

**Why he was not a painter? John Ashbery's  
"The painter"**

**Dr. Ibrahim Ali Murad**

**University of Garmian-Faculty of Education-English Department**

**Abstract**

This paper deals with the poetry of the living American modern poet, John Ashbery (b. 1927) through the poem, "The Painter" which is regarded by most critics as the mouthpiece of his poetic philosophy. It is divided into five short and uneven sections: The first section is introductory where the nature of Ashbery's poetry is disclosed along with his interest in painting and collage. In section two, the text of the poem is presented with reference to the major influences that can be discerned in it. The third section tackles the main symbols in the poem that change it into an allegory, while section four deals with objectivity as the main goal of the painter throughout the poem. The fifth section studies the political and religious connotations in the poem and then the paper ends with conclusions, abstract in Kurdish and Arabic, and a list of bibliography.

**1. Introduction**

John Ashbery (b. 1927) is recognized as one of the most prominent American poets in the Twentieth Century. He has won most of the major American awards for poetry like: the Yale Younger Poets award, Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award, the Griffin International Award, and the MacArthur "Genius" Grant. Although an academic writer himself (graduated from Harvard and a professor of literature now), his poetry defies the limits of any mind that tries to understand it. He gathers seemingly unrelated ideas and pours them on the pages at random rather than producing a logically coherent language of poetry for his readers, who, he should think, must be from the elite and prolific in literary

movements and techniques. The critic William Logan describes Ashbery in the *New Criterion* as " Few poets have so cleverly manipulated, or just plain tortured, our soiled desire for meaning" ([www.newcriterion.com](http://www.newcriterion.com)). The range of his attackers, however, was not limited to personalities like Logan or Stephen Koch; rather, it seems that most of the critics agree, unanimously, on the incomprehensibility of his poetry. His defenders, on the other hand, stress the usefulness of that same difficulty. Some think that the confusion "arises in great measure from the decision not to write the sort of poem Robert Lowell was writing, not to produce within the paradigms offered by the New Critics" (Perloff, 1998:2), while in his *New York Times* article, " The Poetry of Scissors and Glue: the Collages of John Ashbery", Holland Cotter writes:

To Mr. Ashbery, the intermingling of artist and writer always made sense, because he was both, though his primary ambition while growing up in rural upstate New York was to be a painter. And not just any kind of painter. (2008:1).

It seems that Ashbery was willful from the beginning to defy not only readers but critics as well through writing a kind of poetry that left most of those readers and critics in amazement. His aim was "to produce a poem that the critics cannot even talk about" (O'Rourke, 2005:1).

But why? The reasons are worth tracing. Most critics, tracing the causes back to his very first debut in the process of writing poetry, agree that multiple influences shaped the present style and philosophy of writing poetry that is seen in his prolific poetic career:

Fascinated by an article in *Life* magazine about a surrealist exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, Ashbery took up painting. Until he was fifteen years old, he took painting classes at an art museum in Rochester. Ashbery had not yet started

writing poetry, however. The inspiration for his future career came in a similar way to the *Life* magazine experience of a few years earlier. Around the age of fifteen, he won a *Time* magazine current events award, and chose for his prize an anthology of modern American poetry. Influenced by the book, he then began writing poetry. ([www.Brian-Juice.com](http://www.Brian-Juice.com)).

This naïve beginning germinated an eagerness in Ashbery towards painting and poetry simultaneously that extended well to the present time and was reflected in a large number of his poems on top of which is "The Painter". The influence of the New York School of poetry of the 1960s in which he was regarded as a major member along with Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler and Frank O'Hara, was also pushing him ahead towards advocating principles of painting in his poems. It seems that penetration of the philosophy of the Abstract Expressionism infiltrated into his poetry from the same School. Furthermore, the heavy impact of surrealism upon the poetry of the New York School poets is also reflected clearly in Ashbery poems.

Ashbery's travel to France where he spent nearly ten years after he received a Fulbright scholarship to Paris brought him closer to the surrealism that he had become familiar with in New York. This development, along with the other multiple influences shaped the Ashberyian style about which most critics complain. The poem, "The Painter" is one of the fruits of that hard-to-catch style. One last point in this introduction is that Ashbery

refused to choose sides in the debates that preoccupied so many American poets (e.g., Olson, Ginsberg) after modernism. Unlike Olson, for example, Ashbery did not reject "closed verse" often using such elaborate traditional metrical forms as the sestina and the pantoum. (Perloff, 1998: 1)

## 2. "The painter

Sitting between the sea and the buildings

He enjoyed painting the sea's portrait.

But just as children imagine a prayer

Is merely silence, he expected his subject

To rush up the sand, and, seizing a brush,

Plaster its own portrait on the canvas.

So there was never any paint on his canvas

Until the people who lived in the buildings

Put him to work: "Try using the brush

As a means to an end. Select, for a portrait,

Something less angry and large, and more subject

To a painter's moods, or, perhaps, to a prayer."

How could he explain to them his prayer

That nature, not art, might usurp the canvas?

He chose his wife for a new subject,

Making her vast, like ruined buildings,

As if, forgetting itself, the portrait

Had expressed itself without a brush.

Slightly encouraged, he dipped his brush

In the sea, murmuring a heartfelt prayer:

"My soul, when I paint this next portrait

Let it be you who wrecks the canvas."

The news spread like wildfire through the buildings:

He had gone back to the sea for his subject.

Imagine a painter crucified by his subject!  
Too exhausted even to lift his brush,  
He provoked some artists leaning from the buildings  
To malicious mirth: “We haven’t a prayer  
Now, of putting ourselves on canvas,  
Or getting the sea to sit for a portrait!”

Others declared it a self-portrait.  
Finally all indications of a subject  
Began to fade, leaving the canvas  
Perfectly white. He put down the brush.  
At once a howl, that was also a prayer,  
Arose from the overcrowded buildings.  
They tossed him, the portrait, from the tallest of the buildings;  
And the sea devoured the canvas and the brush  
As though his subject had decided to remain a prayer.

(Ferguson et al, 2005: 1736-7)

The poem draws attention from different aspects and so it needs a multiple study and scrutiny. As far as form is concerned, it is called sestina which is a complicated poem that goes back to the Middle Ages and was later used by the Italian poet, Petrarch. It contains 39 lines divided into seven stanzas with a strict pattern in which the final words of the first stanza are repeated in the next five stanzas. The last three lines form a separate stanza called an envoi where the final words of the first stanza are again found.

The poem presents a situation in which artistic creativity, represented by Ashbery here, is at a direct confrontation with the needs and demands of the modern society.

Sitting between the sea and the buildings  
He enjoyed painting the sea’s portrait.

But just as children imagine a prayer  
 Is merely silence, he expected his subject  
 To rush up the sand, and, seizing a brush,  
 Plaster its own portrait on the canvas. (L.1-6)

The painter, here, is the mouthpiece of the poet in which he puts forward his concept and philosophy of poetry which is based on the idea of uniting the techniques of poetry with those of painting. The abstract expressionism makes the poem just a painting in picture, while the surrealist technique is clear in the fantastic images and the juxtapositions that represent an unconscious thought and dream. The poem, therefore, is considered as the most representative of Ashbery's poetry collecting in itself the major influences that made up the bulk of the poet's poetic philosophy. Despite the multiple influences, however, Ashbery's poetry Virginia Blair writes, "as critics have observed, has evolved under a variety of influences besides modern art, becoming in the end the expression of a voice unmistakably his own" ([www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com)).

Ashbery's poem, and in fact his poetry in general, is the expression of the spontaneous flow of the stream of his consciousness which is not only unstructured but wild and natural as well. He made things clear when he told Bryan Appleyard from the *Times*:

I don't find any direct statements in life. My poetry  
 imitates or reproduces the way knowledge or awareness  
 come to me, which is by fits and starts and by indirection.  
 I don't think poetry arranged in neat -patterns would  
 reflect that situation. My poetry is disjunct, but then so is  
 life. (1984)

## 2.1 Symbolism

The first reading of the poem discloses its symbolic dimension where the poet sets himself among a number of symbols. In a ballad-like style, he rushes into

the subject without much introductory. The sea symbolizes the creative, experimental and innovative approach of art while the buildings naturally stand for the traditional and superficial approach. They also can simultaneously represent the unexplored depth of the human consciousness and the achieved conditions of art and architecture respectively. In both cases, however, the poet is sandwiched between the two contradictory and non-reconciliatory elements that pull him in opposite directions. The sea wants him to be the natural wild character who follows his instincts and inspirations whereas the buildings ask him to come back to the tradition of his ancestors in order to become accepted and welcomed by its inhabitants. Ashbery, as a post-modern poet with surrealism, abstract expressionism and painting experience at hand, follows his own instinct and 'enjoyed painting the sea's portrait'. After all "his subject is, so often, aesthetic consciousness- what he calls 'the experience of experience' (O'Rourke, 2005: 2).

Ashbery, here, wants to present the sea portrait rather than painting it; that is why in a moment of pure surrealism imagines the subject to seize the brush and portrait itself. This, for him, does not seem extraordinary at all; rather he thinks that it is as simple as a child's dream. The idea, however, is neither sane nor common and therefore, it can not be achieved unless through a mere prayer. The natural and expected result by the inhabitants of the buildings but not by the poet is ' So there was never any paint on his canvas'. Ashbery is left bewildered and disappointed by his failure. The advice of the inhabitants of the building to: Try using the brush/ As a means to an end (L. 9, 10) is in fact contradictory to his own brush which is symbolically speaking his emotional overflow and subconscious indulgence.

He neither believes in the traditional method of choosing his subject matter nor wants that subject to become a victim to automatism; therefore, he does not know how to explain his philosophy to them, 'That nature, not art, might usurp

the canvas?' (L.14). He has to yield to the demands of the traditional art of the buildings and so in another experimental attempt,

He chose his wife for a new subject,  
Making her vast, like ruined buildings,  
As if, forgetting itself, the portrait  
Had expressed itself without a brush. (L. 15-18)

The poet is reluctant in this mission which does not seem satisfactory to his artistic impulses because his wife symbolizes the traditional art. As a result, he makes her like a 'ruined building' where the symbolic message is highly expressive. For him, the traditional art of the buildings is obsolete and out of function but not necessarily for the artists of the buildings themselves. That is why the portrait made itself automatically and even 'without a brush'.

The point, here, is that the traditional artists and critics of the buildings stressed the medium and not the subject in the case of painting the painter's wife. The painter thought the requirement to be the theory of painting rather than its subject; therefore he returns to his old subject of the sea. His attitude here, again, is surrealistic when he says, 'My soul, when I paint this next portrait/ let it be you who wrecks the canvas'. But this artistic philosophy is rejected by the mainstream critics of the buildings and so the painter is 'crucified by his subject'. The symbolic role of the painter, again, is clear and telling. He has to sacrifice himself for the sake of his avant-gardism and this is what he actually does through going back to the sea for his portrait though he realizes the range of opposition that he will face by the critics of the buildings who symbolize the traditional and conventional artistic ideas. Those critics felt relieved when 'he put down the brush'.

The 'tallest of the buildings' from which the traditional critics tossed the portrait stands for the high position in which they find themselves compared to the low position of the painter. Ironically, however, the sea devours the canvas and the brush that were tossed down from the high buildings. It is true that the



picture represents the unachievable radical artistic philosophy of the painter; yet it also refers to the fact that, at the end, it is the sea that embraces the subject which remains still as a mere prayer.

## 2.2 Objectivity of the painter

The poem seems to be faithful to one of the principles of modern and post-modern poetry which is the concept of objectivity as opposed to the subjective poetry of the previous century whether in America or Europe. First and foremost, Ashbery removes himself from the scene of the poem and gives the authority to his 'painter'. Furthermore, Ashbery is so objective that he implies from the first stanza that the feeling of the speaker in the poem is just a dream and a hope that hardly can be achieved. It is true that objective art is difficult to attain, yet it provides realism and truthfulness to the artist's work and this is what the reader sense in "The Painter".

The problem of the painter of the poem is that he wants to paint objectively and because of the severe opposition of the critics of the buildings 'so there was never any paint on his canvas' (L. 7). The painter, as an iconoclast, wants to present a perfect art in order to be different from the artists and critics of the buildings; otherwise he becomes just another number to be added to the millions of artists in the world. Even when he seems to be subjected to the requirements of the mainstream critics, he is not satisfied with choosing his wife for a subject and so her picture comes out like a 'ruined building'. The requirement proves the traditional subjective nature of the artists and critics of the buildings which can not survive in the vast and limitless area of the universe at large:

Try using the brush

As a means to an end. Select, for a portrait,  
Something less angry and large, and more subject  
To a painter's moods, or, perhaps, to a prayer.

(L. 9-12)

The people in the buildings ask the painter to use ' the brush as a means to an end'. It is a reference to the didactic duty of the art that was adopted by the classics and the literature of the ages previous to the modern age. As an advocate of the principle of art for art's sake by Ashbery who is present in the shape of his speaker, the painter can not use the brush as a means to an end. Here is the objectivity of the poem as a representative of Ashbery's poetry. The complexity arises further from the fact that the painter can not make the traditional critics understand the difference between themselves and him; the difference in the conception of the painting. For him, the source of inspiration for the picture on the canvas should be the objective nature unlike the subjective art which they adopt as a fountain and origin to be put on the canvas.

The painter, therefore, returns once more to the sea where he can indulge in his objective method of painting through calling upon his revolutionary soul to 'let it be you who wrecks[sic] the canvas'. The contradiction is made starker when uproar arises among the critics of the buildings who declare his return to the sea which could be understood by them as infidelity. So the painter is 'crucified by his subject' since he failed to conform, through his art, to the requirements of the traditional artistic society. At the end, the critics get rid of the portrait and toss it down just to be devoured by the sea and the painter's ideals of the artistic achievement remain a mere prayer.

The ending of the poem in this respect expresses the range of the pessimism felt by the poet in regard to the achievement of the objective art in the drastic mainstream of the subjectivity of the modern art. The poet's claim, however, could be turned down upon him and his objective purpose behind the poem could well be called mere subjectivity because that claim itself could be a sign of subjectivity.

### 3. Political and Religious connotations

The poem was written in 1956 which is a year of complex confusion and brawl. Different tyrannical authorities were at work to curb and repress freedom of the peoples including freedom of speech and expression. The Russian government, for instance, used to ask for socialist realism, whereas the America of Senator John McCarthy was hardly at work against any free expression of opinion. Any such expression was enough to put its owner into trouble and enable the authorities to call him a pro-communist; an accusation that became a model for any non-conformist point of view by the men of letters and especially the poets.

The pathetic situation of the painter of the poem lends the poem political and social connotations. The people living in the high buildings could represent the authorities or the mainstream society who prefer the benefit of the authority upon that of the intelligentsia. The line, "Try using the brush/ As a means to an end" is probably the most clear reference to that political perspective. It is an obvious Machiavellian expression that victimizes all the means for the sake of the intended end. The painter, as a modern artist can not conform to such opportunistic measures. For him, nature not art should usurp the canvas and when he replies to the requirements of the people in the buildings and makes the picture of his wife, the result is a distorted picture. He quickly returns to the sea of his paintings because he wants his soul to wreck the canvas. This artistic philosophy, however, is quickly turned down:

Slightly encouraged, he dipped his brush

In the sea, murmuring a heartfelt prayer:

“My soul, when I paint this next portrait

Let it be you who wrecks the canvas.”

The news spread like wildfire through the buildings:

He had gone back to the sea for his subject. (L. 19-24)

The painter's returning to the sea and his prayer for his soul were enough startling news for the inhabitants of the buildings to spread among them 'like wildfire'. That step by the painter is received by them like a grave mistake which calls for catastrophic consequences for any non-conformist person, especially men of letters whether in the East or the West at that age of turmoil.

The worse is to come. The artists, who live in the buildings, are looking down at him which necessarily refers to the fact that any violations of the political tradition of that age could result in a great deal of insult for its holder. The most severe offense comes with the end of the poem where:

They tossed him, the portrait, from the tallest of the buildings;  
And the sea devoured the canvas and the brush  
As though his subject had decided to remain a prayer.

(L. 37-39)

The poem holds a number of religious connotations as well. It contains the word 'prayer' in six different locations in all the six-line stanzas of the poem except for the fifth stanza and also in the three-line envoi with different meanings and purposes. This word is of great importance for the religious connotation. Firstly, prayer is the appeal of a believer to his creator when he is in distress or when he hopes for the achievement for something which seems out of his own power. Secondly, this request proves that there is an opposing power that opposes the achievement of the intended wish. The opposing power, in the case of the painter, is clearly the mainstream critics and society that can not accept the new approach of the painter; it is for this reason that the painter takes refuge in the prayer to fulfill his desire. The opposition is so severe that he is 'murmuring a heartfelt prayer' as if he is scared of a public declaration of his intention.

The painter does not seem successful in his serious attempt of bringing in a new artistic system and philosophy and so,

Imagine a painter crucified by his subject!  
Too exhausted even to lift his brush,  
He provoked some artists leaning from the buildings  
To malicious mirth: "We haven't a prayer  
Now, of putting ourselves on canvas,  
Or getting the sea to sit for a portrait!"

The word 'crucified' has the religious meaning and brings into mind the story of Jesus Christ who came up with a religious system for the sake and welfare of all the humanity. Oddly enough, he was rejected, opposed harshly and consequently was crucified. The painter of the poem compares himself to Christ which necessarily means that his mission is useful and important for humanity like that of Christ. The community of the painter, which is symbolized by the inhabitants of the high buildings, is compared to the Jews who crucified Jesus Christ. This connotes that innovations are rejected by the selfish, greedy and self-interest authority that denies the welfare of humanity. The painter is so disappointed that he was 'Too exhausted even to lift his brush'.

#### 4 Conclusions

This humble work has come out with the following conclusions: The post-modern American poetry has come close to reality and objectivity and the poets became free from their individualistic feelings to a great extent. The strong kinship between poetry and painting, which goes back to the poetry of the English Romanticism, is presented clearly in Ashbery's poetry due to different influences. The mainstream American critics of the late 1950s could not comprehend the great development in the poetic philosophy of their poets and consequently they did not appreciate the positive efforts of such poets. Ashbery's poem, "The Painter" is an attempt to emphasize the wide chasm between the innovative men of letters in America of the post-World War II on the one hand and the traditional conservative society of that age in the States on the other

hand. The poem also stresses the strong connection between poetry and painting since both arts aim at transferring a message from the innermost of the artist to the readers and seers respectively.

### Bibliography

- Appleyard, Bryan. 1984. "John Ashbery Interview". [www.bryanappleyard.com](http://www.bryanappleyard.com) Accessed 2/2/2013.
- Blair, Virginia. 2011. "The Painter". [www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com) Accessed 2/2/2013.
- Cotter, Holland. 2008. "The Poetry of Scissors and Glue". *The New York Times*. [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) Accessed 3/2/2013.
- Epstein, Andrew. 2006. *Beautiful Enemies*. Oxford University Press. Inc. - New York.
- Ferguson et al. 2005. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Fifth Edition. w.w.noton &company. New York.
- Fredman, Stephen ed. 2005. *A Concise Companion to Twentieth- Century American Poetry*. Blackwell publishing Ltd. New York.
- Logan, William. 2007. "Let's Do It, Let's Fall in Luff". [www.newcriticism.com](http://www.newcriticism.com) Accessed 7/2/2013.
- O'Rourke, Meghan. 2005. "How to Read John Ashbery". [www.slate.com](http://www.slate.com) Accessed 1/1/2013
- Perloff, Merjorie. 1998. "Normalizing John Ashbery". [www.jacketmagazine.com](http://www.jacketmagazine.com). Accessed 5/2/2013

### پوخته

نهم توئیننه و بهاس له بهرهمی نهدهبی شاعیریکی مؤدیرنی نهمریکی دهکات به ناوی "جون نهشهری" (1927) که تا نیستا له ژياندا ماوه، نهویش له ریگای پارچه شاعریکیهوه به ناویشانی "وینه کیش" که زوریک له رهخنهگران وای بو دهچن که زمانحالی فهلسهفه شاعرایی نهشهرییه. توئیننهوهکه دابهش کراوه بهسهر پینج بهشی کورت و نایهکساندا. بهشی یهکهم سهرهتایه و تئیدا سروشتی شاعرایی شاعر خراوته روو هاوکات لهگهله بایهخدانی به وینهکیشان و کولاج. له بهشی دووهمدا دهقی شاعرکه هاتوو لهگهله و کاریکه ریبه سهرهکییانهی که بوونهته هوی له دایک بوونی. له بهشی سییهمدا بهاس له سیمبوئه سهرهکییانهی ناو شاعرکه کراوه که نهو شاعرهیان بردوته چوارچیوهی نه لیگورییهوه. بهشی چوارهمیش بهاس له بابتهیی بوون دهکات وهکو نامانجی سهرهکیی کاراکتهری ناو شاعرکه له کاتیکدا بهشی پینجهم بهاس له مانا سیاسی و ناینبییهکان له شاعرکه دهکات. لیکوئینهوهکهش به دهره نجامهکان و ورگیپانی کوردی و عهرهیی پوخته که ی و لیستی سهرچاوهکان کوتایی دیتا.

**الملخص**

يتناول البحث الشاعر الامريكى "جون اشبرى" (1927) الذي لازال على قيد الحياة من خلال قصيدته "الرسام" التي يعتبرها معظم النقاد على انها اصدق تعبير لفلسفة الشاعر الشعرية. وقد قسم البحث الى أربعة اقسام قصيرة وغير متساوية فى الطول. القسم الاول عبارة عن تمهيد عن الشاعر ويوضح طبيعة شعره وكذلك الماماته فى مجالات الرسم و الكولاج. وفى القسم الثانى تأتى القصيدة مع المؤثرات التى ساهمت فى ولادتها بالاضافة الى استعراض الرموز الرئيسية فى القصيدة التى حولتها الى قصة رمزية. كما يتناول هذا القسم الموضوعية كهدف رئيسى لشخصية الرسام فى القصيدة. اما القسم الثالث فيدرس المعاني السياسية و الدينية فى القصيدة و ينتهى البحث بالقسم الرابع الذى تذكر فيه الخاتمة بالاضافة إلى الترجمة الكردية والعربية للمقدمة وقائمة المراجع.