

The Poet as Painter: A Study in John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"

الشاعر كفنن تشكيلي: دراسة قصيدة "بورتريه شخصي في مرآة محدبه"

للشاعر جون اشبري

**Prof. Dr.
Qasim Salman Serhan
Researcher
MuhannedAgelHadi
University of Al-Qadisiya
College of Education**

Abstract

This paper deals with John Ashbery (1927 -), who is acknowledged as one of the "greatest" American living poets. Actually, his fanaticism towards "art for art's sake" leads him to distil his poetry from any social, religious or political issues. The present paper sheds light on the impact of painting on his poetry generally and on his masterpiece "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" in particular. It also focuses on how Ashbery follows the technique of Abstract Expressionism or The New York School which Ashbery forms its backbone. Like the Abstract Expressionist, Ashbery believes that the artist has the capacity to use art as a means to allow the unconscious mind to express itself. It can also be noticed that most of his works are nonobjective because they do not attempt to depict objects from the real world or portray figures from the visible world.

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For contemporary poets, contemplation on other media especially self-portraiture, enables a detailed evaluation of the establishment of selfhood as a textual entity. Ashbery shares a universal interest for how self-portraits are constructed and what they tell the readers about the artist. He

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uses his contemplation upon portrait painting as a way of manifesting and assessing poetic techniques, what is called a "self-reflexive" lyric.¹In this case, painting can supply a starting point for the poet's own self-portrait, a "self" that is universal in Ashbery's poetry, an accumulation of ongoing and erratic experiences.²Thus, examining Ashbery's poems in this way draws a convenient recognition to how poetry addresses not only the idea of selfhood, subjectivity and the role of the artist, but also poetry's engagement with day-to-day experience. His poetic lines are often periphrastic, that is, refuting direct statement through digressive techniques. His poetry exhibits a self-perception of its own creation; the reader is encouraged to consider the poem as action in process.³Ashbery once remarks: "as far as my own poetry goes, while there's a lot of my unconscious mind in it, there's a lot of the conscious mind too."⁴He also declares that most of his poems are about "the experience of experience."⁵For him "the particular occasion [or experience] is of lesser interest to me than the way a happening or experience filters through me."⁶

Ashbery tries to draw a kinship between painting and poetry by adopting the technique of Abstract Expressionist artists in his poetry. For him, the words and phrases are verbal icons that throw the images that glint in the mind without any endeavour to synchronize them.⁷Abstract Expressionism or "action painting" does not strive to emulate reality; instead the artist's canvas becomes a "field of action" on which the painter could express himself.⁸In Ashbery's poems, this idea indicates that a poem should be "the chronicle of the creative act which produced it."⁹It is not a question of "poetry about poetry" but "poetry as poetry."¹⁰Thus, the upshot is poetry of surrealist juxtapositions, complex syntax and continuation that disobey simple logic. In other words, the poems are both controversial and, for many, incomprehensible.¹¹

Influenced by the Abstract Expressionist painters such as Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), Ashbery's poetry reverberates in language the sublime components in these painters works. Their techniques greatly influenced Ashbery's style, which has been referred to as the verbal twin of modern painting.¹²Ashbery's proclivity to juxtapose antithetical images through the collage of lines and repetition of his own words which initiate surreal images is what makes him¹³difficult partly because of this and partly because of the ambivalence of his own feeling and thought.¹⁴In his 1961 essay "Poets and Painters in Collaboration," Porter

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regards Ashbery as being the closest in his verbal application to Abstract Expressionism technique.¹⁵ He states that "Ashbery's Language is opaque; you can't see through it any more than you can look through a fresco."¹⁶ Later on, he writes that Ashbery has retained "the clear but incommunicable knowledge of the child who was surrounded by heaven in his infancy, when a sense of wonder precluded judgment."¹⁷

As a matter of fact, Ashbery's poems are like "kaleidoscopic" compositions constructed from the slivers of meaning; most of them do not form a familiar image, but they are "beautiful" and "radiant" in their own light.¹⁸ Once he remarks of his style: "I attempt to use words abstractly, as an artist uses paint."¹⁹ This means that pronouns might have no definitely recognizable antecedents, lines might have no logical order and poems might consist of mere fragments.²⁰ Instead of creating an underlying attachment that links a poem with its title, Ashbery draws the awareness to their adjoining surfaces. In other words, the title of many of his poem may not fit their contents.²¹ For Ashbery, the artist's audacity is, to some extent, due to his "recklessness," as he argues:

Most reckless things are beautiful, in some way, and recklessness is what makes experimental art beautiful, just as religions are beautiful because of the strong possibility that they are founded on nothing.²²

In fact, this is marked by fragmentation, redirection of clichés, repeated phrases and disjointed recollections, which all float in the stream of consciousness.²³

Critics, like Constante Gonzalez Groba et al., do not only observe Ashbery's manipulation of "objects d'art" as starting motif for his poems, but also the painterly idiosyncrasy find in much of his poetry itself. The collage aesthetic has been, beyond doubt, a major impact on him.²⁴ In his dedication to the "art for art's sake" aspect of poetry, Ashbery carries a similarity to self-conscious practitioners of other arts, especially painting,²⁵ as he himself recalls:

I have probably been influenced by the modern art that I have looked at. Certainly the simultaneity of cubism is something that has rubbed off on me, as well as the Abstract Expressionist idea that the work is a sort of record of its own coming into existence.²⁶

On another occasion, Ashbery makes this latter point more comprehensible:

The process of writing poetry becomes the poem. This was radically demonstrated by action painters such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, who set out not knowing where they were going, in a sensible trance, as it were, and created works of art which are themselves the histories of their own coming into being.²⁷

Peter Stitt states that if the poem itself becomes the process of writing, it is likely that the content of such a poem is poetry, and so it is in some of Ashbery's work.²⁸

Ashbery's poetry can best be described as "Ekphrastic" and Ashbery lavishes on his poetry much of the potentials of painting.²⁹ Leo Spitzer (1887-1960) defined Ekphrasis as "the description of an object d'art by medium of the word."³⁰ Jean H. Hagstrum (1913-1995) paraphrased it in this way: "giving voice and language to the otherwise mute art object."³¹ In fact, Ashbery paints with words. In this way, the verbal art of poetry approaches the visual art of painting.³² Herffernan goes beyond that when he stated that Ashbery tries to use the poetic word to overcome and even negate the capacity of painting.³³ Also through his own language, Ashbery reads in painting the conditions of its self-presentation.³⁴

Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror is a 1975 poetry collection, from which Ashbery's poem takes the same name. The poem's title is taken from a painting by the sixteenth-century Italian painter Francesco Parmigianino (1503-1540) on which it dangles, and Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) described its own conception and implementation from top to bottom:³⁵

Francesco one day set himself to take his own portrait, looking at himself in a convex mirror, such as is used by barbers. While doing this he remarked the curious effect produced by the rotundity of the glass, which causes the beams of the ceiling to look bent, while the doors and all other parts of the buildings are in like fashion distorted, and recede in a very peculiar manner. All this, Francesco took it into his head to imitate for his diversion. He accordingly caused a globe or ball of wood to be made by a turner, and having divided it in half and brought it to the size of the mirror, he set himself with great art to copy all that he saw in the glass, more particularly his likeness But as all the nearer objects thus depicted in the glass were diminished, he

painted a hand, which he represented as employed in drawing, making it look a little larger.³⁶

"Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" is viewed as Ashbery's most approachable poem in terms of language and style and therefore distinguishes itself from many of Ashbery's other poems, which have been described as "hard poems."³⁷ Moreover, this poem is counted among the masterpieces of late-twentieth-century American poetry, and it is certainly regarded as Ashbery's personal masterpiece. Although it is interpreted as having an autobiographical sense, yet it does not reveal gritty details of Ashbery's personal life so much as his opinions about art and its power to transform the artist. In addition, it explores such philosophical issues as the nature of personal identity and the soul.³⁸ The work is apparently a meditation on Parmigianino's painting, offering lengthy observations on Parmigianino's artistic technique and skill. Bloom remarks that this poem is written in the "guise of a meditation that overthrows its object of meditation."³⁹

"Self-Portrait" is opened by imagining just such a situation: "as Parmigianino did it, the right hand/ bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer."⁴⁰ The poem replicates the "full trajectory" starting with the "traditional aesthetic references," or what Ashbery calls "frozen gestures." He viewed Parmigianino as a forefather of modernist painters, a deformer of form like Picasso and an illusionist of dream like Giorgio de Chirico.⁴¹ With brief and lucid phrases, Ashbery summarizes the way the Italian painter and architect Vasari scrutinizes the erection of Parmigianino's convex mirror itself from a sphere of wood.⁴²

The word "as," in the first stanza, foreshadows the whole poem, stipulating the poem's tropological premise. Through simile, analogy and metaphor, the poem mirrors every component of Parmigianino's painting. Actually, the poet reveals that he can do nothing but mirror the painting.⁴³ "The right hand [is] bigger than the head" indicates a distortion created by the mirror's convexity that is homogeneous to Ashbery's narrative method because the apparent boundaries of the narrative become larger than the centre of the story.⁴⁴

The early lines deal with representational art, where "representation" is the widespread category under which metaphor is a distinct type:

 he set himself

 With great art to copy all that he saw in the glass, Chiefly his reflection, of which the portrait

 Is the reflection, of which the portrait

Is the reflection once removed.
The glass chose to reflect only what he saw
Which was enough for his purpose: his image.(SP, 188)

What is "odd" about Ashbery's expression here is that it might seem more precise to say that the portrait represents or reflects the mirror image. However, the portrait is the "reflection once removed," as if there were another interceding reflection or representation between the mirror and the painting. In fact, the painting could not subsist without foregoing representations in Parmigianino's eye and brain of the mirror image. The line "glass chose to reflect only what he saw" strangely provides the mirror with free-will, but at the same time makes the representation in the mirror relies on what Parmigianino is capable of seeing. Thus, the mirror image represents what is in Parmigianino's eye while the portrait represents what is in the mirror. It is also right to say that the eye represents what is in the mirror, and the portrait represents what is in the eye. In this limitless circling of representation, all three elements: eye, portrait and mirror exist only in the concept of representing with relation to the other elements that are themselves representations.⁴⁵

The images of the poem depict the soul or the self as prisoner in the mirror, and as something that cannot be differentiated from its own picture. Therefore, as the poem shows, the soul is an image which presents itself by words that are also basically images.⁴⁶The soul is a captive, but it seems that the captor is art rather than the body.⁴⁷Thus, the poem can be read as a journey from Ashbery's approval of Parmigianino's self-portrait to the poet's adaptation of it, an adaptation improved with Ashbery staging Parmigianino's suicide.⁴⁸

Ashbery illuminates the face as an image of the soul, though not of the soul behind that particular face, but the soul of all souls. What the painting divulges is Ashbery's disappointment with the status of what delegate the soul. The soul is enthusiastic to exert its autonomy, to experience its power, but because it is not strong or free, it "has to stay where it is," cautious of the inspection that would expose it as allusion:⁴⁹

The soul has to stay where it is,
Even though restless, hearing raindrops at the pane,
The sighing of autumn leaves thrashed by the wind,
Longing to be free, outside, but it must stay
Posing in this place. It must move
As little as possible. This is what the portrait says. (SP,
188-9)

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The deformity of the mirror circumnavigates everything in its reflection toward the centre, so that the loyal painting of it must repudiate the standard pictorial illusion of realistic perspective. The painting, as interpreted in the poem, suggests that there are spaces extrinsic to its view, either faraway spaces just out of reach or embedded interior ones, still closed and still keeping their secrets. Actually with respect to this representation, nothing has autonomy or depth; there are no special spaces, only the superficial fold of "alcoves."⁵⁰

There are no recesses in the room, only alcoves,
And the window doesn't matter much, or that
Sliver of window or mirror on the right. (SP, 190)

All in all, the painting, in its presentation of such conditions of form, seems to be multiplex notes about art and language.⁵¹

The pretty and youthful face, which looks "more of angel than of man," appears in an image that concedes openly the function of mirrors in self-portraiture. This image is hauntingly definitely because of its peripheral distortions, especially the warped window and the monstrously elongated hand. The painting retains its harmony despite its violations of Renaissance ideals, partly because of the perfection of its circular shape. Here the portrait is seen as a microcosm into itself. That is why, the image has always astonished its viewers, from Parmigianino's day to Ashbery's own.⁵²

In the second section of the poem, Ashbery begins a more serious digression from the subject of Parmigianino's painting. In other words, the second movement seems to highlight the other things: the historical limitation of any human consciousness and the unavoidable differences between Parmigianino and the viewer of his painting. The timeless globe of the first movement metamorphoses into^{53a} "balloon" that "pops" as "the attention turns dully away." (SP, 190)

Ashbery concludes this stanza with the statement that Parmigianino started to paint everything he saw in the mirror, the whole of the world could be seen from his perspective. What is more is that the convex shape of the mirror plotted with him to⁵⁴ "perpetuate the enchantment of self with self." (SP, 192)

In the third section of the poem, Ashbery goes on to appraise what it means to scrutinize a painting such as Parmigianino's, especially when one grasps how much more disputable it is to apprehend and express experience. The "laws of perspective," which deconstruct the rules

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themselves, present into the poem when Ashbery talks about living in the present, as opposed to dreaming about the future:

Tomorrow is easy, but today is uncharted,
Desolate, reluctant as any landscape
To yield what are laws of perspective
After all only to the painter's deep
Mistrust. (SP, 192)

These laws are innovations of the painter, forcing on the uncharted landscape, which perhaps springs from the painter's lack of trust in his personal perceptions.⁵⁵ Actually, they are "weak instruments though/ necessary." (SP, 192)

Ashbery, in the fourth section, gives his views on Renaissance painting and the position of Parmigianino's painting within the paintings of that period. This section begins with a metaphor, the painting "swims" in and out of the pivot of consciousness:

As I start to forget it
It presents its stereotype again
But it is an unfamiliar stereotype. (SP, 194)

By describing a "stereotype" to be "unfamiliar," Ashbery presents a paradoxical image. Nevertheless, he proposes that the strange state of consciousness in which one thinks of something that he is sure he has thought of before, without being able to remember where or when.⁵⁶ Ashbery's provisional formula "perhaps an angel looks like everything/ we have forgotten, I mean forgotten" (SP, 194) is very close to Walter Benjamin's (1892-1940), a German philosopher and cultural critic, contemplation upon his angel:

The angel, however, resembles all from which I have had to part: persons and above all things. In the things I no longer have, he resides. He makes them transparent, and behind all of them there appears to me the one for whom they are intended.⁵⁷

The fifth section of the poem is started by narrating biographical details about Parmigianino during the invasion of Rome in 1527 by the armed forces of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. He also narrates the history of the creation of the portrait as well as his own creation of the poem in New York. He shows how the astonishment, that amazed the pope and his court, that "arrested" the soldiers who might have ceased the painter's work when they found him in his workshop during the sack of Rome, might give way to a different order of amazement.⁵⁸

The shadow of the city injects its own
Urgency: Rome where Francesco
Was at work during the Sack: his inventions
Amazed the soldiers who burst in on him;
They decided to spare his life, but he left soon after;
Vienna where the painting is today, where
I saw it with Pierre in the summer of 1959; New York
Where I am now, which is a logarithm
Of other cities. (SP, 195)

In the remaining lines of the poem, Ashbery tries out many solutions to the difficult situation of the self-paralyzed by disillusionment with the possibilities of self and stranded in a vacuum of time. He attempts them and refuses them all one by one. He finds a way to refuse the conclusion of the painting, yet he himself hardly finds possible.

Your argument, Francesco,
Had begun to grow stale as no answer
Or answers were forthcoming. If it dissolves now
Into dust, that only means its time had come
Some time ago, but look now, and listen:
It may be that another life is stocked there
In recesses no one knew of; that it,
Not we, are the change; that we are in fact it
If we could get back to it, relive some of the way
It looked, turn our faces to the globe as it sets
And still be coming out all right:
Nerves normal, breath normal. (SP, 196)

The painting reveals that time is antagonistic to human beings; their relation to it is tragic. Ashbery wants to represent this idea to himself as "stale," and to substitute for it a kindly version of human's relation to time, moving with it faithfully as it moves.⁵⁹

In the final section of the poem, Ashbery shifts to his own creation, highlighting both the limitations and possibilities of the aesthetic of artists. Released from Parmigianino's portrait, the poem now starts with a more loosely structure, philosophical exploration of the themes Ashbery has previously highlighted, such as the soul's response to art, and the reality of the present moment. Bloom states that this stanza begins with an amazed sense of achieved identification, showing both the painting and the poet's death:⁶⁰

A breeze like the turning of a page

brings back your face: the moment
takes such a big bite out of the haze
of pleasant intuition it comes after. (SP, 197)

Ashbery wonders whether there is anything specific to aesthetic experience, in other words, whether looking at the painting really means anything:61

Yet the "poetic," straw-colored space
of the long corridor that leads back to the painting,
its darkening opposite, is this
some figment of "art," not to be imagined
as real, let alone special? (SP, 199)

Ashbery's evaluation of the conception of self-portraiture signifies the instability of the borderline between the self and the other, between the model and the model's background. The awareness of that instability shapes the poem's self-portrait as a source of surprise. For Ashbery, the artist has only delusory dominance over his work.62

So as to create something new
For itself, that there is no other way,
That the history of creation proceeds according to
Stringent laws, and that things
Do get done in this way, but never the things
We set out to accomplish and wanted so desperately
To see come into being. Parmigianino
Must have realized this as he worked at his
Life-obstructing task. (SP, 201)

Ashbery friendly addresses Francesco Parmigianino by his first name near the end of the poem to ask him for the withdrawal of the hand that had touched Ashbery and many other poets and painters:63

Therefore I beseech you, withdraw that hand,
Offer it no longer as shield or greeting,
The shield of a greeting, Francesco:
There is room for one bullet in the chamber:
Our looking through the wrong end
Of the telescope as you fall back at a speed
Faster than that of light to flatten ultimately
Among the features of the room. (SP, 203)

The poem is about to end on this note of annoyance, as the "waking dream" of Ashbery's experience with the painting fades out. He is obliged to end inconclusively with this paradoxical characterization of writing

and a paradoxical farewell to his poem. He concedes like Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," in which the latter said "I cannot paint/ what then I was."⁶⁴

An invitation
Never mailed, the "it was all a dream"
Syndrome, though the "all" tells tersely
Enough how it wasn't. (SP, 203)

Spiegelman states that the poem ends subsiding into gestures of farewell and burial.⁶⁵

The hand holds no chalk
And each part of the whole falls off
And cannot know it knew, except
Here and there, in cold pockets
Of remembrance, whispers out of time. (SP, 204)

This poem starts with the life of Parmigianino and Ashbery concludes it with a mental monologue. Ashbery manipulates in this poem a "ganglion of voices from history," but it is inadmissible to the current mind because "it carries/ the momentum of a conviction that had been building." (SP, 197) One can notice that sometimes the speaker puts his confidence in the reader while at other times he likes to be a speechless spectator who records his feeling implicitly:⁶⁶ "too close to ignore, too far/ for one to intervene." (SP, 203)

Nerys Williams notes that this poem is opened with an ekphrastic mode since it thoroughly describes Parmigianino's painting, melting visual art into poetry.⁶⁷ Kalstone and Richard Stamel deal with the painting as a celebration of the "powers of foreshortening and concentration," or an expression of "faith in the representability of world and self through art." They perceive in the painting a variety of "expressive energies" that help to urge the "various ways the speaker sees himself in the painting." In fact, all of which are important in Ashbery's explorations of the counterbalancing energies of "the processes of thinking."⁶⁸

Wallace Stevens once argued that because the "sister arts" have a common source in the imagination and because they appear as a humanistic presence in an age of disbelief, they offered "a compensation for what has been

lost.⁶⁹ Ashbery believes that such trust in the imagination's powers of recuperation would be exaggerated. For him no artwork could recompense for what had been lost. Poetry might try to describe the losses, or indicate the extent of the absence, or tentatively express that "vast unravelling/ out toward the junctions and to the darkness beyond" (SP, 214) the temporal passage of present experience; but it cannot regain the reality of what existed before the loss.⁷⁰

Parmigianino's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" is itself an example of a Mannerist piece, and Ashbery's poem has similarly been described as Mannerist for its own distortions of perspective. Like Mannerist paintings which drew attention to themselves as artificial creations through exaggeration, Ashbery draws attention to his own work of art by examining his own act of creating it. It should be noted as well that Ashbery's technique is viewed as a critique of Parmigianino's Mannerist work. While both pieces are works of self-representation, Ashbery strives to analyse Parmigianino's as well as his own methods of self-portrayal, thereby distinguishing his approach from Parmigianino's by his attempt to eliminate not the self-reflexivity of the work, but the narcissistic and limiting qualities he finds in the painting.⁷¹

Nevertheless, Ashbery's style in "Self-Portrait" is sometimes referred to as Abstract Expressionist rather than Mannerist since he intentionally uses elements of distortion to create a desired emotional effect. He discusses Parmigianino's painting, presenting the verbal equivalent of viewing the painting itself or the experience of viewing it, which transcends the mere description of the painting's details. In doing so, Ashbery delineates the possibilities of both verbal and visual modes of expression.⁷²

Conclusion

Ashbery believes that only by aestheticizing the harsh reality, the poet can imagine the real world and break free from its duties and requirements. He argues that the poet should struggle tooth and nail to make his poetry "aesthetic." In other words, his poetry should not satisfy the needs of society but the demands of art. Ashbery enters into a kinship

with painters, so he emphasizes that poems and paintings exist in two adjacent moments. One can notice that "Self-Portrait" is a bridge between tradition and innovation because Ashbery takes it from the tradition, modifying it with a colour of his own imagination to make it fit the present. In fact, Ashbery's "Self-Portrait" is unique and universal experimentalism, which has its inspiration in Aestheticism because of its strong art criticism and poetic creativity as well as the aesthetic flexibility and variation of the text. Actually, his aesthetic contemplations in this regard are not mere esoteric and theoretical stuff, rather they create an organic unity with his poetry and a dogma to which Ashbery has persisted all his life.

ملخص البحث

يتناول هذا البحث واحداً من أعظم شعراء الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية المعاصرين جون أشبري (١٩٢٧ -). وفي الحقيقة نزوعه لرؤية الفن للفن جعل شعره بعيداً عن المسائل الاجتماعية و الدينية و السياسة. وتضيء الدراسة تأثير اللوحات التشكيلية في شعر أشبري بصورة عامة ، و على تحفته الفنية "بورتريه شخصي في مرآة محدبة" بصورة خاصة. وتركز الدراسة أيضاً على التقنية التي اتبعها أشبري في شعره ، وهي تقنية "التعبيرية التجريدية" أو ما تسمى بـ "مدرسة نيويورك" تلك التي يعدُّ أشبري عمودها الفقري. يؤمن أشبري بما يؤمن به معتقو مذهب التعبيرية التجريدية بأنَّ الفنان له القدرة على استخدام الفن بوصفه وسيلة لإطلاق العنان للاوعي بالتعبير عن نفسه. و يمكن للقارئ أن يلاحظ أيضاً أنَّ معظم أعمال أشبري تكون مجردة أو غير تمثيلية، بمعنى أنها تصور فكرة الفنان أو شعوره دون محاكاة لمواضيع أو أشخاص من الواقع.

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