

ABSTRACT

MCGOWAN, CATHERINE-ANNE CALHOUN. Contemporary Communication: Discourse and Form in the Poetry of James Merrill and John Ashbery. (Under the direction of Dr. Thomas Lisk)

Although James Merrill and John Ashbery approach poetry from very different stylistic angles, the themes that emerge from their work have numerous similarities. Each poet illustrates how classic form has evolved to fit into contemporary context in poems such as “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape” and “To a Pocket Calculator,” as well as commenting on this evolution in works such as “Watching the Dance,” “Litany” and “The Songs We Know Best.” After laying the groundwork of formal change, Merrill and Ashbery discuss how this stylistic evolution is mirrored in the day to day life of our fast-paced contemporary society. In poems such as “Eight Bits” and “Self-Portrait in Tyvek™ Windbreaker,” James Merrill expresses disgust and skepticism with the state of society today, while John Ashbery addresses the need for rebirth in an oppressive landscape in “It Was Raining in the Capital.” Both poets reveal their own feelings of insecurity and self-doubt in “Business Personals” and “Family Week at Oracle Ranch,” poems that are simultaneously nostalgic for the past and optimistic about the future. Exploring these themes sheds new light on postmodernism’s blending of high and low culture. The examination of each poet’s work from a formal and contextual perspective is essential in understanding the need for preservation of both artistic and emotional values of the past in order to have a successful future.

**CONTEMPORARY COMMUNICATION: DISCOURSE AND FORM IN THE
POETRY OF JAMES MERRILL AND JOHN ASHBERRY**

by
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Introduction

Prolific modernist Ezra Pound was famous for his assertion that the goal of modernism is to “make it new” (“Modernist”). As the era of postmodernism emerged after World War II, the literary world saw a “shift in focus” that “catalyzed the rejuvenation of literary genres that were depreciated during the modernist period” (Geyh xvi). This shift was particularly evident in postmodern poetic style. However, the “make it new” edict had not been abandoned but, rather, revised. Traditional structures from past poetic eras were re-embraced, but rather than a strict return to the old, the forms were revitalized in a contemporary way. Frederic Jameson explains this goal of postmodernism:

One of the most significant features or practices in postmodernism today is pastiche. [. . .] Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style [. . .] but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse (656-7).

In order to achieve this revitalization, some postmodern poets embraced a new range of styles in which the high culture of traditional poetic structure is combined with “low culture” from contemporary popular influence.

This pattern of combining tradition and experimentation is particularly exemplified in the works of two poets – James Merrill and John Ashbery – but they fall on different ends of the spectrum. Merrill is primarily a formal poet. He rarely writes in free verse, preferring instead to work in blank verse or any of a variety of other stanza forms. At times he takes liberties with these traditional structures, such as by blending

rhyme schemes and meters. Ashbery, on the other hand, is a very experimental poet who rarely adheres to traditional form. Ashbery prefers to write in free verse, and on the rare occasions that he does use traditional form, he usually takes liberties with the form and uses it with contemporary subject matter.

Despite their differing styles, both poets are postmodern, an assertion confirmed by Mutlu Konuk Blasing's definition:

“Postmodern” marks a historical *and* a poetic difference. [. . .] Thus not only experimental poets like Frank O’Hara and John Ashbery, but formal poets like Elizabeth Bishop and James Merrill are postmodern, for whatever their technical differences, they do not buy into the modernist reification of poetic techniques.

(3).

The loose tenets of postmodernism allow for a freedom of expression for the poet, and James Merrill and John Ashbery each choose to embrace that freedom with a new approach. Both poets share a desire – and perhaps the desire of all postmodernists – to create a new, complex portrayal of human experience. Merrill and Ashbery, though they approach from different angles, examine the meaning of art and poetry in the face of changing social norms, and society’s responses to industrial and technological advances, as well as how human emotions play out in the context of these advances.

James Merrill emerged as a poet of some significance in the 1960s when critics “extolled his gifts as a lyric poet” (Keene). Mutlu Konuk Blasing asserts that “No one has accused James Merrill of being postmodern. If anything, his accomplished formalism and his reliance on traditional verse forms and conventions have made his poetry seem slightly anachronistic.” Despite this assertion, as Blasing himself noted earlier, Merrill

retains a postmodern element by taking traditional, and perhaps anachronistic, structures and putting his own variations on them. It is a use of form that allows for a postmodern appreciation of traditional styles, owing to Merrill's particular fondness for drawing on contemporary resources as a means of making these forms more relevant. Blasing himself later asserts that

While Merrill inhabits conventional metrical and stanzaic forms without much anxiety, his verse also registers its historical position of coming after modernism, and its importance lies in its questioning novelty, progress and modernity – the very possibility of new beginnings. Merrill's postmodernism, then, is not merely a late phase of modernism, but represents a challenge to the idea of modernity (156).

Merrill allows himself the freedom to adjust traditional structures according to the emotion he wishes to convey. He tackles a wide range of subject matter yet still manages to maintain a beautiful self-reflective quality. Merrill expresses feelings that are so personal that his poems yield an explicit emotional element that is absent from John Ashbery's writing. Nick Halpern notes, "We can sense a private, an everyday life behind Merrill's early vocabulary and idiom" (143), clarifying his earlier remark that "James Merrill's sense of the everyday would be formidable because it would be supported by the domestic and the human" (141). This marriage between "private" and "everyday" supports the notion that Merrill's work is postmodern. This expression of emotion may be personal for Merrill, but it also retains a universal appeal, particularly to a contemporary audience. While his form may not always be open, the ideas behind his work operate in an open way that "give[s] the audience the power to assemble the work and determine its

meaning” (Geyh x). Merrill works in emotions and ideas that, although personal for him, incorporate honesty, irony and sarcasm, transposing his personal experiences into objective poetic form.

Within these contemporary resources, Merrill captures a sense of the present that has the potential to appeal to future generations as well. “Various critics have considered him a conventional formalist and an anti-traditional postmodernist. Do his variations on a sonnet represent a re-birth of formalism or a postmodern parody of an exhausted form?” (Materer 2). I suggest it is something of both. Rather than parody, Merrill works in the vein of pastiche, not cruelly mocking the forms of the past, but treating them with respect and updating them for a present-day audience.

John Ashbery primarily relies on open form to get his desired effect; however, he too finds it fitting at times to call upon traditional stanza patterns and poetic structures to reinforce his intent. As opposed to Merrill’s general adherence to and respect for form, Ashbery “knocks layers of old thematic plaster off the brick walls of structure” (Conte). Ashbery frequently celebrates form by coupling it with light-hearted subject matter, a technique that brings older poetic styles into the present tense. Although humor plays a role in his work, “Ashbery denies that he parodies, and if by the term we mean the echoing of a voice for the sake of ridiculing it, we may concede that his phrasing is seldom merely parodic” (Perkins). Indeed,

[. . .] in Ashbery’s writing the difference between parodic and nonparodic verges on the unmeasurable. [. . .] “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape” in which Ashbery elaborates a sestina-length scenario involving the Popeye comic strip characters that seems to bear no reference whatsoever to anything outside of

itself, that seems as much pure poetry, in its way, as any Mallarmé sonnet (Shetley 124).

Ashbery, like Merrill, succeeds in generalizing and abstracting while drawing heavily on contemporary cultural resources and making the personal element apparently absent. Ashbery once said, “you should try to make your poem as representative as possible,” a statement in which John Shoptaw asserts “‘representative’ is implicitly opposed to ‘personal’” (1). While the personal element of Merrill’s poems gives them a universal human appeal through the sharing of common emotions, Ashbery’s lack of self-reflective work creates a body of poetry that, in Ashbery’s words, gets at “a general, all-purpose experience” (qtd. in Shoptaw 1). “No poet since Whitman has tapped into so many distinctly American voices” (Schultz 1), a quality that lends much to his universal appeal. Harold Bloom declared Ashbery “the poet of our moment” in 1976 (Herd 145), and in 1985, Bloom asserted that “no contemporary American poet is so impressively at one with one himself in expounding a discursive wisdom” (Bloom 7), which can be taken as an indicator that Bloom thinks Ashbery’s work holds enough wisdom to endure beyond the present moment.

The works of the two poets that exemplify the combining of form and contemporary themes fall into two primary categories. The first exhibits pastiche of poetic structures and plays with other art forms. Pastiche, “a literary work composed from elements borrowed either from various other writers or from a particular earlier author,” differs from parody in that it uses “imitation as a form of flattery rather than mockery” (Baldick 185-6). The poems in this category take a playful look at not just poetry but also dance and music, art forms that have evolved as societal standards have

changed. Ashbery rejoices in the sestina in the aforementioned “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape.” Merrill takes a fresh look at the power of the ode in “To a Pocket Calculator.” Pastiche of form and art are also found in Merrill’s “Watching the Dance” and Ashbery’s “The Songs We Know Best” and “Litany.” Merrill’s poems use form to elevate his content. On the other hand, Ashbery takes liberties with form as he seeks out a structure of his own that he adjusts to meet his needs rather than seeking a specific pre-existing form to support his ideas. This pastiche of art forms incorporates a respect for the past while simultaneously addressing the significance of these artistic themes in the present.

The changing times mark the theme of the second primary category. Both Merrill and Ashbery have written numerous poems that present a discourse (often while using traditional form, though open form is common as well), comparing contemporary life with the past. The build-up of cities and the technologizing of society has caused the feeling of being trapped, an emotion that John Ashbery captures in “It was Raining in the Capitol.” Merrill’s “Self Portrait in Tyvek™ Windbreaker” looks at traditional ideas in a contemporary setting, calling upon present day scenes and symbols such as “The Oprah Winfrey Show” and the Reebok brand name. James Merrill’s “Eight Bits” and “Family Week at Oracle Ranch,” as well as Ashbery’s “Business Personals” are other works that embody this discourse between past and present as they look at the effect created by the simultaneous trivialization of serious issues and the elevation of the most trivial things. Classic emotional themes are updated and examined in a world in which a superficial attitude towards economic, environmental, and other pressing social issues seems to be overtaking true compassion and willingness to effect change.

In its discussion of open forms, the *Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* describes poems which may or may not adhere to any traditional stanzaic pattern, as “dialogue in disguise.” This description is an accurate summary of the two categories of poems – those that act as a pastiche of art and those that present a dialogue between past and present – even when the chosen form is closed:

This dialogue, this powerful and contentious discussion about the relation of reality to expression, far from being a headstrong rejection of the past, is one of the glories of this century’s literature. The problem is to catch it and listen to it, in all its power and diversity. And, of course, in that sense it does not show itself as a discussion of rhythms and rhymes and stanzas only. But also of their source: the powerful feelings and confusions about identity, expression, and subject matter that have prompted poets of all kinds in this century to voice their feelings (260).

Both Merrill and Ashbery can be said to succeed in vocalizing contemporary feelings. Shetley believes that this style “forgoes the conventions, and thus to some extent the audience” (104); however, the combining of high cultural forms with popular cultural references allows the poetry to be even more accessible to the modern-day reader.

Ashbery and Merrill, whether purposefully or not, have produced poetry that reaches out to the postmodern identity, a sense of self that cannot be defined or narrowed into one or even a few defining characteristics. James Merrill’s personal touch to his poetry pushes emotional boundaries, but his work stays within structural boundaries that help keep his ideas within the reader’s reach. John Ashbery’s avoidance of the personal has an equal effect in not tying down his expressions to a single perspective. Ashbery chooses to manage his emotions by turning them into literary art. His use of open form

and free verse allows numerous perspectives and interpretive opportunities. As society has grown increasingly complex, so has the representation of the individual. In their work, James Merrill and John Ashbery examine this change, compare the past and present, and address the role of the artist and the reader in contemporary times.

Parody and Pastiche in the Poems of Ashbery and Merrill

James Merrill and John Ashbery's means of acknowledging tradition while experimenting with form are twofold. First, each poet shows by example how traditional forms have evolved to fit into a contemporary context. Ashbery writes sestinas with a modern-day twist while Merrill celebrates contemporary accomplishments in the form of an ode. Second, both poets write poems that comment on this evolution of form. They address how art forms such as dance, music, and poetry itself have changed, a modification with which Merrill seems quite comfortable while Ashbery expresses doubt. In both cases, the contemporary poems act as a pastiche, or respectful parody, of the traditional forms. The incorporation of contemporary themes into classical forms represents the postmodern blend of high and low culture. Each poet chooses his blend of form for different reasons. James Merrill uses form as a container for experience – he starts with an experience and expresses it in the appropriate form. John Ashbery, on the other hand, chooses a form and manipulates it to meet his own needs. Rather than being incidental to the experience, both poets' work with form becomes part of the experience.

A prime example of respectful mocking, or pastiche, of strict traditional forms in Ashbery's work is his modern-day take on the twelfth-century poetic form, the sestina. Ashbery makes a complex poetic form accessible to a contemporary audience by lightening the subject matter to that of a motley crew of comic book characters. "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape" parallels the complexity of the poetic form with the overwhelming chaos of oppressive city life, while reflecting on a simpler time and a simpler place: the country that the characters long for.

Invented by the romantic court singer Arnaut Daniel, the sestina was originally a complex poetic form reserved for “a master troubadour.” A composition of thirty-nine lines, the sestina is made up of six stanzas with an envoi of three lines at the end. While it rarely rhymes, the form employs an even more complex pattern of repetition as the same six end words are repeated in each stanza, following a pre-determined order that changes with each set of lines. The final envoi incorporates all of the end words (Strand 24-5). The sestina has found contemporary popularity, as it is well-suited to conversational form in a plain-language style (26). Ashbery’s own popularization of the form is partly responsible for its resurgence, as he has found it useful not so much as a means of “continuing to evolve their traditional thematics but . . . to evade semantic closure” (McCorkle 109). Ashbery’s work exemplifies the way in which this rigid form can be used for a new sense of freedom.

Before writing “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape,” John Ashbery embraced the sestina form in his poem “Faust,” in which he uses the structure to call upon a classic work, Goethe’s early nineteenth-century tragedy *Faust*. This poem weaves together an alternative to the story of Faust, bringing it into a Brecht-like reality that incorporates the Phantom of the Opera and a frustrated orchestra and theatre stage crew. When the Phantom takes over the production, *Faust* takes on a new meaning that satisfies everyone involved, especially the audience. The Phantom departs, and the theatrical space is freed from his burden and, “On the bare, sunlit stage, the hungers could begin.” The hunger to create something new takes root. The theatre has been prepared for a new production to take control, just as the sestina has been prepared by Ashbery as a format for modern themes.

However, Ashbery brings the sestina into a more clearly contemporary context in “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape.” Thanks to skillfully enjambed lines, the poem does not announce itself as being anything unusual in the way of form. It takes a few moments for us to notice that it is a sestina. The subject matter, however, is immediately obvious: “The first of the undecoded messages read: ‘Popeye sits in thunder.’” Any reader with knowledge of popular culture will recognize the name of the cartoon character, “Popeye.” The poem’s narrative continues to include Wimpy, the Sea Hag, Olive and Swee’pea, other characters from the “Popeye the Sailor Man” franchise, making it clear that the life of this rather silly character is indeed the subject of the poem.

Certainly “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape” could be interpreted as mocking the twelfth-century structure of the sestina, as the subject of Popeye seems to imply that a poetic form with such a long history has been reduced to foolish references to popular culture. However, Ashbery’s relatively strict adherence to the guidelines of the form (he writes in free verse rather than meter) suggests that he is not mocking it but celebrating it humorously. A reader makes extremely different demands on cartoons and comic books than on serious poetry. By choosing silly subject matter, Ashbery unites a genre of entertainment that makes few, if any, demands on its audience with one of the most challenging structures of serious poetry. He eliminates the intimidation factor that may go along with the sestina and makes it accessible to a modern audience. Ashbery exhibits simultaneous celebration of classic poetic form and pop culture, giving them equal weight in the poem. He engages cartoon characters in a complex narrative, as they themselves seem to be struggling with the progress of society.

Wimpy and the Sea Hag find themselves relaxing in an apartment that quickly becomes more of a prison than a vacation home as it seems to shrink in size when they remember the country. They are faced with cryptic notes, such as “Thunder / And tears are unvail[ing], [. . .] Henceforth shall Popeye’s apartment / Be but remembered space, toxic or salubrious, whole or scratched.” Olive arrives to save her son Swee’pea from the oppressive apartment and escapes with him to the “country,” an end word that takes on an increasingly archetypal meaning as the poem progresses. “Country” goes from being just a place mentioned in passing to the recurring symbol of country as a place of escape. As “domestic thunder” fills the apartment it becomes evident that the country represents open spaces free from the oppression of modern life. It is as if these cartoon characters cannot keep up with the demands that modern culture has made on them, and they must escape to a setting of more freedom, even as they exist within a structurally complex poetic form. Perhaps Olive sees escaping to the country as an escape from this increasingly complex and nonsensical poem into a simpler time and place. Ashbery uses the sestina as a means of freedom. Though it is structured, by not allowing himself to be tied down by its repetitive end words, as “no end-word has a single determinate meaning” (McCorkle 109), Ashbery can use form as a means of escape, just as his characters can find a way around the structure to escape to freedom by leaving the cramped apartment for the country.

James Merrill’s “To a Pocket Calculator” embraces the same idea of simultaneously exploring a classic poetic form and the effects of modern life, but its message shoots off in quite a different direction. Like Ashbery’s poem, Merrill’s presents a contrast between the complexities of modern life and the presumably simpler period in

which the ode was popular. However, instead of a feeling of nostalgia, “To a Pocket Calculator” celebrates, ironically at times, these technological complications.

The form of an ode is looser than that of the sestina as it emphasizes content over form. Rather than conforming to a strict structural regimen as the sestina does, the ode adheres to a specific purpose – that of elevating its subject in a solemn and heroic manner. “[P]art convention, part mode and all opportunity” (Strand 240), the ode is a form that impassioned the imaginations of the romantics. John Keats celebrated the nightingale, a Grecian urn, and the Elgin marbles, while Percy Bysshe Shelley heralded the West Wind. The ode has continued to find flexible new interpretations with modern and contemporary poets, including Hart Crane, Marianne Moore, and Robert Pinsky. The subject matter of John Merrill’s ode is particularly significant for its intimate relationship with technology. The pocket calculator hardly seems as timeless as, say, the nightingale; however, by capturing it in the form of an ode, Merrill gives it the gift of everlasting meaning.

Unlike the sestina, the ode does not have strict structural rules, so Merrill had the freedom to create a structure of his own to elevate this modern convenience. “To a Pocket Calculator” is written in three stanzas of eleven lines each, and each stanza follows a visual pattern of Merrill’s own creation. Beginning with two syllables, the lines of each stanza get progressively longer, an optical effect that mirrors the increasing row of numbers on a calculator’s display screen as different functions are performed. This is a feature of the calculator that Merrill notes with admiration, saying, “Push-button cogitation sets / You racing, brow clear, up to the ninth digit.” Merrill goes beyond these basic operations, however, to inflate the functions of the calculator into a dramatic tale

that is enhanced by human interaction. “Aside, aren’t you that periodic peon / Translated from his peaks by Mrs. / X or Count Y to the choking / Lianas of a Paris.” These lines make the experience of turning from a simple number, a “peon,” into a more tangled and complex mathematical figure, a “liana,” seem intensely dramatic. The words make the mechanical device seem organic and natural. Merrill’s ode elevates the calculator to the dignity of a natural creature, uneasily intertwining nature and machine, as is so often the case in contemporary life.

The Ultimate Science-Fiction Poetry Guide goes so far as to categorize Merrill’s small ode as a “science fiction [poem] of great merit.” Indeed, by giving something as prosaic as a pocket calculator such a natural role, it does seem that Merrill has entered into the territory of science-fiction. It is fitting that this poem, written in 1983 when the world of computers was just entering into mainstream acceptance and accessibility, should acknowledge in the ode form the rudimentary but still rather impressive powers of this piece of technology. However, to whatever great heights he may elevate the electronic tool in the first two stanzas, Merrill quickly brings it, and technology as a whole, back to ground level in his final stanza: “Proud in- / nocent, beware. / I, too, possess / A magic memory.” Merrill may acknowledge the merits of technology, yet he still exalts the human mind as being the more powerful of the two. While Ashbery calls upon the simple world of cartoon as means of being reminded of a less demanding time, in his statement that nothing can replace the power of human thought, Merrill too acknowledges the desirability of the world before the complications of technology were introduced.

Both Merrill and Ashbery take parody-driven looks at traditionally serious poetic forms in “Farm Implements and Rutabagas” and “To a Pocket Calculator.” In other poems, they make the move from parodying structure and form to the pastiche of artistic concepts. Poems such as Merrill’s “Watching the Dance,” and Ashbery’s “The Songs we Know Best,” and “Litany” take fresh views of a variety of art forms that that have evolved in the same way that poetic structure has. These poems stand as an acknowledgement that just as Merrill and Ashbery have translated traditional poetic form into contemporary terms, so other artists have done the same with their own crafts.

Merrill and Ashbery each use fixed poetic form in these poems to reflect the characteristics of the art form they are discussing. The two parts of Merrill’s “Watching the Dance” are rhymed to reflect the dance form each describes. Ashbery’s “The Songs We Know Best” has the appearance of intentionally bad poetry as it alludes to popular songs and mocks their lack of creative rhyme schemes. “Litany” provides Ashbery’s take on poetry as an art form by using the free-verse form for which Ashbery is primarily known. Form differences aside, all of these poems discuss how art has evolved.

James Merrill’s “Watching the Dance” begins with a two-stanza set entitled “Balanchine’s.” George Balanchine, the founder of the School of American Ballet, was known for his exceptional work with classical ballet as well as choreography for musical theatre (Souche), dance forms characterized by their strict structure. Much like a form such as the ballad or the sestina, Balanchine’s choreographed dances were repeated the same way every time they were performed. There was no room for flexibility for the dancers once Balanchine’s design had been decided. The structure of this first section of

“Watching the Dance” parallels ballet’s simultaneous rigidity of structure and beauty of flowing form:

Poor savage, doubting that a river flows
But for the myriad eddies made
By unseen powers twirling on their toes,

Here in this darkness it would seem

You had already died and were afraid.

Be still. Observe the powers. Infer the stream.

Merrill uses perfectly rhyming iambic pentameter and tetrameter for this section of his dance poem, following an aba cbc pattern. Water imagery, found in references to the river, the stream and eddies, in combination with flowing assonance (the “o” sound in “doubting” and “powers,” for example), captures the delicate movements of the ballet dancer. The poem, like Balanchine’s choreographed pieces, flows like water, smoothly and beautifully with certain calm.

Although it follows the same structure as “Balanchine’s,” the mood and tone of the second section of “Watching the Dance,” “Discothèque,” are quite different. The lines reflect the modern atmosphere of a disco in which there are no strict rules such as those found in ballet. The youth of the disco era dances freely, following the loose structure of popular dance steps, but is never forced to strictly adhere to any set routine. This looseness is reflected in the poem:

Having survived entirely in your own youth,
Last of your generation, purple gloom

Investing you, sit, Jonah, beyond speech,

And let towards the brute volume VOOM whale mouth

VAM pounding viscera VAM VOOM

A teenage plankton luminously twitch.

“Discothèque” follows the same aba cbc pattern, but uses near rhyme rather than perfectly rhyming words. The meter is loosened, and the second half of “Watching the Dance” presents itself in a less rigid form than the first. With this style, Merrill captures the freedom of the dancers in the discothèque. With visual imagery of “plankton luminously twitch[ing],” and onomatopoeia – “vam” and “voom” – Merrill expresses the sights and sounds within a disco of bass-heavy music playing and young people under flashing lights twitching their bodies with the dance steps of the time. Even though it is not structured like Balanchine’s ballets, dancing in the discothèque is also an art form.

By contrasting classical dance and modern movement, Merrill is making a case for postmodern poetry as well. Freedom with form does not mean that form is absent, nor that the poem has less merit. “Watching the Dance” shows that form can exist in structured versions – as in the exact rhyme and meter of “Balanchine’s” – and in looser versions that still have value – as in the near rhyme and looser rhythm of “Discothèque.” Poetry is not the only art form to have evolved, and art is not any less valuable because of its changes.

John Ashbery addresses poetry’s changes directly in his long poem, “Litany,” an excerpt from which appears in Ashbery’s *Selected Poems*. In this poem he is mocking not only the art form of poetry but his own style. “Some certified nut / Will try to tell you it’s

poetry.” Ashbery refers to the contemporary freedom of verse, but obviously, he is also making fun of himself, as he has certainly been that “certified nut” defending his own more experimental works. He frequently works in free verse with unexpected and non-traditional subject matter, embracing the modern ideal of the avant garde. Anything can be considered art if you put the right spin on it, or so those who criticize what passes as artistic in contemporary society will have you believe.

“Litany” tells a loosely structured story in a pattern of free verse. In its original version in *As We Know*, “Litany” was printed “in two parallel columns, the left in roman type and the right in italics, ‘meant,’ according to an ‘Author’s Note,’ ‘to be read as simultaneous but independent monologues’” (Shoptaw 225). Ashbery is conversing with the reader, as well as himself, speaking in plain language, and separating his lines and stanzas with breaks that do not have any obvious purpose. It is a pastiche of modern poetry in which Ashbery is expressing his feelings about this “nutty” form by using that same form that he disparages. “Others, the tenor, the doctor, / Want us to walk about on it to see how we feel / About it before we attempt anything.” Ashbery acknowledges the value of experimenting prior to acting, but the purpose of “Litany” and perhaps even the purpose of Ashbery’s work as a whole is to undo this idea that it is not safe to dive right in to a new process. Ashbery advocates taking risks, not just creating that which is new but daring to take the old, traditionally accepted forms and bring them into the contemporary mind as a means of making them appreciated in a modern light. Ashbery needs no one’s approval to take these poetic risks such as writing a sestina about a cartoon character or a poem such as “37 Haiku” which uses an ancient form in a unique way to make simple observations about his own life.

“Litany” defends this bold approach to the creation of poetic art. In the *Selected Poems* excerpt, Ashbery embraces colorful metaphors and striking imagery:

A splattering of trumpets against the very high
Pockmarked wall and a forgetting of spiny
Palm trees and it is over for us all,
Not just us, and yet on the inside it was
Doomed to happen again, over and over, like a
Wave on a beach, that thinks it’s had this
Tremendous idea [. . .]

The image of a “splattering of trumpets” suggests the explosion of sound. Just like the “wave on a beach,” the risk-taking poet tries out his or her “tremendous idea” over and over again, even if the attempt repeatedly fails, just as a wave is inevitably pulled back into the water. In the following stanzas, the language and the visual imagery continue to be vivid. They swell into one increasingly long stanza until, finally, Ashbery comes back to the level of the everyday. He returns from the exaltation of “poetic” description to a more prosaic diction and subject matter:

Some months ago I got an offer
From Columbia Tape Club, Terre
Haute, Ind., where I could buy one
Tape and get another free. I accept-
Ed the deal, paid for one tape and
Chose a free one. But since I’ve been
Repeatedly billed for my free tape.

In this humorous shift, Ashbery backtracks to the familiar that, according to the voice that started the poem, is surely too familiar to be considered poetry or to be considered art. However, with his powerful language and imagery preceding this account of everyday life, Ashbery illustrates that the ordinary can indeed be art. “Litany” gives the same weight to the “splattering of trumpets” and the “pockmarked wall” as it does to being “Repeatedly billed for my free tape.” By containing these two different images in the context of the same poem, Ashbery acknowledges the aesthetic value of the everyday, even when it is not dressed up with poetic language.

Of course, Ashbery plays devil’s advocate with himself when he looks at a genre that may have become too familiar and too readily accepted: poetry in the form of popular song lyrics. “The Songs We Know Best” examines the evolution of this art form. However, rather than looking at its progress, Ashbery focuses solely on what lyrics have become, and, in fact, how closely they relate to poetry. As song lyrics have sometimes been studied as texts in literature classes, one could safely say that the lyrics of popular music have become a contemporary form of poetry, a form certainly more familiar to the general public than the work of any other contemporary poet. However, Ashbery uses his poem to parody song lyrics’ popularity. He imitates them to illustrate their sharp contrast with the work that “some certified nut” might consider poetry, Ashbery’s own more usual style.

In “The Songs We Know Best,” Ashbery uses iambic pentameter for his couplets arranged into quatrains. Each quatrain follows a rhyme scheme of aabb, ccdd, etc. It appears that as a means of proving his point, Ashbery purposely chose a pattern of rhyme lacking in much innovation – the first stanza, for example:

Just like a shadow in an empty room
Like a breeze that's pointed from beyond the tomb
Just like a project of which no one tells –
Or didja really think that I was somebody else?

With his similes that lack any novelty of style (“like a shadow in an empty room), and the slang contraction of “did you” into “didja” – a word that appears in the poem several times – Ashbery has written intentionally bad poetry to make fun of the “poets” of today – that is, the songwriters who have gained international acclaim. The rhyme is tired and obvious. It could even be called sing-songy. That repetitive quality is exactly what has made popular music so prevalent and well-liked – the repetition is familiar, easily remembered, and not intellectually taxing.

With variations on lines reminiscent of the work of prolific singer/songwriter Bob Dylan¹, “The Songs We Know Best” weaves a story out of catch phrases and slang. “Didja really think I was somebody else” recalls the casual parlance of rock singers, while “you pause before your father’s door afraid to knock” echoes the oft-recorded Dylan hit, “Knockin’ On Heaven’s Door.” Ashbery ambles through stanzas both prophetic and preachy, reflecting the rock ballad genre of the 1960s and 70s with lines such as “Our knowledge isn’t much it’s just a small amount / But you feel it quick inside you when you’re down for the count,” and

Even when that bugle sounded loud and clear
You knew it put an end to all your fear
To all that lying and the senseless mistakes

¹ In *The Vermont Notebook*, Ashbery playfully lists Dylan among contemporary poets, an inclusion that may indicate Ashbery’s respect for Dylan’s poetic abilities.

And now you've got it right and you know what it takes

Though the poem appears to be trying to tell a story, the narrative that results is unnecessarily cryptic with no clear narrative. Ashbery seems to have created a caricature of a Dylan ballad. John Shoptaw describes it as “a hilariously soulful number set to the rhythm of Peaches and Herb’s ‘Reunited’” (260). Clearly, Dylan isn’t the only pop star this poem invokes. Of course this “bad poetry” is not all negative in its effects. “The Songs We Know Best” highlights an important feature of contemporary song lyrics – they are more accessible; therefore they reach a broader audience than other forms of poetry can. The repetitive rhyme may be a sacrifice for what has become, as Ashbery says quite clearly in the title, “The Songs We Know Best.”

The poetry found in popular music can be mass-marketed to reach a broader audience. It is more conducive to multi-media distribution and consumption than a poem on paper could ever hope to be. Even though the line between popular media and poetry is increasingly blurred – audio recordings of poets reading their work are widely available; Bob Dylan’s lyrics and Beatles’ lyrics are available in book form – the media remain saturated with the latest and trendiest of pop stars, a fact that can be confirmed when passing by a newsstand or flipping through the channels of cable television. To a certain extent, this is what postmodernism is all about – combining “high” and “low” cultures so as to make art more available to society. Certainly Ashbery is parodying these songwriters in “The Songs We Know Best,” but it is a playful pastiche, blurring the line between making fun of the songs and respecting them. Although rather than respect, it may be discomfort that Ashbery is feeling because of the popularity of these trivial song lyrics. In addition to making fun of himself – Ashbery has certainly been guilty of

“trivial” poetry – he presents an extreme version of the song lyrics as a means of masking his own uneasiness. If these songs are considered art in contemporary society, then the traditional role of “art” may have been undermined. However, part of the role of postmodernism is “examining popular culture and its effect on individuals” (Geyh xviii). From this perspective, the perceived “undermining” of art is actually an acknowledgement of how poetry has evolved so that it may respond to an evolving society.

This evolution of art forms includes the transformation from strict rigidity to increased flexibility, as is the case in dance and poetry, as well as the decline of art from an exalted place of high culture to an approachable level within popular culture. The latter is the sacrifice that goes along with contemporary art’s new role in accessibility. These changes are well-documented in Merrill and Ashbery’s poems and acknowledged by critics as well. Mutlu Konuk Blasing notes,

The avant-garde values of risk taking, process, and novelty are also John Ashbery’s stylistic values [. . .]. What makes for the difference – and the *real* novelty – of Ashbery’s poetry is that he registers the changing cultural function of such techniques and increasingly acknowledges, after the early sixties, that experimental techniques and values are in fact consistent with the larger cultural economy (111).

Ashbery demonstrates a talent for acknowledging not only changes across time, but also within the postmodern time-frame itself. Ashbery’s present – beginning with his first popular works in the 1960s – is quickly becoming the past, and both his and Merrill’s awareness of ongoing societal changes is reflected in their work via structural changes.

James Merrill distinguishes himself from Ashbery in being more accepting of these societal changes. He works with the ode form quite comfortably in “To a Pocket Calculator” and acknowledges the change in dance forms in “Watching the Dance” without negative judgement, but rather a sort of reverence. John Ashbery implies some underlying criticism of the evolution of poetic structure, but also self-awareness that his own work is part of the change. Of course, there is an element of self-doubt that comes into play here as Ashbery is one of the more experimental poets. These artistic changes can be attributed to changing cultural values, an idea that holds particular relevance in many of Merrill and Ashbery’s later poems. The “cultural economy” emerges in their work and provides an essential component for their dialogue between traditional ideas of art and contemporary settings and voices. Merrill and Ashbery’s explorations of structure become relevant as each poet engages in a dialogue with contemporary attitudes and strives to capture something in the present that may be preserved for the future.

The Discourse Between Old and New – A Poetic Dialogue

After a look at Merrill's and Ashbery's takes on the evolution of art forms, it seems fitting to turn to their perspectives on societal change. Both poets address how rapid technological advancements and industrial developments over the last few decades have drastically altered our societal makeup. Ashbery sets a poem in a cityscape to illustrate the city's oppressive nature, while Merrill observes the cultural changes that result from dependence on brand names and modern conveniences. Both poets are critical of the way in which these changes have led to an apathetic attitude toward matters of essential value. The very fact that they choose poetry as their medium implies a belief in the values represented by poetry itself. Merrill is struck by the emotional oversimplification of pop-psychology and consumerism as a means of avoiding personal responsibility. Ashbery struggles with the unnecessary complication of basic ideas. Each poet suffers from self-doubt about his own role in society and his relevance in the artistic world.

Ashbery's "It Was Raining in the Capital" is written in ballad form: four-line stanzas rhyming abcb. Within this traditional ballad structure that dates back to the fourteenth century (Strand 75), Ashbery creates a narrative in a cityscape, a setting far from traditional in the realm of the ballad form. The poem launches into a story right away with characters identified as "her" and "The one they called the Aquarian." The "her" of the poem appears to be seeking freedom, and does indeed find a rebirth in the coming of spring:

For spring had entered the capital

Walking on gigantic feet.

The smell of witch hazel indoors

Changed to narcissus in the street.

Despite this sensory presence of the season of new arrivals, there is still a repressive element in the air. The rebirth cannot take shape, for it is trapped in the modern accoutrements to be expected in a capital city:

Bundles of new, fresh flowers,

All changing, pressing upward

To the distant office towers.

This stanza begins with the line, “She thought she had seen all this before.” The “thought” is indicative of a sense of *déjà vu* that stems from the presence of the flowers, but is undone by their lack of freedom. Something is off about this ushering in of spring, as the flowers have lost their wild freedom and are instead “pressing upward” to surpass the “distant office towers” that mark the industrialization of nature.

This feeling of being trapped encompasses “her” in the following stanzas:

Having spoken in that way, thinking

There could be no road ahead,

Sobbing into the intractable presence of it

As one weeps alone in bed.

Its chamber was narrower than a seed

Yet when the doorbell rang

It reduced all that living to air

As “*kyrie eleison*” it sang.

At this point in the poem, a door is both figuratively and literally opened to “her.” However, it quickly becomes clear that this may only be another trap of technologized society. The Aquarian, who has arrived at her door as a potential savior, is described as “never born of woman / Nor formed of the earth’s clay.” The Aquarian suddenly becomes analogous to the subject of Donna Haraway’s “The Cyborg Manifesto,” “a hybrid of machine and organism” (604). “Never born of woman,” the Aquarian has instead been created, perhaps in the mind of “her,” or perhaps in the visions of reality that have been created by an increasingly artificial society.

The world has moved beyond a place where “she” can be saved by nature. Rather, it is technology’s version of nature, this inhuman figure, which must become her savior. Ashbery implies some evil in technology, asking “Or was such lively intelligence / Only the breath of hell?” However, in a later stanza the Aquarian does prove to be a helpful resource – if only to make it evident that the restoration of true natural being is a lost cause:

“This is what my learning
Teaches,” the Aquarian said,
“To absorb life through the pore
For the life around you is dead.”

The Aquarian may further the industrialization of society, but at the same time, he offers a solution, as well as acknowledgement that natural life is indeed dead. The “she” of “It Was Raining in the Capital” may feel pressure and suffocation under the newly technology-driven world; however, it is that hybrid of nature and technology that serves

not only to hinder but to help her, as “The Aquarian” tells her that there is another way. She faces the fact that these societal changes, such as the oppression of flowers by buildings, are inevitable, yet simultaneously acknowledges that she is not forced to succumb to the pressure of change. There is no need for the alterations in society to get the better of her personal ideals. Ashbery offers a chance for hope by using the imagery of the flowers that grow among the buildings. Though they may be struggling at this stage in their life cycle, there will be a rebirth, as flowers perennially return. This rebirth can be true for her as well, and the dead “life around you” may only be a temporary circumstance. This adaptation to contemporary life illustrates the poet’s need to express a newly complex representation of the self.

While Ashbery addresses the oppressive nature of the cityscape and its effect on the self in general terms, Merrill takes observation of cultural change to a very specific level in “Self Portrait in Tyvek™ Windbreaker.” Numerous key terms date the poem and place it quite firmly in Merrill’s present, which has become our past. Tyvek™, for example, is cleverly affixed with its trademark symbol so that there is no confusion about its commercial nature. As he weaves a tale of his windbreaker, “white with a world map . . . I found it in one of those vaguely imbecile / Emporia,” Merrill alludes to DuPont, the Gap, Reebok and Oprah, all terms that root this poem deeply in the late twentieth century. There can be no mistake, Merrill is commenting his own present. In contrast to Ashbery’s neutral observation of the coexistence of nature and industry, Merrill embraces modern conveniences and makes them go to work for him in this poem, although he may be approaching them with a mix of disgust and nostalgia.

Merrill begins by describing his windbreaker made of “the seeming-frail, / Unrippable stuff first used for Priority Mail.” The image of the world map on the jacket indicates that this is to what world geography has been reduced. It is simultaneously fragile and indestructible, and it is within anyone’s closest grasp. Yet as Merrill describes the shop in which he found the windbreaker, it becomes clear that fragile, and quite impermanent, symbols and imagery have come to represent our society:

This one featured crystals,
Cassettes of whalesong and rain-forest whistles,
Barometers, herbal cosmetics, pillows like puffins,
Recycled notebooks, mechanized Lucite coffins
For sapphire waves that crest, break, and recede,
As they presumably do in nature still.

The use of the word “presumably” speaks volumes about Merrill’s perception of this place and the products it sells. Nature has become non-existent. It has been replaced by retail goods. This examination prompts Merrill to provide a contrasting image, as he flashes back to something in the past with true relevance, weight and meaning. He describes listening to “Songs of Yesteryear / Sung by Roberto Murolo. Heard of him?” And with this question, Merrill goes on to explain who Roberto Murolo was, how “Into the nuclear age [he] sang with a charm, / A perfect naturalness that thawed the numb / Survivors and reinspired the Underground” after World War II. Murolo represents an emotional point of stability in a time of great unrest: “From love to grief to gaiety his art / Modulates effortlessly, like a young man’s heart.” It seems that Merrill would like to inspire these emotional reactions. “Self-Portrait in Tyvek™ Windbreaker” centers on this

desire and Merrill's attempt to break through the superficial impermanence of contemporary life by acknowledging it and confronting it. As the poem concludes with an invocation of Murolo himself, Merrill's desire to reveal raw emotions and true passion behind this flimsy wall of self-interest emerges.

Merrill pursues the theme of societal inaction by ascribing human characteristics to the jacket itself:

Even this dumb jacket
Probably still believes in Human Rights,
Thinks in terms of "nations," urban centers,
Cares less (can Tyvek breathe?) for oxygen
Than for the innocents evicted when
Ford bites the dust and Big Mac buys the farm.

This attitude is reminiscent of Donna Haraway's cyborg, as the jacket plays a role of pure function to solve problems without the distraction of human life. Of course the jacket is merely another piece of inanimate matter that may send a message but serves no active purpose. "Even this dumb jacket" may focus on human rights, nations' rights, and the state of the economy, but it still goes on playing its predetermined role as it accompanies Merrill to the gym. The idealistic people who claim to have these concerns are no more effective than a windbreaker at affecting change. For Merrill, the windbreaker becomes an embodiment of all that is shallow. He presents a viewpoint that is not only skeptical, but riddled with disgust. This poem is, after all, a "Self-Portrait." It is not only the society around him that Merrill criticizes, but the way in which he has become encased in society's superficial values.

As if catching himself in this downward spiral, Merrill begins a stanza with a half-hearted attempt at optimism, to justify both society and his own role in it: “Still not to paint a picture wholly black, / Some social highlights.” At this point he goes on to cite pay-phone sex, Oprah and the laugh track. Are these the only things we have to proud of? No sooner does Merrill make the suggestion of optimism, than he returns to his pessimistic rant. He criticizes Americans who “Shrug off accountability by dressing / Younger than their kids.” He mocks the environmental movement: “Like first-graders we ‘love’ our mother Earth, / Know she’s been sick, and mean to care for her,” but of course in this society of inaction that “meaning” to care never becomes doing.

The sarcastic attitude that he carries throughout the poem makes it clear that Merrill struggles to understand the superficiality of society and laments the way in which this shallow attitude overshadows essential human values. He expresses concern with impermanence in the lines, “The swells of fashion cresting to collapse / In breaker upon breaker on the beach.” Whatever social trend in activism is popular this season will surely change in a few months, just as clothing styles do. In his final lines, Merrill calls upon Roberto Murolo. “Don’t ask, Roberto,” he says. Rather, Merrill says, just “Sing our final air:”

Love, grief, etc. * * * * for good reason.
 Now only * * * * * STOP signs.
 Meanwhile * * * * if you or I’ve ex-
 ceeded our [?] * * * ~~more than time~~ was needed
 To fit a text airless and * * as Tyvek
 With breathing spaces and between the lines

Days brilliantly recurring, as once *we* did,
To keep the blue wave dancing in its prison.

Merrill's final stanza, in its playfulness, is a call to action and a verbalization of what he is hoping to break through the superficiality of society to find by writing "Self-Portrait in Tyvek™ Windbreaker." As love and grief exist "for good reason," the basic truths of the emotions emerge. By replacing words with asterisks, Merrill removes the façade that contemporary society paints on reality and uses his carefully chosen words to recall what once was. "Self Portrait in Tyvek™ Windbreaker" seems nostalgic for the past, as it identifies so strongly with the emotional bankruptcy of the present.

Nostalgia for a time before technological complications emerges in Ashbery's "Business Personals;" however, "Business Personals" lacks the optimistic component of "It Was Raining in the Capital" and instead parallels "Self-Portrait's" cynical attitude. The poem begins with what appears to be Ashbery's invocation of the muses, "The disquieting muses again . . ." as he calls upon them to assist in creating this poetry of a new age. Ashbery acknowledges that the notion of poetry has changed: "The songs decorate our notion of the world / And mark its limits, like a frieze of soap-bubbles." Like Merrill's concern with impermanence in "Self-Portrait," these lines speak of Ashbery's similar frustration. Our notion of what makes up the world around us could burst at any moment, brief as a soap-bubble. Ashbery seems to fear that contemporary poetry suffers the same impermanence, only being relevant for a brief moment and serving merely as "decoration," perhaps like his own poem "The Songs We Know Best."

The third stanza of "Business Personals" wonders, with some skepticism,

Could one return

To the idea of nature summed up in these pastoral images?

Yet the present has done its work of building

A rampart against the past, not a rampart,

A barbed-wire fence.

The word “pastoral” conjures notions of past literary traditions; however, Ashbery fears that his work as a postmodernist acts as strangling barbed-wire. The present is suffering because it has formed a boundary between itself and the past. Even a rampart, as a protective barrier that could potentially be overcome, offers some hope that Ashbery sees dashed, as he replaces that barrier with the threatening image of barbed-wire, a force that turns potential poetic achievements away because of their lack of future relevance. These metaphors are indicative of the changing nature of cultural defenses. The rampart is a much more durable obstacle than barbed-wire, but it also puts up a much less painful defense. Ashbery struggles with the idea of the present closing itself off to the influences of the past, and he seems doubtful of present-day values’ success in the future.

In “Eight Bits,” a collection of brief observations, James Merrill also takes a skeptical approach in looking at how times – and perceptions – have changed and blocked out values and influences learned from past experiences. The first and seventh bits are the most relevant to the dialogue between old and new, as the first looks at a teenager’s perception of God and Merrill’s apparent disgust with it:

Light show at the Planetarium.

Schlock music. Seven colors put through drum

Majorette paces. “We saw God tonight,”

Breathes Wendy. Yes, and He was chewing gum.

In this poem, Merrill observes the way in which God has been reduced to a superficial experience of flashy lights and “schlock music.” While Ashbery questions, “Why can’t everything be simple again?” Merrill sees one of the key concerns of existence, the presence or absence of a higher power, being made into something trivial. Youth has put much too much weight on experiences that are meaningless. The essence of true art has been lost to “Laser Majesty.”

In the seventh bit, “To an Actor on Location for a Film in Which He Gets Killed,” Merrill goes on to express the idea that in contemporary times, nothing is as it seems. A film serves as the perfect illustration of elements of society that cannot be taken at face value. The actor dies, “The spear goes through you but you feel no pain,” but it is only an illusion. Merrill seems to see this film’s illusion as a metaphor for contemporary art as a whole. A laser light show is the closest youth can come to God, and the portrayal of death and grieving on film causes those emotions to be made superficial as well. Certainly the long tradition of performance on stage can be said to possess these same painless imitations of emotions, but when entering into the world of celluloid, a new relationship is formed between the audience and the art. Film creates a new intimacy because the details are clearer, making the experience much more intense. The special effects made possible by film bring the experiences one sees to a new level in which death and violence are so prolific on the screen that their occurrences in reality seem unreal. “To an Actor on Location for a Film in Which He Gets Killed” exemplifies this disparity as it captures how normal it is for the “dead” actor to attend a postmortem dinner at the narrator’s “place at nine.” It is the embodiment of violence and death without consequences.

“Earth receives / A battered image and the housewife grieves.” These lines from “To an Actor on Location for a Film in Which He Gets Killed” illustrate the manipulative ability of film that is not found in other artistic mediums. These lines present a superficial society that imprints images upon the viewers in a means of coaxing a universal opinion, rather than allowing them to think for themselves. All of this complication is contrasted by the aesthetic simplicity of the final piece, “A Bit of Blue Tile on the Beach,” “Fragments like this, my Sunshine, fall / When you flash from your shower stall.” Merrill’s imagery is simple and straightforward. There are no complications, no superficialities. Instead there is beauty and poetry in something simple – a chip of tile. In the present moment, the beauty in this tile is a subjective image that allows the appeal to exist in the eye of the beholder.

While Merrill is critical of oversimplification, Ashbery seems concerned with unnecessary complications. Returning to “Business Personals,” one cannot help but wonder if this poem is personal for Ashbery, if after years of experimenting with alternative structures and styles, he has become riddled with self-doubt that his work has any staying power. Of course, as we have already seen, Ashbery’s work does successfully climb over the “barbed-wire fence.” His work has accomplished a respect for and a revitalization of structural styles of the past. It has served to both preserve the past and create a new style for the present that he may hope will endure into the future. Still, he concludes “Business Personals” with a lament for things past:

Such simple things,
And we make of them something so complex it defeats us,
Almost. Why can’t everything be simple again,

Like the first words of the first song as they occurred

The “Almost” of this final stanza offers hope, and appears to be Ashbery’s self-reassurance. Just as the “she” of “It was Raining in the Capital” comes to realize that life can be absorbed “through the pore,” so Ashbery will not be defeated by the transient world around him that he finds so frustrating. Every new poem he writes becomes its own “first words of the song.” The dialogue between old and new survives for Ashbery, and he will continue to cross that rampart, whether barbed-wire obstacles, such as skeptics and critics, are in his way or not.

Merrill’s own self-doubt emerges in “Family Week at Oracle Ranch,” an intensely personal commentary. The tone of this poem, while ripe with skepticism, has a flexibility indicating that the speaker may give way to acceptance and understanding. “Self-Portrait in Tyvek™ Windbreaker” derides the same ideals that “Family Week at Oracle Ranch” embraces – though not with ease. The dialogue between past and present is immediately evident in “Family Ranch,” as the poem opens with the lines:

The world outstrips us. In my day,
Had such a place existed,
It would have been advertised with photographs
Of doctors – silver hair, pince-nez –

Merrill goes on for the next two stanzas to describe the difference between the sanatoriums of his “day,” and this new environment, in which the patients share “pain like fudge from home.” As time has passed, things have become less sterile and more touchy-feely. The crystals, recycled notebooks, and herbal cosmetics of “Self-Portrait”

have come into emotional being at the Oracle Ranch, a rehabilitation institute at which Merrill is spending a week with a loved one.

As the poem opens, it is obvious that Merrill is no more comfortable with new age ideas of healing in this recovery environment than he is with the trinkets being sold in the shop. In the third stanza, he describes the place as “little more than a fat farm for Anorexics, / Substance Abusers, Love & Relationship Addicts.” In a world that is so crowded with complexities – like the world Ashbery laments in “Business Personals” – all of these emotional injuries have been lumped together into a single place of healing.

The second section of the poem, called “Instead of Complexes,” begins

Simplicities. Just seven words – AFRAID,

HURT, LONELY, etc. – to say it with.

Shades of the first watercolor box

(I “felt blue,” I “saw red”).

In a society in which everything has become unnecessarily complicated, the Ranch makes problems and emotions alarmingly simple. Feelings have been reduced to primary colors, with guidelines on how to express them (“Not to say / ‘Your silence hurt me,’ / Rather, “When you said nothing I felt hurt.”). Merrill’s skepticism gives way to frustration. As he goes through this experience trying to understand what his loved one experiences, he finds that the seven colors are not enough. The potential for complex shading of each color, and in turn each emotion, is ignored by the counselors instructing the patients how to feel. By avoiding replying to their stories with a sardonic “Thank you for sharing,” Merrill is resisting the temptation to mock the patients. It is difficult to avoid turning the entire experience into a parody of itself.

But as the poem progresses, Merrill gradually gives himself over to the experience. Skepticism gives way to participation. Merrill is encouraged to accept himself as no better than anyone else, to assimilate into this new society, to understand “just how much / You have in common with everybody else.” He is instructed not to be “terminally unique.” With these words, “Family Week at Oracle Ranch” evolves from a visit to rehab to a striking commentary on poetic styles. Merrill’s poetry has been described as “poems of occasion,” that is, poems “inspired by an occasion of intense psychological and emotional import in the poet’s private life” (Adams 19). It seems that this experience has evolved for Merrill not only as a socially personal event, but also as an artistic realization. In this environment in which complexes are broken down into simplicities and only primary colors are allowed, Merrill is being robbed of his ability to express himself. The addicts of the narrative, as they retreat to childhood in a struggle to come to terms with themselves and their addictions, are like poets being discouraged from expressing themselves in unique ways. The patients are being drawn out of their addictions to become better people, but at the same time they are losing their identities. From the perspective of Oracle Ranch, anything that is too unique or quirky can’t possibly pass as normal. It must be rescued from “terminal uniqueness.”

Merrill’s entire journey in “Family Week at Oracle Ranch,” can just as easily be taken to describe his relationship with poetry as it can his week at a rehabilitation center. From his initial annoyance and skepticism, to eventually giving in, Merrill is a poet broken down by the demands of society for a stanza or two, but he makes a quick recovery, using poetic form to shore himself up. As the poem concludes, he comes to a significant realization. As Merrill is leaving Oracle, he learns the statistic that “An

amazing forty per cent / Of our graduates are still clean after two years. / The rest? Well .
. . Given our society, / Sobriety is hard to implement.” Sobriety becomes analogous to
always coloring inside the lines or consistently adhering to a prescribed poetic form.
Artistic creativity is discouraged by a “sober” society.

“Family Week at Oracle Ranch” provides an interesting contrast in tone to “Self
Portrait in Tyvek™ Windbreaker.” Merrill struggles in “Self-Portrait” to understand this
shallow and superficial society. He wants to inspire genuine emotions. In “Family Week”
he finds those emotions being repressed, forced into consistency, and turned bland. He
loses the many shades of feeling that are necessary to shape his poetry. In moving
through this experience, he realizes that the complexities of society, the concerns over
petty things and ignorance of tragic issues, are the bad that must be taken with the good.
In “Family Week at Oracle Ranch,” Merrill is forced to address his own ordinariness, but
he doesn’t have to accept it. He manages to find a balance between his ordinary self and
his unique self, and is not forced to make a choice between the two. The complexities of
this contemporary world make a terminal uniqueness acceptable.

In the conclusion to “Family Week at Oracle Ranch,” Merrill says that “Change is
the ‘feeling’ that dilutes / Those seven others to uncertain washes / Of soot and silver,
inks unknown in my kit.” Contemporary chaos means that there is inevitable change in
society, in the individual, and in poetry. The world cannot be reduced to seven emotions,
and poetry cannot be limited to prescribed forms. Rather, those emotions and forms must
be embraced and manipulated so that they may come into the present tense:

Change sends out shoots

Of FEAR, LONELINESS; of GUILT, as well,
Towards the old, abandoned patterns;
Of joy, eventually, and self-forgiveness –
Colors few of us brought to Oracle . . .

And if the old patterns recur?
Ask how the co-dependent moon, another night,
Feels when the light drains wholly from her face.
Ask what that cold comfort means to her.

With this guardedly optimistic conclusion, Merrill addresses the need for a return to long-neglected emotions and structures, and acknowledges the presence of one thing that does not change. The moon, as a representative of rebirth and remaking oneself, serves as an unchanging inspiration.

In the assortment of poems I've been discussing, both Merrill and Ashbery highlight changes in modern society. They condemn much of the change, commend some of it, and seem to believe poetry is the key to recognizing the difference. The postmodern dialogue between past and present and old and new works itself out in Merrill and Ashbery's poetry. Mutlu Konuk Blasing explains this best:

Merrill can address a postmetaphysical condition in meters and rhymes. When novelty becomes an old value, then, the past offers novel oppositions. . . . Merrill and Ashbery alike can distance themselves not only from the various pasts they invoke, but from "progress;" failure to do so would be to repeat the progressive past (11).

This embracing of the past for its “novel” ideas and the distancing from “progress,” are what allow Merrill and Ashbery to be successful in capturing aspects of the heart of human nature. They acknowledge the way in which things have changed in the present day, be it emotionally, intellectually, or aesthetically, yet they simultaneously respect poetry as a way of connecting past, present and future.

Merrill’s acknowledgement of his own immersion in contemporary society allows him to present this dialogue from an insider’s point of view. Not only does Merrill acknowledge and criticize the changes, but he recognizes how they affect his own life and work. Ashbery, on the other hand, takes a more ambiguous poetic role with regard to his personal relationship with society. His true intent is difficult to grasp, a characteristic that leaves Ashbery’s opinions on societal changes mysterious, except that he seems to use the poetry to chronicle societal changes. However, in the case of both poets, the emergence of self-doubt suggests a certain uneasiness with postmodernism’s challenging of boundaries.

Conclusion

A central feature of postmodernism is “the effacement in it of some key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture” (Jameson 655). In combining high and “low” cultures, postmodernism also manages to reflect societal changes. In comparing the present day to the era in which modernism emerged, “we can measure the immensity of the cultural changes that have taken place. [. . .] there is very little in either the form or the content of contemporary art that society finds intolerable and scandalous” (661). As society has changed, so have its standards, and Ashbery’s and Merrill’s poetry reflects this change.

John Ashbery makes liberal use of popular culture, be it by writing a sestina about Popeye as he does in “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape,” or making fun of contemporary songwriters in “The Songs We Know Best.” By exploring these topics in traditional poetic form, he really captures what Frederic Jameson suggests postmodernism is all about when he describes the blending of “high” and “low” culture. James Merrill also achieves this combination of high and low by bringing pop cultural references that have become essential to our everyday lives into the context of heady explorations of societal attitudes and human nature, as he does in “Self Portrait in Tyvek™ Windbreaker” and “Family Week at Oracle Ranch.”

Each poet draws on the personal elements of his own life as a means of making sense of contemporary life within the context of traditional values. Merrill uses his experiences at a rehabilitation center and in a neighborhood that takes note of his new

windbreaker. Ashbery looks internally at the role of his work while balancing grand poetic language with a brief narrative about a tape club scam. The age of technology has affected media, communication, working environments, and the way in which people react to all of these things. Through the relation of personal experience, each poet gets to the heart of the human reaction to societal change and how behavior has evolved as a result. Their personal approaches are different. Merrill presents a more intimate view of his own life, while Ashbery draws on his experiences with greater ambiguity; however, both poets create a sharp commentary on how society has evolved. In “Watching the Dance,” Merrill compares two distinct styles of movement as a means of looking at how, from a structural perspective, the world has changed. Ashbery does the same in “Litany” as he examines how poetry has changed as society has changed – the same structures that were once so popular are no longer enough for contemporary society and its unique set of demands.

In terms of this changed society itself, both poets are successful in capturing the emotional changes that have accompanied the structural changes. “Business Personals,” “Eight Bits,” and “Self-Portrait in Tyvek™ Windbreaker” allow Ashbery and Merrill to express their frustrations with change and long for the lost elements of times past, such as attention to detail, action as opposed to false effort, and the acceptance of the simple nature of things instead of their unnecessary complication. “It was Raining in the Capital” and “Family Week at Oracle Ranch” offer narratives of experiences contiguous with Merrill’s and Ashbery’s nostalgia for past circumstances, but also illustrate ways to cope with what society has become. These poems show that adaptation is possible, and the basic tenets of the past need not be lost in order to adjust. Poetry keeps these poets and

their readers rooted in a concrete perception of self and society. The word, written to acknowledge the shortcomings of the world, acts as a reminder that getting swept away in rapid-fire technology, industrialization, and the superficiality that accompanies it is not a negative thing, nor is it an absolute necessity.

Perhaps most importantly, Merrill and Ashbery have found ways to preserve the elements of art that should not be forgotten or lost in the rush of modern society. In “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape” and “To a Pocket Calculator,” Ashbery and Merrill illustrate that the traditional poetic forms of the sestina and the ode do not need to fade away with the past. They too can find relevance in contemporary life, as they give weight to the elements of modern society that seem unlikely to possess any kind of timeless quality.

If postmodernism is to succeed in “catalyz[ing] the rejuvenation of literary genres that were deprecated during the modernist period” (Geyh xvi), then James Merrill and John Ashbery are central to this accomplishment. They cement their roles as postmodern artists as they capture the thoughts and feelings of contemporary society, while simultaneously embracing the forms, themes, and emotional elements of the past that are too valuable to be abandoned. Both poets have succeeded in keeping the traditions of poetry alive while simultaneously exemplifying and extending postmodernism’s complex representation of the self. They acknowledge that their present is rapidly become the past while recognizing the indeterminacy and flux of the future.

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