



Representation of Feelings in *Two Books: The Anatolikon/To the City* by John Ash

Emre ÇAKAR¹ 



¹Assistant Professor, Manisa Celal Bayar University, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of English Language and Literature, Manisa, Türkiye

ORCID: E.Ç. 0000-0003-2288-9261

Corresponding author:

Emre ÇAKAR,
Manisa Celal Bayar University, Faculty
of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Department of English Language and
Literature, Manisa, Türkiye
E-mail: emre.cakar@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of emotions in the poetry of John Ash with a focus on his collection entitled *Two Books: The Anatolikon/To the City* (2002). Through an in-depth analysis of selected poems, the study explores Ash's encounters with ancient Greek cities, the impact of migration, and the use of metafiction. The study also considers Ash's portrayal of historical events and the attribution of emotions to ancient cities and highlights his role as a semihistorian. Furthermore, it examines the relationship between emotions and thoughts and traces its origins to the emergence of Romanticism and the shift in the literature from strict rationality to the reliance on emotions. Within these compositions, his personas manage the preservation and history of ancient cities that pose historical significance in the Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman empires and Armenia in poetry. Intentionally obfuscating the differentiation between reality and history, Ash invites readers to navigate the dynamic interplay between the plain present and the echoes of an ancient era. Positioned within the history of British poetry, Ash is recognized as a contemporary postmodern poet. A dualistic approach characterizes his poetic works in which one facet is marked by the emotive expressions of his speakers, particularly regarding the antiquated urban landscapes they visit. His philosophical musings on poetics, history, and poetry mark the other facet of his poetry. This study aims to examine Ash's postmodern inclinations in light of his utilization of emotions and ideas in the poems of *Two Books: The Anatolikon/To the City*.

Keywords: John Ash, Feelings, Postmodern poetry, *Two Books: The Anatolikon/To the City*, metafiction



Introduction

Exploring the embodiment of life in literature has been a prominent topic throughout the history of arts and letters. In his influential work, *The Great Tradition*, Leavis (1950) discusses the relationship between life and literature by examining the novels of George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad. The importance of novelists, as highlighted by Leavis in his book, lies in their transformative impact on the art of literature and human consciousness. He emphasizes their ability to expand the boundaries of artistic expression and to deepen the understanding of life's possibilities (p. 2). Leavis's argument focuses on the notion of a "sense of life," which he posits as essential for authors in accurately reflecting life. This sense of life encompasses an interest in the complexities of existence and a refined aesthetic sensibility. According to Leavis, the fusion of profound insight into life with an appreciation for its aesthetic dimensions distinguishes great literature.

The origin of the relationship between emotions and thoughts can be traced back to several centuries ago, particularly during the emergence of Romanticism, which marks a departure from Enlightenment. In *The Struggle of the Modern*, Spender (1963) claims that Keats and his fellow Romantics notably revisited Shakespeare's concept of the imagination "as an independent sovereign activity centered in the poetic genius, and owing allegiance to no superior intellectual authority" (p. 11). This notion marked a departure from the approach of Augustan poets who utilized imaginative talents to support established theological, aristocratic, and rationalist ideologies. However, Spender contends that poets of the 18th century, similar to Pope, regarded the imagination as a servant of the rational thought of their era and determined to harmonize divine and scientific reasoning (1963, p. 11). In contrast, the Romantics viewed poetry as a realm independent of such intellectual creation and prioritized the free expression of individual creative vision over attempts to unite different philosophical realms. The key notion they posited was that poetry, if confined solely to conveying truth, would cease to be poetic. This concept reached its zenith with Wordsworth's declaration in the "Preface" of *Lyrical Ballads* (1802): "For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of feelings" (pp. x-xi). This sentence became the motto and the "Preface" became the manifestation of Romanticism. Consequently, poets shifted their focus from objects and actions to emotions and, thereby, emphasized the divergence of feelings from thoughts within the realm of poetry.

In *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, Abrams (1971)

evaluates the intricate relationship between poetry and science. During the 18th century, a widespread belief is that poetry and science were diametrically opposed and mutually incompatible, which was encapsulated by the notion that “if science is true, poetry must be false” (p. 299). Elucidating this dichotomy through an episode involving Newton and Keats, Abrams recounts that Newton discovered that light passing through a prism transforms into a spectrum of colors—a rainbow. Years later, Keats accused Newton of dismantling “all the poetry of the rainbow by reducing it to the prismatic colors” (Abrams, 1971, p. 303). This discord between poetry and science is deeply connected to the issue of *given reality*. Western philosophers typically found themselves in conflict with the inherent nature of reality, as articulated by Kateb (1997) who stated that they were frequently “at war with given reality.” Because the world was disliked in its given form. This opposition mainly stemmed from the fact that the world was disliked simply because it existed, which leads to discontent, anger, and, ultimately rebellion (p. 1241). Alienated with the established reality, the Romantics directed their focus toward nature: “Nature is alive and, for the artist to be intensely alive, he or she must fuse with that world and attain a highly individualized mystical experience that digs down into the core of reality” (Peer, 2011, pp. 1–2). Consequently, the Romantics underscored the potency of emotions in relation to the profound significance of nature.

The tension between reason and emotions paved the way for the French Revolution, which emerged as a seminal event within the tapestry of Romanticism. Despite its initial promise, the aftermath of the Revolution did not align with optimistic expectations and left a disillusioned populace in its wake. The reason is that “from the creation of political and intellectual freedom it turned to tyranny, slaughter, and imperialist expansion” (Peckham, 1951, p. 16). This disappointment was particularly poignant for intellectuals and poets, such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, who were fervent proponents of the Revolution. The disillusionment ran deep; a number of critics posited that Wordsworth experienced a “spiritual death” shortly after witnessing the discouraging outcomes of the Revolution (Peckham, 1951, p. 16). The loss of equilibrium between emotions and reason left these intellectuals unable to reconcile with the stark new reality, which ultimately consigned them to a fate of spiritual demise. Thus, after losing the balance between emotions and reason, they could not compete with the new reality, and they were destined to spiritual death.

Certain postmodern poets confronted a parallel challenge when facing the veracity of truth and accepting the given reality because “truth for postmodernists is an effect

of discourse," that is, "truth is always contextual" (Flax, 1992, p. 452). The exploration of truth and reality by postmodern poets signifies the interplay among discourse, context, and perception in shaping one's understanding of the world. Similar to the rebellion of Romantics against the rational constructs of Enlightenment, postmodernists did against the *so-called* given reality of modernity. In this context, Peer (2011) asserts the significance of Romanticism in understanding modernism and postmodernism and emphasizes its crucial role in comprehending Romanticism (p. 1). Contrary to the romantic archetype of the solitary seeker of meaning in nature, John Ash, a postmodern poet, diverges in his approach. His personas express a yearning for ancient cities and cultures, yet he skillfully avoids surrendering to melancholy. Operating within the postmodern ethos, Ash employs an ironic and cynical style when addressing the world around him. Acheson (1996) comments on Thom Gunn, a poet associated with the Movement, by noting that his poetry "admires the art of imitation" and "involves the abjuration of romantic individualism and quests for pure originality or autonomy" (p. 168). Although indefinitely classified as a postmodernist, Gunn's poetry exhibits early aspects of postmodernism. Similarly, Ash's characters neither seek meaning in nature as do their romantic counterparts nor aspire to transcend the world. Instead, Ash engages with cities and people in a cynical manner, which distinguishes him from the romantic poets. This cynicism is evident in the interactions of his characters with city life and in their attitudes toward human relationships and cultural events.

Examining the relationship between Romanticism and postmodern poetry, Acheson's assertion holds significance: "The poet is no longer, like Yeats, the romantic agonist fighting the 'filthy tide' of modernity nor, like Larkin, the disillusioned sufferer of a debased world where communality is simply banality, but the servant of an essential humanity that derives from shared community" (1996, p. 368). This quotation implies a departure from the individualistic and adversarial stances of earlier poets and underscores the evolving responsibilities and perspectives of poets regardless of changing social dynamics and challenges. In this context, Ash's language consistently carries a mocking and ironic voice, which distinguishes it from the somber and melancholic romantic tradition. This divergence reflects the evolution of poetic sensibilities and perspectives in response to changing cultural and philosophical landscapes.

The concept of interest in life is associated with realism to a certain extent. Sauerberg claims that:

[p]ostmodernist writers tend to focus either on “reality” in a state not to be processed because already edited or processed before the literary imagination gets to work, or on the act of writing itself, and to problematize any authorial or textual authority. (1991, p. 2)

By exploring the manifestations of postmodernist tendencies in prose, Sauerberg’s analysis highlights the challenge to traditional textual authority within the realm of prose literature, which reveals the complex interplay between reality and writing and the nature of artistic expression.

The relationship between realism and poetry changes its stance in postmodernism and focuses on unsteadiness. According to Gregson (1996), a collision occurs between postmodernism and realism in contemporary British poetry, which produced instabilities (p. 238). In this collision, the instabilities not only challenge the conventional notions of representation but also drive the dynamic exploration of diverse perspectives and poetic techniques. Although instabilities disrupt traditional literary frameworks, the concept of realism persists as a powerful force, which functions as a standard for portraying the unvarnished truths of human experience. A few critics evaluated the characteristics of stimulating the writing of novelists in poetry, which paved the way for an in-depth understanding of the instabilities that originated from the complex relationship between reality and postmodern poetry. Building on the persisting power of realism, Kennedy (1996) analyzes the perspectives of postmodern poets and elucidates their challenging conventional notions of textual authority. In *New Relations*, Kennedy also examines several characteristics that are unique to British postmodernist poetry. These characteristics are “the dialogue with realism,” “the ghosts of politics,” and “aesthetic practice versus social reality” (1996, p. 86). Expanding on the examination of the engagement of postmodern poetry with realism, Kennedy conducts an in-depth examination of the intricate relationship between reality and postmodern poetry. He explores the unconventional notions of realism in poetry and argues that “[c]onventional realism may be frustrated in its desire for mimetic precision but the world is still describable: the difference is that description has no responsibility except to the logic of the imagination” (Kennedy, 1996, p. 100). Thus, conventional realism encounters certain challenges in capturing the intricacies of reality; nevertheless, it remains valuable in describing the world through the lens of imagination in which precision is not the fundamental element of postmodern poetry.

As Gregson states, instabilities are “the premise of the most radical postmodernists ... like John Ash” (1996, p. 34). Born in Manchester in 1948, Ash is one of the minor but eccentric poets of contemporary British poetry. Ash proceeded to spend one year in Cyprus and subsequently returned to Manchester before relocating to New York. Ultimately, he resided in Istanbul from 1996 to the time of his passing in 2019. The Introduction section of *The New Poetry* claimed that John Ash is “fascinated ... with the excitements of senses, and with social bizarrerie” (Hulse, Kennedy & Morley, 1993, p. 23). Blended with senses and social strangeness, Ash’s poetry is frequently set in an urban background to underline the inseparable relationship between the two. While portraying various scenes from city life, Ash benefits from the possibilities of postmodern poetry, that is, he rarely locates “a stable self in his work” (Hulse, Kennedy & Morley, 1993, p. 23). In his book, *To the City*, Ash handles several places. For example, in his poem “Some Places I Know and Do Not Know,” Ash speaks about cities as follows: “I suppose I wanted to tell you about these places/because I find them beautiful and interesting” (Ash, 2002, p. 88). However, a few of these places are unattractive to Ash, for example, “they often turn out to be a lot smaller than you expected” (2002, p. 88). The problem lies in the representation of these places, which does not reflect the place for real. Therefore, he claims, “[t]hey look like reproductions of themselves” (2002, p. 88). In the meantime, these places transform into their pulp replicas without any elements of authenticity, which he criticizes in his poetry. Ash frankly states that he does not intend to write about such places; he says, “I could tell you about my trip to *Albania*, / except that I have not yet been to *Albania*” (Ash, 2002, p. 88). Employing an unstable self in his poem, Ash creates the idea that the unstable self is reliable. Thus, apart from cities with copies of their images, the unstable self also finds a place in Ash’s poetry, which diverts Ash’s writing away from traditional realism.

Typically employing the city as a background, Ash reflects his experiences of the cities he lived in and visited in his poetry. The author’s poetry collection namely *Two Books: The Anatolikon/To the City* (2002) evinces his preoccupation with urban centers, particularly those located in Türkiye. He employs the antique cities of the Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman empires and Armenia. However, Ash deliberately blurs the distinction between the real and the historical by representing various emotions through the speakers of his poems. The feelings of people in those cities with vast historical backgrounds vary; however, the poet’s emotions about the cities and the people living therein remain on the page. A few critics claim that “John Ash is fascinated by the sweeping gestures of purple, elevated styles, with the excitements of the senses,

and with social bizarrerie. He has rarely found it possible to locate a stable self in his work" (Hulse, Kennedy & Morley, 1993, p. 23). Ash, who is considered one of the British postmodern poets, follows a two-sided path. The first reveals the process how his speakers feel in these old cities, while the second examines the significance of poetry, history, and meaning of life. This study analyzes selected poems by Ash, in *The Anatolikon* and *To the City*, with a focus on the utilization of emotions and ideas about ancient cities and the poetry featured in these works.

Whispers of the Heart, Echoes of the Mind

Poets and critics Morrison and Motion (1982) edited *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* and defined the poetry of the 1970s as impersonal; Morrison and Motion claimed that the young poets of the period were "not inhabitants of their own lives" (1982, p. 12). In other words, the poetry of the period reports the lives of other people from the perspective of poets who are only spectators. As it turns out, these poets were "intrigued observers, not victims but onlookers" (1982, p. 12). Being an observer enables the poet to consider events from a vantage point in which he/she can interpret certain behaviors and emotions of people. The role of the poet–observer is to closely examine the lives of individuals and subsequently craft narratives based on their observations. In fact, while playing this role, they benefit from the effects of space on emotions in their poems. Lynch (1976) discusses the correlation between emotions and concepts and their contextual placement within the environment in the "Foreword" of *Environmental Knowing* and states:

Feelings and ideas are not merely troublesome intervening variables that must be passed through in order to understand visible behavior. Good behavior is by no means a reasonable motive for improving the environment. Feelings and ideas, and the actions and sensations that are part of them, are what it is like to be alive, and the goodness or badness of that experience is the why of policy. (p. viii)

In this quotation, Lynch emphasizes the importance of feelings and ideas, and, importantly, he defines the fundamentals of being alive. For Lynch, to be alive, one must be aware of one's emotions and ideas. It is the interchange between people and their environment, which "encourages them to grow into fully realized persons" (1976, p. v). Hence, the poet must possess a vivid sense of life to reflect the colorful aspects

of life, especially by pondering on emotions. The literature calls this notion “the embodiment of life,” which can also be traced in Ash’s *The Anatolikon*.

The Anatolikon includes a collection of poems that explore various aspects of life in Türkiye, a country where the poet resided for a while. According to Scannell (2002), these poems “effectively evoke the otherness of an alien culture and its ambience as it becomes more familiar yet always retains the mystery and allure of the exotic” (p. 51). Moreover, the introductory poem of the book sets the stage as a captivating narrative similar to a diary, which enables the reader to embark on a fascinating journey through various cities and locations in Anatolia. “The Anatolikon,” the first poem of the book, is set as if it were a diary of the speaker in Anatolia; thus, the reader accompanies the journey of the narrator in several cities and places. At the same time, the reader witnesses emotional changes in the speaker throughout the poem. The speaker opens the poem, “They said: ‘Why do you want to go that place? There is / nothing to see’” (Ash, 2002, p. 9). The initial verses of the poem suggest that the location lacks interest or appeal. Nevertheless, the speaker still wants to see the place, because he likes its name, which means *opium* and *fortress*, that is, Afyonkarahisar in Turkish. Although Afyon is considered an uninteresting place, the speaker reports original stories that he encounters during his trip, such as “two young salesmen from Uşak ... sang for [them] on / the summit / Of the fortress rock” (Ash, 2002, p. 9). Eventually, he learns that “all the kilims had been stolen / from the mosque,” which made him very sad (p. 9). While the reader knows the geography where the events occur and witness them, they share the feelings of the narrator.

In the middle of the poem, the poet–speaker asks himself, “what was I looking for?” (Ash, 2002, p. 12). Amid the feeling of psychological perplexity, the poet–speaker hints that he does not know what he is looking for; therefore, he continues to wander in the cities. After seeing the walls of İznik, the ancient Greek city of Nicaea, he visits another ancient Greek city, Sinasos, that features “many fine many fine Greek / houses / With balconies and sunrooms falling slowly into ruin” (Ash, 2002, p. 12). In Sinasos, a village in the Cappadocia region, “three charming girls” invited the speaker, and he recounted the story as follows:

In an upper-room, where no one lived, they showed me
 paintings
 In which the painter had evoked the orthogonal boulevards

Of European cities he had never seen, and here a tale of exile
 And expulsion lay concealed like a sharp pin in the folds of
 a blanket,
 For, of the family who built the house, or their descendants,
 or neighbours,
 Or the descendants of those neighbours, not one remained
 in Sinassos. (Ash, 2002, p. 13)

In these lines, the poet–speaker overtly refers to the population exchange between Türkiye and Greece in 1924, which underlines one of the simple truths of human experience, namely, migration. Is it migration? Following World War I and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, Türkiye underwent a period characterized by policies that affected the Rum and Turk societies. In response to ethnic and religious tensions that were prevalent in Turkish and Greek regions, the respective states determined a population exchange initiative within these territories. This exchange compelled thousands of Turkish people residing in the Greece and Rum communities in Türkiye, whose roots in these lands spanned centuries, to relocate to various regions (Metintaş & Metintaş, 2018, p. 2).

According to the Lausanne Peace Treaty, The Government of the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye and the Greek Government reached an agreement that encompasses the following provisions. A compulsory exchange of Turkish citizens shall be enforced following the Greek Orthodox faith residing within Turkish territory, and Greek citizens practicing the Muslim faith residing within Greek territory (*Lausanne Peace Treaty VI*). As per the provisions of the Treaty of Lausanne, the populace of Sinassos who were of Greek origin were required to migrate to Greece. Consequently, the Turkish residents of Greece were obligated to migrate to Türkiye. Here, the speaker neither feels that he is a part of the exiled village nor forms intimacy with the girls. The poet–observer perceives the feeling of exile and expulsion in the ancient village by directing attention to objects around him but does not allow himself to shoulder the burden of exile. At the end of the poem, the speaker says, “O distances and ghosts!” (Ash, 2002, p. 13), which refers to people that were forced to leave their places. He goes on, “O the descent of the sun in places where forgotten names / are written” (2002, p. 13). Through the sunset, the poet–observer remarks on the gloom created by the end of the day and reminds the reader of the names of the *forgotten* people. Lastly, he finishes his poem by saying, “The road is lovely as if there were no death” (2002, p. 13). Thus, the observant

narrative of the poet captures the profound impact of migration and exile and draws attention to the historical population exchange between Türkiye and Greece in 1924. While describing the weight of exile and expulsion in the ancient village as evidence of the simple truth of human experience, Ash challenges the traditional textual authority through the documentary-like statements of the poet–observer.

Ash further explores the representation of personal reality by combining the reflections of the poet–observer with plain emotions. According to Campion (2004), Ash’s portrayal of emotions in his poetry originates from his *lonerhood*, which results in a sense of “conversational openness” within his poems (p. 141). Campion also argues that Ash skillfully intertwines “absence and presence, dream image and naturalistic reality,” which creates a captivating blend of elements (Campion, 2004, pp. 141–142). The first poem of “A Short Divan” sequence *To the City* entitled “The Gloom of Turkish Music” begins with the introduction of the feelings of the speaker about Turkish music. Here, the gloomy tone of Turkish music reminds him of the death of his mother. After such death, the speaker feels devastated and says, “I thought when my mother died / I would be inconsolable, that it would be ‘the end of me,’ / but it was not” (Ash, 2002, p. 79). However, he reveals that his mournful state disappeared within some time: “It felt strange, but sad and regrettable only in the sense / that everything is sad and regrettable, or potentially so” (Ash, 2002, p. 79). The speaker regards his state as relatively strange; however, it eventually turns out to be normal. From an alternative viewpoint, Ash initially highlights the emotional distress experienced by a lonesome individual in an unfamiliar cultural setting, which subsequently draws a parallel between this sentiment of despondency and the bereavement of the speaker of his mother.

In postmodern writing, the concept of history has transformed into *histories*, which emphasizes the existence of multiple perspectives and interpretations of history, due to the challenges against the idea of a single historical truth. White (1978), a prominent historian and theorist, points out the plurality of historical truth and of readings and analyses and notes as follows:

no historical event is intrinsically tragic; it can only be conceived as such from a particular point of view or from within the context of a structured set of events of which it is an element enjoying a privileged place. For in history what is tragic from one perspective is comic from another”. (p. 47)

White emphasizes the plurality of historical truth, which highlights that different interpretations are contingent on the contextual framework in which events are situated. This notion of diverse perspectives is reflected in Ash's poems in which he focuses on historical events and cities from various angles. This notion is true for the two abovementioned poems. Building on the representation of diverse perspectives in postmodern writing, Ash (2002) employs his personal analysis of different historical events once again in "The Displeasure of Ruins." The poet-observer depicts various antique cities, each of which elicits a different emotion from the reader. The poem begins with, "How must it feel to be exhumed / after centuries of living peacefully / under the earth, to be exposed to harsh sun ... [and] to be stared at by ignorant crowds / dressed in unsightly leisure-wear?" (Ash, 2002, p. 126). In this poem, Ash focuses on the remains of the antique cities viewed by ignorant people to represent the feeling of grief. The second stanza of the poem reads as follows:

In Sardis there is grievance,
 in Ephesus a chorus of angry complaints,
 and at Sebaste the theatre is wounded
 by the removal of its orange grove;
 likewise the theatre of Nyssa mourns for
 its uprooted olive trees, which gave it
 such welcome shade. (Ash, 2002, p. 126)

These lines illustrate Ash's use of personification to attribute emotions and characteristics to ancient cities, which makes Ash a semihistorian. In this regard, historians are known to attribute meaning to historical events by providing descriptions when creating a narrative in the context of a storyline. According to White (1978), "the emplotments of the history of 'society'" presented by Marx in his *Manifesto* and Freud in *Totem and Taboo* embody this classification. However, in postmodern poetry, poets, such as Ash, occasionally act similar to a historian while portraying a historical event. For instance, Sardis in Manisa is personified as embodying a sense of complaint, while Ephesus in İzmir is personified as representing an angry complaint. The theater of Sebaste in Uşak is wounded and that of Nyssa in Antalya laments for its displaced olive trees. The context that Ash observes from these cities is the "air of serenity / of damaged glory," and he employs the image of "Castrated Apollo" to define the crippled state of these cities (Ash, 2002, p. 126). Apollo, the god of music, poetry, and the sun, represents order and beauty; however, the perfect image of Apollo is interrupted through castration, which causes sadness in those cities.

Therefore, Ash uses emotions and historical elements, which is similar to a historian, in his description of the ruins of the ancient cities he visits.

In his analysis, Corcoran (1993) handles the intricacies of postmodern theory and its inevitable link to the uncertainties, worries, and claims that “[i]f postmodern theory is an attempt to write the history of the contemporary, then its uncertainties, anxieties and discursive fractures are hardly surprising” (p. 203). As asserted by Corcoran, each poet assumes the role of a semihistorian who endeavors to examine and interpret historical events from unique and subjective perspectives. In this sense, Ash’s subjectivity functions as a catalyst for the combination of the elements of city life and personal feelings. In “Nervous Poems,” from *To the City*, in which he exemplifies several representations of tension due to different events in city life, Ash concentrates on the feeling of anxiety along with the emotions of gloom and confinement. In the beginning, the poet–observer states, “I climbed the steep street of music / past ouds, and guitars, and gleaming pianos, / and I felt nervous” (Ash, 2002, p. 128). The statement of the speaker suggests that they attempted to play various musical instruments, including the oud, guitar, and piano. Thus, it is likely that they were unsuccessful in their attempts, which resulted in the feeling of nervousness. Subsequently, the reader is presented with additional vignettes from the daily routine of the speaker, including the purchase of a newspaper and the experience of unexplained nervousness, and the lunchtime activities of the speaker, which are similarly accompanied by the feeling of anxiety. Afterward, he returns to his apartment, which is “an obvious trap”; thus, he feels nervous once again (Ash, 2002, p. 128). This relatively lengthy poem embodies other incidents of anxiety; in the end, the speaker addresses his love as follows:

Then I thought of writing to you,
nervous poems, and my hand moved freely.

Nervousness,
we cannot go on like this. But will. (Ash, 2002, p. 129)

Although Ash does not give up elaborating on the tension of living in an urban landscape, he changes the course of the poem in the abovementioned lines by referring to his love. Thus, “Nervous Poems” is revealed as a manifestation of Ash’s innermost sentiments. However, the metapoetic dimension of the poem introduces an intriguing ambiguity by leaving the reader perplexed regarding whether the voice derives from the poet,

Ash, or that of a fictional counterpart. This context induces a sense of anxiety in the reader. As Steven Connor argues within the context of *Postmodernist Culture* (1989), “subjectivity gives way to textuality” (p. 125). McHale (1987) also remarks that reality “more than ever before is plural” (p. 39), and this plural reality confuses the mind of the reader (McHale, 1987, p. 269). Consequently, Ash engages the contemplations of the reader by employing metapoetic circumstances throughout his verses.

In addition, Ash expresses his thoughts and ideas in his *The Anatolikon* and *To the City*; for example, in his “My Poetry,” the first poem of *To the City*, Ash mentions the criticism of his poetry. The poem begins, “Because they didn’t get it, and wanted to be polite / critics used to call my poetry ‘experimental’” (Ash, 2002, p. 73). Ash reveals that the critics denounce his poetry as *experimental*, only because they do not understand his poetry. Thus, Ash presents a metafictional poem. The utilization of metafiction can be analogously compared to the transparency of a car engine: it openly displays its system of inner workings, including all mechanics and elements; however, it also retains an element of enigma. Regarding the working of metafiction, Hutcheon (1988) remarks that “art forms parodically cite the intertexts of both the ‘world’ and art and, in so doing, those art forms contest the boundaries that many would unquestioningly use to separate the two” (p. 127). According to Hutcheon, “postmodernist art offers a new model for mapping the borderland between art and the world, a model that works from a position within both and yet not totally within either” (1988, p. 23). This technique matches that of Ash and his poetry, as he addresses the profound criticism directed at his verses. Ash ascertains to perceive the reason underlying their harsh criticism of his poetry. While seeking to comprehend the reasons behind such harsh criticism, Ash examines the liminal space between art and reality. The speaker expresses as follows:

This always puzzled me. Was I some kind of scientist?
Was I planning to clone Mallarmé or an ox?
What did they mean? Uh, I always thought
it was just my heart talking about the things
I loved and hated, hated and loved, like Scriabin. (Ash, 2002, p. 73)

These lines suggest that Ash mocks the critics through their ideas that his poetry is experimental but not in a scientific manner. His poetry is experimental in its own way, which occasionally makes understanding his poetry difficult for the critics. Currently, the lack of compatibility of the poet with literary circles evidently exists. In these lines,

one can well observe that Ash employs certain elements derived from thoughts and emotions. He defines his poetry as such. He distinctly claims that his heart talks about the things he loved and hated, which is similar to the Russian composer Scriabin “who was a very strange person” (Ash, 2002, p. 73). Indeed, Scriabin was a strange person who transcended traditional tonality; therefore; critics also loved and hated him. Similarly, in terms of the critiques he received, Ash claims that he feels sadness and freedom at the same time. At the end of the poem, he says that “In truth, I care little / about either of these composers. Ah, sadness and freedom!” (Ash, 2002, p. 73).

In this perplexing interplay of literary allusions to various composers and novelists, Ash’s poetry functions as a thought-provoking machine of metafiction in which references to figures, such as Mallarmé, serve as stepping stones for transgressing the boundaries of traditional subject matters. In this context, the poem “Mallarmé” signifies a discerning journey into the essence of poetry, which unravels the notion that the true subject of poetic expression lies within poetry. At the beginning of the poem, the poet–speaker claims that, “I am sick of hearing that / ‘The only true subject of poetry is poetry’” (Ash, 2002, p. 80). However, to defend his poetry, Ash sincerely claims that a poem “can be about anything or nothing” (2002, p. 80). Here, the poet feels that he is free to talk about anything, because he is the poet–creator.

Conclusion

In summary, John Ash’s poems address the complex interplay among emotions, observations, and historical elements, which renders him a distinctive poet–observer in contemporary British poetry. In his collection entitled *The Anatolikon/To the City*, he displays the interplay between people and their environment and unveils the impact of emotions on one’s understanding of life. Performing an action similar to Janus, Ash’s poetry exemplifies the poetics of postmodern British poetry. On the one hand, Ash’s speakers act similar to poet–observers, while perceiving the feelings of the ex-centric people around him. For example, in “The Anatolikon,” he focuses on the feeling of sadness and expulsion, which reminds the reader of the people that had been forced to immigrate, through the image of exile.

By infusing historical events with human-like characteristics and addressing their grievances, Ash illuminates the sense of loss and disrupted order experienced by these cities by inviting reflection on the complexities of their past and present states. As analyzed

in "The Displeasure of Ruins," Ash also represents diverse perspectives that provide various interpretations of ancient cities and historical events along with the representation of emotions of people, which renders him a semihistorian in his own right. Thus, his poems blur the line between historical events and personal realities and leave the reader to meditate on the interplay between subjectivity and textuality, as reflected in "Nervous Poems." In contrast to the principles of Romanticism, John Ash, as a poet of postmodernism, takes a different approach. His poetic personas convey a longing for ancient cities and cultures; however, he refrains from yielding to melancholy. Within the framework of postmodernism, Ash utilizes an ironic and cynical style to engage with the world.

Moreover, Ash concentrates on thoughts by referring to the metapoetic aspects of postmodern poetry and the interplay between reality and art. In postmodern literature in which historical truths are plural, the postmodern poetry of Ash portrays a diverse representation of feelings and experiences in historical events and, thus, abandons the reader amid different potential interpretations. His poems question traditional textual authority using the documentary-like accounts of the poet-observer. Through his poetic remarks, Ash reminds people of the instabilities that stem from the complex relationship between reality and postmodern poetry. Employing the elements of metafiction in his poems, such as "My Poetry" and "Mallarmé," Ash refers to literary critics and poets, such as Mallarmé, to transgress the limits of traditional subject matters and to glorify the freedom of poetic expression. By abandoning conventional realism, Ash also represents an experience with the reproductions of cities and components of city life. However, he remains unsure whether or not it is real. Ash's concern for the poetic role of the representation of the real and metafiction distinguishes his poetry as essentially postmodern. In his collection, *The Anatolikon/To the City*, Ash traces the alternative portrayal of historical and contemporary cities and illustrates people dwelling in these places with their emotions and thoughts. Finally, John Ash's poetry encompasses a poetic spirit that invites the reader to celebrate the possibility of artistic exploration and the power of introspection in his postmodern odyssey.

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