief concern.

Q.18. What are the chief merits of Ashbery as a poet?

Ashbery is an innovative poet of remarkable intelligence, humor, and originality, Ashbery is recognized as one of the leading poets of his generation. We find freshness of approach with experimental touches.

Q.19. What is John Ashbery's contribution to the American Poetry?

According to the *The New York Times,* John Ashbery's dazzling orchestrations of language open up whole areas of consciousness no other American poet has even begun to explore. His surrealistic approach to poetry, artistic skill and technique unsurpassed are the his major contribution in American poetry.

Q.20. Do you think that Ashbery is a paradoxical poet?

I live with this paradox; on the one hand, I am an important poet, read by younger writers, and on the other hand, nobody understands me. I am often asked to account for this state of affairs, but I can't.

This self-assessment by the American poet John Ashbery is fair and succinct. He is a paradoxical poet because his poems slide

through a variety of voices and styles with quick fire cuts between sensations, comments and events; sometimes the disruption of expectation is so frequent that it becomes easy for a sceptical or lazy reader to feel that the poems are nothing more than a random agglomeration of words, images, quotations and phrases.

Q.21. What is language poetry?

Language poetry is a label whose meaning may vary depending on who is defining it. He, however, lists several poets who are widely considered Language poets since they have appeared in Language anthologies published between the years 1973 and 1987, as well as critical essays and particular poetry magazines. Hartley assumes that Language poets, in their work, attempt to challenge the model of communication that the conventional poem depends on. As a result, most Language poets reject traditional forms of writing, such as the linear, autobiographical, chronological narrative, and attempt to remind us of the socially contrived basis of any writing.

Q.22. What are the major characteristics of Ashbery's poetry?

His work is characterized by originality, impressionistic elegance, dark themes of death and terror.

Q.23. How are Ashbery's poems conceived and produced?

His poems are innovative. He lets his text flow in a paragraph-length associative structures, which penetrate layer after layer deeper into anxieties, doubts, and false beliefs

Q.24. What is Ashbery's concept of poetry?

We may say that Ashbery wishes nature – the real objects, people or situations – to appear on the paper not mere words attempting to convey the images. Not just that, he even wished ideas to appear in solid visible form. It is evident that Ashbery paints accurate lifelike pictures of his subjects. As for any message or lesson, he bluntly rejects it. As a bird sings for its own pleasure so does Ashbery write to satisfy his own urge for putting his observation and experience on the paper.

Q.25. How do you think is representative of Ashbery's poetry?

The painter like Ashbery is innovator and wants to capture the vitality of life rather than the mere surface transmit beauty of the same. The painter is the most representative of Ashbery's poems and it is a key to understanding Ashbery both as and poet and artist.

Q.26. What is the most remarkable thing of the poem, The Painter?

The painter is written in a sestina form and a perfect example of craftsmanship. What makes the poem most remarkable is its felicity of expression, thematic imagery and symbolic meanings.

Q.27. What does the Sea symbolize in the Painter?

The sea in the Painter is a symbol of creativity ad the unexplored depths of human consciousness. It also resents the vitality and essence or life, which has been long ignored. The buildings and their architecture are the explored and achieved conditions of art.

Q.28. What does the Painter symbolize?

The painter symbolizes the creative and modern urge and the people in the buildings are traditional critics who fail to understand the philosophy of art.

Q.29. How does the Painter conceptualize his art?

He conceives his subject as children imagine a prayer in silence. He expects his subject similarly. He wanted the sand to catch the brush and paint the portrait without any effort on his part. The painter believes in the unconscious nature of art but the nature of his prayer is different from those of children and it is fake. The Painter also believes that the artist should be in control of his art and dictate all its terms and conditions of the creation of act.

Q.30. What kind of a poem Melodic Trains is?

Melodic Trains is a realistic presentation of town life. It is a fine blend of subjective and objective views. It is just a poem but has been presented before us in such a cinematic approach before our eyes that we feel a part of the whole train experience physically and spiritually. The poet has taken watch, travel, pipe, taxi and destinations as the raw material for the production of the poem and conveys humdrum routine of the town dwellers in many perspectives.

Q.31. What is the main theme of the poem?

Melodic Trains becomes a journey of life, the faces of passengers and what all the time is going in their minds. The poet discusses a journey of life, which sets man in relation to other men and how to behave with them. The humdrum

journey of life often ends in death, but the joy of travel lies in good behavior with other people. The poet discusses social, psychological and familial issues through this poem.

Q.32. How do you think that Melodic Trains is a social poem?

Though the poem is psychological, yet the whole poem has been cast in the social context. The poem imparts a deep philosophy of life. Life is full of restlessness, tensions and discontentment, but it is also true that most of the problems in life are caused by the insane attitude of modern man. Clouds of anxiety are scattered everywhere, at each stop. During these anxious moments, we create more trouble for other people and forget that there are also humans like us and demand our full sympathy and respect. The poet raises the issue of sympathy and its importance in every day life. Haste and race has spread panic and disorder in our mechanical life. The hurry to reach home makes life only complex rather than solve any practical issue.

Q.33. Why does the poet use the image of Tower of Pisa?

The passengers experience tensions in their journey and the winds of doubts are so strong that they bend their mind to one side of anxiety as the Tower of Pisa is bent. The chances of getting a taxi are uncertain the comparison of the waiting people with Tower of Pisa gives the stanza a metaphysical touch.

Q.34. What does Melodic Trains mean?

The poem shows melodically sounding related series of thoughts that are developing in our mind. They are called Melodic trains for they have the power to transform the minds of people from some ordinary experience to some particular. The poem is a fine example of stream of consciousness technique. The poem shows the complexity of thoughts as they pass through the sensitive mind of a poet.

Q.35. Why does the poet use the image of Chorus?

The train journey becomes a semblance to the drama in real life. As the play has acts and chorus as the character, so is the situation here. Every man and woman along with their family members act as chorus throughout all the stages of their life – tragic or comic may be. So the image of chorus is very significant in reference to the whole of poem.

Q.36. When does the modern American literature start?

Modern American literature has its beginnings since 1900, i.e. the twentieth century. The first writer generally known to be modern and from whose works, most of American literature has been produced is Mark Twain.

Q.37. Why are there so many poetic groups in America?

America is a vast country with many regions, political background and ethnic conflicts. The emergence of so many poetic groups have been caused by the variety of writers and their typical needs and also the expression of American literature which took place so late while the British Literature had lived a full of grandeur.

Q.38. What is the basic manifesto of Imagism as propounded by Ezra Pound?

The basic manifesto of the imagists was a call for a new rhythms, clear and stripped-down images, compressed poetic expression, and use of common speech.

Q.39. Write a short note on the New York School Poetry.

A group of artists, writers, and musicians in which John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara represented poetry. Ashbery and O'Hara wrote wildly experimental poetry that derived from dada and from an embrace open-road aesthetic—namely a desire to keep moving and to celebrate change, instability, and chance. The resulting poems provide verbal trips through landscapes of shifting discourse with no center and no fixed voice: modes of speech alternate rapidly, high diction is mixed with street slang, and moments from different realms of experience are juxtaposed.

Q.40. What are the major trends of Modern American Poetry?

The Major trend of American poetry are the followings:

(a) American poetry is experimental.

(b) It is confessional and highly subjective.

(c) Most of the writers have adopted imagist, surrealist and DADA approaches in their poetry.

(d) The themes of modern poetry are religious emptiness, alienation and uncertainty.

Appendix

An Interview with John Ashbery

On the Value of Criticism; on Good Working Conditions for Poetry

Gangel: How do you feel about formal criticism of your work?

Ashbery: Criticism, in general, has less and less to do with my work. I'm sometimes kind of jealous of my work. It keeps getting all the attention and I'm not. After all, I wrote it.

I really don't know what to think when I read criticism, either favorable or unfavorable. In most cases, even when its sympathetic and understanding, it's a sort of parallel adventure to the poetry. It never gives me the feeling that I'll know how to do it the next time I sit down to write, which is my principal concern.

I'm not putting down critics, but they don't help the poetry to get its work done. I don't have much use for criticism, in general, even though it's turned out I've written a lot, mostly art criticism.

Very few people have ever written a serious mixed critique of my poetry. It's either dismissed as nonsense or held up as a work of genius. Few critics have ever accepted it on its own terms and pointed out how I've succeeded at certain moments and failed at other moments at what I was setting out to do.

I will quote one of my favorite lines from Nijinsky's journal: "Criticism is death." He doesn't elaborate on that statement at all.

Gangel: You mentioned before you get inspiration from conversations overheard in the streets. Where else?

Ashbery: I'm very much of a magpie as far as reading goes. I read anything, which comes to my hand. *National Enquirer*, Dear Abby, a magazine at the dentist, a Victorian novel. I don't have a program in anything, as a matter of fact.

Someone remarked about an obscene passage in a poem. I replied that this shocked him not because it was there, but because there were not more of them.

There is an American feeling that if you do one thing, you've got to do that and nothing else. It goes against my grain.

Poetry includes anything and everything.

Gangel: Do you find it easy to relate to people?

Ashbery: Yes I do. I am a very gregarious person. This often surprises people, because my poetry does have a reputation for being aloof and antihuman. But I'm quite the reverse. I enjoy talking with just about anybody. My students, for instance. We get along very well socially. I don't believe in closing myself off from anybody or anything.

My best writing gets done when I'm being distracted by people who are calling me or errands that I have to do. Those things seem to help the creative process, in my case.

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