

The Poetics of John Ashbery

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Abstract

John Ashbery (1927-) takes the postmodernist polysemy of meaning in interpreting a work of art and the polyphony of styles in composing as his forte. He questions the various linguistic codes and makes us aware of the artificiality of the language. All political, ethical and aesthetic imperatives are rhetorical constructs. The writer uses language to persuade the reader to accept the formulated truth and he intervenes in the process of perception by his/her politics of representation. Though his iconoclastic approach towards writing and individuality of style has kept him aloof from mainstream academic syllabi, yet he has now become a prominent figure in Contemporary American Literature. It is interesting to note how Ashbery's poetry revives the Romantic sensibility while applying the digitalized methods and the postmodern syndromes of immediacy, indeterminacy, disjunctive syntax, open-ended and multiplicity of interpretations. This paper explores the aesthetics of John Ashbery's poetry.

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It is interesting to note how contemporary American poetry is zanus-faced. It is specially noted for innovation and experimentation. Although it gives new interpretation to life, inaugurates new styles of composing, evolves new poetics, yet it looks back at its predecessors for reviving the imagination and reflects the spirit of Emerson, Wallace Stevens or Poe. Several experimental aesthetic movements—Romanticism, Symbolism, Vorticism, Imagism, Surrealism, modernism, post-modernism, and post-structuralism have influenced different genres of poetry. However, the innovative spirit of the contemporary poets is not yet abated. If we distinguish between the aesthetic self, social self and the inner self, then Ashbery's ruminations are mostly related to this third category or unconsciousness. Matthew Arnold has observed in his Oxford lecture, "On the Modern Elements in Literature," (1869) that poetry primarily engages with the question, "how to live?" He has coined the phrase "imaginative reason" to emphasize on poetry that relies on "the senses and the understanding" rather than the medieval poetry that thrived on "the heart and imagination."

John Ashbery (1927-) takes the polysemy of meaning in interpreting a work of art and the polyphony of styles in composing as his forte. Ashbery deconstructs the traditional presumptions about the objectives, themes, and narrating events sequentially while composing a verse. He is concerned about the limits of language in expressing the momentary thoughts that flash in the mind. The sub-conscious and the unconscious are brought to the forefront to highlight the volatile nature of consciousness. Ashbery's work is a criticism of the attempt of the traditional poets to unify thoughts that recur in the mind, often haphazardly, or to formalize experience. He is grouped with the "New York School of Poets", who extended the frontier of composing after the Pound- Eliot revolution. The other important poets in this group are Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler, Kenneth Koch etc. Their style is passionate, experimental, and innovative. They incorporated the style of art and music in their works and revolted against the solemn note in modernist poetry. Koch attacked the staleness of modernist poetry in *Seasons on Earth*:

The Waste Land gave the time's most accurate data,
It seemed, and Eliot was the Great Dictator
Of literature. One hardly dared to wink

Or fool around in any way in poems,...¹

They were partly inspired by the “projectivist” ideal that form is only an extension of content as propagated by the new formalists like Charles Olson, R. Duncan etc. Ashbery finds coherence among dispersed particulars and interpretive codes. He dramatizes shifts of emotional levels, surge of thought, and resonance of feelings. However, unlike most of the “New York School of Poets”, he is not solely interested in language games. Instead of referring to abstract ideas, he deals with lived situations and the open-ended verses are more compatible to express the individual mind. His familiar and textureless language reflects the changing moods of the persona. For Ashbery writing is an event, a praxis that aims at dismantling an established ideology and broadens the horizons of meaning, to return to the world of human beings from the specific domains of the abstract and the conventional. This approach to poetry was emulated by some of the contemporary poets like Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, Ron Silliman, Leslie Scalapino, Ann Lauterbach, James Tate etc. who are popularly known as the “LANGUAGE POETS”.

Ashbery prefers the aesthetics of indeterminacy. He deconstructs “pure Affirmation”, that “doesn’t affirm anything” as stated in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. Unlike the realists like Auden who considers that the ulterior purpose of poetry or any work of art is to “disenchant and disintoxicate”, Ashbery’s work sometimes purposely lack logic. He is one of the last romantics in American poetry, as Yeats or Dylan Thomas was in British poetry. Ashbery is somewhat akin in temperament to the romantics and advocates the Emersonian prophesy of spontaneity and autonomy of imagination and transcendentalism. Though Ashbery’s style is postmodernist and is one of the last “Avant Garde”, yet he appropriates the romantic sensibility and the credo of subjectivism. Harold Bloom tries to draw a parallelism between Ashbery and his precursor Wallace Stevens. Ashbery appropriates and replicates the theme of “mythology of self”, which was inaugurated by Stevens. The voice of an individual passing through the different phases of life, his dilemma, discontent, resolutions are presented through blurred visions, pieces of conversation, pastiche. In *Three Poems*, he uses the metaphor of coming to a fork in the road, which rejoins at the end. The admixture of reality and fantasy completes the journey of the mind. The regions through which we pass are constantly modifying us.

John Ashbery also questions the various linguistic codes and makes us aware of the artificiality of the language. All political, ethical and aesthetic imperatives are rhetorical constructs. The writer uses language to persuade the reader to accept the formulated truth and he intervenes in the process of perception by his/her politics of representation. Though his iconoclastic approach towards writing and individuality of style has kept him aloof from mainstream academic syllabi, yet he has now become a prominent figure in Contemporary American Literature. His early book, *Some Trees* (1956) won him the Yale Younger Poet Series with W.H. Auden as the jury. Two of his widely discussed poems: *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror* and *Flow-Chart* won him the Pulitzer Award in 1976, National Book Award, Critic’s Circle Award, the Poetry Society of America’s Robert Frost Medal. In 1984 he received the Bollingen Prize and MacArthur Prize fellowship in the following year and also two Guggenheim Fellowships subsequently. Most of his early poems are collected in the volume, *Selected Poems* (1985) and his later poems are collected in the volume entitled, *Notes from the Air* (2007). This same year Ashbery reached his eightieth birthday and have perpetuated his aptitude of producing new, controversial, stimulating classics with vibrant experimentalism. In 1992 he was honoured with Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize and the Antonio Feltrivelli International Prize for Poetry. He is now a member of the *American Academy of Arts and Letters* and the *American Academy of Arts and Sciences*. In 1989-90 he was Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at

Harvard. As a Chancellor he had presided over the *Academy of American Poets* from 1988 to 1999.

I have had so many identity crises
in the last fifty years you wouldn't believe it. (Ashbery 1992 6)

The Pound-Eliot movement revised the Romantic view. However, the post-fifties poets and critics have expressed their skepticism about T.S. Eliot's theories of 'Objective Correlative', 'Impersonality', 'Classicism', 'Dissociation of Sensibility'etc. Randall Jarrell has questioned whether Eliot followed his theoretical formulations in praxis. Jarrell has observed in *The Third Book of Criticism* (1965) that Eliot's *Wasteland* is not so much an austere "criticism of the contemporary world", as the anguished "relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life."² Jarrell concludes that T.S. Eliot "was one of the most subjective poets who ever lived". Wallace Stevens' reading of Eliot further clarify that it is his "supreme cry of despair...not his generation's," (ibid). Often it becomes difficult for the reader to differentiate between the "man who suffers" and the "mind that creates". Is it really possible to separate the identity of the poet from the man of the world as claimed by T.S. Eliot in his essays? Karl Shapiro's collection of essays, *The Poetry Wreck* (1975) reflects his polemical rejection of what he saw as the poetry 'Establishment'. The essay entitled as "T.S. Eliot: The Death of literary Judgment", articulates a rejection of Eliot's critical authority, which was already widely felt by the present-generation poets, critics and readers. Contemporary American poetry is specially noted for its innovative techniques and experimentation. The readers are exposed to a variety of poetic fare- Black Mountain Poets, the New York School, Beat poets, Confessional poets, Immigrants etc. Robert Lowell (1917-1977) has suggested that poetry could be fragmentary and subjective. In *Life Studies* he has advocated a movement beyond the merely literary, "a breakthrough back into life". He was perhaps first in the American soil to realize that "the times have changed. A drastic experimental art is now expected and demanded."³ Contrary to Eliot's technique, verse is now no longer cloaked with allusions, but is characterized by a fresh invention; the rhythm is compatible with the expression of emotion. Poetry is the saga of an individual confronting life, not on his father's terms but on his own. Robert Pinsky has stressed on the rhetoricity of all poetic forms, whether 'open' or 'closed' in *The Situation of Poetry* (1976). Different trends in contemporary poetry have led most of the popular poets to strike a middle way between the followers of Eliot and the oppositional poetics of a figure like Allen Gingsberg. Adrienne Rich has observed that the contemporary writers explore and write about what is "humanly possible" (Rich 1) instead of referring to classical allusions and framing theories. Writing is rather a journey through possibilities and fluidity of thought, the unexplored probabilities beyond compromised, degraded, dated system. Ashbery explores the nuances of an individual's experience with innovative improvisations in composing. He is conscious of the slippage of metaphor/language. Charles Altieri says in *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry*, that the "self-conscious rhetoric" in Ashbery, is a reaction against "rhetorics that claim naturalness".

Almost all the poems of Ashbery are 'writely texts' that invite the reader's participation for construing the meaning of the open-ended texts. The poet's identity accrues from multiple voices, rather than thrusting one assumed mono-dimensional interpretation based on biographical or historical study. While Whitman left his *Song Of Myself* without a final period, Ashbery directs his readers to a mélange of contexts, fragmentary episodes, moments, descriptive scenes and images that defy any definite conclusion. Critics find it difficult to locate any key passage or interpretative center/ node around which the heterogeneous elements of the poem are woven. For example his *The Skaters* can be interpreted in three ways: as a descriptive poem, autobiographical and self-reflexive. This dissemination of a fixed

meaning or central focus gives a free play to the reader's mind and lures him/her to a web of unending interpretations. While commenting on Ashbery's style, J. D. McClatchy has written that "the effect is rather like overhearing a radio in the next room whose dial someone is slowly turning: one minute Beethoven, the next hip-hop, the next a traffic report. All are equal in the 'flowing, fleeting' moment, nothing is excluded or judged."⁴ The prize-winning *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* begins as a biography of the Italian mannerist painter, Parmigianino, and ends in a psychological monologue. The poem is a ganglion of voices from history, yet it is relevant to the present mind because "it carries / The momentum of a conviction that had been building..." (ibid). At times the speaker seems to confide in the reader, at other times he prefers to be a silent observer who records his impressions vaguely: "too close to ignore, too far / For one to intervene," (ibid).

John Ashbery's Individuality and Tradition

John Ashbery imbibes the romantic credo of subjectivism in his poetics. Unlike the Pound-Eliot tradition he does abide by the theory of "Impersonality" in a work of art. For him the concept of reality is itself an illusion and life cannot have any objective experience. The unconscious mind cannot be expressed objectively. Poetry not only mirrors the society but makes us aware "of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate" (Stanford 51). To T.S. Eliot this "dark psychic material" is a sort of "demon" without a name. He does not celebrate the postmodernist concept of inadequacy of language and has said that the poet writes "not in order to communicate with anyone, but to gain relief from acute discomfort," (Stanford 51). It is an act of purging out the unseen feelings. In literary criticism T.S. Eliot has distinguished between four kinds of emotions. "Personal emotion" is evoked by the biographical details of the poet's life, "structural emotion" evolves gradually from the reading of a poem, "art emotion" has an emotional impact on the reader, and "emotion without an adjective" can be synonymously for any of these three related emotions. It may be observed that while the modernists try to solve and affirm, postmodernism does not affirm anything. Zygmunt Bauman has highlighted that in postmodern sociology, "there is no longer a need, or a room, for those 'hard-core' intellectuals whose expertise is 'legitimation,' i.e., supplying proof that what is being done is universally correct and absolutely true, moral and beautiful," (Natoli 441). It would be more appropriate now to emphasize on repression and relativity instead of trying to legitimize and objectify thoughts, experiences, messages etc. Krieger Murray has said in "A Window to Criticism" that poetic language can be viewed in three ways. In the modernist view it is seen as a "window to the world." In the postmodernist interpretation it is an enclosed field of "endlessly faceted mirrors ever multiplying its maze of reflections but finally shut up within itself." Murray concludes that this set of mirrors "becomes window again after all." M.H. Abrams has observed in his book on literary criticism *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953), that the mimetic function of art has asserted a possible equation between external reality and "the reality that is created within the symbols of art, so that the latter mirrors the former." In postmodern aesthetics this process of creating/mirroring reality is not to be universally accepted but is subject to changes because it is based on the individual artist's vision and perceptions. A deconstructive analysis reveals how a text undermines its foundation by revealing the internal contradictions and biases. The incidental features of a text can betray or subvert an "essential" message. Paul de Man has explained that to understand deconstruction in a structuralist context needs to analyze a text "as grids, as patterns" that are not sustained in the work. Catherine Belsey has argued that the issue of finding "truth" has become "superfluous to cultures that stand outside" it (Natoli 442). Post-structural and postmodern practice "displays truth as a linguistic

tyranny which arrests the proliferation of meanings, assigns values and specifies norms," (Natoli 446). Belsey has taken resistance as an enterprise which does not struggle within the nexus of "binary oppositions" but it is realized "within a story of meanings that are always plural, subject to excess, in process, contradictory," (Natoli 446). In contemporary texts the modernist desire to locate "history of truth," is replaced by postmodernist alternatives/liminality/in-between conclusions, "textual uncertainties" and "conflicting interests," (ibid). Ashbery sometimes coins words to express some sort of inexplicable phobia related to acute identity crises as found in "The Large Studio" from the collection entitled *Hotel Lautreamont*:

...And the *bowsprit* (a word I have never understood)
comes undone, comes all over me, washes
my pure identity from me- help! [Italics mine] (Ashbery 1992 7)

Harold Bloom has referred to it as *askesis* and has explained it as "a movement of self-purgation which intends the attainment of a state of solitude," (Bloom 1973 15). In an interview in the *Paris Review*, Ashbery has admitted the ploy of using uncommon words to inflict gags and tricks on the readers. He has quoted the last sentence from his only novel, co-authored with James Schuyler, *A Nest of Ninnies* (1969) to explain his choice for rare words: "So it was that the cliff dwellers, after bidding their cousins good night, moved off towards the parking area, while the latter bent their steps toward the partially rebuilt shopping plaza in the teeth of the freshening *foehn*, [Italic mine]."¹¹ Ashbery tries to make his readers fend for themselves, consulting the dictionaries and thus in the process they are closing one book and opening another. He gives an explanation of the word as "a kind of warm wind that blows in Bavaria that produces a fog," (ibid). Most of the contemporary poets are interested in the experiential "unwrapped primal world," (Ramanan 130) and establish a counter discourse to the Eliotian syndrome of intellect and ratiocination. Patrizia Lombardo and Kevin Mulligan of the "Geneva School of Emotions" have noticed in the *Critical Quarterly* "a contemporary counter-movement against reason, or nationality or logos." Ashbery inspects how the same event can affect the individuals differently. The attempt to find a fixed entity of home is perpetuated as an unending phenomenon in "Cop and Sweater":

Now those homeless *hirsutes* we call men
Are on our backs...
Sometimes a plan will come
to take one of them away... (Ashbery 1992 22)

The phrase "waiting cemetery" in the same poem recalls the existential angst and the desire to resist it is apparent in the lines:

A man could smash through
this, drain the Slough of Despond
build individual habitats for bird and person,...(ibid)

Ashbery's self-indulgent tone makes him a belated romantic. He advocates the Emersonian prophesy of spontaneity and autonomy of imagination. Ashbery is also a postmodern transcendentalist who believes that the ultimate reality transcends or goes beyond human experience. He is a follower of the doctrine of "Surrealism" and prefers to work against chronology, causality and sense of unity. He explores the mysteries of experience and depths of feeling in individuals who encounter varied situations. Theodore Roethke had tried to devise a "psychic short-hand when his protagonist is under great-stress" (Coyle 340) as stated in *Praise to the End!* (1951). Ashbery delves into the mythology of the 'Self' to weave the saga of an alienated individual, placed within the forces of the cosmos. The trespassing of the subconscious mind in the conscious elemental world is narrated in "Music Reservata":

We are born, buried for a while, then
spring up just as
everything is closing... (Ashbery 1992 24)

In *Flow-Chart*, he establishes the importance of "our coming to know ourselves as the necessarily inaccurate transcribers of the life..."⁵ The voice of an individual passing through the different phases of life, his dilemma, discontent, resolutions are presented by Ashbery through pieces of conversations that comprise the spectrum of life. Nostalgic commemoration of childhood days is the theme of Ashbery's *The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers*. The reader is reminded of the Wordsworthian *Immortality Ode* as the persona recollects the sweet-salad days:

Yet I cannot escape the picture
Of my small self in that bank of flowers.⁶

Unlike the Romantics who lament the bygone days, Ashbery accepts change and passage of time positively. He says in *Our Youth*, collected in *The Tennis Court Oath* that:

You will never have that young boy
That with the monocle
Could have been your father...⁷

This change is a necessary part of life for Ashbery unlike Wordsworth who sadly reminisce the "visionary gleam" of youth. Ashbery embraces the new while appropriating the past and engages with the questions of: "how to live, what to do?"⁸ in *Grand Galop*. Indecision, uncertainty and change are delineated to foreground the human world. Thus, he claims in the poem 'Indelible, inedible', collected in the *Shadow Train*:

Some things are always left undecidable
And regroup, to reappear next year in
A new light,
The light of CHANGE...(ibid)

Romantic glorification of the past is juxtaposed with the idea of mobility of memory in 'Decoy', collected in *The Double Dream of Spring*:

...our pyramiding memories,...
Seeking in occasions new sources of memories,...
...memories will keep us going, alive,... (ibid)

Ashbery cherishes the attempt to re-start the journey of life with enriched experiences from the past. His present is a newer version of the past. His 'Grand Abacus' begins with the nostalgic mood of a Romanticist. He wants to venture through the valley at hand to reminisce the past and relish the present as well:

Perhaps this valley too leads into
The head of long-ago days. (ibid)

He states in 'The Instruction Manual', collected in *Some Trees*:

Here I am then, continuing but ever beginning
My perennial voyage, into new memories, new hope and flowers...⁹

The persona of 'Clepsydra', in *Rivers & Mountains* is time itself, and the poem is contemplation on how it feels while it is passing through multifarious scenes. For Ashbery the public man of feeling remains at the centre of his thought. His solipsistic aestheticism is more generalized than personal. The poetic self emerges from a combination of multiple selves. The desire to return to the past is juxtaposed with the desire to rise above and proceed in the poem entitled "Voyage in the Blue". A

rehabilitation of the past ideals is necessary, “yet in the having we shall be growing, rising above it / into an admixture of deep blue enameled sky and bristly gold stars,” (Corn 241). Ashbery’s work is an appropriation of Romanticism and a leap into Postmodernism. In an interview in the *Paris Review* he has stated that he was “particularly attracted to the Metaphysical poets and to Keats, and [he] had a Chaucer course, which [he] enjoyed very much.”¹¹ He sometimes adopts the breaking-device of *kenosis* (Bloom 1973 14) to deviate and appropriate on his predecessors. His “The King” is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and begins with the line from the Elizabethan bard’s work, “So have I heard and do in part believe it,” (Ashbery 1992 27). He is aware of the lost self amidst deterioration of values. He makes an attempt to find out the banes of civilization in ‘Decoy’, collected in *The Double Dream of Spring*:

...The twentieth-century scheme of things;

That urban chaos is the problem we have been seeing into and seeing into,

Descending code of values...

...deterioration of moral values, punctuated

By acts of corporate vandalism every five years,...⁸

However, unlike the modernists he does not lose all his hope on the present where “things fall apart” to use W.B. Yeats’ phrase. Ashbery, as a postmodernist views the absence of the CENTRE, “the centre cannot [or rather does not] hold” as a mark of freedom. For him this polyphony, without a single centre takes us towards greater naturalism. Afterall, life is not one-dimensional and symmetric. It leads us to varied experiences which have no coherent order or meaning. Instead of trying to deduce a unified meaning in the poem, the reader should enjoy the dynamic motion in Ashbery’s poetry. Ashbery composes out of delight and creates an intermediate style which is an appropriation upon T.S. Eliot’s classical allusiveness, Ezra Pound’s imagism and vorticism, Robert Lowell’s “breakthrough” into life narrative, surrealism and the idiosyncratic style of ‘Beat generation’. Poet of every generation try to break free from “the prevalent dogmas of the day and define a new imperative,”¹² as observed by Dr. Acharya in her article. Critics are aware of the temporality of canons. Harold Bloom has juxtaposed Stevens’ *Le Monocle de Mon Oncle* with Ashbery’s *Fragment* to reveal the similarity in style and composition, (Bloom 1973 142).). He explores the revelation of unconscious impulses, projects the images in dream and advocates individuality while being aware of the existentialist angst. The state of the world or the meandering consequences that are resonated in the mind cannot be tracked solely by causality. Thus the poem, “The King” ends with the lines:

...No explanation

is offered, and none necessary...(Ashbery 1992 28)

“Unexpected details” as said by Ashbery always intervene the logical proceedings of the mind and “there is more to inconstancy than you will want to hear.” Uncertainties always find their space in the mind as in the external world. The uncertainty of being is stressed in the concluding lines of “By Forced Marches:”

I am all I have. I am afraid.

I am left alone. (Ashbery 1992 31)

He writes on the different aspects of self-realization: interpersonal, Dionysian, occult or abstract. Another important aspect of Ashbery’s work is an indifference to the exigencies of American politics and power-game. He has no political or cultural sanction or partisan motive behind writing. He is perhaps the most self-conscious and least programmatic among the contemporary poets. He did not think specifically about techniques or subject matters for his poetry because he took poetry as the “chronicle of the creative act that produces it...” (Elliott 1098). Agnes Heller has

argued in her article, "Existentialism, Alienation, Postmodernism: Cultural Movements as Vehicles of Change in the Patterns of Everyday life," that postmodernism "does not stand for a particular politics of any kind," (Natoli 447) because it does not follow any type of "fixed distinction." Ashbery appreciates his fellow poet, Frank O'Hara in his lecture on the 'Frank O'Hara's Question'. He says that O'Hara's poetry "has no program...it does not speak out against the war in Vietnam or in favour of civil rights, 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, (Shetley 109)." Some critics like Louis Simpson have accused Ashbery for his reticence on political issues and non-co-operation with political protests. Ashbery reacted to the charges and replied to Simpson in a letter which was subsequently published in the *Nation*, 29 May 1967: "All poetry is against war and in favour of life, or else it isn't poetry, and it stops being poetry when it is forced into the mould of a particular program. Poetry is poetry. Protest is protest. I believe in both forms of action," (ibid). However, Ashbery's poetry never terminates into a political manifesto or a philosophical doctrine. One field of study or activity should not overlap with another field. He does not write to indoctrinate the minds but to give pleasure.

Influence of Abstract Expressionist painters on Ashbery

Poets like John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara have tried to draw a kinship between painting and poetry. While Philip Sidney thought of poetry as a 'speaking picture', Ashbery and O'Hara who were eminent art critics, adopted the technique of Abstract Expressionist artists in poetry. The words and phrase are verbal icons that cast the images that flash in the mind without any attempt to synchronize them. Ashbery's style of composing traces the entire process that goes into the making of a poem. This technique is somewhat akin to that of the Abstract Expressionist painter, Jackson Pollock, popularly known as 'Jack the dripper'. Pollock's drip painting takes the method of creation as the subject of art. Similarly, Ashbery juxtaposes contexts and images as they enter and leave the mind randomly without any apparent cause-effect relationship. Painting provides a starting point for the poets own self-portrait – a 'Self' that is omnipresent in Ashbery's work, an accumulation of ongoing and changing experiences. The poet's direct address to the painter in Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* is a reminder of the two separate worlds that are the mirror images of each other. They are brought together in Ashbery's work through the alchemy of artistic process. If the reader juxtaposes Ashbery's *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror* and the painting by Parmigianino, which inspired it, then s/he can notice Ashbery's unique ability to explore the verbal implications of painterly space. He gives a verbal transcription of Parmigianino's distorted images and the poem resonates with the visual impression of the painting. As paints are used to conceal unwanted spots similarly, "a smile paints the easy vapor that rises from all/ human activity," (Ashbery 1992 29). In 1952 Harold Rosenberg coined the term "action painting." In the hands of an Abstract Expressionist the canvas became a field or arena in which to act rather than to analyze and explain. Jackson Pollock's "Action Painting" captures the images in a state of happening (not in a state of stasis). The static, immobile and inanimate objects are never his subjects. His painting is much near to the expression of a "life- experience" (Grana 149): framed in a varied matrix of inter-personal and intra- personal relationships. Clement Greenberg has referred to this genre as the 'American Style.' Similarly, Ashbery juxtaposes contexts and images as they enter and leave the mind randomly without any apparent cause-effect relationship. As Pollock's canvas comprises daubs of paints sprinkled to baffle the readers, Ashbery and contemporary Language Poets have an obtuse style of writing with frequent shifts in tone, time, voice, scraps of conversation, admixture of the refined and the demotic to create a kind of verbal collage. This plurality makes the

poem difficult to understand but at the same time it dismantles any established ideology or the claim of any authentic voice. The indeterminacy of Ashbery's subject matter is stated clearly in 'Syringa' that begins with the line: "Its subject/ Matters too much and not enough," (Perloff)³. The kaleidoscope of words is sustained by visual imagination. Roland Barthes observation is pertinent here to understand the importance of sight. He says that "sight is the only sense in which continuity is sustained by the addition of tiny but integral units: space can be constructed only from completed variations," (*Language*, Feb.1978)¹⁰. Scraps of conversations, variations in tones can be brought together like fragments in a collage to open implied possibilities. Ashbery creates frames of scenes and actions instead of describing them. The opening lines of 'Leaving the Atocha Station' in *The Tennis Court Oath*, juxtapose images as they pass by, however haphazardly or waywardly:

The arctic honey blabbed over the report causing darkness...
The fried bats they sell there
Dropping from sticks,...
Your prayer folds...
The garden...
Blind dogs expressed royalties...⁷

The poet tries to capture the moment when a train rattles out of a station of no particular significance. Like a painter who not only portrays inanimate, still objects but also eternalizes evanescent moments, Ashbery also uses painterly words and phrases to make the readers recollect their past experiences of pulling out of a station. The use of words and the use of paints coalesce indistinguishably in "Baked Alaska:"

I refuse to open your box of crayons...
there may be something new in some combination
of styles, some gift in adding the addled
colors to our pate... (Ashbery 1992 53)

Most of his poems can be alternatively called as epitomes of living experiences/moments. His poetry is "vehicular" to quote the Emersonian term.

Positioning Ashbery within the tenets of post-modernism

The deconstructionist and post-modernist interpretations does not differentiate between “literary” and “communicative” language. Postmodernism considers all writings, even non-literary and all forms of communication as texts. The whimsicalities of his thought find expression in his arbitrary use of language, individuality of style which is synchronously an assimilation, appropriation and deviation. He is inspired by the Romantic credo as manifest in Wordsworth’s *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*: “the poet writes under one restriction only, namely, the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human being... as a Man,” (79). He abides by the postmodernist trend of pastiche and parody and repudiates the solemn note of modernist poetry as apparent in T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Wallace Stevens, Edgar Allan Poe etc. He is aware of the crises in modern civilization, yet he preferred to write in a playful tone and seldom lost the joy involved in the process of composing. Ashbery says in the opening poem in the volume entitled, *Houseboat Days* that he wants to stay away from all sorts of opposition: “to praise this, blame that.” However, he is not oblivious of the onus of the poet to reveal the contemporary social scenario. Instead of directly vituperating his condemnation against the degenerated politico-moral society he mockingly calls the politicians and diplomats as the “harbingers of gloom” in ‘Decoy’. Ashbery has critiqued all propagandist ideologies as sheer language manipulations. Ashbery has critiqued all propagandist ideologies as sheer language

manipulations. Keith Cohen has argued that Ashbery's work not only exemplifies a "disavowal of any political aim...beyond good an evil" as found in "Daffy Duck in Hollywood," but also undermines the capitalist discourse of "continuity, utility and closure," (Lehman 1980 26). As most of the other self-reflexive writers, Ashbery also refuses to explain reality or rather refuses "to pretend any longer that reality is equivalent to truth...coherent and national," (Elliott 1156). Ashbery is conscious of the inability of language to articulate fixed meaning in contrast to the deliberateness that is manifest in the works of T.S. Eliot who gives the theory of 'Objective Correlative'. Eliot is convinced that "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events" can be the 'formula' of 'a particular emotion'. However, Ashbery discards this referential equation of language or power of language to express reality. Reality is relative and subjective because contemporary writers do not distinguish between "the self that experiences and the self that writes," (Elliott 1012). Language is a symbolic order that structures both self and the world. He delves into the remote areas of consciousness and for him the external facts need not terminate into internal experiences or sensory emotions. His works are subject to multiple readings and are resistant to a single interpretation. He questions the various linguistic codes through which we define ourselves and the world. He broods over the familiar themes of the relationship between art and life, the instability of the notion of 'Self', nuances of language, the passage of time. Some of his poems can be read as a moment's epiphanic vision or a slide show of a particular phase of life. His compositions unravel the boundaries between poetry and prose. The theoretical shift around 1960 was based on a revision canon that disestablished the formulations of T.S. Eliot and the New Critics. Since then no single poet or a group of poets has dominated the American poetic field. "Authority in American poetry has been dispersed, permitting a plurality of theories and styles," (Elliott 1084). Charles Olson thinks that the "poetic self" is a "participant in the larger force" to enter into a "world of thought and feeling in which we may participate but not dominate ..." (Elliott 1092). Ashbery does not entirely depend on the world of discourse because he believes that language is an artificial construct. A sense of playfulness is imbibed in his language as well as vision since nothing is absolute. Most of his poems resist any definite analysis and signs out aphoristically or rather inconclusively with incomprehensible gestures.

Language as a medium of expression has been interpreted variously by the different schools of literary criticism. New critics differentiate between literary and communicative language. I.A. Richards has drawn a distinction between "emotive" and "scientific" language. The deconstructionist view of language is derived from Saussure's distinction between "langue" and "parole," the language system and its individual manifestation. The New critics have emphasized on the text as an artifact and both the conceptions of "intentional fallacy" and "affective fallacy" does not establish any relationship between the author and the reader. The text assumes its own identity apart from the author-reader nexus. The Phenomenological critics such as Hillis Miller and Geoffrey Hartman asserted in the early 1970s that the author's consciousness is central to apprehending the meaning of a text. It is the readers' responsibility to realize experience, extend and complete the visionary consciousness of the writer. The deconstructionists have put an exclusive emphasis on the responses of the readers. It has two basic tenets. Firstly, it takes the text as a product and the reader its consumer. The meaning of the text depends on how the reader masters the codes and conventions of linguistic and literary systems. Secondly, the critics like Stanley Fish, Norman Holland and David Bleich extends the concept of "writerly text" which was initiated by Roland Barthes. Here the text is taken as an ongoing process or performance, subject to multiple writings where the reader participates in producing synchronous meanings. Thus reading a poem also entails its re-writing. This process views all texts as inter-texts whose meaning can be apprehended in terms of other texts. The New Historicists have asserted that the

reader is constituted by the historical, cultural and the ideological conditions of his/her times. They try to locate the inter-relatedness between the socio-historic contexts to understand a text. The meaning of the same text may vary in different historic moments. It is important to follow how each historic moment looks at its past in terms of its existing social and ideological positions. Thus, a text's meaning is mutable and multiple based on the changing historical imperatives and socio-cultural perspectives. For the New Historicists the text has to be inevitably positioned in the contemporary ideological ambience to understand its significance. Ashbery has a knack to engage in new ways the creative minds of the past by adopting the aesthetics of appropriation and revisionary ratio. Postmodernism is not an entire subversion or deviation from modernism but also its continuation. It has "provided the conditions necessary for exploring and recuperating traditions," (Natoli 464) revising and renewing it. Ashbery has adhered to the postmodernist practice of viewing "the subject as contradictory and multilayered," (Natoli 467). Postmodernism has certain fault-lines in praxis and in this paper I have tried to locate the position of Ashbery as a postmodern poet who is evolved out of Romantic sensibility.

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Notes & References: Online Resources

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