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NOW FACE TO FACE: ASHBERY'S
 "SELF-PORTRAIT IN A CONVEX MIRROR"

In John Ashbery's long poem "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," he engages with Sixteenth-Century Italian artist Francesco Parmigianino's painting by the same name:

"Francesco one day set himself
 To take his own portrait, looking at himself for that purpose
 In a convex 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. (9-17)

In the painting, as in the poem, a distortion exists between the artist's hand "thrust at the viewer" and "loom[ing] large" (2, 60), and his eyes or face, "the polestar" of the mirror portrait which "is in repose" (122, 8). Although it is the tension created by this duality, among others, which is the focus of Ashbery's overarching project, I assert that it is the hand, the source of *technae*, or technique, which reveals a structural reinforcement of the poem's project. Ashbery's techniques of form – including versification, syntax, and punctuation – in his poem "mirror" Parmigianino's painting techniques in his self-portrait. In doing so, each artist utilizes the same effects to convey the themes of dualities or mirroring (hand/eyes or face, internal/external, distortion/reality, reality of portrait/reality of poem), and slippage of agency (which also accounts for the slippage of meaning in Ashbery's poem). And because Parmigianino's painting is, as Ashbery claims in line 232, "the first mirror portrait," slippage exists between the identities of the beholder, the beheld, the artist, the poet, and the reader.

Ashbery uses formal poetic techniques at the level of the line in many ways. In doing so, he constructs a textual version of the painting which parallels the visual techniques of the painting's project. First, the lines' visual appearance on the page mimics blank verse, which implies a dramatic element (although whether this is a monologue or a dialogue, which imitates the slippage of identity in the mirror-portrait, remains to be determined). Second, the lines are organized into sections of various lengths, which mimic the portrait's distortion. Third, the lines' movement fluctuates between strong medial caesuras and lines with no pause, not even endstops. This technique, combined with Ashbery's use of skillful line breaks, enacts an advance-and-retreat motion which mimics the convex movement of the mirror, and calls attention to the theme of dualities that is so central to this poem. The resulting "half lines" give "half meanings," distorted as the mirror's reality is distorted, which last until the next line completes the thought. All of these formal effects serve to heighten the distorting effects of both poem and portrait, both of which also provoke the following questions of agency and meaning, which I will address: where is the soul located? where, or what, is the center of the distortion? and are these points one and the same? The syntax of Ashbery's poem, particularly as it relates to agency (hand/face, artist/viewer, poet/reader) and identity serves only to increase this distortion. In contrast, his manipulation of punctuation (parentheses, quotation marks, and dashes) seems calculated to defend against this slippage of identities by clearly defining boundaries, just as the portrait is ultimately limited by what is contained within the frame of the painting.

Lastly, I would like to examine the apparent importance of this poem's form to Ashbery by describing a limited-edition art book of "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," created in collaboration with Andrew Hoyem of The Arion Press, a copy of which resides in the Special Collections of the University of Utah's Marriott Library. The design of this art book accentuates the visual project enacted in the poem's text in a manner that is a compelling conclusion to this inquiry.

Perhaps the best way to begin is to address the immediately apparent form of the poem. First, the poem is divided into six long sections or stanzas as follows:

PART	INTERVAL OF LINES	TOTAL DURATION
I	1 - 99	99
II	100 - 150	51
III	151 - 206	56
IV	207 - 250	44
V	251-310	60
VI	311-552	242

I am uncertain whether the six parts have any significance, but the progression of the sections according to line intervals seems to enact the distortive effects of the portrait. At first, the parts begin and end at the 100- or 50-line marks, but then they expand, such that part IV begins at line 207, V ends at 310, and VI ends at 552. And the duration of the sections is shorter at the center (parts II-IV) and more expansive at the outside parts (I, V, and VI), much as a convex image is more focused at the center and distorts images so that they appear larger towards the edges.

Second, the poem visually resembles blank verse. Careful scansion of the poem's prosody reveals a meter much too loose to label blank verse, but because it approximates a consistent line length in block form, the poem gives the appearance of blank verse, which in turn suggests a dramatic verse element. As stated earlier, I remain unsure whether "Self-Portrait" is a dramatic monologue, dialogue, or something more complex. Obviously, Ashbery is the speaker, but are we hearing Ashbery the poet or Ashbery the art critic? And this speaker of "Self-Portrait" is addressing the painter of *Self-Portrait*, but these two portraits demonstrate such a high degree of slippage that the identity of Ashbery sometimes merges with that of Parmigianino. And because Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait* seems to distort and shift in Ashbery's perception throughout the poem, so do those identities distort and shift. Add in a wealth of quotations and self-conscious parenthetical asides, and one is no longer sure who is speaking. But, to quote Ashbery, "more / Of this later" (179-80).

A closer look at the surface of the poem reveals fluctuations within the lines. The first several lines contain strong medial caesuras marked by punctuation which divide usually descriptive or appositive phrases:

As Parmigianino did it, the right hand
 Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer
 And swerving easily away, . . . (1-3)

This sequence is followed by a parallel but shorter sequence of lines without pauses or endstops.

These enjambed lines usually contain several unstressed syllables which attribute a tripping, rushed

feel:

u / u / u u / u u u /
 The time of day or the density of light
 u / u u u / / u
 Adhering to the face keeps it
 / u u u / u u u / u /
 Lively and intact in a recurring wave
 u u / u
 Of arrival. (21-24)

This alternating pattern of a sequence of caesuraed lines followed by a shorter sequence of unpaused lines repeats throughout the poem. What is compelling to note is that here, still at the surface of the form, we again have distortive effects that mimic the portrait. Because the enjambed lines flow together, they work more as a unit, giving a sense of fullness or solidity which characterizes the full, least-distorted center of the convex image. In contrast, the slower, choppier lines with medial caesuras create a distorted focus or emphasis on each phrase, just as objects at the edge of a convex image appear to have an enlarged emphasis. It will be fascinating to see further on that when Ashbery has something important to say, it is usually framed in the sequence of enjambed lines. But again, "more / Of this later."

The distortions only increase when we move beyond surface effects into the interior of the poem. My personal favorite is Ashbery's use of strong medial caesuras instead of endstops in sequences of lines, which creates "half lines" on each side of the caesuras, all with their own "half meanings." Ashbery brilliantly manipulates these "half meanings" over the line breaks, such that the expectation of meaning set up by the second half of one line is thwarted by the first half of the following line. These skillful line breaks often enact an "advance-and-retreat" motion which simultaneously imitates the convex images of the portrait and the theme of dualities so central to the poem. It is compelling, in fact, that these "half meaning" shifts over line breaks most often coincide

with the major dualities of the poem, the hands and the eyes or face, and their relation to the position of the soul. In the following, the "advance-and-retreat" effect actually involves opposition of motion or the appearance of motion, as with these examples of the hand:

[The right hand] thrust at the viewer
 And swerving easily away, as though to protect
 What it advertises (2-4, thrust/swerve and protect/advertise);

. . . which makes the hand loom large
 As it retreats slightly (60-61, loom/retreat, play on "handloom");

. . . withdraw that hand,
 Offer it no longer as shield or greeting,
 The shield of a greeting. . . (525-7, withdraw/offer, shield/greeting);

Or these of the eyes or face:

[the face], which swims
 Toward and away like the hand
 Except that it is in repose (6-8, swims/repose, play on *repasa*, "pause");

. . . turn our faces to the globe as it sets
 And still be coming out all right (300-1, sets/coming out);

Or even that of the soul:

The soul has to stay where it is,
 Even though restless. . .

 . . . but it must stay
 Posing in this place. It must move
 As little as possible (34-39, movement/no movement).

This effect is intensified, and enacts the problems of meaning and location in lines where agency is established only to be usurped. In these instances, the lines usually shift meaning over the course of the passage, rather than over a line break:

"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. . ." (9-11)

In the first line, "Francesco. . .set himself" would seem to give agency to his identity or will, even his artistic soul, while "looking at himself" locates agency in the eyes or perception. And yet "a convex mirror. . .used by barbers" seems to undermine these agencies, both because of the distorted image of the mirror and the word "barbers," which means unartistic skill at the very least, and could also be a play on "barbarian." The next example is a continuation of the first:

"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.
The glass chose to reflect only what he saw. (14-18)

Again, "he set himself" gives agency to the will or soul. Here we get a sense of the dichotomy between hand and eyes in "copy," in which the agent is the hand, the seat of technique, and "all that he saw," where the agent is the eyes. But "the portrait / is the reflection once removed" would seem to express the limitations of agency in both the hand and eyes. The next line, "The glass chose. . .," removes agency from the artist altogether. What would seem to be fixed comes unfixed:

I see in this only the chaos
Of your round mirror which organizes everything
Around the polestar of your eyes which are empty,
Know nothing. . . (120-23).

In "I see," the agency of the poet is asserted, but what "I see" is characterized by a chaos centered on the portrait's eyes "which are empty, / Know nothing." The center will not hold, because even the polestar moves, as noted memorably by Helen Schlegel to Leonard Bast in *Howard's End*: "It goes round and round, and you go round after it."

But while the manipulation of half lines and line breaks serves mainly as an effect that further enacts form and establishes the primacy of the hands and eyes, Ashbery pushes the give-and-take of agency a step further. Beyond the question of agency's residence in the eyes or the

hands lies a more disturbing proposition -- here, even the soul's agency is in question, subject to danger and "your look" (whose?):

The soul establishes itself.
But how far can it swim out through the eyes
And still return safely to its nest?
.....
...the soul is a captive, treated humanely, kept
In suspension, unable to advance much farther
Than your look as it intercepts the picture. (24-6, 29-31)

With this image, Ashbery addresses the deeper problem of the location of the soul, or more specifically, the soul and meaning of art. Is it in the hands/technique or the eyes/intuition? Is the holder of agency where meaning is located? or from where the distortion of meaning emanates?

To move into a discussion of meaning, I must point out that for the Ashbery of this poem, meaning does not emanate reliably from words. In fact, words seem to be even less reliable than the distorted images of the portrait (or more reliable? since we are sure that they are *not* where meaning resides!). Ashbery asserts his frustration with words throughout the poem:

That is the tune but there are no words.
The words are only speculation
.....
They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music (47-50);

...there are no words for the surface, that is,
No words to say what it really is (92-93);

Whispers of the word that can't be understood
But can be felt (275-76);

...a vague
Sense of something that can never be known
Even though it seems likely that each of us
Knows what it is and is capable of
Communicating it to the other (351-55);

...as in the game where
A whispered phrase passed around the room
Ends up as something completely different. (444-46)

In these examples, the words themselves cannot communicate any credible meaning. At most, they only convey some intuitive sense.

Ashbery explores these problems in order to lead us to this provisional answer: what *does* seem capable of communicating some sort of meaning for Ashbery is, again, the power of the visual images of the portrait -- "This is what the portrait says" (39); "[the globe] is a metaphor / Made to include us" (302-3) -- and especially the hands and eyes: the hand "advertises" (4); "in that gaze / . . . / one cannot look for long. / The secret is too plain" (40-43); "But your eyes proclaim / That everything is surface" (79-80); "But the look / Some wear as a sign makes one want to / Push forward ignoring the apparent / Naïveté of the attempt" (355-58). But as we can see, even here, meanings are not clear, or do not hold for long. They are intuitions based upon perceptions of the portrait by the poet, and as such, are always in flux.

While most of us would be gnashing our teeth at this point, Ashbery includes lines that seem to demonstrate a certain calm, even delight, with this flux of meaning. I want to pause and emphasize this delight, because it seems to emanate from the overall form of the poem as a "Self-Portrait." While the title and the poem obviously are inspired by the Parmigianino portrait of the same name, its poetic enactment of this concept belies a great deal of delight. As in the painting, a poetic self-portrait allows the poet to be creator, beholder, and beheld simultaneously. The fact that the poetic self-portrait must contend with words and their meanings only temporarily frustrates Ashbery, as he transforms the problem of the proposal to delight most compellingly at the exact center of the poem: "The surprise, the tension are in the concept / Rather than its realization" (226-27); but also when he asserts "This nondescript, never-to-be-defined daytime is / The secret of where it takes place" (373-74). And again, in reference to the whispering game where meaning is distorted, Ashbery posits:

It is the principle that makes works of art so unlike

What the artist intended. Often he finds
 He has omitted the thing he started out to say
 In the first place. (447-50)

Interestingly, these lines that deal with trying to pin down meaning are nearly always framed by Ashbery in his enjambed, caesura-less lines, which would tend to parallel them with the center of the convexity where there is the least distortion.

From this point, I want to turn to Ashbery's uncharacteristic use of punctuation in this poem, specifically parentheses (noticeably convex), dashes, and quotations. These marks, which separate words into units of meaning with definite boundaries, seem to do the same work as the lines which try to locate meaning.

Parentheses, which usually function in postmodern poetry as a self-conscious interjection by the poet, here have the added distinction of mimicking the convex shape of the portrait. Ashbery uses parentheses nine times over the course of the poem, but primarily in the second half, which coincides with an increase in distortions. Two of the examples are less significant, and seem to be a tongue-in-cheek reference to academic documentation, as in "(Vasari)" in line 211 and "(Freedberg)" in 222; one example seems mostly informative: "(It is the first mirror portrait)" (232). But the remaining phrases are divided into those that define meaning through dualities, as in the play on "speculation," "(From the Latin *speculum*, mirror)" (49), or the tension between surface and interior:

(Big, but not coarse, merely on another scale,
 Like a dozing whale on the sea bottom
 In relation to the tiny, self-important ship
 On the surface.) (176-79);

or else the phrases deal with ambiguities of meaning:

(Except perhaps to brighten bleakly and almost
 Invisibly, in a focus sharpening toward death--more
 Of this later) (178-80);

such as the intuitive forms of the id:

(Except for the sculptures in the basement:
They are where they belong) (409-10);

or when art comes out differently from the artist's intent, "(though / Secretly satisfied with the result)" (451-52).

The dashes, of which there are five, seem the antithesis of the parentheses: rather than giving us "curved" meanings within curved space, the dash is more straightforward, direct, as in Ashbery's account of a questioning which will take place "in an orderly way that means to menace / Nobody--the normal way things are done" (307-8), or in Ashbery's disillusionment with "[a]ping naturalness": "Once it seemed so perfect--gloss on the fine / Freckled skin, lips moistened. . ." (509-10).

But in the quotations (again located mainly in the second half of the poem), I believe Ashbery plants the key to the question of location of meaning in the portrait and in its "mirror," the poem. Most of the quotations function again as a sort of self-conscious postmodern awareness of titles and references, as well as ironically-meant terms: "the 'poetic,' straw-colored space" (387), or "Some figment of 'art,' not to be imagined" (390). Yet some of the quotations tell us exactly where meaning is located, and where Ashbery has been pointing all along: in the Derridean Transcendental Signified:

"Play" is something else;
It exists, in a society specifically
Organized as a demonstration of itself. (423-25)

In this mirror-poem, the Transcendental Signified of *jeu*, "the game, / Which doesn't exist until they are out of it" (432-33), represents something outside of us, a meaning outside of our control. Like Derrida, Ashbery's adoption of the terms "play" and "game" indicate a resolved anxiety, where meaning does not have to be pinned down. Therefore, to answer the questions posed about meaning earlier, meaning is a sort of Transcendental Signified that exists outside both the portrait and the poem, or perhaps somewhere between them, in perception. As such, meaning is most clearly represented at the center of the convex image, in the eyes, the "nest" of the soul. And

because this perception constantly shifts between the dualities of the portrait and the poem, this centrally located meaning is also the source of the distortions. As mirrors of each other, both the convex portrait, with its perceived distortions of image, and the poem, with its words as inadequate distorters of meaning, are worlds or "globes" that must be encountered on their own terms. But lest the technique located in the hands be dismissed too easily, it is ultimately Ashbery's technique, like that of Parmigianino's, which helps us find the momentary anchors of meaning through his use of formal poetic structures.

In closing, I would like to reassert the evident importance of these formal structures to Ashbery, which in 1984 led him to collaborate with Andrew Hoyem of The Arion Press to produce an art book of "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" in a very limited edition of 175 copies. The "book" comprises 28 round, unbound pages of the poem interspersed with original prints by artists whose work Ashbery admires. The pages have deckled edges, which indicates that they were cast for the specific purposes of the book on a round mold approximately 1 1/2 feet in diameter. The book is contained inside a steel canister, much like a film canister, on the front of which the title is printed in a circular fashion around a central convex mirror, about 4 inches in diameter. This mirror is cleverly designed to reflect the reader's face: thus, to the negotiations of beholder/beheld/artist/poet/reader is added yourself, "So that you could be fooled for a moment / Before you realize the reflection / Isn't yours" (233-35). The poem itself is arranged on the pages such that the page number is inside a small circle in the center of each page, and the lines emanate out from the center like rays which progress counterclockwise. This art book represents the culminating marriage of form and content, and so delighted Ashbery that in its foreword, he writes, "This edition with illustrations by artists whose work I feel close to seems to me a good idea for the opposite reason of taking the poem away from itself and amplifying it in ways I had never anticipated."