

What if you were asked to name the most important contemporary musician? Could you argue for a family tree that traces everything, Hip Hop to Portishead, back to a single figure? Wouldn't that risk overestimating a favorite while reducing the others to mere followers. Who is the most important contemporary poet? It's too easy to point to Ashbery as the single reason high-modernism slid into post-modernism so gracefully we still can't find a seam. However, his influence was coincidental with a long moment that included the 60's, Vietnam, feminism, semiotics, Oulipo, the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movement, Hejiniian breathing new life into Gertrude Stein on her way to writing *My Life*—her disjunctive retelling of how she learned to speak—and Susan Howe's poetic mash-ups: lyric + history + discourse, and Armantrout's wry tangential minimalism. On the lyric side, we'd have to discredit Charles Simic, James Tate, and cross out Brock-Broido's "brocade apostrophes" (Bonnie Costello, reviewing *The Master Letters*), Glück's *Meadowlands*, Carson's *Plainwater*, and Graham's *Materialism*. Poetic history mirrors real history (tanks and such, plus ideas). To try to pin that much credit (or blame) on one person suggests the world doesn't exist. All of these poets, Ashbery among them, practice a poetic that combines earnestness and irony, the exact ratio of which is dictated by the poet's personality and personal encounters with history. All prefer collage over linear cohesion. Collage takes us back to Surrealism, and to early Eliot, and Rimbaud before that. Maybe we have to go back that far to credit someone with being the *most* important poet.