

The Pose of Imposture: Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"

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"Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror": the very title poses the problem raised by Ashbery's poem—a problem that itself might be formulated in terms of posing and imposture, a vocabulary of disguise that introduces doubt into the representation of the self. The title, of course, announces the text's engagement of the issue of representation and, specifically, of the difficulties that inhere in the attempt to represent oneself. For the image constitutive of a self-portrait demands that it be read in some relation to the original; but as Ashbery's poem indicates, the nature of the "original" is often far from clear. Douglas Crase has suggested that Ashbery's "Self-Portrait" points to the convexity or distortion implicit in any enterprise of self-depiction.¹ By carrying Crase's observation one step further, however, we may note that the effect of convexity in Ashbery's "Self-Portrait" is to redirect attention from the portrait of the "self" to the distinctive *angle* of that portrayal. The subject, then, is less the portraitist than the problematic nature of the portraiture; for the text announces the self-portrait's generic imperative to mirror not the "self," but the process of mirroring the "self," its persistent concern, in other words, with the representation of (self) representation.

Since the attempt to represent representation, however, always finds itself mediated by anterior representations, the self-portrait can only offer its representation of representation as an interpretation of an earlier representation of representation. We have entered, then, a hall of mirrors, or in Joyce's words from *Ulysses*, "a mirror within a mirror." And as a result, the vexing convexity of Ashbery's aesthetic "mirror"

may seem, if not to have invested itself and thereby become concave, to have conned us at any rate into Plato's cave where the shadows of shadows beguile us with a seemingly endless chain of displacements.

Critics who would place themselves in control of this process try to twist that chain upon itself by defining its circuit as "self-reflexive."² But the inadequacy of that term to the situation at hand becomes obvious if one attends carefully to the system of displacements here at work. For if the representation of the "self" is, in fact, a representation of the representation of the "self," and *that* representation is, in turn, an interpretation of some other representation of some other "self," the identity of the "self" is too gravely in doubt to allow this process to be explained away as neatly "self-reflexive." Instead, we must ask with the seriousness latent in all rhetorical questions (to the extent that they constitute questions of rhetoric): who is it that Ashbery's "Self-Portrait" actually portrays?

Asking such a question inevitably leads back to the title and to the question raised by the title—a question that takes shape as a question of title. For we must ask ourselves who has title to this title, and what entitles Ashbery to appropriate it as his own. The title that names the poem, that seems to identify its distinctive property, bestows upon the text the proper name of another, thus providing the property with a name that is, as it turns out, not strictly proper. It is Parmigianino, of course, who is entitled to this title beneath which Ashbery's poem poses as if it were its own. And Ashbery, from the outset, acknowledges the painter's prior claim, beginning his own "Self-Portrait": "As Parmigianino did it."³ By presenting his poem under the name of Parmigianino's painting, Ashbery seems to indicate that the earlier work of art serves, in some sense, as the model for his own artistic endeavor.

But this too leads to complications. What, after all, does it mean for something to serve as a "model"? In the domain of the plastic arts—the domain suggested by Parmigianino's "Self-Portrait"—a model may be that person or object that the work of art attempts to imitate, the original that the creation seeks to double or reproduce. Yet if the model possesses the priority and the authenticity that derive from its status as the "original," the word "model," in another sense, implies a crucial *lack* of authenticity to the extent that it signifies a reproduction of some *other* object, a replica or a copy, frequently on a scale much smaller than that of what it represents. The "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"—both as title and as genre—becomes, in this way, a machine for the production of reproductions claiming title as "originals": and the title of Ashbery's poem, therefore, by designating Parmigianino's self-portrait as its

model, only inscribes an uncertainty into all of the relationships opening out from that title—an undecidability that centers on questions of authenticity and imposture.

Once more, then, we return to the title, this time to view it in relation to the text; but to do so we must consider first the poetics of the title, an issue central to Ashbery's investigations of the issue of centrality. Ashbery himself, in interviews, has discussed the importance of titles and the role that they play in the creation of his poetry.⁴ In *As We Know* he calls attention to this concern in a group of poems, each of which takes shape as a single sentence played out across the title and the single line of the poem's text proper. One, for example, is called "The Cathedral Is" and it consists of one line: "Slated for demolition." Such a work forces us to interrogate the nature of any title. It forces us to suspend our assumption that a title like "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" will be metaphoric—a large box to contain the poem by means of some essential correspondence—and to consider the possibility that it may announce a purely metonymic relationship—a relationship governed only by chance or contiguity. It compels us, therefore, to question the *place* of the title. Is it situated outside the text, presiding over it from a privileged, authoritative position to enunciate the text's authentic name—the name that articulates its essential character? Or is the title itself inside the text, and thus far from being conclusive, or privileged, or authentic, always necessarily partial, always necessarily *textual*? To put the matter another way, we must ask not only if the title names the text properly, but also if the title is, properly, a name at all.

To ask in what way "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" names Ashbery's poem, then, is to begin to bring into relation the various differences that inhabit the title—differences between Parmigianino and Ashbery, between representation and misrepresentation, between metaphor and metonymy. It is to recognize that the title, insofar as it identifies the literary object by bestowing a name upon it, aspires to the patriarchal prerogative of the proper name. A sexual thematics thus informs the questioning of the title that has been raised in terms of rhetoric above. That is to say, if the title can be placed in a metaphoric relation to the text, if it can assume, to use Roman Jakobson's term, a "paradigmatic" function so that Ashbery's poem can be seen to *be*, or to *be like*, a self-portrait in a convex mirror, then the title can be said to name the text "properly," to identify it legitimately in terms of resemblance or correspondence. This association of metaphor with the production—or the reproduction—of legitimate substitutes springs, as Jonathan Culler points out, from the privileged position that

patriarchal cultures accord "metaphorical relations—relations of resemblance between separate items that can be substituted for one another, such as obtain between the father and the miniature replica with the same name, the child."⁵

As a metaphor, then, the title would claim an essentially phallic authority as superscription. It would participate in a system of patriarchal values centering on the determinacy of truth, on the certainty of origins, and, indeed, on the very notion of centrality itself. It is that system, with its emphasis on truth as presence and as unity, a system underwritten by the visibility and "presence" of the phallus, that Derrida has labeled "phallogocentrism."⁶ By seeing the phallus as implicated in the nostalgia for presence at work in logocentrism, Derrida, as he himself makes explicit, takes aim at Lacan and at what he sees as Lacan's concept of the phallus as a transcendental or "privileged signifier," as that which grounds or gives meaning to the play of all other signifiers.⁷ In opposition to such a designation of the phallus as primary and unique, Derrida declares, "It is one and the same system: the erection of a paternal logos . . . and the phallus as 'privileged signifier' (Lacan)."⁸ Thus insofar as the title as a metaphor seeks to define the text in terms of essence or essential correspondence, it aspires to the phallic authority central to phallogocentrism. And in so doing it asserts the legitimacy and the intelligibility of that text that it seeks to name by affirming the certainty of its paternity, the unmistakable resemblance it bears to its origin.

Yet as the questions raised earlier have already made clear, the legitimacy of this title as a name for the text is precisely what remains uncertain. For the title here, to the extent that it functions metonymically rather than metaphorically, rejects the vertical hierarchy of Jakobson's paradigmatic relations in favor of the more random, horizontal displacements of a syntagmatic chain. We can see this by noting that the title of Ashbery's poem does not merely stand over the text magisterially, designating the poem as "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." It simultaneously finds itself implicated in the syntactical structure of the opening line, thus disseminating itself and denying any claim to the superior authority of a privileged, determinate meaning. After all, the text's initial clause, "As Parmigianino did it" (*SP*, p. 68), refers to the poem's effort of self-representation only by directing us back to the title for the antecedent of "it." Through its involvement in the syntax of these opening words, the title can be viewed as having an aleatory rather than an essential relation to the text. And if, in its metonymic relation to the poem, the title refuses to concentrate

meaning, but disseminates it instead, it is appropriate that it does so by raising the question of antecedents or origins. For dissemination, as Derrida has discussed it, calls origin into question insofar as it is that which does not return to the father—which does not accede to the singularity and intelligibility of "Truth."

Significantly, the text raises this issue of pronouns in relation to their antecedents not only to question the referent of "it," but also, and more importantly, to inquire into the referent of the textual "I." For the "I" of the poem has apparently defined its own antecedent as Parmigianino and his "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." But the issue of literary genealogy is more complex than that. In what way can Parmigianino's "Self-Portrait" be seen as the antecedent of Ashbery's text? Surely not in the sense of a precursor, for as Harold Bloom has noted, Ashbery's literary roots here "are not so much in Parmigianino as in Stevens."⁹ Bloom goes on to posit a revisionary relationship between Ashbery's "Self-Portrait" and Stevens' "Poem with Rhythms." I would suggest, however, that the Stevensian connection may be explored at least as profitably by viewing "Self-Portrait" as a commentary of sorts on "The Man with the Blue Guitar."¹⁰

In such a context one might consider the ways in which Ashbery's revisionary reading of Stevens—conducted by means of his meditation on Parmigianino—parallels Stevens' response to Whitman—conducted by means of his meditation on Picasso. The full unraveling of that correspondence is the subject for another occasion; at present I want only to note that just as Ashbery's poem presents itself under the name of Parmigianino's painting, so Parmigianino himself serves here as an alias, a cover, for the true literary antecedents of Ashbery's speculations—"From the Latin *speculum*, mirror" (*SP*, p. 69)—on the enterprise of representing the self. These numerous acts of impersonation—these acts of misrepresentation—expose an element of duplicity at the very core of Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," and they point at the same time to an anxiety about its own authenticity. The poem's representation of representation as misrepresentation leads, then, to one final question concerning the title. If Parmigianino's painting—or Stevens' poetry designated obliquely by means of that painting—serves as the model for Ashbery's "Self-Portrait," how can the poem, in fact, be a self-portrait unless the significance of the self is severely qualified or directly called into question?

Stevens, of course, throughout "The Man with the Blue Guitar," returns insistently to the questioning of the self in its relation to the world beyond it; and the affirmation at which he finally arrives is of the

power of the poetic self to affirm itself by means of its own internalized strength:

Here I inhale profounder strength
And as I am, I speak and move

And things are as I think they are
And say they are on the blue guitar.

(XXVIII, 11–14)

The imagination's imperative takes the world as its mirror so that the poet is able to appropriate the reality outside himself as his own. In this way he can see in it an image of himself so that "Franciscan don was never more / Himself than in this fertile glass" (XXIX, 15–16). So potent is the solipsism of this enlarged, this capacious self—a self descended from the Whitmanian persona celebrated in "Song of Myself," and evoked by Stevens as "A substitute for all the gods: / This self, not that gold self aloft, // Alone, one's shadow magnified" (XXI, 1–3)—that the problem encountered in the attempt to represent it—or, in Stevens' words, to "play man number one" (III, 1)—is the difficulty of finding a way to depict a self that is so all-encompassing as to evade any definition whatsoever:

Where
Do I begin and end? And where

As I strum the thing, do I pick up
That which momentarily declares

Itself not to be I and yet
Must be. It could be nothing else.
(XII, 7–12)

Any form of representation must inevitably limit such a self, and it is in the recognition not only of the limits of representation, but also of representation itself as a *mode* of limitation, that Stevens provides the insight upon which Ashbery's text enlarges.¹¹ For in his undersong Stevens acknowledges an emptiness, a gap, or what he calls "an absence," that inhabits reality and the imagination both. "Poetry is the subject of the poem," he writes, "From this it issues and // To this returns" (XXI, 1–3). But he adds that "Between the two, / Between issue and return, there is // An absence in reality" (XXI, 3–5) and that absence, he suggests, may be "an absence for the poem" (XXI, 8).

That more profound absence takes shape as a questioning of the spiritualized, the transcendental claims made on behalf of the self. Where Whitman had written in "Song of Myself":

I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
 And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,
 And nothing, not God, is greater than one's self is
 (1269-71)

Stevens darkly counters by proposing that
 The person has a mould. But not
 Its animal. The angelic ones

Speak of the soul, the mind. It is
 An animal. The blue guitar—
 On that its claws propound, its fangs
 Articulate its desert days.

The blue guitar a mould? That shell?
 (XVII, 1-7)

In the hollow of this empty aesthetic shell, Ashbery's text finds its opening, the gap on which it builds; it discovers the initiating insight through which it can offer its own contribution to the dialogue between Whitman and Stevens that centers on the relationship of the body and soul, reality and imagination, reduction and transcendence. "The secret is too plain," Ashbery's poem asserts in what may be its most widely quoted lines:

The pity of it smarts,
 Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,
 Has no secret, is small, and it fits
 Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention
 (SP, p. 69)

The text purports to reveal here that the secret of Parmigianino's painting, like its own secret and, indeed, like the secret of all representations of the self—including those acts of consciousness through which the self is represented to itself *as* itself—lies in the absence, or more precisely, in the fictionality of any autonomous self. The "hot tears" provoked by the knowledge that the painting contains no "soul," no living presence, bemoan as well the absence or hollow at the center of all selfhood, the difference or division that Lacan, for instance, in his "Mirror Stage," sees as constitutive of identity itself. Thus when the poet undertakes to portray himself—and in so doing to render himself both subject and object at once—he recognizes the impossibility of defining any indivisible identity.¹² He recognizes that he is destined to remain the "dreaming model" who merely "considers / Lifting the pencil to the self-portrait" (SP, p. 71) because he understands the artificial, which is to say, the *conventional* nature of all

selfhood. Even in the self-constituting movements of his consciousness, he discovers, as he acknowledges to himself, that “no part / Remains that is surely you” (*SP*, p. 71).

Little wonder, then, that his meditation leads him to feel “like one of those / Hoffmann characters who have been deprived / Of a reflection” (*SP*, p. 74). If he has been “deprived / Of a reflection,” though, it is because he has found himself too accurately reflected in Parmigianino’s “Self-Portrait.” He has seen a reflection of himself there as a fictive or hollow self—as a “self” only insofar as selfhood is a trope that seeks to evade the multiplicity, the internal otherness that he recognizes when

the whole of me
Is seen to be supplanted by the strict
Otherness of the painter in his
Other room

(*SP*, p. 74)

With this the text announces its thematic concern with the element of difference that undermines, even as it underlies, identity. “This otherness, this / ‘Not-being-us’ is all there is to look at / In the mirror” (*SP*, p. 81), Ashbery writes as his text, advertising its deconstructive insight into the metaphysical illusion of self-presence, exposes the alterity that inhabits the self and its representations from the outset.

With regard specifically to principles or modes of representation—with regard, that is, to the Stevensian focus on “the pure good of theory” that forms so prominent a strand of Ashbery’s text—the perception of this “otherness” works against the affirmation of any mimesis predicated upon intrinsic or essential correspondence. To the extent that it makes everything—including the self and its self-portrait—different from and in itself, this “otherness” necessarily subverts the spiritualizing gesture of analogy and violates the perspectival relation between inside and outside on which metaphor as representation rests.¹³ Indeed, Ashbery’s poem insistently undoes that opposition as it meditates on the image contained in the room of Parmigianino’s painting. It continually shifts perspectives in order to confound any effort to distinguish between an aesthetic, textual, or purely linguistic interior and the historical, experiential reality outside of it. Thus the painting, the poet declares, is “life englobed” (*SP*, p. 69), and in its “room,” which cannot be differentiated from the changing world beyond it, “everything gets ‘programmed’ . . . more keeps getting included / Without adding to the sum” (*SP*, p. 72). In fact, the painting, far from being interpreted as distinct from the flow of history, seems to

"contain this flow like an hour-glass" (*SP*, p. 73) so that the life of the urban landscape itself comes to seem merely "the backing of the looking glass of the / Unidentified but precisely sketched studio" (*SP*, p. 75).

At the same time, however, the text dramatizes a resistance to this undoing of the inside/outside dichotomy. The poet, throughout the first five sections of the poem, willfully attempts to reassert that the painting *is* a privileged realm of meaning, a domain of interiority linked to presence, fullness, and truth. Thus when the wooden hemisphere becomes "a globe like ours" (*SP*, p. 77), it is viewed as a world that corresponds essentially, and therefore meaningfully, to the world of experience. The poet in this way seeks to affirm that "we are a part of it and / Can live in it as in fact we have done" (*SP*, p. 76) since its "room . . . accommodates everything" (*SP*, p. 77). He wants, in other words, to reclaim the painting's comprehensiveness and its comprehensibility, its plenitude such that we "can live in it" and participate in the presence that it reveals. As I have suggested already, such a system of values provides the ideological foundation for metaphor; it comes as no surprise, then, that the poet sums up this dramatization of a resistance to the text's demystifying insights by explicitly averring that the painting "is a metaphor / Made to include us" (*SP*, p. 76). With this claim he undertakes to deny the displacements effected by metonymy and to affirm that experience

will not take place at random
 But in an orderly way that means to menace
 Nobody—the normal way things are done,
 Like the concentric growing up of days
 Around a life: correctly, if you think about it.
 (*SP*, p. 76)

The poem narrates its refusal of metonymy's "random" juxtapositions with this appeal to the "orderly" and "normal" logic of concentric organization—an organization that underscores belief in the reality of a central, interior truth and that calls to mind such systems of hierarchical arrangement as Dante's vision of heaven and hell. This ideologically freighted concentricity metaphorizes the transcendental impulse at work in metaphor itself. But the text exposes the untenability of this enshrinement of the logocentric ideal, the untenability not only of such explicitly organic metaphors (the "growing up of days") but also, and more importantly, of the organicism inherent in metaphor itself. For even in this attempt to celebrate the concentricity of metaphor, metaphor comes undone as soon as one recognizes the "random" collocation, which is to say, the metonymic relationship, that governs the

accumulation of "days / Around a life"—the metonymic relationship that governs the very vehicle of this metaphor for metaphor.

The text itself, by the time it reaches its final section, must acknowledge this dissolution of every metaphoric necessary into the horizontal displacements of a metonymic contingency:

This always
Happens, as in the game where
A whispered phrase passed around the room
Ends up as something completely different.
It is the principle that makes works of art so unlike
What the artist intended.

(SP, p. 80)

Undeceived by metaphor with its claims to authenticity and naturalism, the text reveals the pervasiveness of this "unlike"-ness, the inescapability of differential structures. Even "*this* thing, the mute, undivided present" (SP, p. 80) betrays the distortions of an "otherness . . . changing everything / Slightly and profoundly" (SP, p. 81) so that it too is "completely different" (SP, p. 80) from itself. Such an insistence on the element of difference or textuality inherent in experience refutes what Derrida has discussed as the logocentric metaphysics of presence based on the self-authenticating privilege of speech. "Once it seemed so perfect," the poet writes with regard to that now displaced presence, "gloss on the fine / Freckled skin, lips moistened as though about to part / Releasing speech" (SP, p. 82). But that natural and immediate self-presence must now be refused as "a frozen gesture of welcome etched / On the air materializing behind it, / A convention" (SP, p. 82). For Ashbery's "Self-Portrait" undertakes thematically to stage its own deconstruction, to transform the mirror of art into the mirror image of mimesis by representing representation as difference.

It is wholly appropriate, therefore, that in one of its final images the text repudiates its coherence, and thus its own identity, by denying that it has delineated—or that it ever could delineate—any self-portrait at all. "The hand holds no chalk," the poet, as "dreaming model" (SP, p. 71), declares; and literalizing the enterprise of deconstruction, he adds: "each part of the whole falls off" (SP, p. 83). Thus, in the words of David Shapiro, "It might be said that the poem finally admits no self-portraiture except the portraiture of a text";¹⁴ or, as Richard Stamelman writes in one of the best deconstructive readings of Ashbery's poem, "self-portraiture is stripped of authority and authenticity; and knowledge appears as no more than the random coalescence of fragments."¹⁵

But there is something troubling about the neatness of this overtly deconstructive "Self-Portrait." On the one hand, the dismemberment imaged here as the aesthetic object is hollowed out—as it falls apart to reveal itself as a "hoard of destructions" (XV, 1–2), to use the phrase from Picasso that Stevens cites in "The Man with the Blue Guitar"—makes explicit the connection between deconstructive reading and the undoing of that discourse of power central to what Derrida describes as phallogocentrism. As I noted earlier, the authoritarian values of autonomy, plenitude, and self-mastery that inform phallogocentrism are grounded in the visible presence of the phallus which becomes a transcendental signifier assuring the fixity, the self-identity of truth. The poem's assertion, then, that "each part of the whole falls off" (*SP*, p. 83) appears to displace the phallic image of unity and comprehensiveness through a dismemberment, a figural castration, that subverts the integrity of the subject of "Self-Portrait." And yet, on the other hand, by imaging the deconstructive pressuring of a text as a dismemberment, as the opening of a hole in what was "whole," the poem points to its own persistent recuperation of the phallus, its own entrapment in what Derrida calls "the snare of truth-castration," the snare of the phallogocentric positing of a relation between castration and truth.¹⁶

This recuperation or ensnarement can be seen, on one level, in the way in which the text aspires thematically to reveal the truth of its own deconstruction, to appropriate to itself a sophisticated awareness of its own discontinuity in order to reassert its ability to know itself. Thus in Stamelman's exemplary deconstructive account of the poem, Ashbery's text "lifts the protective veil of artifice from works of poetic and artistic representation, thus opening up their surface to view; a disclosure that shows exactly how poems, stories, and paintings (like Parmigianino's self-portrait) hide, disguise, or suppress realities of temporality and loss."¹⁷ This dramatic unveiling aims to expose the truth of loss, the reality of lack that elsewhere is hidden or disguised; it affirms, that is, castration as truth and thus returns us to the phallogocentric orientation toward truth by making a fetish of castration itself so as to cover up—and *not* to recover—the indeterminacy such lack would imply.

The phallus, even in its "absence," then, remains the privileged signifier that underwrites the poem's fetishistic insistence on the truth of dismemberment or loss. And throughout the poem this fetishism obtrudes to inscribe its refusal of the deconstructive theme that the text would seem to articulate. For example, we learn in the final image that

the hand of the portraitist "holds no chalk" as "each part of the whole falls off" (*SP*, p. 83), and thus that the phallic instrument of metaphoric representation or self-reproduction is missing or denied. But the text's fetishistic fixation on the hand—its disproportionate attention to the hand's disproportion—has already transformed the hand itself ("bigger than the head" [*SP*, p. 68], looming "large" [*SP*, p. 69], and "on another scale" [*SP*, p. 70]) into a metonymic substitute for the phallus whose absence the text so boldly advertises.

This magnification of the hand, of course, can be seen in Parmigianino's painting, and one might be tempted to attribute its importance in the poem to nothing more than Ashbery's faithful meditation on the earlier work. But the numerous invocations of the hand betray the extent to which the poem has seized upon that aspect of the portrait and placed it in the service of its fetishistic desire. At the outset, for instance, the painting's enlarged hand provokes telling efforts of interpretation in the poem: Ashbery proposes that the hand seeks "to protect / What it advertises" (*SP*, p. 69), reading its swerving gesture as conservative or defensive. As a defensive strategy, however, it aims not "to hide something" (*SP*, p. 69) but to "protect" by advertising or exposing what otherwise remains hidden. In this way even as the hand reveals the room of the portrait as illusion, as a "hollow" (*SP*, p. 69), it can still "loom large" (*SP*, p. 69) enough to convey the pathos of its alleged desire to "stick . . . Out of the globe" (*SP*, p. 69). In other words, while the hand calls attention to its own status as a *painted* hand by showing the painter in the act of creating the portrait, it simultaneously invokes in the text a pathos that obliquely reconstitutes the very illusion of presence that it has dismantled. The poem stresses this conservative element when it reads the hand as working "to fence in and shore up the face" (*SP*, p. 69). Like Eliot's "fragments . . . shored against [his] ruins," this fragmentary, almost disembodied hand ("Roving back to the body of which it seems / So unlikely a part" [*SP*, p. 69]) attempts to reinforce a threatened ideology of fullness and presence, to function both as "fence" and defense against the "vacancy" (*SP*, p. 77) or absence in the painted face.

Gesturing "in pure / Affirmation that doesn't affirm anything" (*SP*, p. 70), the hand takes on the quality of Sidney's poet who "nothing affirms." But while refusing to "affirm anything," the hand, as "pure / Affirmation," *does* affirm its very refusal of affirmation, fetishistically essentializing its own gesture into a "pure" or absolute truth that substitutes for the lack of any object, any *thing* for it to affirm. Ashbery himself has quite cogently discussed, in *Three Poems*, the nature of such

a fetishistic substitution: "details," he writes, "can too easily become fetishes, i.e., become prized for themselves, with no notion of the whole of which they were a part, with only an idolatrous understanding of the qualities of the particular details." And he adds that "Fetichism [sic] comes into being only when there is a past that may seem more or less attractive when compared with the present."¹⁸ Thus the fetish as metonymic displacement not only defends against what Freud views as the "absence" that it confronts, but it also invokes a covert nostalgia for the presence that once was.¹⁹

Like Parmigianino's painting, then, Ashbery's text has a "secret" that is hidden or "sequestered" (*SP*, p. 68) by being "too plain" (*SP*, p. 69)—a secret that it protects by advertising. What is simultaneously hidden and exposed here is the textual inscription of a nostalgic desire: a desire for presence that will disallow absence or loss, a desire to escape from the pose or positioning of differential language and to break free into something outside the constraints of textuality.²⁰ Even the evocation of deconstruction as dismemberment figures in the unfolding of this desire to the extent that it occurs in the context of a larger movement toward a recuperation of the past:

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*, p. 83)

This remembrance of things past takes shape as a literal re-membering of the dis-membered or fallen-off parts of the whole, and it offers the possibility of hearing once more the "whispers out of time" that lead back to the realm of self-authenticating voice, that lead back to the erotic specificity of the painting with its "lips moistened as though about to part / Releasing speech" (*SP*, p. 82). For the "Self-Portrait" parades its secret in this inescapable eroticism through which the "hole" (*SP*, p. 73) or the absence or "what should be the vacuum of a dream / Becomes continually replete" (*SP*, p. 73).

The fetishism that particularizes the hand specifies the phallic nature of that eroticism. It evokes the hand as a token of mastery or control and confers upon it the power to "weave the delicate meshes" (*SP*, p. 70) of the very text in which it is contained. Though the subversion of metaphor by metonymy is acknowledged as taking the matter of "creation / Out of our hands" (*SP*, p. 81), the imposing presence of the hand itself serves to raise the question of authority and

control in explicit relation to the phallogentric positing of a transcendental signifier:

Whose curved hand controls,
 Francesco, the turning seasons and the thoughts
 That peel off and fly away at breathless speeds
 Like the last stubborn leaves ripped
 From wet branches?

(*SP*, p. 71)

This introduction of the image of the leaves—an autumnal image with a literary history that reaches back to Homer by way of Stevens and Shelley, Milton and Virgil—serves as a trope of pathos, a trope of emotional presence in the scene of loss, that identifies the transcendental signifier as the signifier of a desire for the presence of pathos, of a desire for the reassuring self-presence implicit in a subject who is capable of desire.

Because this desire manifests itself in Ashbery's "Self-Portrait" as an attempt to reassert selfhood by submitting the self to dispersal, to differentiation, one could, with David Shapiro, name as narcissism the distinctive eros that motivates the text's implicit reconstruction of this presence or identity that it explicitly disavows.²¹ But the relationship specified by the poem is not literally one of narcissistic specularity. The poet meditates not on his own image, but on that of Parmigianino; and where Narcissus was enchanted by the apparent otherness of his reflection, Ashbery's "Self-Portrait" presents the situation of one who finds himself

deprived
 Of a reflection, except that the whole of me
 Is seen to be supplanted by the strict
 Otherness of the painter in his
 Other room.

(*SP*, p. 74)

Since narcissism posits the self-enclosure of desire, the "strict otherness" that informs this eros requires that its provenance be redefined to some degree.

An insight into its precise nature may be found in a passage from *Three Poems* in which Ashbery prefigures the attractive force exerted by the self-portrait in Parmigianino's convex mirror:

Not an atom but did not feel itself obscurely compelled to set out
 in search of a mate, that didn't ache to join in the universal
 turmoil and hullabaloo that fell over the earth, roiling the clear
 waters of the reflective intellect. . . . The individual will . . . sallies
 forth full of ardor and *hubris*, bent on self-discovery in the guise

of an attractive partner who is *the* heaven-sent one, the convex one with whom he has had the urge to mate all these seasons without realizing it. Thus a state of positively sinful disquiet began to prevail wherein men's eyes could be averted from the truth by the passing of a romantic stranger whose perfume set in motion all kinds of idle and frivolous trains of thought leading who knows where—to hell, most likely, or at very best to a position of blankness and ill-conceived repose on the edge of the flood, so that looking down into it one no longer saw the comforting reflection of one's own face and felt secure in the knowledge that, whatever the outcome, the struggle was going on in the arena of one's own breast. (*TP*, p. 57)

This "self-discovery in the guise" of a "convex" partner is actualized in the "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" where it defines an eros that insists not only on the otherness of the self—and thus on difference within the category of the same—but also on the recuperation of selfhood by means of a relationship that is not "going on in the arena of one's own breast." Renouncing the "enchantment of self with self" (*SP*, p. 72), the poem suggests an eroticism informing its relationship with the image of Parmigianino, which is evoked, in Vasari's words, as "rather angel than man" (*SP*, p. 73), and seen with loving attention to the "gloss on the fine freckled skin" and the "lips moistened as though about to part" (*SP*, p. 82). Whether or not the text evokes a desire "to mate" with this "attractive partner . . . the convex one," the eroticism that characterizes its obsessive fascination with the painting's face ("As I start to forget it / It presents its stereotype again" [*SP*, p. 73], "A breeze like the turning of a page / Brings back your face" [*SP*, p. 76]), and the "tenderness" (*SP*, p. 69) of its gaze inflects narcissism in the direction of a homosexuality, where homosexuality has the force of a desire that is deconstructive and phallogentric at once.

It is deconstructive insofar as it questions the inevitability and absolutism of the pairing of male and female by exposing the element of sexual difference that can supply the basis for erotic desire within either category alone. It defines within the realm of sexuality an area of difference and dispersal wherein the heterosexual model of "productive" insemination is displaced by a "non-productive" or playful dissemination. Thus Roland Barthes offers a vision of "*homosexualities* whose plural will baffle any constituted, centralized discourse" and thereby refute the singularity and self-identity that phallogentrism affirms.²² But if this homosexual desire bespeaks the text's recognition of its own intrinsic difference or otherness, it is nevertheless expended in an effort of "self-discovery" that remains firmly within the

phallogocentric economy of presence and accessibility to truth. The deconstructive thematics of Ashbery's "Self-Portrait" contains within it, then, this restitution of an erotic presence and this reappropriation of a phallic identity predicated upon self-knowledge. By thematizing its own deconstruction, of course, the poem makes the possibility of any "knowledge" problematic; it recognizes that as the painting's eyes "know nothing" (*SP*, p. 71), so the artist himself "doesn't know" (*SP*, p. 72) what things are possible to him. Indeed, when he looks in the mirror of his own aesthetic artifact he discovers that "a ship / Flying unknown colors has entered the harbor" (*SP*, p. 81). But if the text underscores the difficulties of knowledge, it also eroticizes knowledge—and a demystified self-knowledge in particular—as an object of desire. In this way it apprehends the eroticism that attends upon deconstruction itself as an activity of cognition. It points, that is, toward the interference of a sexual thematics with any critical enterprise directed toward discovery or interpretive sophistication.

In the process it exposes the desire, the will to power, at work—as Derrida perceives—within the machinery of deconstruction. Gayatri Spivak puts it clearly when she writes: "Derrida acknowledges that the desire of deconstruction may itself become a desire to reappropriate the text actively through mastery, to show the text what it 'does not know.'"²³ On a cognitive level, then, Ashbery's poem elaborates just such a deconstruction of deconstructive cognition by unfolding its implication in a system of desire. But where Derrida deconstructs deconstruction by seeing desire itself as "a deconstructive and grammatological structure,"²⁴ where his enterprise recognizes the impossibility of all knowledge and thus the participation of every critical reading in the endlessly elaborated play of textuality, Ashbery's "Self-Portrait" concludes with a diminished, but still nostalgic claim for the possibility of apprehending—however infrequently—a lost plenitude or essence:

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*, p. 83)

In conjuring these "whispers out of time," the text manifests its own desire to escape the contingency of the "growing up of days / Around a life" (*SP*, p. 76), a contingency evoked more explicitly in *Three Poems* where the poet asserts: "there is something to be said for these

shiftless days, each distilling its drop of poison until the cup is full; there is something to be said for them because there is no escaping them" (*TP*, p. 67). Such escape *does* become possible, however, through what the "Self-Portrait" calls "whispers out of time" and *Three Poems* describes as "words that were not words but sounds out of time" that act "like a marvelous antidote to the cup that the next moment had already prepared and which, whether hemlock or nectar, could only have proved fatal because it *was* the next . . ." (*TP*, p. 76). The desire expressed by the appeal to these "whispers out of time," then, is not a Derridean recognition of desire itself as differential, but an expression of the "will to endure" that the text was "hoping to keep hidden" (*SP*, p. 79)—a willfulness that prompts the final violence with which the text dismisses Parmigianino's portrait: "There is room for one bullet in the chamber" (*SP*, p. 82). Ashbery's poem knows that "the principle of each individual thing is / Hostile to, exists at the expense of all the others" (*SP*, p. 80) and therefore its own potent "will to endure" constitutes a desire to secure its own identity and authenticity by finding itself in the place of its antecedent and reappropriating itself through the other.

As mentioned earlier, however, Parmigianino here figures Stevens as Ashbery's antecedent. The displacement of Parmigianino, therefore, must involve in some way a displacement of Stevens that is accomplished by means of the erotic energy directed here toward the recovery of the self. To sketch briefly the nature of this substitutive movement, we may note that Ashbery's "Self-Portrait" reads Stevens reductively as a poet of absence—as the "shearsman" (I, 2), the agent of undoing, in "The Man with the Blue Guitar." It thus associates Stevens with the emptying out of presence, with the inability to achieve convexity that Stevens himself suggests in the second canto of that poem:

I cannot bring a world quite round
Although I patch it as I can.

I sing a hero's head, large eye
And bearded bronze, but not a man.

(II, 1–4)

As Ashbery's antecedent, then, Stevens guides the later poet in the overtly theoretical articulation of his deconstructive polemic. Unable to make present the convexity or the roundness of a world, Stevens, in this reading, is used to signify the problematic nature of any mirroring or representation; and it is against this problematization that the poem rails in an outburst that challenges its own thematic preoccupation:

those assholes
Who would confuse everything with their mirror games
Which seem to multiply stakes and possibilities, or
At least confuse issues by means of an investing
Aura that would corrode the architecture
Of the whole in a haze of suppressed mockery
Are beside the point. They are out of the game,
Which doesn't exist until they are out of it.

(*SP*, pp. 79–80)

In this diatribe against the emptiness of an endless deconstructive *mise en abyme*, the poem rejects the purely cognitive abstraction associated with Stevens and with Stevens' assertion that "poetry is the subject of the poem" (XXII, 1). Eros, for Ashbery, becomes the subject of the poem: the eros that informs poetry and cognition both, and that determines the evocation of Parmigianino's painted eyes:

there is in that gaze a combination
Of tenderness, amusement and regret, so powerful
In its restraint that one cannot look for long.

(*SP*, p. 69)

But if one does look just a little bit longer, one can see that those eyes belong properly neither to Ashbery, nor to Parmigianino, nor even to Wallace Stevens. The beautiful and pathos-laden description of the portrait, with its curving arm and its gaze combining tenderness and amusement, leads back not to Stevens and his "hero's head," but to Stevens' antecedent: to Whitman and the following passage from "Song of Myself":

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,
Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable rest,
Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next,
Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.

(75-79)

If Ashbery's "Self-Portrait" reads Stevens as a poet of absence, then it views Whitman as a poet of plenitude; if it apprehends Stevens as a "shearsman," an abstracted professor of philosophy's deconstruction, it sees Whitman as a manifest presence, a passionate professor of desire. Ashbery's own poetic strategy crosses Stevens with Whitman, cognition with desire; and by doing so it is able to propose a theoretical discourse on eros and presence that illuminates the presence of eros in the discourse of any theorizing. In this way the "Self-Portrait" manages to achieve the highest degree of interpretive subtlety without giving itself

over to "mirror games" or being reduced to what Stevens called "the idle accomplishment of an extremist in an exercise."

Ashbery's text is thus positioned to expose the pathos of its skepticism, the poignancy of the desire that always informs its irony; for that irony serves a strategic function in support of the text's "will to endure," its desire to escape the pervasiveness of temporal contingency. Such a strategy distinguishes the author of the "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" from the constructors of "mirror games," which is to say from the deconstructors for whom no nostalgia for lost wholeness and integrity is at stake as they "corrode the architecture / Of the whole in a haze of suppressed mockery" (*SP*, pp. 79–80). In Ashbery's words, "they are out of the game" (*SP*, p. 80), while he positions himself, in Whitman's words, "both in and out of the game." His text, then, effectively shores up its identity by thematizing its deconstruction; it reappropriates the knowledge and integrity of its selfhood by acceding to the dispersal of the self "like a wave breaking on a rock, giving up / Its shape in a gesture that expresses that shape" (*SP*, p. 73). Precisely positioned to advertise the pathos of its inevitable position within a differential system of language, so that "longing to be free, outside . . . it must stay / Posing in this place" (*SP*, p. 69), the "Self-Portrait" suggests finally that only by adopting this pose of self-exposure can it assert its integrity and claim that paradoxical property: its authentic posture.

¹ Douglas Crase, "The Prophetic Ashbery," *Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery*, ed. David Lehman (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), p. 42.

² Ashbery himself has said of his work: "As has been pointed out by Richard Howard, among others, my poems are frequently commenting on themselves as they're getting written." ("Craft Interview with John Ashbery," *The Craft of Poetry: Interviews from the New York Quarterly*, ed. William Packard [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974], p. 121). This essay will suggest that such an assertion ought not to be accepted unquestioningly. Instead it should be investigated as thoroughly as an author's more conventional thematic readings of his own work.

³ John Ashbery, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 68. The poem will hereafter be abbreviated as *SP* and all further page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

⁴ Ashbery writes: "It seems to me that the title is something that tips the whole poem in one direction or another . . ." ("Craft Interview," p. 111).

⁵ Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982), p. 60.

⁶ See Jacques Derrida, *Éperons, Les Styles de Nietzsche*, trans. Barbara Harlow

(Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 60. The French "phallogocentrisme" is mistranslated as phallocentrism on the facing page.

⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 287.

⁸ Cited in Culler, *On Deconstruction*, p. 172.

⁹ Harold Bloom, "The Breaking of Form," *Deconstruction and Criticism*, Harold Bloom, et. al. (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), p. 26.

¹⁰ Lynn Keller has written on Ashbery's relationship to Stevens in "Thinkers without Final Thought: John Ashbery's Evolving Debt to Wallace Stevens," *ELH*, 49 (Spring 1982), 235-61. She does not, however, trace Ashbery's career as far as "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," nor does she discuss the importance to Ashbery of "The Man with the Blue Guitar."

¹¹ See Bloom, "The Breaking of Form," p. 26.

¹² David Kalstone observes that "all questions of scientific reflection capturing a real presence, turn instantly into other kinds of reflection: changeable, even fickle thought," *Five Temperaments: Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), p. 177.

¹³ See Kenneth Burke's discussion of metaphor in "Four Master Tropes," *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1969), pp. 503-17.

¹⁴ David Shapiro, *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1979), p. 7.

¹⁵ Richard Stamelman, "Critical Reflections: Poetry and Art Criticism in Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,'" *New Literary History*, 15 (Spring 1984), p. 611.

¹⁶ Derrida, *Éperons, Les Styles de Nietzsche*, p. 59.

¹⁷ Stamelman, "Critical Reflections," p. 613.

¹⁸ John Ashbery, *Three Poems* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 57. This book will hereafter be abbreviated as *TP* and citations will be given parenthetically in the text.

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), XXI, 152-57.

²⁰ Though his essay differs greatly from mine in what it sees as the causes and consequences of this bifurcated desire, Charles Altieri persuasively locates a similar conflict at work in the text. It is, he writes, "as if the speaker's mental hand were divided between the desire to identify and a desire to break out of the balloon of his own endlessly circling monologue." "Motives in Metaphor: John Ashbery and the Modernist Long Poem," *Genre*, XI, No. 4, p. 683.

²¹ Shapiro, *John Ashbery*, p. 7.

²² Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, 1977), p. 69.

²³ Gayatri Spivak, "Translator's Preface," *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), p. lxxvii.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. lxxviii.

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