

## **John Ashbery's Poetry: A Postmodern approach**

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**Abstract:** Postmodernism has had its influences on different literary genres such as fiction, drama, and poetry. Truly, fiction has been the center of attention in many critical studies. But the manifestations of the movement can also be traced in poetry. John Ashbery is one of the contemporary poets whose poetry is best regarded as the postmodernist poetry. His works have been characterized by a free-moving and disjunctive syntax, experiments with linguistic elements, integrated humor and prosaic features. In his poems, the human mind and its workings are evident. He experimented radically with different elements of poetry such as linguistic and semantic aspects. Nowadays he appears to have been to the second half of twentieth century what Eliot was to the first: the most universally acknowledged of poets writing in English. The present essay elaborates on Ashbery looking back at poetic tradition while absorbing current techniques of combining present and past, centrality and marginality, and placing reader and writer side by side.

**Key Words:** Postmodernism, poetry, John Ashbery, experimentation, centrality, Marginality

Ashbery ranks among the excellent postmodernist poets. His creative record of publication, beginning in 1956 and including twenty volumes of poetry, strongly corresponds with the arrival, rise, and climax of the postmodernist mode in North America. In addition, the moves in that long poetic occupation seem to parallel, when they do not actually predict, shifts in postmodernism across a range of cultural practices. Ashbery's early poetry, peaking in *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), shows the first stage of postmodernism. Ashbery as an avant-garde writer and a key member of the so-called 'New York School' of poetry occupy a controversial status in American poetry. Once he was a part of a marginalized opposition to the central poetic mode, and later turned into one of the most respected contemporary American poets, and he has influenced many other writers. His poetry is often felt to be meaningless. John Ashbery's works successfully display the poets' approaches to contemporary literature. A postmodern approach is mainly exemplified in Ashbery's poetry he has reworked past ideas and traditions of the former modernist period, resulting in his contemporary styles of writing that he is famous for. He is historically attributed to the early appearance of postmodernism with the introduction of the New York School of Poets. Ashbery has borrowed from much of modern theory, often challenge these ideals, such as the rejection of subjectivity for an objective poetic voice.

Professor Jeffrey T. Nealon in his analysis of postmodern literature, states, 'Postmodern text destroys the language of the past to allow others to feed on its innovations and further open up the system to the possibility of thinking differently.' In fact modernist works of art and literature put emphasis to a subjective approach that demonstrates deeper meanings; a new postmodernist approach saw a contradicting method that was both objective and disloyal of the formerly established and traditional conventions.

However, the postmodern movement demonstrated that it borrowed elements from modernism. For example, when an objective view was introduced in literature, it should be noted that this development could not have occurred without the influence of subjectivity as explored throughout the modernist period. This suggests that the existence of postmodernism lies in its ability to 'work within the framework of the past,' but by doing so, 'it must use the same language and acknowledge its tradition as representation.' Consequently, it can be argued that postmodernism is basically a representation of the old ideas demonstrated during the modernist period.

John Ashbery employs the form of the dramatic monologue in his poem, Ashbery's poem is much like one continuous stream of thought with primarily long and complex lines. In order to lighten the tone of the poem 'to escape the solemnity of the time, Ashbery noticed a need to 'embrace popular culture.' He achieved this through his use of the 'pop-cultural' character, Daffy Duck. This decision effectively enabled him to undertake the subject of historical and social change, but in an exclusively comedic manner.

The first line of *Daffy Duck in Hollywood* illustrates Ashbery's 'ability to be simultaneously silly and suggestive' when the narrative voice of Daffy Duck reveals, 'Something strange is creeping across me' (1). This dramatic opening line immediately engages the reader and draws them in with such poetic force, encouraging them to continue reading. However, lines such as 'He promised he'd get me out of this one, / That mean old cartoonist!' (10-11) remind the reader that when reading Ashbery's work, one must take him 'both seriously and ironically at once.'

Ashbery's *Late Echo* represents the idea of a ambiguous title. *Laughing Gravy* is another title that provides no insight into the central theme of the poem, and appears to perhaps have no relation to the poem at all. A poem usually helps the reader to understand the title, it means usually summarizes the poem and reveal the poet's intentions in using this particular title. Of course, there is no such thing as a late echo, for as an echo is a repetition of a sound, it is essentially already late. *Late Echo*, which in fact, does not appear to display a key theme, nor does it reflect a particular thought. Some of Ashbery's poetry for example *Late Echo* illustrates the concept of referential uncertainty. Paul Hoover's in his introduction summarize the whole of postmodern poetry by listing its common and important issues he states:

"Postmodernism decenters authority and embraces pluralism. It encourages a 'panoptic' or many-sided point of view. Postmodernism prefers 'empty words' to the 'transcendental signified,' the actual to the metaphysical. In general, it follows a constructionist rather than an expressionist theory of composition. Method and intuition replace intention."

The readers see the repetition of words or sounds throughout the poem, but this idea does not hold any truth. Ashbery's opening lines, 'Alone with our madness and favourite flower / We see that there is nothing left to write about' (1-2) also characterize referential uncertainty, for the reader, are left thinking whose 'madness' (1) is being referred to here. Ashbery employs disorderly and unpredictable number of lines in his stanzas for example in *Laughing Gravy* which emphasizes the postmodern idea that poetry should not submit to any rules, but should undermine the concept of order. While the first stanza has three lines, the second has four, and the third and final one features just two lines. The poem presents itself as a stream of consciousness with apparently casual thoughts spread together to form a poem. To from the insight, 'All these people coming in...' (4) to the next immediate thought, 'The last time we necked / I noticed this lobe on your ear' (5-6), only highlights that the piece is contemporary. The uncertainty of the poet's thoughts constructs the narrative of *Laughing Gravy* and support the postmodern approach in its rejection to stick to specific or deeper meaning/interpretations.

The use of parody, another poetic device, creates a satirical sense of foreboding early on in the first stanza when 'the air sang Johnny, / Remember Me' (7-8). The lyrics to this love song demonstrate a comic warning to the reader of the tragedy that will occur in the seventh stanza: the woman's death. This reference to popular culture and the title of a pop song from the 1960s more illustrates the increasing regularity of popular culture in contemporary writing, which effectively combined high culture with popular culture, influencing and creating an updated pop culture.

When Ashbery's publishing career began in the 1950s, his poetry was marginalized. At the beginning of the 1960s, a poem was generally expected to appear "self-contained, coherent, and unified: that it present, indirectly to be sure, a paradox, oblique truth, or special insight", and in such a poem the speaker had to be someone separate from the author, but still a particular "persona" (Perloff 1996: 107). The separation of the author and the speaker, in particular, is a New Critical principle. Many Poets were famous practitioners of this style of writing that was connected to Modernism in "economy, wit, irony, impersonality, scrupulous handling of form", but hardly made use of such characteristics as "extreme ellipsis, fragmentation, and discontinuity" Ashbery's work was characterized by avant-gardism and experimentation from the beginning. This was the atmosphere in which such works as *Some Trees* (1956) and *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) were written, and the early work also established Ashbery's reputation as a 'difficult' poet.

The late 1950s also saw the rise of another mode of poetry which took its motivation from the New Critical rule of separating the speaker and the poet. This mode has been termed 'confessional' poetry, which has its premise the poet's direct speech and naturalness of emotions. The convention is that the poet is the speaker. The poet becomes, in Breslin's words, "a representative victim" who reflects on his or her self and predominantly negative feelings and experiences, and the reader's role is to empathize and to begin a reflection of his or her own experience (Breslin 1987: 42-43). A confessional poem is, then, meaningful in terms of one person's self, past and present, and the poem ultimately aims at revealing something about this one person.

Breslin (1987: 218) states, Ashbery's poetry resists the "earnestness about 'experience'" that succeeds in most of the poetry up until the 1980s, which partly explains why Ashbery's work became so highly praised at the time. This is also related to the confessional poetry of the 1960s, which was discussed earlier. While confessional poetry was partly a reaction to the New Critical mode of reading, it soon became established, and as Terrell Scott Herring (2002: 415) comments, it "exemplified the irony and paradox structuring the ideal New Critical poem" because the relationship between "public and private" was so clearly an issue. Therefore, confessional poetry provided good material for New Critical study (Herring 2002: 415). The practice was, then, ultimately close to New Criticism, even though a confessional poem might have been more open in terms of structure than earlier New Critical poems. Both of these poetic tendencies emphasize the centrality of the single voice and one identity or person whose presence provides the meaning of the insights or emotions presented in the poem. One feature of Language poetry is the challenge their work present to the idea of a unified voice and how that relates to Ashbery, but the centrality of experimentation for their poetics is useful to remember, as one approaches their work. Confessional poetry reduces in importance after that decade, but the centrality of "earnestness" goes beyond it. A poem like 'Litany', on the other

hand, foregrounds the nature of the self as a pronominal position, as a linguistically created starting point, rather than attempting to posit an illusion of a sincere subjective presence, and forces readers to consider the judgments they make on the basis of the pronouns for example about who is speaking and about the attitudes and tones of an utterance. The experiences and statements that are presented are thus placed not as essentially authentic and 'earnest', but rather as examinations of how such experiences and points of view are expressed.

Subjectivity is related to how ideas originate from a certain perspective or a mind that provides their organization and meaning. Identity and personality, on the other hand, are the property of 'person'. An identity entails characteristics that distinguish the person from all other persons. Personality and identity can be related to 'characters' in a literary text, whereas subjectivity can simply be understood as a "vantage point". In any case, pronominal relations like the centrality of the *I* in a poem encourage readers to perceive poems as the expression of a single speaker or subjectivity.

Ashbery's poetry bears a relation to postmodernism because of the fragmentariness and the spreading of a unified subject. In postmodernist literature, single identities and particular personalities are no longer understood to be central, as Charles Russell sees, because "individual subjects, voices, texts, or codes" always function within "collective discourse" and larger societal structures (Russell 1985: 246-247). According to Russell (1985: 247) in postmodernism "we are found to be constructs of discrete elements of social discourse". The languages and discourses that we use are central rather than individual personality, as the language that a person speaks is finally what defines him/her.

Ashbery's poetry has always concerned with the chance of multiple voices and the spreading of a subjective position. However, because there is in most poems and *I*, his poems may come out subjective or private. Ashbery is often called a 'solipsist', and his texts are repeatedly described as 'meditations' on or around vague subjects. For example Harold Bloom ([1982] 1983: 271-273) says that Ashbery's poetry is essentially concerned with "solitude". All in all, there are multiple meanings, polyphony of voices, and the poems also take the reader's position into account.

In order to understand a "vantage point" for a poem, several related concepts can be found: voice and speaker, self, subject and subjectivity, identity and personality. The reader try to create a voice or a speaker that brings together the totality of the text and charges the language with his or her presence and meaning, thus it serves as a point of reference. As observed in relation to 'No Way of Knowing', normally upon encountering the pronoun *I* in a poem, one would expect to be able to create a regular voice that is obvious in the pronoun, but Ashbery's poetry presents a challenge to this expectation. His own, oft-cited account of his use of pronouns that he presented in an interview with the *New York Quarterly* is revealing:

The personal pronouns in my work very often seem to be like variables in an equation. "You" can be myself or it can be another person, someone whom I'm addressing, and so can "he" and "she" for that matter and "we;"... 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 the important thing at that particular moment rather than the particular person involved. I guess I don't 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 in my poetry which I again feel is a means toward greater naturalism. (Ashbery in Packard (ed.) 1987: 89-90; my ellipsis)

Ashbery's poems present steady interaction between unclearly defined and vague positions they are mostly clear only through pronouns. Usually the poems include the pronoun *I*, which marks a speaker, but a continuous presence or a persona is difficult to identify on the level of the whole text. Both the *I* and *you* are unclear and changing. 'Person' in Ashbery's poems is evident only in fragments of different discourses and present only in "the fact of addressing someone". Address is, then, also important for Ashbery's polyphony.

*The Tennis Court Oath* has sometimes been rejected by critics as a point in Ashbery's career where he is merely experimenting while trying to develop a more "mature" style. Mona van Duyn wrote that the "state of continuous expectation, a continuous frustration of expectation" that the poems create does not really even correspond to her understanding of the kinds of effects poetry should offer (van Duyn 1962: 394). While this is also a matter of personal taste, van Duyn's comment illustrates a unwillingness to even consider what this different conception of poetry requires, and confirms to how a certain conception of poetry may prevail in the mind of one person or a group of people. It is, then, easy to understand why in the beginning of his career Ashbery was a marginal poet.

In conclusion, the works of John Ashbery successfully demonstrate the poets' approaches to contemporary literature. He employs past ideas and traditions of the previous modernist period, the result is his contemporary styles of writing that he is famous for. He employs postmodern approach on his poetries. In fact, Ashbery has borrowed from much of modern theory, often challenges these ideals, such as the rejection of subjectivity for an objective poetic voice.

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