

**The Impact of John  
Ashbery's(1927- )  
Beliefs on his Poetic  
Technique**

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John Ashbery has been the most outstanding poet of the United States for more than fifty years now. He wrote twenty books of poetry for which he won several literary awards. Though all credit goes to John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch for forming the New York School of poetry, John Ashbery has doubted the practical existence of such a school.

The concern of this paper is to study the impact of the beliefs of John Ashbery on his own poetic technique which was considered uncommon particularly in the fifties of the last century.

In the... fifties, there was little like  
Ashbery's poetry to be found...[It is  
characterized by] its precocity and surreal wit.<sup>(1)</sup>

It was notable then that realism, empiricism and rationalism characterized this decade. The poets of the fifties reacted against the poetry of the twenties, which tended to be difficult, allusive and experimental. They also rebelled against the political romanticism of the thirties and the surrealism of the forties.

Yet, Ashbery has got a different attitude. Asked about the difficulty the reader finds while reading his poems Ashbery says,

I think difficult is often used interchangeably with 'complex' or 'complicated'.... I think poetry has to be complicated if it's going to reflect the world and what the poet wants to say.<sup>(2)</sup>

This reminds us of Eliot's famous statement in this respect in the early twenties:

Poets in our civilization...must  
be difficult.<sup>(3)</sup>

The aspects of this difficulty can be seen in his special use of pronouns, discontinuity of ideas and sense, literary allusions and unrelated images.

In his poem 'Some money' one finds no logical arguments or facts about money:

I said I am awkward.  
I said we make fools of our lives  
For a little money and a coat.  
Why have all the windows darkened?<sup>(4)</sup>

Here one finds that money acts like a bad tool in life; it darkens and damages life. This is followed by an ambiguous image, which has no connection with the previous one.

The laurel burdened its image into the sky like smoke?<sup>(5)</sup>

Laurel stands for success; yet here it burns itself "into the sky like smoke". So there is no relationship between what he portrays and real life.<sup>(6)</sup>

In the next stanza, the poet says,

No pen mightier than this said the object  
 As though to ward off a step  
 To kiss my sweetheart in the narrow ally  
 Before it was wartime and the cold ended  
 On that note.<sup>(7)</sup>

In these lines, one sees a lover kissing his sweetheart in his alley before wartime. Yet such a scene ends with an ambiguous note:

The cold ended on that note.

The reader can never suggest what note he is referring to or what special note that the cold woul' end on. This may state his desire to create in his poetry some sort of puzzlement or mazes. In one of Ashbery's critical notes one reads

It was fun... trying to puzzle it all out,  
 like mazes and mysteries.<sup>(8)</sup>

In 'Insane Decision', one finds another example of obscurity. After talking about the things he is interested in such as lakes and paintings, the poet goes back to puzzles and mazes:

In the night it slipped its mooring.  
 By daybreak they were gone  
 All I did was let the kettle boil.  
 The familiar silhouette  
 Kept me from thinking about it.<sup>(9)</sup>

If we could accept the first two lines as a metaphor which might stand for something that is not in the

own.<sup>(10)</sup> No explanation could be given for the silhouette, which is familiar. Does the silhouette stand for the vapour that comes out of water while boiling? Even if the vapour or boiling water makes a shadow, stranger still is that the "silhouette kept him from thinking about it". "It" here is also ambiguous.

'Litany' is a poem of seventy pages; each page is divided into two columns. The difficulty of this poem lies in the way the reader should follow when reading it. For each column sometimes seems to be independent. At other times one thinks that the thread of meaning can be followed in the opposite (facing) column. Reading down the columns on the left ignoring the right ones one feels that something is missing or that the meaning is not complete.

The last rains fed

Into the newly opened canal.<sup>(11)</sup>

This is a stanza of two lines on page four, which describes the falling of rain on "the newly opened canal". This description of such a landscape can be followed in the opposite stanza in the second column rather than the successive one.

The fences are barrel staves

Surrounding, encroaching on

The pattern of the city,

The formula that once made sense to

A few of us until it became

The end.<sup>(12)</sup>

The same note can be seen in the first column on page six. The poet thinks of a way through which he could recall the past:

If I could plan how  
To remember what had indeed once  
Been there.<sup>(13)</sup>

Then one finds a result of such a recall in the opposite stanza in the second column:

How quickly the years pass  
To next year's sun  
In the mountain family.<sup>(14)</sup>

At other times one reads many columns which seem to have no relation with the opposite ones. Commenting on the poem John Keeling gives the same note.

At times the columns seems to come  
together, at times seem to stay distinct.<sup>(15)</sup>

In fact, no coherence or logical progress could be noticed between the columns of the poem. In a conversation with Peter Stitt, the poet himself admits this and adds that the reason behind this technique is his belief that our life is empty, meaningless and has no definite dimensions.

The poem is of immense length and there  
is a lack of coherence between [its] parts. ...  
this would somehow exemplify the  
emptiness of life or at any rate, its  
dimensionless quality.<sup>(16)</sup>

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Another example of the discontinuity and lack of coherence in Ashbery's poetry can be found in his long poem 'Flow Chart'. It is a poem of six sections. Yet one never notes a definite theme or meaningful beginning or logical end. There are many beginnings and unrelated sections. One of the sections of the poem (which seems to be independent) is about the poet's past days when he was a student. He recalls his university library and the reading room where he had to pass hours doing papers.

Sometimes an important fact would come to light  
 Only to reveal itself as someone else's discovery  
 While I felt my brain getting chafed  
 As everything in the reading room took on an unreal,  
 Somber aspect.<sup>(17)</sup>

Another seemingly independent section deals with Reagan's policy and his political attitudes:

Each year the summer dwindles noticeably, but the Reagan  
 Administration insists we can not go to heaven without  
 Drinking caustic soda on the floor  
 Of Death valley.<sup>(18)</sup>

In 'The Other Tradition', we have many images, which can never lead to a meaningful idea or opinion.

They all came, some wore sentiments  
 Emblazoned on T-shirts, proclaiming the lateness  
 Of the hour....<sup>(19)</sup>

One can not know who are those people or what they are late for. More obscure are the following lines where

those people gather for no specific reason. They repeat a name and get ready for a meeting.

... More chairs

Were brought and lamps were lit, but it tells

Nothing of how all this proceeded to materialize

....and the people waiting outside and in the next

Street, repeating its name over and over...

.....

And the meeting was called to order.<sup>(20)</sup>

Commenting on the poem, Marjorie Perloff says that he can not define what specific occasion or event Ashbery refers to here.

Perhaps the 'event' is an Encounter Group session?

A religious retreat? A stay in sanatorium or mental

hospital ?<sup>(21)</sup>

As for the meeting that is about to be held, Marjorie Perloff suggests that it could be a political meeting or just a social gathering.

Reading 'At Lotus Lodge' which is some sort of an episode or a vision from the poet's past, one finds just fragments, i.e., one hears unconnected parts of conversation and sees unrelated images. This is why we have neither a clear vision nor a complete story.

... You arrived late last night.

And we are right, at such moments, not to worry about the demands.

They are like trees planted on a slope, too preoccupied

---

With the space dividing them to notice this singular tale of the past  
 And the thousand stories just like it, until one spills over  
 Into dreams and they can point to it and say, "that's a dream".<sup>(22)</sup>

I stress again the point that the poet's belief in the meaninglessness of life events has inspired his technique of unrelated ideas, disconnected phrases and images. Ashbery supports this point of view saying:

I never thought of myself as having a relationship  
 to confusion; every moment is surrounded by a  
 lot of things in life that do not add up to anything  
 that makes sense and these are part of a situation  
 that I feel I' m trying to deal with when I' m writing...  
 I begin with unrelated phrases and notations that later  
 on I hope get resolved in the course of the poem....<sup>(23)</sup>

In Ashbery's poem 'He', one again sees disconnected images, scenes and actions.

He knows that his neck is frozen  
 He snorts in the vale of dim wolves.  
 He is the liar behind the hedge  
 He grew one morning out of candor  
 He hears the weak cut down with a smile  
 He waltzes tragically on the spitting housetops.<sup>(24)</sup>

It begins with "his neck that is frozen", then his snorting "in the vale of dim wolves" then visiting the island, then being the liar behind the hedge, hearing "the weak cut down with a smile, then waltzing on the spitting house tops." Commenting on the poem, Charles Molesworth says that Ashbery's imagery is



Arbitrary, coy, disaffected, smart.<sup>(25)</sup>

Then he gives the same note referred to in the beginning of this paper concerning the relationship between Ashbery's beliefs and his poetic technique.

The arbitrary continuation of the poem lies at the centre of Ashbery's aesthetic, which seems a flirtation with nihilism, the fag end of an autotelic art that apotheosizes symbolism's elevation of style over content.<sup>(26)</sup>

It is also notable that sometimes one can find some sort of link between Ashbery's verse lines. Yet no complete idea or imagery can be followed or detected.

Ashbery's poetry sidles up to and slips away from meaning, as each line [may] link to the one before and after it, but the overall context remains vague and elliptical.<sup>(27)</sup>

Coming to literary allusions one recalls Eliot's in the twenties and his statement that every poem must include all the previous poems. This adds to the difficulty of understanding poetry. Yet Eliot's purpose might have been a desire to impress his readers

with a vast range of esoteric knowledge.<sup>(28)</sup>

As for Ashbery one sees a use of literary allusions different from Eliot's in the sense that Ashbery uses it to give a different treatment and unusual technical aspect of the subject in the original text.

In Ashbery's 'Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror' one finds an allusion to Parmigianino's drawing which bears

the same title. Yet the difference lies in his reconsideration of the attitude towards art.

Commenting on both works, Richard Stamelman says that where as Parmigianino's work shows that art can represent the world in which we live and the inner feelings of the self,

Ashbery's critical revision of the painting reveals what is a stilled and detemporalized scene of reflection.<sup>(29)</sup>

Ashbery believes that art can not embody any of the realities of life.

The hand holds no chalk  
And each part of the whole falls off  
And can not know it knew, except  
Here and there, in cold pockets  
Of remembrance, whispers out of time.<sup>(30)</sup>

Life keeps changing; so what is real about it is its everlasting change. Consequently Art, here, which is represented by Parmigianino's painting fails to reflect reality.

It is the immobility of the Parmigianino painting, its changeless and unmoving reality that Ashbery questions.<sup>(31)</sup>

An allusion to Eliot's 'The Waste Land' is found in Ashbery's poem 'A Day at the gate' which deals with a patient in one of the medical centres who is frightened while waiting to know about his own medical chart.

Believe you me it was a situation  
 Aladdin's lamp might have ameliorated. And where was I?  
 Among ..... magazines, recycled fish,  
 Waiting for the wear and tear  
 To show up on my chart. Good luck.<sup>(32)</sup>

The chart that tells about his state and the serious situation which the poet finds himself in, alludes, yet in a parodic form, to what happens in the first part of 'The Waste Land'.<sup>(33)</sup> In such a part Madame Sosostris, the fortune-teller, felt afraid of being arrested by the police while holding her horoscope waiting her clients to tell them about their future.

I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring  
 Thank you. If you see dear Mrs. Equitone  
 Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:  
 One must be so careful these days.<sup>(34)</sup>

It is interesting to know about another aspect of Ashbery's poetry denoting difficulty and complexity; it is his own use of pronouns.

The pronouns, as always in Ashbery's [poetry], create confusion for readers who look for logic and continuity.<sup>(35)</sup>

In 'The Recent Past' Ashbery doubles the self in order to make the reader 'you' a mirror of himself.

You were my quintuplets when I decided to leave you  
 Opening a picture book the pictures were all of grass  
 Slowly the book was on fire, you the reader  
 Sitting with specs full of smoke.<sup>(36)</sup>

These lines may refer to the idea that the poet represents the reader, or that the reader is a mirror of the poet.

The same idea is repeated in 'A Blessing in Disguise' which also states Ashbery's confusion about the singularity and the multiplicity of the 'You' or the reader he is writing to:

And I sing amid despair and isolation  
 Of the chance to know you, to sing of me  
 Which are you. You see,  
 You hold me up to the light in a way  
 I should never have expected or suspected, perhaps  
 Because you always tell me I am you....  
 I prefer 'you' in the plural, I want 'you'  
 You must come to me, all golden and pale  
 Like the dew and the air  
 And then I start getting this feeling of exaltation.<sup>(37)</sup>

Certain critics comment on Ashbery's use of the pronoun 'it' which might refer to different possible things.

The problematic of the subject is encoded in the multiple usage of 'it'....For Ashbery the subject is the indefinite antecedent behind the impersonal pronoun 'it'.<sup>(38)</sup>

This is clear in Ashbery's poem 'Drunken Americans' where he says,

I saw the reflection in the mirror  
 And it does not count.....  
 To make a difference...

.....  
 .....What if you can't own  
 This one either? For it seems that all  
 Moments are like this; .....  
 And take it home with you.....<sup>(39)</sup>

First of all, one can not define what reflection he refers to. Is it his image or something else beside him. Then what is 'it' that does not count 'to make a difference out ...of the light of a college town'. In the fourth stanza 'it' refers to the canvas which he cuts out of its frame to take home.

Discussing Ashbery's 'Indefinite You', Bonnie Costello says in his essay 'Ashbery and the idea of the reader' that 'you' in Ashbery's poetry does not refer to a specific person. 'You' could be

a reimagined self, an erotic partner, a syntactic counterword ... its importance lies in its ambiguity.<sup>(40)</sup>

Ashbery has a personal reason behind his ambiguous use of 'you':

I guess I do not have a very strong sense of my own identity and I find it very easy to move from one person in the sense of a pronoun to another and this again helps to produce a kind of polyphony.<sup>(41)</sup>

On another occasion Ashbery shows that his way of using the pronouns is due to a technique of his own. He explains,

The personal pronouns in my work very often seem to be like the variables in an equation. 'You' can be myself

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or it can be another person, someone whom I'm  
addressing and so can 'he' and 'she' for that matter and  
'we'.<sup>(42)</sup>

Examining the shifts in pronouns in Ashbery's  
poetry, John Vincent argues,

They bring pleasure and fun with their irreverence  
surprise and sentimental identification in their breakage.<sup>(43)</sup>

For this is a break from what is usual concerning the  
order of gender or number. 'I' may change into 'we',  
people or audience; readers can be transformed into  
'he' or 'she'.

Another example can be taken from 'The Grapevine'  
where pronouns change and result in a state of  
ambiguity:

Of who we and all they are  
You all now know. But you know  
After they began to find us out. We grew  
Before they died thinking us the causes

Of their acts. Now we'll not know  
The truth of some still at the piano, though  
They often date from us, causing  
These changes we think we are. ....<sup>(44)</sup>

Here we can not be sure of the doer of the action, or  
who knew the truth, or where danger was; is the doer  
'we' or 'they' or 'you'? Can 'you' represent the reader  
and the listener? Does 'you' include 'we'? or that they  
are different.

Another point that needs consideration is the relation between what has been known about his sexuality – his being a registered homosexual – and his use of the masculine pronoun. John Vincent stresses the idea that such a pronoun could be a referent to

a friend, a lover or the poet himself and when examining  
him as a love poet, critics make sure to consider the  
beloved as male.<sup>(45)</sup>

Critics suggest diverse referents to ‘we’ and ‘they’ in the *Grapevine*. They see that ‘we’ refers to the homosexuals of whom the poet is one and ‘they’ points to (represents) those who hate them or who try to issue laws against them.

In *‘Soonest Mended’* the pronoun ‘we’ which is mostly supposed to refer to a man and his lover sometimes changes to be a referent to a larger group of people at several points of the poem.

Barely tolerated, living on the margin  
In our technological society, we were always having  
to be rescued  
on the brink of destruction, like heroines in *Orlando Furioso*  
Before it was time to start all over again.

.....  
And then there always came a time when  
Happy Hooligan in his rusted green automobile  
Came plowing down the course, just to make sure  
everything was O. K.

About how to receive this latest piece of information.<sup>(46)</sup>

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In 'As we know' one finds that the pronoun 'it' refers to different things.

All that we see is penetrated by it –  
 The distant treetops with their steeple (so  
 Innocent), the stair, the windows' fixed flashing –  
 Pierced full of holes by the evil that is not evil.  
 The romance that is not mysterious. ....<sup>(47)</sup>

'It' refers to gay sex.

.... You rub elbows with it.  
 .... That day you did it  
 was the day you had to stop, because the doing  
 involved the whole fabric, there was no other way to appear<sup>(48)</sup>

The first 'it' here may refer to man's sexual organ while the second one may point to practising gay sex, which is not accepted in moral society.

Reconsidering the poet's use of 'it', John Vincent says,

The list locating the 'it' – 'the evil that is not evil' specifies homosexuality in religious discourse; 'the romance that is not mysterious' respecifies it in relation to heteronomous courtship.<sup>(49)</sup>

In this respect Ashbery says that the reason behind his use of shifting pronouns (they, you, I) in some poems is his belief that

We are somehow all aspects of a consciousness  
 giving rise to the poem and the fact of addressing  
 someone, myself or someone else, is what's



important thing at that particular moment rather  
than the particular person involved.<sup>(50)</sup>

Thus he claims that the poet sometimes participates in the event and at other times he just recounts the experience.

He views the incidents recorded from outside and inside,  
from the vantage point of the past as well as the present  
and projected future.<sup>(51)</sup>

In his poem 'The Other Tradition', Ashbery reflects man's unawareness and inability to understand what is happening in our world.

.....I still remember  
How they found you after a dream in your thimble hat  
Studious as a butterfly in parking lot.<sup>(52)</sup>

The poet here seems to be addressing himself; he shifts between 'I' and 'you' to make some sort of distance to express his views freely.<sup>(53)</sup> 'You' also may be a friend or a lover. 'I' and 'you' could be a part of 'they'. In other words, Ashbery moves among them – the previous pronouns – to create distance. It might be added that 'you' is an unspecified noun in the sense that it could be an imagined self, a partner, or a lover.

'You' could also represent all of these functions in one poem. The reader's inability to define what 'you' represents creates interest and fun. More interesting is to find different (referents) identifications of the pronoun 'you' which could fit the situation in the text. Bonnie Costello adds that the readers could also participate in the situation.

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Accepting the fruitful ambiguity of the second person pronoun, we find that Ashbery's poetry is not only fictively addressed to another but actually addressed to us, that at least one very concrete reification of 'you' is an actual reader.<sup>(54)</sup>

In sum, Ashbery's beliefs and attitude to life have an impact on his poetic technique, which is considered a break from the normal in the fifties. Ashbery is a nihilist who sees life as meaningless.

Where are you when you have gone through these and arrived nowhere? How do you feel when you are not sure what, if anything, you feel? What seems worth doing when you have no ground or motive for doing anything?<sup>(55)</sup>

Commenting on the unrelated ideas, disconnected phrases and images in his poetry, Ashbery says that this is due to his belief that life events and happenings do not make sense. Therefore, he believes that poetry should be a reflection of our incomprehensible and futile life. As a result, one finds that his poems are full of ambiguous words and phrases; they look like mazes and puzzles that are hard to decode.

What adds to the difficulty of his poems is that one finds many possible meanings of a verse line, a phrase and even a word; consequently one can not settle on any of them.<sup>(56)</sup>

The poet's use of shift pronouns, which confuses the reader, is due to two reasons. The first reason is his

feeling that he has no strong sense of his own identity. The second one is his belief that shifty pronouns create interest and pleasure for the reader; since vagueness, ambiguity and the ingenuity of his poems internal structure were his major interest; more than 'meaning'.

## Notes

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