

Research Article

Contemplations on the Self: A Critical Study of the Selected Poems of John Ashbery

K. Govindaraj¹, R. Suresh Kumar²

¹Department of English, Annamalai University, Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu, India, ²English Wing, DDE, Annamalai University, Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu, India



ABSTRACT

Ashbery attempts to locate his writing beyond ideology, beyond the desires of one who would not pave the way for conflict with the desires of the rest. While a sizeable majority of intellectuals of Ashbery's generation have moved away from any lingering dreams of social and political consensus forged in the 1950s, Ashbery's language determinedly undoes the unitary systems of belief. He avoids the iron reference of particular ideologies by challenging the assumption that human experience can be intelligently ordered within definable systems. Stevens believes that it is our human rage for order that demands us to organize the chaos of experience. He says that, in the work of art, every man introduces his own order into the life about him, and order can be supplied only by the creative intelligence, the imagination, of the artist. In metaphors, fables, and meditative commentary, the artist dramatizes and reflects on the act of mind ordering the reality. Thus the poem is but a "supreme fiction", a totally structured reality. He, however, presents a different attitude toward writing; he writes poetry not or organize but to illustrate the arbitrary, unpredictable, and uncertain nature of the world. When travelling into the world Ashbery has created, one feels lost in the middle of a world Ashbery has created, one feels lost in the middle of a world with isolated details but no connected landscape, a world that cannot be comprehended or organized.

Address for correspondence:

K. Govindaraj,
Department of English,
Annamalai University,
Chidambaram, India.
E-mail: kgovondaraj@gmail.com

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John Ashbery can rightly be pronounced as one of the most influential Anglo-American poets of the 20th century. Brian McHale in "How (Not) to Read Postmodernist Long Poems: The Case of Ashbery's "The Skaters," has remarked that Ashbery can be considered as the Eliot of the second half of the 20th century because of his determining influence and the parallel of his career to the "onset, rise, and climax of the postmodernist mode in North America" (562). Whether this is because Ashbery has been always very intimately bonded to the spirit of the times or whether his influence in several aspects actually sparked the trends later to interpret the writing of more than one generation could be the subject of ceaseless discussion.

Like his contemporaries, Ashbery attempts to locate his writing beyond ideology, beyond the desires of one who would not pave the way for conflict with the desires of the rest. While a sizeable majority of intellectuals of Ashbery's generation have moved away from any lingering dreams of social and political consensus forged in the 1950s, Ashbery's language determinedly undoes the unitary systems of belief. He avoids the iron reference of particular ideologies by challenging the assumption that human experience can be intelligibly ordered within definable systems.

His poems are, in specific, pronounced to exhibit how the esthetic climate has changed once the consensus started to deteriorate. The belief in the possibility of radical change is persisted and contained within a harsher, more caustic style of poetry, in that he has exploited a style that seriously transforms and questions the nature of interpretative systems in general. He has been apprehensive of the pleasures of system and method, the old fascination with the structure as a totaling order of thought. New Critics infer that people conduct their affairs in a methodical fashion and that a poet's task is to affirm the order behind human behavior as a binding system of understanding.

Thus, writing, to him, is to venture into regions as yet uncharted and unpredictable and needs a rigorous effort to dismantle what has been established. Freedom can only come by means of transcendence, beyond the reach of a stable, self-authenticating system of knowledge. For this reason, he skilfully eliminates the elements of metaphor and other figurative devices, the mediating systems of language. Rather than base his poem on logic, he appears to be basing it on illogic, attempting to bring back the disruptive effects of language which have been largely ignored and suppressed by New Criticism. The elements of rhetorical play, which is present everywhere in his poems, are fundamentally used to subvert logic rather than to support it.

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His subject matter is similar to that of his favorite poet, Wallace Stevens. Both poets take for granted that reality is fragmentary and always remains disorderly. However, Stevens believes that it is our human rage for order that demands us to organize the chaos of experience. He says that, in the work of art, every man introduces his own order into the life about him, and order can be supplied only by the creative intelligence, the imagination, of the artist. In metaphors, fables, and meditative commentary, the artist dramatizes and reflects on the act of mind ordering the reality. Thus, the poem is but a "supreme fiction," a totally structured reality. He, however, presents a different attitude toward writing; he writes poetry not to organize but to illustrate the arbitrary, unpredictable, and uncertain nature of the world. When traveling into the world Ashbery has created, one feels lost in the middle of a world with isolated details but no connected landscape, a world that cannot be comprehended or organized.

Although he agrees with Stevens about the inherent uncertainty of reality, he strongly doubts that poetry has such a miraculous power to make order where there is no order. He instead dwells on the impossibility of imagining or constructing any reality. We may attempt to reproduce reality, but since it is always in motion, always forming and reforming itself, we can never produce reality as it is. Thus, the reality reproduced in an artwork remains always disordered, rough, unpredictable, but yet fascinating and esthetically captivating.

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 ("The Painter" 1-6).

The picture that the artist paints of reality is the picture that reality itself would paint. The sea would paint its own portrait just by throwing itself onto the canvas. Even if the painter is working hard to create his own version of reality, his envisioning of reality is always provisional; it even transforms itself and disappears in the very process of being proposed. As a result, he dips his brush not into his paints but into the sea, hoping that the disordered reality would express itself directly on his canvas: "As if, forgetting itself, the portrait/had expressed itself without a brush" ("The Painter" 19-20).

What he is most concerned with is not his artistic control over reality but his artistic (re)presentation of the uncontrollable reality. Therefore, the painting must be done without any interruption of the painter's rational mind. The painter is simply a medium through which reality would express itself. One often feels that the presiding consciousness of Ashbery's poems is transparent, or merely a neutral conduit of impressions. He just attempts to reflect or mirror the disordered reality as registered by the mind; he himself has said, "I'm trying to set down a generalized transcript of what's really going on in our minds all day long." ("The Painter" 29-30) After all, it is the sea itself, not the painter that paints its own portrait by devouring the canvas and the brush.

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 Painter" 37-39).

Spontaneously, in the poem, he intentionally tests one of the most orderly of all poetic forms against the power of disorder: Sestina. He is required to write seven stanzas, with the end words (buildings, portrait, prayer, subject, brush, and canvas) repeating every stanza. In the concluding stanza, the same words must be repeated as the middle and end words of the three lines. He has periodically employed such traditional poetic forms throughout his career, preferring the most demanding forms which, like the sestina, seem to get directly into one's less-conscious mind.

Ashbery is an instance of a poet who, throughout his career, eliminates meaning without achieving any special intensity. As Robert Boyer mentions in "A Quest without an Object," "Meaning is often left out of an Ashbery poem. To ensure the continuity of a quest for which ends are necessarily threatening" (121). Thus, writing occurs where the "Moment of outline recedes/always darker as the vanishing point/is turned and turns itself/into an old army blanket, or something flat and material" ("drame bourgeois"). If there is ever meaning in Ashbery's poetry, it can be perceived only at the limit of some non-real borderline of the vanishing point. The vanishing point, in particular, signifies a leaving-out of the usual bridges which may give a false impression of permanence. The result of this leaving-out process is a turning away from the too bright blaze of a moment, a cutting loose from the intention to mean something final, which is, as Ashbery regards, another and truer way of writing.

For him, however, such indeterminacy provides the closest approach to the real condition of mind, and of reality itself, which by its very nature is full of contradictions and ambiguities. Reality is so multifarious and full of contradictions that any portrayal of it must be equally complex and ambiguous. Thus, the indeterminacy in his poetry, as Charles Altieri contends in *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry*, entails capturing the many levels and possibilities that reflect the maximum of experience "not to represent confusion but to dramatize qualities of mind, shifts of emotional values" (138).

Soon there is to be an exchange of ideas and
Far more beautiful handshake, under the coat of
Weather is undecided right now.

Postpone the explanation.

The election is to be held tomorrow, under the trees.
("The Skaters" 626-630)

It is this particular sense of indeterminacy that gives shape and meaning to his poetry. Ashbery values indeterminacy, the indeterminacy of meaning within an individual work which gives the work the widest possible range of associations: "What should be the vacuum of a dream/becomes continually replete as the source of dreams" ("Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" 180-181). His purpose is not simply to present indeterminate discourse or to show the inherent complexity of language.

Thus, in his poetry, there is much confidence in a new threshold for incoherence and randomness, leading to affirmations of freedom. The logic of syntactic connections

diffuses into multiple logics, whose internal principles of relatedness do not belong to the referential system of language. His poetry often blocks all our attempts to rationalize his disruptive words and images and to make them conform to a coherent interpretive structure. Most of his poems are in fact filled with wholly dissociated elements that propose the absence of meaning, or of a general pattern of relationships.

The night is a sentinel

Much of your time has been occupied by creative games
Until now, but we have all-inclusive plans for you.

We had thought, for instance, of sending you to the middle
of the desert,

To a violent sea, or of having the closeness of the others be
air

To you, pressing you back into a startled dream

As sea-breezes greet a child's face.

But the past is already here, and you are nursing some
private project ("These Lacustrine Cities" 12-13).

There appears to be no world in this poem, no whole to which these fragments may be pronounced to belong. What he presents here is rather a blank configuration of words in which there is no center that holds them together, in which the circumference of meaning is either seen to be zero or practically infinite. Hence, the overall objective of his poetry may be to deconstruct experience rather than to project interpretations on experience.

Poetry becomes a model of existence as a dialectic of immersion in the object which allows one to shape the self. It allows us to recognize our existence in the world as a condition of reciprocal being where each is shaped through the other. Within this interaction is the mysteriousness of transformation, as when "the water surface ripples, the whole light changes" ("The Skaters" 20). The observer mirrors the observed and becomes the observed.

A look of glass stops you

And you walk on shaken: Was I the perceived?

Did they notice me, this time, as I am,

Or is it postponed again? ("As One Put Drunk into the
Packer-Boat" 15-18)

This poem reveals the interlinking activity involved in the observation that suspends and subverts the opposition of subject and object.

His most central poem, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," presents a good example of the meditative act of reflection between self and text. The convex mirror, Parmigianino's means of self-speculation, comes to mirror his own speculations, dissolving the edges of the observer and the observed.

The glass chose to reflect only what he saw
Which was enough for his purpose: His image
Glazed, embalmed, projected at a 180° angle
The time of day or the density of the light
Adhering to the face keeps it

Lively and intact in a recurring wave arrival. The soul
establishes itself. ("Self-Portrait in a Convex mirror"
18-24).

Here is the painter's self-portrait, here is the poet looking
at the painter's self-portrait, and here, therefore, is the poet's
self-portrait.

He becomes both the subject and the object of his poetry
as he sees his own reflection in Parmigianino's self-portrait.
The result is that he can never get fully inside or outside
either himself or the convex mirror. The mirror traps the
viewer while forming a surface that mediates the connection
between the viewer and the viewed. Both the self in the
painting and the other responding to the painting appear
simultaneously, joining at the illusionary surface of poetry
which comes to distort any normal perspectives like the
convex mirror.

After all, Ashbery appears to have found a momentary
identity established by the interaction between the self as it is
portrayed and the desire for the portraying self to be known
through its expression; the poet's self is mirrored, and in turn,
the self-mirrors whatever comes to it in the process of writing.

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