

## Abstract Expressionism Techniques in John Ashbery's

### "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"

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#### **Abstract:**

John Ashbery (1927-) is one of the most prominent postmodern poets in America who is known for his innovative techniques. He continues to be the most controversial poet, as he disregards the laws of logic in picturing reality. Ashbery's style is deeply influenced by the experimental methods of modern painting. He has been mostly associated with Abstract Expressionism that signifies the great progress in the European avant-garde visual art. The Abstract expressionists often choose to present subjects in graceful distortion, rather than attempt to record life with absolute accuracy. Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" is typical of ekphrastic poetry. It is inspired by a painting which has the same title by the sixteenth-century Italian painter, Francesco Mazzola. The painting is not a realistic portrait of the painter, for it is deliberately distorted as it would be in a convex reflection. Ashbery unfolds the essence of postmodern poetry which illustrates the inability of the forms of language to capture the reality beyond the mental image. Like the Abstract Expressionists, he makes of his poems a depiction of the real workings of the mind which is liberated from all the constraints. Furthermore, the poem is a verbal depiction of the painting; it assumes and transforms the inner voice of the portrait.

John Ashbery is one of the first truly postmodern poets to achieve wide acclaim. Langdon Hammer, chairman of the English Department at Yale University, states that: "no figure looms so large in American poetry over the past 50 years as John Ashbery."<sup>1</sup> The play of the human mind is the subject of many of his poems. In *the Open Journal of Philosophy*, Roland Benedikter and Judith Hilber state that Ashbery is the "representative of the post-modern worldview."<sup>2</sup> Stephen Burt, a poet and Harvard professor of English, describes Ashbery as, the "last figure whom half the English-language poets alive thought a great model, and the other half thought incomprehensible."<sup>3</sup> Ashbery himself asserts that there are no traditional subjects or themes in his poetry: "Most of my poems are about the experience of experience . . . and the particular experience is of lesser interest to me. I believe this is the way in which it happens with most people, and I'm trying to record a kind of

generalized transcript of what's really going on in our minds all the day long."<sup>4</sup>

He makes clear that his goal is "to produce a poem that the critic cannot even talk about."<sup>5</sup> Ashbery's poems have a dreamlike quality. He declares that he would like to "reproduce the power dreams have of persuading you that a certain event has a meaning not logically connected with it, or that there is a hidden relation among disparate objects."<sup>6</sup> Ashbery is recognized as one of the most experimental poets of his generation. His unrelated, juxtaposed images sometimes exasperate the reader, as "these fragments slipped away like verbal hallucinations, leaving the atmosphere charged with emotional haze."<sup>7</sup>

After receiving his B.A. at Harvard in 1949, Ashbery wrote an M.A. thesis at Columbia on Henry Green (1905–1973), the English novelist. The choice was characteristic, since Green's works are written in the form of witty conversation.<sup>8</sup> When Ashbery went to France as a Fulbright Scholar, he became interested in the French writer, Raymond Roussel (1877-1933).<sup>9</sup> Obviously Ashbery is deeply affected by Roussel's techniques that are closely similar to the devices of Abstract Expressionism.<sup>10</sup> Roussel illustrates that his books have been composed not out of experience but out of verbal games. He phonetically deconstructs certain phrases to create new sequences of words that become the basis of a poem.<sup>11</sup> Ashbery says that Roussel's writing is "like the perfectly preserved temple of a cult which has disappeared without a trace, or a complicated set of tools whose use cannot be discovered."<sup>12</sup>

Ashbery is enthusiastically interested in French paintings that are associated with Surrealism.<sup>13</sup> His attention to the French avant-garde is addictive and thorough. He expresses his dislike for any institutionalized literature in his article, "invisible avant-garde."<sup>14</sup> The article argues that the avant-garde has already established its own tradition and he states that the traditional literature is now represented by "a handful of decrepit stragglers behind the big booming avant-garde juggernaut."<sup>15</sup> Ashbery wrote two poetry collections: *The Tennis Court Oath*, published in 1962, and *Rivers and Mountains*, published in 1966. Both of them are regarded as highly controversial because of their experimental form and style.

Soon after his return to New York, Ashbery published the volume *The Double Dream of Spring* in 1970. This was followed by *Three Poems* in 1972. By the mid 1970s, Ashbery was receiving a greater amount of critical recognition for his poetic work and was regarded as one of America's most prominent poets, despite the controversy surrounding his work.<sup>16</sup> From 1974 to 1990, Ashbery served as a Professor of English and a Codirector of the M.F.A. program in Creative Writing at Brooklyn College. During that time, he

continued to write poetry. His works *Houseboat Days* (1977) and *As We Know* (1979) are increasingly described as both difficult to decipher and avant-garde. His more recent work includes *And the Stars Were Shining* (1994), *Chinese Whispers* (2002), *Where Shall I Wander* (2005), and *A Worldly Country* (2007).<sup>17</sup>

Ashbery has always been unpredictable and has experimented with different manners of writing within his poems, often incorporating seemingly arbitrary elements and apparently disjointed phrases into his work. As he stated in his interview with David Lehman: “Art with any serious aspirations toward realism still has to take into account the fact that reality escapes laws of perspective and logic, and does not naturally take the form of a sonnet or a sonata.”<sup>18</sup>

An examination of Ashbery’s biography reveals an ongoing involvement with art: Ashbery was a critic for the *Paris Herald Tribune* for five years and an executive editor of *ART news* for nine years. “Modern art was the first and most powerful influence on Ashbery,” said Helen McNeil in *the Times Literary Supplement*.<sup>19</sup> Exploring Ashbery’s poetry illustrates the influence of modern painting on his style.<sup>20</sup> Ashbery himself claims, “I have perhaps been more influenced by modern painting and music than by poetry.”<sup>21</sup>

Visual arts are Ashbery’s lifelong interest. He even aspired to become a surrealist painter and took painting classes.<sup>22</sup> Ashbery lived in a close contact with the galleries and painters of Abstract Expressionists who were then, in the early fifties, “trying to clear professional space for their own careers.”<sup>23</sup> The Abstract Expressionist movement signifies the great progress in the European avant-garde visual arts. The fifties were a period when, in the words of Helen McNeil, “American poetry was constrained and formal while American abstract-expressionist art was vigorously taking over the heroic responsibilities of the European avant-garde.”<sup>24</sup>

The Abstract Expressionists were inspired by surrealist techniques, notably automatism.<sup>25</sup> They began turning away from figuration and relied instead, in the words of Irving Sandler, “on their particular experiences and visions, which they painted as directly as they could.”<sup>26</sup> The canvas became a record of the artist’s expressive presence. The paintings’ visual ferocity expressed the irrationalities, anxieties and ambiguities in the individual’s psych, but hoped to reach the intrasubjective in this way too.<sup>27</sup> Ashbery’s poetry has been mostly associated with Abstract Expressionists because of the correspondence of his style to “nonrepresentational methods of picturing reality.”<sup>28</sup> As Robert Von Hallberg observed, Ashbery’s writing has much closer relation to the work of the so-called second generation of Abstract

Expressionists, with their “[e]mbarrassment with seriousness” and love for “accident, innocence, and of course fun and the various reliefs experienced in the presence of absurdity,” as well as with their shared attraction even to the vulgar.<sup>29</sup>

Ashbery’s ekphrastic poetry<sup>30</sup> is unique because, as David Lehman has remarked, Ashbery uses specific paintings “as points of departure that discover themselves by meditating on *objets d’art*, and thus displacing them. . . . Gazing at the painting, the poet comes virtually to inhabit its room, to make its quarters his own.”<sup>31</sup> Noting that Ashbery’s poetry is analogous to modern painting, the poet and critic, Leslie Wolf, begs the question, “but what does it mean to say that a visual art is analogous to a verbal or symbolic one?”<sup>32</sup> While colors and shapes in paintings evoke associations in the mind of a viewer, the words and phrases of a poem have denotative meanings. The poet tries to emulate the abstraction that characterizes modern painting. Wolf states that “to reach this state of freedom in a verbal art, the poet must use the signifying quality of his medium *against itself*. . . . The poet must arrange ‘brushstrokes’ of his tableau in such a way that they yield contradictory clues.”<sup>33</sup>

Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” is written in a style often described as “verbal expressionism.”<sup>34</sup> It is the title poem for Ashbery’s celebrated 1975 collection that won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award, all in 1976.<sup>35</sup> “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” is a long poem in free verse which was inspired by a painting which has the same title, completed in 1524, by the Renaissance painter Francesco Mazzola (1503-1540), who is most commonly known as Parmigianino.<sup>36</sup> In an interview with David Lehman, Ashbery says: “that was the first time I ever took a painting as the subject for a poem. And I did it only after I left *Art News* and supposed that I wouldn’t be involved with writing about art anymore. It was as though I had been consciously avoiding this particular input while I was in the business of being an art editor, as though I shouldn’t be writing what is so close to my daily business.”<sup>37</sup>

Ashbery’s poem is ostensibly a meditation on Parmigianino’s painting, offering lengthy observations on Parmigianino’s artistic technique and skill.<sup>38</sup> It begins with a concise description of the painting, containing excerpts from comments that were made about the work at the time of its presentation in the early sixteenth century. John Hollander notes that “the poem moves . . . in and out of attention to the painting, anecdotes about its composition, citations of

commentaries on it . . . and multifaceted reflections on art's own reflectiveness of itself and what is around it, on time and chance and intention."<sup>39</sup> Ashbery includes an excerpt from the Italian painter and historian, Giorgio Vasari, (1511 – 1574) detailing the anecdote of the making of the painting:

Vasari says, “Francesco one day set himself  
To take his own portrait, looking at himself for that purpose  
In a convex mirror, such as is used by barbers . . .  
He accordingly caused a 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,”  
Chiefly his reflection, of which the portrait  
Is the reflection once removed.<sup>40</sup>

Parmigianino decided to draw himself as reflected in a concave glass. He purposely chose to paint the mirror instead of a straightforward self-portrait, and in doing so, he made a statement about the nature of art and what it can reveal. The colors in Parmigianino’s painting, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, are pale and muted, not bold or life-like, which adds to the sense that we are looking at a reflection of the artist in the mirror.<sup>41</sup> A constant dialogue underlies the act of painting, an argument between the painter and his reflection in the mirror. The artist manages to not only study himself in a convex mirror, but also reproduce exactly what he sees in it. The viewer is made to believe that the artist is looking at his image reflected in the mirror and not a surface created with paint and brushes.

The portrait reflects the image of the young Parmigianino aged 21. He looks dreamy, angelic and full of aspirations. The viewer gets the impression that the painting is a celebration of his youthful talent. His direct gaze holds the poet’s attention and the light literally falls on and illuminates the artist. It shows the long process of psychological self-exploration that the innovators must go through in order to channel their creativity. Benedikter and Hilber observe that “the dichotomy of the artist and his reflection, his ego and super-ego is balanced in a synthesis of the reflection of the reflection.”<sup>42</sup> Being completely absorbed in the painting, Ashbery identifies with Parmigianino for a short time: “So that you could be fooled for a moment / Before you realize the reflection / Isn’t yours” (*CP*, 74). The poet feels that “the whole of me / Is seen to be supplanted by the strict / Otherness of the painter” (*CP*, 74). This shows the profound influence which the sixteenth-century painting has on

Ashbery: “Something like living occurs, a movement / Out of the dream into its codification” (*CP*, 73).

Ashbery is strongly interested in the portrait because of its “fragmentary appearance.”<sup>43</sup> Parmigianino has created a different sense of reality in his painting, something which is shifting, distorted and unruly. The convex mirror reveals a reality which is not identical, yet not different from its origin. The distorted reflection is still a portrait of the self. Ashbery states that “the portrait / Is the reflection once removed” (*CP*, 68), placed at a distance, as well as reversed and distorted by the mirror: “The surface / Of the mirror being convex, the distance increases / Significantly” (*CP*, 69). In Abstract Expressionism, as the objective truth is stripped of its meaning, forms take precedence over the content:

. . . Realism in this portrait  
No longer produces and objective truth, but a *bizarria*  
However its distortion does not create  
A feeling of disharmony.

.....  
Like a wave breaking on a rock, giving up  
Its shape in a gesture which expresses that shape.  
The forms retain a strong measure of ideal beauty  
As they forage in secret on our idea of distortion (*CP*, 73).

Parmigianino’s angelic face is portrayed as contemplative. There is also an emphasis placed on his huge but tender, delicately formed hand, and it is this which dominates the foreground of the picture. It is essential to remember that Parmigianino's painting is not a realistic portrayal of the painter, for it is intentionally disfigured as it would be in a convex reflection. This eccentric, tricky idea is consistent with the stylistic experimentations of Mannerist painters, who often present subjects in elegant disfiguration, rather than attempt to depict life accurately.<sup>44</sup> Commenting on the technical artistry of the portrait, Ashbery illustrates the distorting effect of the convex mirror in the painting:

As Parmigianino did it, the right hand  
Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer  
And swerving easily away, as though to protect  
What it advertises. A few leaded panes, old beams,  
Fur, pleated muslin, a coral ring run together  
In a movement supporting the face, which swims  
Toward and away like the hand  
Except that it is in repose. It is what is sequestered (*CP*, 68).

The poet studies the size of the painter's hand. His observations yield quickly to a meditation on the nature of reality. To emphasize that the reflected image is not identical to reality, Ashbery states that Parmigianino makes “the hand loom large,” “roving back to the body of which it seems / So unlikely a part” (*CP*, 70). It seems that Parmigianino represented his hand in this way in order to highlight the gap between the painting and the reality outside it.<sup>45</sup> The hand is wavering, in its attempt to assume its own reality beyond the image:

Francesco, your hand is big enough  
To wreck the sphere, and too big,  
One would think, to weave delicate meshes  
That only argue its further detention (*CP*, 70).

There is an implied parallel between the poem and the painting. Just as Parmigianino's hand seems to reach out beyond the painting, Ashbery's “self-portrait” is also an attempt to “contain the contingent.”<sup>46</sup> Ashbery meditates on the shifting nature of the world, likening Parmigianino's portrait to a person at the center of a sphere. He compares the vision that passes before one's eyes to a reality spinning about a central core like a “carousel starting slowly / And going faster and faster” (*CP*, 72). In trying to capture an instant of this spinning, Parmigianino has been only marginally successful, the poet observes that it is impossible to record a perfect moment, to “rule out the extraneous / Forever” or to “perpetuate the enchantment of self within self” (*CP*, 73).

Ashbery is impressed, in particular, with the representation of the eyes, which are considered the entrance to the soul. The poet perceives the soul animated in the eyes Parmigianino has painted. The soul of the self-portraitist is trying to break free through the eyes: “The soul establishes itself. / But how far can it swim out through the eyes / And still return safely to its nest” (*CP*, 69)? Parmigianino, at the same time, is careful not to fully expose himself to the onlooker, and uses his hand as a shield “to protect what it advertises” (*CP*, 68). “The soul,” Ashbery says, “establishes itself,” yet it “is a captive” (*CP*, 69). It is longing for freedom, but trapped within the human form; and the human form is trapped within the sphere of our world, “life englobed” (*CP*, 69). The eyes in this picture do not fully satisfy the poet, however deftly they are painted: “But your eyes proclaim/ That everything is surface. The surface is what's there/ And nothing can exist except what's there” (*CP*, 70). It

becomes clear that he enjoys the painting, but he senses its inadequacy as a representation of reality.<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, the poet suggests that the words in poems sometimes prove inadequate: “They seek and cannot find the meaning in music, / We see only postures of the dream” (*CP*, 69). However, Ashbery shows that art also exists as a tool that holds its subject in place, preserving a moment in time, so that the past is always evident in the present. As the poet notes:

. . . . This past  
Is now here: the painter's  
Reflected face, in which we linger, receiving  
Dreams and inspirations on an unassigned  
Frequency (*CP*, 82),

In the poem, the voice of the speaker is Ashbery’s own. The poem represents the poet thinking out aloud, as he considers Parmigianino’s self-portrait. Although Ashbery appears to be addressing Parmigianino in the poem, his voice also seems to be self-reflexive sometimes. Hollander notes, in *The Gazer's Spirit*, that

. . . it may be observed that Francesco Parmigianino's celebrated anamorphic self-portrait becomes, as the object of elaborately digressive meditation, a skewed representation of a skewed representation. This itself comprises, in its intense mimetic function, another sort of figurative mirror in which the self-portrait of the artist generates an image of the poet at work, and thereby of anyone at the rest of life.<sup>48</sup>

In Ashbery’s “self-portrait,” the relation between the self and its mirror image can be mimetic, only in a distorting, ironic and evasive way. At the same time, Parmigianino’s self-portrait conveys a sense of an enigmatic and unspecified reality. The reflected image becomes more real than reality because, as the convex mirror reveals, “the surface is what’s there / And nothing can exist except what’s there” (*CP*, 70). Parmigianino’s “round mirror . . . organizes everything / around the polestar of [his] eyes” (*CP*, 72), and dramatises the dissociation between reality and the represented image. The artist’s mastery in portraying his own image “reveals the paradoxical position of the subject caught up in the power of forms.”<sup>49</sup>



The distorting effect of the convex mirror in Parmigianino's "self-portrait" reflects the random relation between reality and form. Furthermore, the poem illustrates the disconnection between reality and language.<sup>50</sup> In Ashbery's "self-portrait," both the poem and the painting merge with each other. Yet, like language, the visual image seems to fail to represent the authentic moment: "The words are only speculation / (From the Latin *speculum*, mirror) / They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music" (*CP*, 69). Ashbery suggests the impossibility of capturing experiences through forms:

Some figment of "art," not to be imagined  
As real, let alone special? Hasn't it too its lair  
In the present we are always escaping from  
And falling back into, as the waterwheel of days  
Pursues its uneventful, even serene course (*CP*, 78-9)?

One of the defining aspects of postmodern writing is the preoccupation with the ways through which language shapes relations with both inner and external realities. Ashbery sheds light on the quintessence of postmodern poetry which does not show faith in the power of forms to embody the reality beyond the image. David Shapiro describes Ashbery's writing as "homage to consciousness and a love song to language inside language."<sup>51</sup> This is indicated in Ashbery's emphasis on the distance separating reality from both visual and verbal forms:

And just as there are no words for the surface, that is,  
No words to say what it really is, that it is not  
Superficial but a visible core, then there is  
No way out of the problem of pathos vs. experience (*CP*, 77).

Jean-François Lyotard states that Ashbery's poem is a "self-portrait" infused with the "nostalgia for the unattainable."<sup>52</sup> A nostalgia for a glimpse of a lost moment in which the self recognises itself in the mirror image, while realising that the present is no longer there:

But it is certain that  
What is beautiful seems so only in relation to a specific  
Life, experienced or not, channeled into some form  
Steeped in the nostalgia of a collective past (*CP*, 77).

In Parmigianino's willfully distorted "self-portrait," the lost moment, in which the inner self is perceived, is redeemed: "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" (*CP*, 76).

Ashbery shows the deficiency of forms to break through "the present we are always escaping fro / And falling back into" (*CP*, 78). However, towards the end of the poem, Parmigianino's "unidentified but precisely sketched studio" (*CP*, 75) becomes a reminder of "another life" (*CP*, 76), different from the life of the painting and of the poem. Ashbery concludes by "beseeching" Francesco to "withdraw that hand" (*CP*, 82), because there will always remain a segment of life beyond its reach:

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 (*CP*, 83).

The poet's memory, that supplies readers with misremembered details or assorted distortions, is parallel to the misshapen and wrongly proportioned items in Parmigianino's portrait.<sup>53</sup> Ashbery recognizes the frailty of his memory as an artist. Hence, in the last lines of the poem, he refers to the "cold pockets / Of remembrance, whispers out of time" (*CP*, 83).

The exercise of observing a centuries-old depiction of someone observing himself functions as a comment upon the nature of consciousness. It shows how an objective, limitless universe can only be perceived as a reflection from the distorted surface of human sensation, with the self as a symbolic center, and an image which by its nature is only a fictive representation of a point in space and time. The poem, like the self, is "a reflection of other reflections, a shape making shapes of shapes given,"<sup>54</sup> yet also communicating a dreamlike gesture. It, like the self, has no explicit meaning. The elusive treatment of the subject and the incessant piling up of meanings embody "our coming to know ourselves as the necessarily inaccurate transcribers of the life that is always on the point of coming into being."<sup>55</sup>

Ashbery's emotionally charged poetic portrait invites the reader to become involved in the multiple, mirrored presences in the text which indicates the impossibility to portray life without disfiguration. Benedikter and

Hilber describe Ashbery's poem as "not only a meditation on art, but also an early and most lively description of the 'post-modern' mindset, destined to remain valid for decades, up to the present day."<sup>56</sup> David Kalstone states that on "reading Ashbery's work, I often have the feeling that he speaks not only to his moment but to the condition of much postmodernist poetry."<sup>57</sup> A condition that is to do, in Kalstone's terms, with the ways in which postmodernist poetry explores the relation between language — the medium of poetry — and the self. Ashbery, Kalstone goes on, "is not simply reminding us that poetry gives us access to the inner life; he is emphasizing the unique power of language to reveal how much of external life, the inner life displaces."<sup>58</sup>

Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" is a self-portrait in words. Ashbery drives the reader backwards on a journey to Parmigianino's self-portrait which becomes a self-projection of the author, in fact, "Parmigianino's painted ego manifests itself as Ashbery's psychic extension."<sup>59</sup> Ashbery draws a circle enclosing all contradictions of his self, similar to the round painting which encircles Parmigianino's reflected image and which marks neither a beginning nor an end: The whole is stable within / Instability, a globe like ours, resting / On a pedestal of vacuum" (*CP*, 70)

The painting reveals the self's awareness of the loss of the sense of reality, and the poet creates redeeming forms which may restore a lost, meaningful relation between the inner self and the external world. Both the painter and the poet try to capture the elusive present. Because it takes more time to read Ashbery's self-portrait than it does to look at Parmigianino's, the present in the poem seems more fluid than it does in the painting. Parmigianino's painted self-portrait is a snapshot of his face at a given moment; Ashbery's poetic self-portrait is a moving picture of his mind working in time.<sup>60</sup>

Ashbery poeticizes Parmigianino's painting. The mute portrait, depicting Parmigianino, speaks through the verbal depiction of the painting in the poem. Fred Moramarco states that "Ashbery's intention in 'Self Portrait' is to record verbally the emotional truth contained in Parmigianino's painting."<sup>61</sup> Moramarco adds that "one is struck by Ashbery's unique ability to explore the verbal implication of painterly space, to capture the verbal nuances of Parmigianino's fixed and distorted image. The poem virtually resonates or extends the painting's meaning. It transforms visual image to verbal precision."<sup>62</sup> Thus, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" is typical of ekphrastic

poems which, as John Hollander notes in *The Gazer's Spirit*, “include addressing the image, making it speak, speaking of it interpretively, meditating upon the moment of viewing it.”

Like the Abstract Expressionists, Ashbery responds to the challenges of contemporary art and its confidence in unconventional forms. He shakes off the chains of literary tradition and he writes challenging and experimental poems. Ashbery's “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” becomes a multilayered texture of attitudes that the reader is invited to share during the process of meditation on the portrait. Ashbery manages to capture a variety of emotional states existing side by side, prefiguring subtler means of enacting the interpretative nature of thinking. He makes of his poems a representation of the mind which is free from all the restrictions.

Ashbery offers new dimensions for the self, comparable to the Abstract Expressionists' treatment of the different reflections on the transparent surface of a canvas. He has initiated his particular style of writing which is characterized by a greatly liberated sense of connection between observation and speculation, producing meditative poem that contains intellectual self-reflection. Much of the poem's strength lies in its revelations of Ashbery's perceptions, his self-portrait as a poet who uses words, like the brush strokes in a painting, to articulate his sensations.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Langdon Hammer, “But I Digress,” a review of *Notes from the Air: Selected Later Poems by John Ashbery*, *New York Times Book Review*, April 20, 2008, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/books/review/Hammer-t.html?pagewanted=print&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/books/review/Hammer-t.html?pagewanted=print&_r=0) (accessed February 22, 2015).

<sup>2</sup>Roland Benedikter and Judith Hilber, “The Post-Modern Mind: A Reconsideration of John Ashbery's ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’ (1975) from the Viewpoint of an Interdisciplinary History of Ideas,” *Open Journal of Philosophy*, 2012. Vol.2, No.1, 65.

<sup>3</sup>Stephen Burt, “John Ashbery a poet for our times,” *The Times* (London), 26 March, 2008, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/arts/> (accessed May 12, 2015).

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Susan M. Schultz, *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry* (Alabama: the University of Alabama Press, 1995), p. 106

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Meghan O'Rourke, “How to read John Ashbery,” [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/the\\_highbrow/2005/03/the\\_instruction\\_manual.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/the_highbrow/2005/03/the_instruction_manual.html) (accessed March 21, 2015).

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in “Richard Howard’s Ashbery,” <http://isola-rifiuti.blogspot.com/2011/03/richard-howards-ashbery.html> (accessed May 22, 2015).

<sup>7</sup>A. Poulin and Michael Waters, eds., *Contemporary American Poetry*, 7th ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), p. 587.

<sup>8</sup>“John Ashbery profile,” <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88v/ashbery-bio.html> (accessed June 22, 2014).

<sup>9</sup>David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p. 28.

<sup>10</sup>Abstract expressionism is a post–World War II art movement in American painting, developed in New York. It was the first specifically American movement to achieve international influence and put New York City at the center of the western art world, a role formerly filled by Paris. Although the term "Abstract Expressionism" was first applied to American art in 1946 by the art critic Robert Coates, it had been first used in Germany in 1919 in the magazine *Der Sturm*, regarding German Expressionism. In the United States, Alfred Barr was the first to use this term in 1929 in relation to works by Wassily Kandinsky. Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 5-7.

<sup>11</sup>Mark Ford, *Raymond Roussel and the Republic of Dreams* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), xxii.

<sup>12</sup>As quoted in Ford, xxii.

<sup>13</sup>Ernesto Suarez-Toste, “‘The Tension is in the Concept’: John Ashbery’s Surrealism,” *Style*, Volume 38, No. 1, Spring 2004: 3. Surrealism is a cultural movement that began in the early 1920s, and is best known for its visual artworks and writings. Its most important center is Paris. The Surrealists painted illogical scenes with photographic precision, created strange creatures from everyday objects and developed painting techniques that allowed the unconscious to express itself. André Breton, the leader of the Surrealists, asserted that Surrealism was, above all, a revolutionary movement. Surrealism spread around the globe, affecting many countries and languages, as well as political thought, philosophy, and social theory. Dawn Ades and Matthew Gale, “Surrealism,” *Dictionary of Art*, Vol. 30, ed. Jane Turner (New York: Grove, 1996) 18.

<sup>14</sup>David Sweet, “‘And Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name’: John Ashbery, the Plastic Arts, and the Avant-Garde,” *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 50, No. 4, Autumn, 1998: 320.

<sup>15</sup>Quoted in Sweet, 320.

<sup>16</sup>“John Ashbery,” <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/john-ashbery> (accessed July 5, 2015).

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>Quoted in David Lehman, “The Making of the Last Avant-Garde the New York School of Poets,” <http://jacketmagazine.com/05/tlag-intro.html> (accessed May 4, 2015).

<sup>19</sup>Quoted in “John Ashbery,” <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/john-ashbery> (accessed July 5, 2015).

<sup>20</sup>“John Ashbery,” <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/john-ashbery> (accessed July 5, 2015).

<sup>21</sup>Quoted in “Ashbery, Parmigianino, and the Convex Mirror,” <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/ashbery-parmigianino-and-convex-mirror> (accessed April 21, 2015).

<sup>22</sup>“John Ashbery,” <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/john-ashbery> (accessed July 5, 2015).

<sup>23</sup>Robert Von Hallberg, “Avant-Gardes,” *The Cambridge History of American Literature: Volume 8, Poetry and Criticism*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 104.

<sup>24</sup>“John Ashbery,” <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/john-ashbery> (accessed July 5, 2015).

<sup>25</sup>Automatism is a technique first used by Surrealist painters and poets to express the creative force of the unconscious in art. In the 1920s the Surrealist poets André Breton, Paul Éluard, Robert Desnos, Louis Aragon, and Philippe Soupault tried writing in a hypnotic or trancelike state, recording their train of mental associations without censorship or attempts at formal exposition. These artists were influenced by Freudian psychoanalytic theory and believed that the symbols and images thus produced, though appearing strange or incongruous to the conscious mind, actually constituted a record of a person’s unconscious psychic forces and hence possessed an innate artistic significance. Their goal was to materialize the forces of human imagination by presenting a concretely irrational assemblage, the symbolical function of which was to reveal the hidden desires suppressed, according to psychoanalysis, deep into our subconscious. “Automatism,” <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/definitions/automatism.htm> (accessed May 22, 2014).

<sup>26</sup>Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 30

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Quoted in “John Ashbery,” <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/john-ashbery> (accessed July 5, 2015).

<sup>29</sup> Von Hallberg, 105.

<sup>30</sup>Ekphrastic poetry is a vivid description of a visual work of art. Through the imaginative act of narrating and reflecting on the “action” of a painting or sculpture. The poet may amplify and expand its meaning, producing a rhetorical exercise. The first ekphrastic representation was dramatized by Homer in the XVIII book of the *Iliad*, in which Achilles’ shield, created by the blacksmith god, Hephaestus, is described. “Ekphrasis,” <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/glossary-term/ekphrasis> (accessed December 4, 2014).

<sup>31</sup>David Lehman, “The Making of the Last Avant-Garde the New York School of Poets,” <http://jacketmagazine.com/05/tlag-intro.html> (accessed May 2, 2015).

<sup>32</sup>Quoted in “Ashbery, Parmigianino, and the Convex Mirror” <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/ashbery-parmigianino-and-convex-mirror> (accessed May 22, 2015).

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>“Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” <http://www.encyclopedia.com/article-1G2-3079300022/self-portrait-convex-mirror.html> (accessed March 2, 2015).

<sup>35</sup>Poulin and Waters, 587.

<sup>36</sup>Francesco Mazzola (1503–1540) who is known as Parmigianino is an Italian Mannerist painter and printmaker. His work includes Vision of Saint Jerome (1527) and the Madonna with the Long Neck (1534). Parmigianino is an artist whose exaggerated forms and unnatural features became known as anti-classical mannerism. He strove towards a sophisticated style, willing to break from convention, while still executing a masterful technique. It is sometimes said that Parmigianino had dug the roots, among other daring artists, for what would be called modern art centuries later. “Francesco Mazzola,” <http://www.virtualuffizi.com/francesco-mazzola-called-parmigianino.html> (accessed June 21, 2015).

<sup>37</sup>“Interview with John Ashbery,” [https://www.loa.org/images/pdf/LOA\\_Ashbery\\_interview\\_on\\_Collected\\_Poems.pdf](https://www.loa.org/images/pdf/LOA_Ashbery_interview_on_Collected_Poems.pdf) (accessed May/December 5, 2015).

<sup>38</sup>“Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” <http://www.encyclopedia.com/article-1G2-3079300022/self-portrait-convex-mirror.html> (accessed March 2, 2015).

<sup>39</sup>John Hollander, *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 87.

<sup>40</sup>John Ashbery, *Collected Poems 1956-1987*, ed. Mark Ford. (New York: Library of America, 2008), 68. All the quotations of poetry in this chapter are taken; henceforth, from this book, abbreviated as (*CP*, with page number(s)).

<sup>41</sup>“Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror,” [http://www.artble.com/artists/parmigianino/paintings/self-portrait in a convex mirror](http://www.artble.com/artists/parmigianino/paintings/self-portrait-in-a-convex-mirror) (accessed June 4, 2015).

<sup>42</sup>Benedikter and Hilber, 67.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 66.

<sup>44</sup>Mannerist painters represent Mannerism which is a European movement of art that emerged during the later years of the Italian High Renaissance around 1520. Mannerism originated as a reaction to the harmonious classicism. In the work of the Mannerist, an obsession with style and technique in figural composition often outweighed the importance and meaning of the subject matter. Mannerist artists evolved a style that is characterized by a thoroughly self-conscious cultivation of elegance and technical facility, and by a sophisticated indulgence in the bizarre. The figures in Mannerist works frequently have graceful but queerly elongated limbs, small heads, and stylized facial features. The modern artist became extremely interested in the spiritual intensity and stylistic experimentation of Mannerism, and they perceived affinities between it and modern expressionist tendencies in art.” Mannerism,” <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/mannerism.htm> (accessed April 4, 2015).

<sup>45</sup>Dimakopoulou, “The Poetics of Vision and the Redemption of the Subject in John Ashbery’s *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*,” <https://erea.revues.org/436> (accessed May 22, 2015).

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Stamatina Dimakopoulou, “The Poetics of Vision and the Redemption of the Subject in John Ashbery’s *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*,” <https://erea.revues.org/436> (accessed March 27, 2015).

<sup>48</sup>Hollander, 85.

<sup>49</sup>Dimakopoulou, “The Poetics of Vision and the Redemption of the Subject in John Ashbery’s *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*,” <https://erea.revues.org/436> (accessed March 27, 2015).

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>David Shapiro, *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press. 1979), 2

<sup>52</sup>Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. 1979. trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 81.

<sup>53</sup>Susan McCabe, “Stevens, Bishop, and Ashbery: A Surrealist Lineage,” *Wallace Stevens Journal*, 1998: 149.



<sup>54</sup>"A Reflection upon 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' "  
<http://www.oocities.org/ulysses0004/AshberySelfPortrait.html> (accessed June 6, 2015).

<sup>55</sup>James Longenbach, "Ashbery and the Individual Talent," *American Literary History*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Spring, 1997: 109.

<sup>56</sup>Benedikter and Hilber, 65.

<sup>57</sup>David Kalstone. *Five Temperaments: Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 200.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>Benedikter and Hilber, 65.

<sup>60</sup>John Vincent, "Reports of Looting and Insane Buggery Behind Altars: John Ashbery's Queer Poetics," *Twentieth Century Literature* 44 (Summer, 1998): 155.

<sup>61</sup>Fred Moramarco, "John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara: The Painterly Poets," *Journal of Modern Literature* Vol. 5, No. 3 (Sept., 1976): 436.

<sup>62</sup>Moramarco, 436.

## تقنيات التعبيرية التجريدية في جون آشبيري

لـ(بورترية ذاتي في مرآة محدبة)

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### الملخص:

جون آشبيري ( ١٩٢٧- ) هو واحد من شعراء ما بعد الحداثة الأبرز في أمريكا المعروف تقنياته المبتكرة . ويتابع أن يكون الشاعر الأكثر إثارة للجدل ، كما أنه يتجاهل قوانين المنطق في تصوير الواقع . ويتأثر أسلوب آشبيري و عميق من الطرق التجريبية من اللوحة الحديثة . وقد ارتبطت في الغالب مع التجريدية التعبيرية الذي يدل على التقدم الكبير في الفن البصري الأوروبي الطبيعي . في كثير من الأحيان اختيار التعبيرية التجريدية إلى تقديم موضوعات في تشويه رشيقة ، بدلا من محاولة تسجيل الحياة بدقة متناهية . آشبيري في " بورترية ذاتي في مرآة محدبة " هي الحال في الشعر ekphrastic .

وهو مستوحى من لوحة والتي لديها نفس العنوان للرسام الإيطالي في القرن السادس عشر ، فرانسيسكو مازولا . اللوحة ليست صورة واقعية للرسام ، وذلك لأنها مشوهة عمدا لأنه سيكون في انعكاس محدب . آشبيري يتجلى جوهر الشعر ما بعد الحداثة الذي يوضح عدم قدرة أشكال اللغة للقبض على واقع ما وراء الصورة الذهنية . مثل التعبيرية التجريدية ، وقال انه يجعل من قصائده تصويرا لل عمل حقيقي من العقل الذي يتحرر من جميع القيود . وعلاوة على ذلك ، القصيدة هي تصوير لفظي من اللوحة . يفترض ، ويتحول الصوت الداخلي لل صورة .