

NYU Conversations (John Ashbery)

#1: Process and [Restrictive] Forms

I first came across the word *pantoum* as the title of one of the movements of Ravel's "Trio," and then found the term in a manual of prosody. I wrote a poem called "Pantoum" in the early '50s; it is in my book *Some Trees*. "Variation on a Noel" [in *A Wave*] is the only other time I have ever used the form [as of publication of this statement in 1987; he has used it since]. The poem was written in December of 1979. I was attracted to the form in both cases because of its stricture, even greater than in other hobbling forms such as the sestina or canzone. These restraints seem to have a paradoxically liberating effect, for me at least. The form has the additional advantage of providing you with twice as much poem for your effort, since every line has to be repeated twice.

--- John Ashbery, from *Ecstatic Occasions, Expedient Forms; 85 Leading Contemporary Poets Select and Comment on Their Poems*, edited by David Lehman (Ann Arbor, Univ. of Michigan Press, 1996, 2d edition); also in *Selected Prose* (with the text of the poem).

John Ashbery's experiments with many different types of poetic structures span his career. Whether outrageous, confounding, subtle, ingenious, or haunting, these sometimes surprisingly effective works represent efforts to make language work in unexpected ways. JA will read some of these pieces, and talk with participants about the process of making them, particular inspiration or impetus to work with a particular form, etc. Works considered may include "Phantoum," his recent pantoum (in *A Worldly Country*), and "Fininsh Rhapsody," (in *April Galleons*) a Finnish form that requires the poet to restate an idea in a completely different way in the same line (unlike the pantoum, which reuses entire lines); also his new collage poem "They Knew What They Wanted" (published in the catalogue for his exhibition last fall at Tibor de Nagy Gallery, and later in the *London Review of Books*) and its relation to other collage works such as his cento "The Dong with the Luminous Nose" (in *Wakefulness*), and the relation of those to his early poem "He" (in *Some Trees*). Other works that could be discussed include "Pantoum," Canzone," and two "Sonnet"s from *Some Trees*, "37 Haiku" from *A Wave*, the double sestina from *Flow Chart*, "Hotel Lautreamont" from *HL*, and "100 Multiple-Choice Questions" (most recently in *Collected Poems 1956-1987*), which could lead to discussion of parody and appropriation as restrictive forms (e.g. "The Songs We Know Best" from *A Wave* and "Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox" from *The Double Dream of Spring*).

(continued ...)

(Ashbery/NYU Spring 2009, #1, p.2)

[It's interesting to note JA's comment that he, characteristically, became aware of the pantoum in a musical context rather than a literary one.]

(Facilitated and developed by Jonathan Boyd and David Kermani of The Flow Chart Foundation's Ashbery Resource Center <www.flowchartfoundation.org/arc> .)

1/13/09