A Brief Review of John Ashbery’s

John Ashbery died on September 3, 2017 at the age of ninety. His life in poetry was astonishing by anyone’s standards; he won almost every major prize for poetry except the Nobel and published many books to critical acclaim, such as *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1975. He has been called the most innovative and important poet of his generation and the most imitated. This second volume of his *Collected Poems* marks a turning point in Ashbery’s work, one where, beginning with *Flow Chart*, he confronts his mortality and reflects on his past life, his failures and his successes, as well as his current position in the poetry world.

This second volume of the Library of America’s Edition of Ashbery’s *Collected Poems* spans the years from 1991 to 2000 and includes several important books, such as *Hotel Lautreamont, And The Stars Were Shining, Can You Hear, Bird, Wakefulness, Girls On The Run, Your Name Here*, and a number of uncollected poems. Of note is the uncollected poem, “Hoboken,” which was an early collage poem that in fact predated Burroughs’s and Gysin’s work with the cut-up technique. These
books find Ashbery continuing to experiment with language, venturing into new territory with the first of the books collected here, Flow Chart.

Flow Chart stands as the major work in this volume, and while there is much here to satisfy an Ashbery enthusiast, I would like to focus primarily on this book, originally published by Knopf in 1991; it lays the groundwork for some of the subsequent themes that emerge in this second volume. I think of Flow Chart of as a kind of memoir, or better yet a diary (“Even my diary has become an omen to me, and I know how I’ll have to go on writing; it would be disappointed / otherwise”), in which Ashbery offers his coded impressions on love, politics, the contemporary world of poetry and his own position in it—his youth as a young gay man and his life in a rural setting in Hudson, New York, all of which he treats in a witty yet reflective and critical way, often humorous and ironical. We witness his mind at work in these pages. His tone changes as often as his thoughts, the sentences like a winding road in a forest, leading him to unfamiliar territory, where he views the sometimes wonderful landscapes of memory, or relives experiences that caused him to reevaluate his life. He is at once cerebral, and elegiac, exhibiting a relation to nature reminiscent of Wordsworth. For Ashbery the natural world offers some relief from the stress of living, just like a close friend or a lover would; he is a kind of modest pagan, a nature poet in an urban landscape. And in each of sections of this long poem we are reminded of Ashbery’s linguistic invention, humor, and elusive style.

Though life in the Hudson valley is “reasonably absorbing / and there are a lot of nice people around” Ashbery reminds us of “that feeling of emptiness” that “keeps turning up like a stranger you’ve seen dozens of times, out of focus / usually.” Recent political news hardly offers any relief: “Now the news of inflation. How to combat it? Is there any world-power / so stupid / it thinks it must have the answer, or that an answer actually exists?” And those “peaceful voices, rising / tier on tier / in the storied gothic cathedral, go unheard. Nobody thinks it’s time for them.” World peace is always just beyond one’s reach and
of course the politicians never know what they’re doing. Ashbery’s mind follows the meandering way of its thoughts, not governed by a logic imposed by the System, but by the nonlinearity of dreams and memory and followed by abrupt shifts to the present, where Ashbery writes, “My hair, today, is beautifully combed. I am on a roll, I guess.” Witty, yes, but the truth concealed in such a remark is that we all are, no matter that we don’t often say it, vain to a certain extent. “Set in our ways” as we grow older.

Now older, Ashbery gives his impressions of his fame as a poet and his position with relation to the younger poets: “it has all been in vain, this celebration: listen, / what do children think of you now? Suddenly everyone is / younger, and many of them not all / that young, either, and who, do you suppose loves you?” Life is made up of a sequence of events, the meaning of which consistently eludes our attempts at full understanding, however hard we try to make sense of ourselves and the world. Every thought is an incomplete thought, which leads one in a different direction. We despair of ever coming to terms with society, finding acceptance there instead of having to battle the political and social forces that seek to destroy us year after year, that affect ourselves and others, and for which love appears at times a solution though not without its own set of often insoluble problems. But not always. There are small victories sometimes; and we must not lose hope.

So, life goes on. We feel the need “to keep up appearances, impress the neighbors,” but you must never let your guard down. And what of regret? Ashbery writes, “I thought of all my lost days and how much more I could / have done with them, / if I had known what I was doing. But does one ever?” Make peace with yourselves or at least try to, there is nothing to know, you’ll ask yourself what it all means, you’ll ask others, but no one can provide the answer. That’s life. Put aside thoughts of “what could have been / if one had made the slightest / exertion in another direction.” You’ll find “it’s always a relief to come / back / to the beloved home with its misted windows, its teakettle, its / worn places on the ceiling, / for better or worse.” There
is a sense of resignation in these lines, a result of his reflections on his mortality, of our collective fate. But this, of course, does not mean the fight is over. After all, experience does teach you things and you go on: “Only give no thought to the morrow – / it will presently arrive and take care of itself, you’ll see.” Go contrary, don’t take the straight path in life. In “Going Away Any Time Soon” from Wakefulness, Ashbery writes, “What good are rules anyway / They apply only to themselves and other rules.” Reason and logic will get you so far and then you’ll find yourself confronting the unknown, you’ll meet strangers in bars or on the street and these are the best teachers.

Ashbery’s poems are about feeling rather than emotion; about texture and surface rather than meaning, and in this they are similar to abstract painting — collage-like rather than logically constructed. Marshall Olds, writing on Late Romanticism in an essay called “Literary Symbolism”: “The physical universe, then, is a kind of language that invites a privileged spectator to decipher it, although this does not yield a single message so much as a superior network of associations.” Ashbery writes,

I could never bring myself to offer my experiments the gift of objective, scientific, evaluation. Anything rather than that! So I feel I have wandered too long in the halls of the nineteenth century: its exhibits, talismans, prejudices and doomed expeditions are but too familiar to me; I must shade my eyes from the light with my hands, the light of the explosion of the upcoming twentieth century.

Ashbery is a kind of master ventriloquist. He’s the maestro of the voices he uses to talk to himself in his own mind. They are incantatory, scolding, disgusted, delighted, genial, nonsensical. They belong to the various characters the poet inhabits, the various masks he wears. On subjectivity, Ashbery writes, “And I purposely refrained from consulting me, / The culte du moi being a dead thing, a shambles. That’s what led to me.” This
rejection of the conventional lyric poem (“enough of this self-congratulation in Aegean sunrises. Who are we, after all? And who needs profundity?”), with its presumptions of a speaker with a singular identity, whose emotion is the central focus of the poem. This leads to a different sense of the self, as a kind of aura, elusive, and changeable, a glimpse of which, like a flickering light in the dark, occasionally appears in an Ashbery poem. At times Ashbery uses the “we” to express solidarity with society, from which he feels marginalized, but solidarity does not last, and he retreats into a private world. In “The Village of Sleep” from *Wakefulness*, he writes, “That spasm I created for my own diversion, now it’s clearly emerging out of the octopus drool that so long enshrouded it, while I, a nether spur to its district railway, am overrun with coughing doubt for the duration, yet here I must stand, a seeming enigma.”

For all the resistance to meaning in a typical Ashbery poem, he has certainly become less “obscure” to readers, as a result of all the critical analysis devoted to his work over the years. But in “A Poem of Unrest” from *Can You Hear, Bird*, Ashbery writes:

But since I don’t understand myself, only segments of myself that misunderstand each other, there’s no reason for you to want to, no way you could even if we wanted it.

There are things that simply can’t be understood about a person, however much we try. It is a sobering thought for those who believe in reason and believe that we can fully understand each other, our reasons for doing what we do, acting the way we do, saying the things we say. We try to understand but fail. This does not mean, of course, that there aren’t moments when we are surprised about what we find out about each other. There is a light in the darkness. And if we’re not stubborn, we won’t insist on trying to explain that which defies explanation. After all, the problem may simply be in the approach you take. Ashbery, in the excerpted lines above, could almost be giving us a
hint about his own work. His poems are made of these “segments of myself that misunderstand each other” and thus are the result of dialogue in his own mind and with the reader. The conversation with reader will continue as we read him, discuss his work, teach him in classrooms, and write essays and books on him. He will be important to future readers as he has been to many in the past and in the present. Ashbery’s work points to the future and reminds us of the need for risk in the pursuit of self-knowledge. It also reminds us that poetry, like jazz, needs to stretch its boundaries and seek out new terrain in order to remain a vital force in our time.

Works Cited