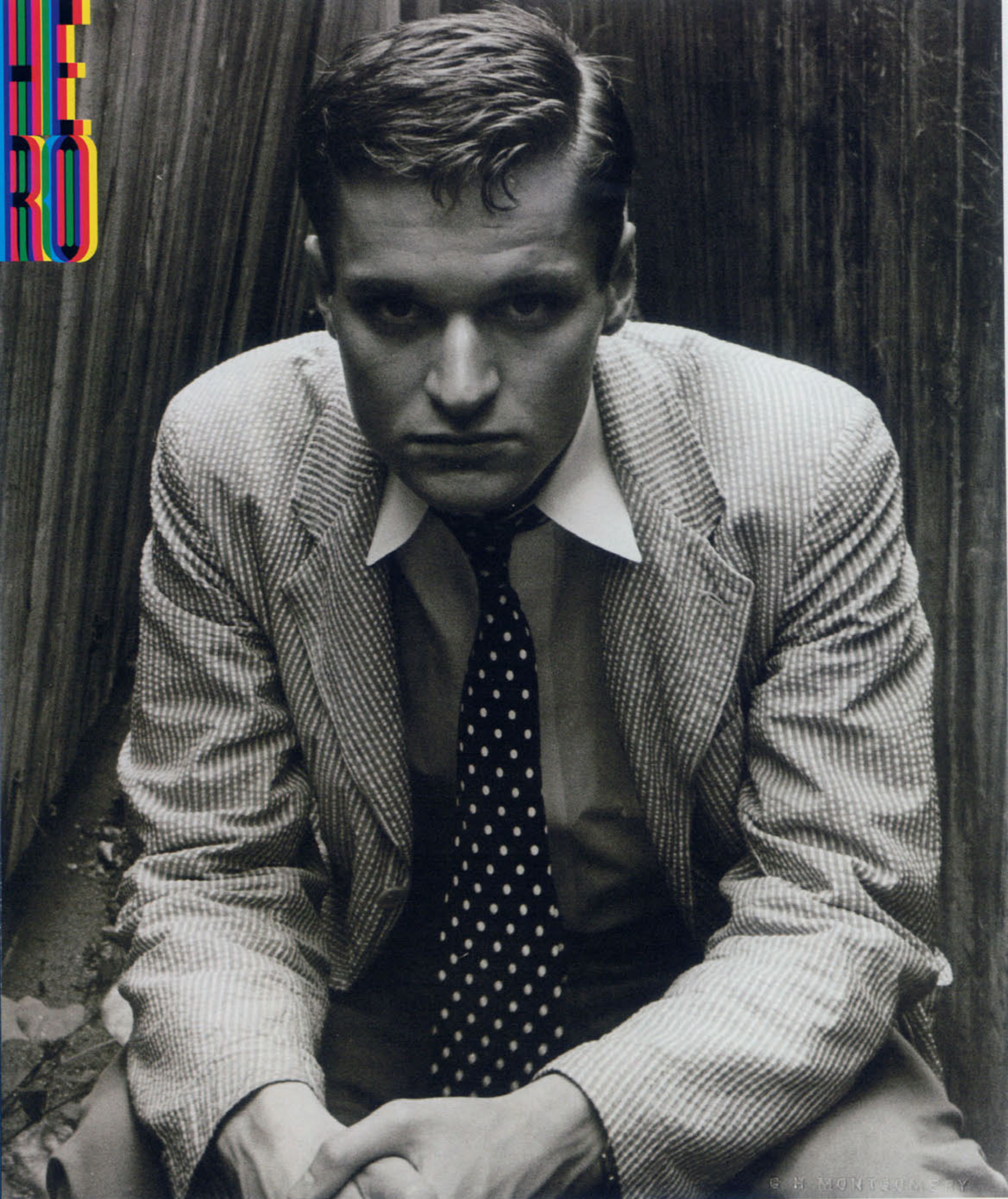

JOHN ASHBERY POET

John Ashbery is not a poet of our time. He is *the* poet. If the early twentieth century had Eliot, we have Ashbery to show us the broken thoughts, wayward romantic rambles, and swarms of media messages that invade our brains all at once—and the constant struggle to find some (god, any!) secure meaning in it all. A member of the legendary New York School of poets in the '50s and '60s (along with Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch), Ashbery grew in fame with each new volume, matching comic wit with heroic brawls with the language of the everyday. His collection *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, published in 1976, won a trophy case of awards, including the Pulitzer, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. It also revolutionized the whole poetic form. In a sense, Ashbery had made poetry essential again. His latest book, *Chinese Whispers*, out this October from Farrar, Straus & Giroux, offers just what you expect from the poet, which is everything. This is a man who can go from the simple, opening with a line like "Just when I thought there wasn't room enough / for another thought in my head, I had this great idea—" ("My Philosophy of Life"), all the way to the sublime, with "flamingoes fall over each other in the luxury of getting away" (*Flow Chart*), which punches you right in the heart and makes you feel like lying down for the rest of the day. **Christopher Bollen**

Christopher Bollen When did you start writing poetry?
John Ashbery When I was 8 years old, I wrote a poem about the battle of the snowflakes and the bunnies. I thought it was so perfect that I could never surpass it.
CB Ha! It was your first big masterpiece and everything's been downhill since?
JA Yes. Actually, I was first more interested in drawing and painting than writing poems. Then, when I was in high school, I won a *Time* magazine current-events contest. The prize was a choice of four books, and the only one that interested me was an anthology of contemporary poetry. The more I read, the more I wanted to try to write them myself.
CB Which poets were you drawn to?
JA I avoided the poems that were hard to understand, like most people do when they first start reading modern poetry. I had already read some of the easier poets, like Frost and Edna St. Vincent Millay. I liked them, but I got more interested in the difficult ones, like Dylan Thomas, Wallace Stevens, and Marianne Moore. My favorite for a long time was W.H. Auden, but this was of course his early work. I found Auden very difficult at the time.
CB So were you already writing poetry by the time you started at Harvard?
JA I come from modest circumstances. My father was a farmer near Rochester, on Lake Ontario. My mother's father was a professor at the University of Rochester. He was a great reader and my favorite person in the family. He sort of took over my education. I arrived at Harvard less than a month before the end of World War II. The place was half shut down until my second year, when the *Harvard Advocate* opened up again. That's where I met Kenneth Koch.
CB Did the two of you get along instantly?
JA Yes. We showed each other our poems. I didn't have anybody to talk to about poetry before. Nor did he, really. So we became very close friends. At that time at Harvard there were a lot of poets who would go on to become famous—Robert Creeley, Robert Bly, Donald Hall, Adrienne Rich…
CB That's an impressive list of poets.
JA Yes. Of course, we didn't know we were at the time.
CB What did you think you were?
JA I knew I was a poet, but I didn't know anyone would ever read my stuff.
CB So when did you meet Frank O'Hara?
JA He published in the *Advocate* before I met him. I didn't really know him, and then we met a couple of months before graduation and became instant friends. He had an intimidating look, so while I knew who he was, I didn't feel like going up and introducing myself. He had a broken nose so he looked like a boxer. He looked kind of mean, which was completely misleading.
CB You're saying he didn't look much like a poet to you?
JA I didn't know what a poet was supposed to look like. But he looked like someone who didn't suffer fools gladly. In fact, he did suffer fools gladly.
CB Did you love his poems?
JA Yes. Frank was a tremendous inspiration. He read immensely and discovered all these twentieth-century writers that nobody else knew about and wouldn't know for some years to come. When I first met him, he was reading Beckett—and this is before *Godot*, when no one had ever heard of Beckett—Jean Rhys, Flann O'Brien, and Ronald Firbank. During the short time Frank and I knew each other at Harvard, we used to go to the movies a lot. It was the height of the film-noir period, and we'd go to matinees in Boston. He was also a composer. He listened to Poulenc and also liked Rachmaninoff, which you weren't supposed to like. At Harvard, it was all Bach and Buxtehude. I said to Frank, "My god, you really listen to Rachmaninoff piano concertos?" I knew them, but I didn't think it was permissible for an adult to like them. I kept getting the sense from him that you could make up your own mind for yourself on what was good.
CB You two graduated together?
JA Frank was a year older than I. But since he was in the war, he graduated a year later. I left and came to New York, where Kenneth was studying English in graduate school at Columbia. I really wanted to stay at Harvard, but they didn't let me in. My grades weren't good enough. For some reason, Columbia did. I was scared to move to New York, but Kenneth assured me it'd be fine and I'd like it. Sure enough, I did and spent two years getting an M.A. in English. But basically I never did anything. I didn't go to class. I hung out in the Village, where I lived. That was a time when artists and painters and impoverished intellectuals could afford to live there.
CB That's an imaginary tale to me. That Village one hears about might as well have never existed by the time I came to New York.
JA It was wonderful while it lasted. But after I got my degree, I decided I didn't want to be a teacher anyway, and I worked in publishing and eventually got a Fulbright scholarship to France. I left when I was 28 and stayed in France for ten years.
CB Was it when you were hanging out in the Village that the famed "New York School of poetry" developed?
JA That name, of course, wouldn't come into existence until quite a long time afterward. But that's when I met James Schuyler and Barbara Guest, and Kenneth was around. Frank went to the University of Michigan for a year. After that, he moved to New York and got a job selling Christmas cards in the lobby of the MoMA. Eventually he worked his way up to becoming a curator. Frank fell very much in love with the New York art scene, more so than I. My best friends were the painters Jane Freilicher and Larry Rivers, whom I met through Kenneth.
CB When people classify that time as "the New York School," do you have a feeling that there was some collective effort going on, that you were all working in the same vein?
JA Yes, but it was such a small group. We never knew anybody would read what we were writing. Eventually, the art dealer John Bernard Myers at Tibor de Nagy, who showed some of our painter friends, decided to publish pamphlet-type books of poetry. Frank did the first book. Then I did one. Mine was called *Turandot and Other Poems*. I sort of disowned that book later. No one can find it anyway. A few of the poems were reprinted in my first real collection, published in 1956 by the Yale Younger Poets series, called *Some Trees*.
CB I know it well. Auden awarded that prize to you, didn't he?
JA Yes. Frank and I met Auden and his friend Chester through James Schuyler. But I never got to know him well.
CB What was your first impression of Auden?
JA Because I loved his poetry, I was dazzled by him. But there was nothing you could tell him that he didn't know. He was very crotchety. His friend Chester, who was much younger, I saw a lot. Originally, I submitted my book to the Yale Press for the Younger Poets competition. It got returned by Yale and was never forwarded on to Auden. O'Hara had the same thing happen to him. Both of our manuscripts were screened out. Auden spent the summer on the island of Ischia and decided not to award the prize that year because he didn't like any of the works. But Chester gave him both of our manuscripts, and he ended up choosing mine.
CB Was O'Hara seething with jealousy?
JA Not at all. He was extremely generous. Actually, he wrote the only favorable review of the book when it came out, in *Poetry* magazine. *Some Trees* went pretty much unnoticed. I just discovered, in reading a collection of Schuyler's letters that hasn't been published yet, that Auden hadn't really liked either of our manuscripts. But he wouldn't have been paid if he didn't choose something, since he let several years go by without awarding the prize. So he disliked mine less. Years later he told someone he had never understood a single line of my poetry. I can see why, and why he wouldn't notice the influence he had on my work. I was reacting by trying in some way to do something as original as he had.
CB You went to France right after *Some Trees* came out?
JA No. I was already there. I ended up living in Paris and writing art criticism, first for *Artnews* and then for the *Herald Tribune*.
CB Did you prefer Paris to New York?
JA Yes.
CB And did you find the same scene of artists and painters like you had in the Village?
JA After I became an art critic for the *Herald Tribune*, I met a lot of artists. And then I met some French poets and some Americans, too. I edited a literary magazine called *Locus Solus*, one called *Art and Literature*, and I did a lot of translation.
CB Would you say that by this time in Paris, the New York School had disbanded?
JA No. It had just come into existence. The term was coined in 1961 by Myers in the hope that the prestige of the New York School of painters would rub off on us. Largely thanks to Kenneth, a lot of young poets studying at Columbia wrote in a style influenced by our poetry. The St. Mark's Poetry Project began in the '60s, and that was their general headquarters. I came back in 1965 because my father died, and I had to take care of my mother. That was when I became somewhat known. My third book came out then, *Rivers and Mountains*, and it received a National Book Award nomination. I was about 40.
CB When *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* came out in 1976, did you expect it to be such a literary triumph?
JA No. I never expected it to win all of those prizes. This really made me famous all of a sudden. But in a way, it had a negative effect. People thought, Oh, this book must have some really important stuff in it, but I don't understand it. What the hell is it all about? If it hadn't received so much attention, people wouldn't have felt so much that they had to deal with it.
CB After *Self-Portrait* came out, you were taken as a kind of icon of the Language poets.
JA That group was in its infancy at the time.
CB Let me ask you this. Do you think language is indeed an imperfect tool of expression, that it isn't really capable of expressing some real self underneath?
JA Yes, and that's what's so interesting about it. We have no other means of communicating with each other really. The broken attempts to say what it is we mean have a certain parallel importance to what it is we think we are saying. The two together are what makes it all move along, however irrationally or ineffectually.
CB Time is a prevalent theme in your work. You seem to have an obsession with it. In your new book, *Chinese Whispers*, there is that beautiful part about years: "How to describe the years? Some were like blocks of the palest halvah, / careless of being touched. Some took each other's trash out, / put each other's eyes out. So many got thrown out / before anyone noticed, it was like a chiaroscuro / of collapsing clouds." And sometimes in your poetry, it's not even year to year but second to second. You seem to be battling the way we try to remember or put time together in our heads.
JA I guess this is my preoccupation. It's what I think about most. I read Proust when I was 20, and I think he has probably always been the main influence. Also, when you get older, you're actually experiencing time. When you're young, you write about it as an abstract concept. I guess aging, getting older, is the subject of my poetry. I always wondered what was the subject, but then it occurred to me, that's what it was: time passing. Ronald Firbank has a great line, "My dear, age is the one disaster." I'm going to be, to my surprise, 75 this year. It's one of those occasions that makes you aware of your age. First 30 and that was "Ugh." 40, "Eeew!" 50, "Oh, my god." 60, and now 75. It still feels like I'm just starting out.
CB Do you think your poetry is always changing and moving in different directions? I mean, *Flow Chart* was an unbelievably long, epic poem to come along. Did you sit down intentionally to write a poem of such length?
JA Yeah. I try not to repeat myself. A friend of mine asked what I was writing, and I said I was writing a bunch of short poems since my poems are usually so long. And my friend said, "Why don't you write a hundred-page poem?" I'm always trying to do something I haven't done before. In a way this is impossible, because I'm still the same person. The work does come out differently, and this is disconcerting to people who have come to terms with what I've written in the past. But I can't continue writing one way. Wallace Stevens said in a poem about poetry, "It must change."
CB You also have a great deal of humor in your poems. In *Flow Chart*, just as an example, you break in with "Which reminds me: / When are we going to get together? I mean really—not just for a / drink and a smoke, but really / invade each other's privacy in a significant way." In *Chinese Whispers*, there are lines like "The crowds have bicycled far out to see you fail. / Don't disappoint them" and "We owe this to our childhood dogs, / sprig of hope." You don't expect such funny lines in serious poetry.
JA Yes. I believe I have a very good sense of humor. People expect something serious. When I'm giving readings, sometimes the audience is too intimidated to laugh because they think it must be a serious poem and I might get upset.
CB So how do you think *Chinese Whispers* goes in a new direction?
JA I can't really remember *Chinese Whispers* very well. Another thing I do is forget my poetry. It's what I haven't yet written that I'm always thinking about. A line from one of Kenneth's poems that's always in the back of my brain is "To go is to go farther."
CB So when you're described as the greatest living American poet, how does that feel?
JA I think it's very nice. My mother said when I first showed her a book of my poems—I was always trying to impress her, and she was not a literary person at all—she sort of looked through the book and said, "Well, I really don't understand it, but I think it's awfully nice of them to publish it." I think it's very nice of them to like my work. There are also a lot of people who really don't get my poetry and even violently detest it. I don't know who is right and for how long the jury will be out. Forever probably.
CB Well, who does win the war between the bunnies and the snowflakes?
JA I think it was the snowflakes.

John Ashbery at Harvard University, 1949
Photography George Montgomery
Chinese Whispers comes out in October from Farrar, Straus & Giroux