

Erica Wright: On John Ashbery

John Ashbery is something of a rock star to poetry lovers. The man himself is genial and approachable; the poetry, however, has a bad-boy appeal: difficult, magnetic, rebellious. Last spring, he read from his latest collection, *A Worldly Country*, at St. Mark's Church in Greenwich Village. He walked to the podium in the body of an eighty-year-old man; yet the voice that emerged was much younger. He thanked his introducer, Anselm Berrigan, who referenced Ashbery's early dismissal (age eight) of rhyming poetry. Ashbery laughed a little at that youthful renunciation and then read *A Worldly Country*'s title poem, composed entirely of rhyming couplets: "One minute we were up to our necks in rebelliousness, / and the next, peace had subdued the ranks of hellishness." It seemed to be a gesture to a defiant past put behind him, but no one was fooled.

A descendant of T.S. Eliot, another poet who broke with literary convention and enjoyed an uneasy relationship with his birth country, Ashbery was born in Rochester, New York, in 1927. He grew up on his father's fruit farm, a place poet Dan Chiasson recently referred to as the kind where imagination is the only escape from boredom. After graduating from high school, Ashbery went to Harvard where he befriended Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch. He later received his M.A. from Columbia. When he was twenty-eight, Ashbery's first book, *Some Trees*, was selected by W. H. Auden for the 1956 Yale Series of Younger Poets Award, and the same year he also received a Fulbright and moved to Paris where he remained for a decade. After his scholarship money ran out, he survived by translating and writing art criticism for the *International Herald Tribune*. Ashbery's real success came in 1975 when *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Ashbery has published more than twenty poetry collections as well as prose, plays, and one novel co-written with James Schuyler. He is the Charles P. Stevenson, Jr., Professor of Languages and Literature at Bard College and divides his time between New York City and Hudson, New York.

A Worldly Country continues Ashbery's tradition of discursive poems, akin to Eliot as much as to the French poets Ashbery admires. Frequently he uses pop references in his work, and while he isn't entirely dismissive of American culture, he admits, "I've always felt somewhat at a remove from the world around me in America." That remove, of course, may be mirrored back to him by readers who are baffled by his poems, one who famously wrote in to the *New Yorker*, a magazine that had frequently published Ashbery's poems, to profess his utter confusion. Along with the advice Ashbery himself offers below to those readers, another might be simply: attend a reading. It's not that Ashbery is a performer; rather, it's that the poems are meant to be heard. Tuning in and out of an Ashbery poem heightens the experience, allows you to savor a particular line or phrase. In a word: music.

At eighty, Ashbery is active as ever: in addition to *A Worldly Country*, he released his selected later poems, *Notes from the Air*, late last year. This collection is a far cry from a swan song. Ashbery continues to write new poems, was just appointed Poet Laureate of MtvU (MTV's college network) and is looking forward to an upcoming collaboration with filmmaker Guy Maddin. Often when the age of a poet is mentioned, the number is a kind of excuse, a polite way of acknowledging a writer's falling off. Ashbery's face has some telltale signs of age: a

little slack in the cheeks, a few deep-set wrinkles in the forehead. But he is far from ravaged, and his age would be difficult to guess. In photographs, he often gazes directly at the camera?tight-lipped as if he is keeping secrets. He has the same square jaw of youth, the same thin lips and clear, blue eyes. The part of his hair is the same, though the locks have thinned and whitened. And his poetry too is as beguiling as ever. Like Merlin, he seems, almost, to be aging backwards. More than any other American poetry, Ashbery?s lends itself to subjective interpretation, and I have no qualms about reading myself into ?To Be Affronted? from *A Worldly Country*: ?When I was young I / thought he was a wizard."

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