

## **Abstract Expressionism and Raymond Roussel in the Poetry of John Ashbery**

John Ashbery is the epitome of the postmodern poet and he reflects in his writings a variety of influences. These are an inherent part of the understanding and appreciation of his poetry but also informative about his attitude to the literary canon: more precisely, they are testimonies of his attraction to avant-gardes and minor and marginal authors. Two representatives of these have been selected for detailed comparison. The first is the second generation of Abstract Expressionists associated with the 1950s New York School of poetry of which Ashbery became a prominent member. The second is the French obscure proto-surrealist Raymond Roussel. The thesis compares several formal aspects of Ashbery's poetry with their respective techniques with a view to elucidate the workings and attitudes behind Ashbery's singular style.

Abstract Expressionists were chosen due to Ashbery's long engagement with visual arts criticism and the already-mentioned fact of their shared milieu of the New York School. The comparison, based on Charles Altieri's 1988 article "John Ashbery and the Challenge of Postmodernism in the Visual Arts," distinguishes two main parallels between the visual and linguistic material: a treatment of language similar to collaging and the resulting transformation of the poetic self. In Ashbery, surreal metaphors and fragments of found or seemingly found texts function as autonomous parts of a collage: the effects they provide enable Ashbery to stand somewhere in between the lyrical and the epical, allow for abstract effects and introduce a public dimension into the verse. The traditional lyrical subject is abolished in favor of a multilayered texture of attitudes that the reader is invited to share during the process of interpretation, a process that is strangely mirrored in the conflicts within the poem itself. Ashbery thus escapes the simplifying traps of assertive self and makes his poems at once more democratic, skeptical and faithful to real workings of mind.

Raymond Roussel has been the object of Ashbery's fascination since the 1950s and the subject of his intended dissertation too. Moreover, he was a figure admired by many of the Surrealists, a movement well known to Ashbery. Roussel's most famous feat is probably the invention of his "procédé," a deconstructivist and essentially poetic method applied to prose in which a phrase is decomposed into a sequence of words based on the phonetic ambiguities of French and these become a skeleton of a future story. This mode of writing, indebted to the strict dictum of chance and Roussel's taste for popular literature, obliges Roussel to devise wildly improbable scenes of a strangely artificial yet very disconcerting quality where the low and the high, the serious and the ridiculous combine.

For Ashbery, the most important feature of Roussel's writing, especially of his incongruous poetry, lies in the way it answers the structure of our real-life experience. Ashbery subverts the tedium of Roussel's persistent exotic descriptions into the tedium of the everyday variety of our lives. The plasticity of a fictional world divorced from reality yet strongly claiming realness is converted into the autonomy of thoughts. Roussel's techniques thus eventually point in the same direction as that of Abstract Expressionists. Both influences support each other and explain the reasons behind Ashbery's writing that has been, especially at the beginning of his career, deemed confusing and impenetrable.