JOHN ASHBERY: A PAINTER OF POEMS

John Lawrence Ashbery was born in Rochester, New York on July 28, 1927. Though both his parents had earned college degrees, his biggest intellectual influence was his grandfather, Henry Lawrence, who chaired the physics department at the University of Rochester and on whose library Ashbery spent a great deal of time while he was growing up (he lived mainly with him and spent the weekends with his parents on their farm). He attended Deerfield Academy (a prestigious preparatory school in Massachusetts) on a private grant from a neighbor and there he was first exposed to the poetry of W. H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, and Wallace Stevens.

He then attended Harvard, where he became the editor of the Harvard Advocate (publishing works of his own, as well as of his friends Frank O’Hara and Kenneth Koch) and, in 1949, earned his B.A. Some years after getting his master’s degree from Columbia, Ashbery collected what he considered to be his best work and submitted it to the Yale Series of Younger Poets competition, in which every year since 1919 Yale University Press has published the first collection of a promising American poet. The contest was at that time judged by W. H. Auden himself who rejected all 12 finalists and requested to see O’Hara and Ashbery (both their entries had already been dismissed by screeners at YUP), and eventually awarded the prize to Ashbery for his collection Some Trees. On a side note, the following year Auden would reject Sylvia Plath’s Colossus. His friendship and frequent collaborations with O’Hara and Koch eventually led critics to find similarities in their works and classify them (along with James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, and Kenward Elmslie) under the label “New York School” of poetry, a name closely related to the New York School of painting, which was then an already-established artistic movement that included painters such as Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, and Jackson Pollock.

On 1956, he moved to Paris on a Fulbright Fellowship and remained there for the next ten years (during this time, he published one of his most controversial and
underappreciated collections: *The Tennis Court Oath*). He moved back to New York in 1966, shortly after O’Hara’s death, and has been living and working there ever since. His most critically and publicly acclaimed collection is called *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), which won a Pulitzer Price, a National Book Award, and a National Book Critics Circle Award. He is now retired, and spends his time between New York City and upstate New York with his partner, David Kermani.¹

One of the first obstacles that face the reader who is approaching the poetry of John Ashbery for the first time is the widespread claim that his poetry is extremely difficult (if not downright impossible) to understand; the Encyclopaedia Britannica’s entry on the American poet is quite telling on this respect: “Ashbery’s poetry was initially greeted with puzzlement and even hostility owing to its extreme difficulty. His poems are characterized by arresting images and exquisite rhythms, an intricate form, and sudden shifts in tone and subject that produce curious effects of fragmentation and obliquity…” However, even despite the generalized critical assessment of his work, it is possible to find a way to achieve an understanding not of an absolute, underlying message in any of his poems, but of the artistic aims he has pursued throughout his career, and of the position he holds in regard to the poetic experience and the conveyance of meaning.

The fact that Ashbery is one of the most illustrious members of the first generation of the New York School of Poets is fundamental in the task of achieving some degree of comprehension of his particular style and methods. As I briefly mentioned earlier, there is an important connection between the New York School of Poets and the New York School of painters, and that connection is firmly rooted on John Bernard Myers, the director of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, whose role in the formative years as poets of O’Hara, Koch, and Ashbery was decisive. Myers coined the label himself, and helped establish a social network of artists from different fields that contributed to the poets’ (particularly Ashbery and O’Hara) conceptualization of the meaning and purpose of art and poetry. As David Lehman puts it in *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of The New York School of Poets*:

> “From Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, they learned that it was okay for a poem to chronicle the history of its own making -that the mind of the poet, rather than the world, could be the true subject of the poem- and that it was possible for a poem to be (or

¹ This biographical introduction is primarily based on Harold Bloom’s biography of Ashbery as it appears on his *Comprehensive Research and Study Guide*; however, there is additional data that I included as a result of my own readings and research.
Ashbery’s poetry is notably concerned with the creative process of writing, (as opposed to the mere poetic representation of an external referent), with the idea that meaning is achieved only after the final word is considered, and the expressive possibilities of language. As a poet, he is less interested in covering his poems under a veil of mystery than in achieving an almost photographic rendition of his thoughts and meditations. In an interview for the Paris Review, he confesses: “I 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.” Thus, any reading of Ashbery’s poetry must dismiss any expectations of clear, plain meaning, and instead should focus on the enjoyment of the experience, on a dialogue that, for a brief moment, can be held with one of the greatest, most acclaimed poets of our time.

The following poems have been selected with the aim of introducing us to the poet’s particular style without posing too great a challenge. The idea is that we take an initial and cautious step towards acquainting ourselves with Ashbery, so that eventually we will be more favorably disposed to his more abstract (and interesting) works.

Paradoxes and Oxymorons

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 steam and chatter of typewriters.

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.

This poem was published in the 1980 collection *Shadow Train*. The title immediately suggests the idea of contradiction (a paradox is a statement that leads to a contradiction or a logically impossible situation, and an oxymoron is a figure of speech that involves two contradictory terms), an idea that runs throughout the poem. The first line, for instance, proclaims that the poem is concerned with language on a very plain level, yet, even though its use of language is indeed simple and straightforward, the poem itself is quite complex, as it develops an extremely problematic subject matter: the relationship between a text and its reader. Later on, almost as if to underline the contradictory quality of the first line, the poetic voice questions openly the notion of a ‘plain level,’ only to answer such a question with further contradictions.

One other reason this poem is initially perceived as simple is because of its heavy use of repetition, since instead of being confronted by obscure imagery or unusual word choices, the reader is soothed by the recurrence of simple words, such as “look,” “have,” “miss,” “level,” and “thing.” It is important to note that, aside from giving some degree of truth to the initial statement, repetitions here help reinforce the theme of contradiction, as the reader cannot help but notice the contrast in the phrases that accompany each repeated word: when the poetic voice says “Look at it talking to you. You look out a window” there is an evident contrast between the poem that is addressing the reader, and the reader who, in turn, looks out a window; so, even though the poem wants to be understood, the reader is reluctant to even try to understand it.

There are many examples of paradoxes “You have it but you don’t have it,” “The poem is sad because it wants to be yours, and cannot.” and oxymorons “A deeper outside thing,” “chatter of typewriters” that can be identified within the poem, but these examples
are only superficial: the truly paradoxical in this text concerns the poem and the reader. The poem is personified, given particular characteristics that turn it into an active presence, capable of talking, missing, and feeling sadness. However, on the last stanza it is reverted to a passive role, it has been played, and its meaning and appreciation depend now only on the reader. The reader, on the other hand, is denied its usual independence from the text. We are, straight from the start, a part of the poem (the poetic voice immediately establishes that we don’t understand the poem and that we miss its meaning) and eventually, we are told that we ourselves are the poem. So, in a sense, the reader who normally imposes a particular interpretation on the poetic voice is now being analyzed and interpreted by it.

At its core, the poem is concerned with how the reader plays an essential part in its (the poem’s) existence. This could very well remind us of reader-response criticism, a school of literary theory that emphasizes the reader’s role in the construction of meaning in any given text. Yet, it is interesting to note that, although the reader is placed in a privileged position in regard to the poem, the poem itself is not denied any importance whatsoever, quite on the contrary, it is infused (by means of a very interesting example of personification) with a life of its own.

The Painter

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.

So there was never any paint on his canvas
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 moods, or, perhaps, to a prayer.”

How could he explain to them his prayer
That nature, not art, might usurp the canvas?
He chose his wife for a new subject,
Making her vast, like ruined buildings,
As if, forgetting itself, the portrait
Had expressed itself without a brush.

Slightly encouraged, he dipped his brush
In the sea, murmuring a heartfelt prayer:
“My soul, when I paint this next portrait
Let it be you who wrecks the canvas.”
The news spread like wildfire through the buildings:
He had gone back to the sea for his subject.

Imagine a painter crucified by his subject!
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!”

Others declared it a self-portrait.
Finally all indications of a subject
Began to fade, leaving the canvas
Perfectly white. He put down the brush.
At once a howl, that was also a prayer,
Arose from the overcrowded 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 Painter” was first published in the collection Some Trees, and it is a good example of Ashbery’s talent as a poet, as well as of the literary influences we can identify in its themes. If we pay close attention, it is possible to see some of Wallace Steven’s concern with outer perception and inner signification (the way we saw in, for instance, “The Snow Man”) and the relationship that exists between nature (particularly the sea) and artistic creation, as is evident in another of Wallace’s poems: “The Idea of Order at Key West.” The form of the poem is the sestina, a structure in which 39 lines are arranged in six six-line stanzas and an envoy (a shorter stanza that provides a commentary on the rest of the poem) of three lines. The true difficulty residing in the sestina is the scheme of repetition that accounts for much of the structure’s appeal; in a sestina, the final words of the first stanza are repeated in the subsequent stanzas following a simple pattern: the last word, then the first, then the second to last, then the second, then the third to last, and finally the third word.

But the poem is interesting for reasons other than its intricate structure; it is also a profound meditation on the relationship between art and nature, and between painting and poetry. In the first stanza, we are introduced to the painter, who, faced by both nature and artificiality (represented by the buildings) chooses to paint the sea. However, he is troubled by the fact that he considers his artistic medium insufficient to adequately portray his subject (he would like the sea itself to be a part of the canvas, to serve as a representation of itself). In the second one, the contrast between the artist and the people in the buildings is made more evident, as the latter intrude upon the creative process and demand that he is put to work, even to the point of suggesting a change of subject. On the third stanza, we get an insight into the artist’s mind that confirms our suspicion that the painter is ultimately concerned with nature, rather than with modes of representation (art in particular); still, he chooses his wife for a subject, and the portrait is said to have almost painted itself. The painter is now slightly encouraged and uses seawater in order to paint the sea, but the people in the buildings are troubled by the news. In the fifth stanza, the poetic voice addresses the reader, we are made to realize the painter’s impossible situation, the difficulty in finding a way to let nature express itself faithfully on canvas; a situation that is further reinforced by the building’s artist’s mockery. The last six-line stanza returns the painter (and the reader) to the beginning, the impossibility of painting the sea results in a blank canvass and in the
painter’s defeat. Finally, the commentary provided by the envoi is at once disheartening and beautifully ironic: the portrait is tossed into the sea, and it becomes a part of it rather than the other way around. The subject, then, absorbs the representation; art becomes a part of nature.

This is an uncommonly straightforward poem by Ashbery, the sequence of events can be fairly easily discerned and the imagery is not at all obscure; however, as is the case with many of his poems, the reader is suggested a line of meditative reflection: one has to think if it is possible to agree with the painter, with the people in the buildings, or with the sea’s obdurate persistence in being impossible to represent. Our own views about art, nature, and the creative process are thus put into question, and the reader is left with more than the poetic experience that is the reading of “The Painter,” we are left with a desire to think about ourselves.

Please consider the following.

1. In “Paradoxes and Oxymorons,” the most common repetition is, by far, that of the word “you” How does such a repetition affect the poem? How does it (if at all) influence the reading experience?

2. In the same poem, it can be argued that the poem and the reader experience a reversal of roles. By which means does the poetic voice manage to do so? Does it follow in the general tone and underlying meaning of the poem?

3. What does it mean when, in the first line of the sixth stanza in “The Painter,” the poetic voice says that “Others declared it a portrait”? How can we relate such a statement with the wider world of critics and readers?

4. What is the significance of the allusions to a prayer that can be found throughout the same poem?

5. What is your personal opinion about the poetry of John Ashbery? Would you agree with the following statement made by him in the interview I quoted earlier: “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.”
Works Cited


Works Consulted
