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Critical Reflections: Poetry and Art Criticism in Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"

Richard Stamelman

I want my image—mobile, knocked about among a thousand changing photos, determined by various situations and periods of life—to coincide with my “self” (profound as one knows). But it is the contrary that must be said. It is “myself” who never coincides with my image; for it is the image that is heavy, immobile, stubborn . . . and “myself” that is light, divided, dispersed and, like an imp in a bottle, moves agitatedly from place to place.

Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire*¹

I

“SELF-PORTRAIT in a Convex Mirror” is a title that has a double identity; it is a name shared by two different works of art: on the one hand, the small Mannerist self-representation (it is only 9 5/8 inches in diameter) painted on a convex piece of poplar wood by Francesco Parmigianino in Parma between 1523 and 1524;² on the other, the postmodernist poem of 552 lines composed by John Ashbery in New York, probably between 1973 and 1974.³ The painted self-portrait is as self-enclosed, condensed, and smoothly englobed as the poetic meditation is open-ended, rambling, and fragmented. Where Parmigianino’s face floats angelically in a state of perfect, timeless immobility, Ashbery’s mind rushes to and fro in a dance of associations, thoughts, and self-conscious reflections. His consciousness moves in a recurring, although decentered, pattern from a meditation of the Parmigianino painting to a contemplation of his own life, to a consideration of the nature of poetic and pictorial representation, and back to the painting once again, where the meditation starts anew. While the painter presents an image of himself at once complete and unchanging, the poet represents the comings and

goings of sensations, desires, thoughts, and impressions—"a mimesis," he says, "of how experience comes to me."⁴

Although both works share the same title, they are radically different forms of self-representation. By entitling his poem "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," Ashbery appears to have wanted to reveal the extreme difference between Mannerist and postmodernist aesthetics and the great disparity between the idea of self and the attitude toward reality that those two aesthetics embody. He wanted, in other words, to make his poem serve as a *critical reflection* of the painting: an ekphrastic re-presentation of Parmigianino's self-portrait and at the same time a radical criticism of the illusions and deceptions inherent in forms of traditional representation that insist on the ideal, essential, and totalized nature of the copied images they portray. Whereas portraiture has consistently been regarded as a "meditation on likeness,"⁵ in Ashbery's hands it becomes a meditation on difference.

The critical difference in Ashbery's poem is literally the difference criticism makes by being inserted into his poetic discourse; poetic expression and critical analysis function together in "Self-Portrait." Wherever he can, he inserts a difference, a sense of critical otherness, that illuminates the disparity between his act of self-portrayal and Parmigianino's, which the poem paradoxically mirrors. Ashbery's criticism of the painting enables him to reveal and thus "dispel / The quaint illusions that have been deluding us" ("Litany," *AWK*, p. 35), not only in the representations of the world, which painting, poetry, and narrative give, but in the fictions one uses to order one's life and past.

Ashbery is a poet of demystifications, differences, and, as will become clear, deconstructions. In the very act of presenting the Parmigianino painting—describing its formal elements, its stylistic mannerisms, the history of its composition—he critically dismantles the portrait, pointing to the sealed, life-denying, motionless image of self it portrays; the poem offers a critical deconstruction of representation itself, or more precisely, of the aesthetic of perfection which gives representations an aura of eternal sameness, enshrining them in the paradise of art so that they constitute what Harold Bloom calls a "supermimesis."⁶ The Parmigianino painting as it is taken into and described by Ashbery's poem—so that it is transformed into a text, an *ekphrasis*, an inscribed version of the work of art—dazzles the reader with its triple reflection; it has its source in the mirror image that Parmigianino copies onto a convex surface and which Ashbery four hundred and fifty years later contemplates and represents:



Parmigianino. *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

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.

(“SP,” p. 68)

Mirroring and meditation constitute the critical reflections which Ashbery’s poem projects as it presents and deconstructs Parmigianino’s self-portrait. Criticism, the poet suggests, is reflection: a specular

interpretation that mirrors and meditates simultaneously. The critic *reflects* the work he studies—quotation, paraphrase, photographic reproduction are mirror images of a special type—by *reflecting upon* it; the specular thus leads to the speculative, as Ashbery suggests:

The words are only speculation
 (From the Latin *speculum*, mirror):
 They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music.
 (“SP,” p. 69)

Before offering my own critical reflection of and upon Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” before putting forth yet another meditation through mirroring to join the many critical speculations of the poem already written⁷—which cannot fail to illustrate, yet again, how a text is a *mise en abyme* and reading an encounter with a maze of self-reflecting passages, with what Yeats called a “Mirror on mirror mirrored”⁸—I would like to discuss Ashbery’s understanding of the task of criticism and reflection.

Ashbery’s critical demystification of the concept and practice of criticism can be found in “Litany” (AWK, pp. 3–68), a sixty-five page work—his longest poem to date—that is composed of two independent poetic texts printed in facing columns; the poems are meant to be read as simultaneous monologues. In “Litany” Ashbery asserts that the time has come to establish a “new school of criticism” that would not differ greatly from poetry in its choice of subject matter. The “new criticism” would be neither obscure nor esoteric; it would avoid being overly preoccupied with itself. Above all, it would try to give expression to and communicate an understanding of the fragmented experiences of ordinary men and women living in the temporal world of random happenings. Since “Just one minute of contemporary existence / Has so much to offer,” Ashbery writes, the “new critic” would evaluate that moment and then “show us / In a few well-chosen words of wisdom / Exactly what is taking place all about us” (AWK, p. 32). To this end, the “new criticism” would unselectively embrace all events of life and being:

... All
 Is by definition subject matter for the new
 Criticism, which is us: to inflect
 It is to count our own ribs, as though Narcissus
 Were born blind, and still daily
 Haunts the mantled pool, and does not know why.
 (AWK, p. 35)

The image of the blind Narcissus is an intriguing one. He visits the same scene of reflection, the “mantled pool,” but never comes to understand why he is compelled to return. Fated to repeat the same acts and gestures, he would appear to have, as Ashbery says of contemporary life in “Self-Portrait,” “a vague / Sense of something that can never be known” (p. 77). What this Narcissus does know is the inexplicable need to haunt the same landscape, to feel his way among the same objects, like the poet who counts ribs he cannot see. The blind Narcissus expresses Ashbery’s recognition of the limits of self-knowledge and self-representation. The self can be neither seen—it changes too rapidly for a whole image to be grasped—nor known—it is consistently undoing what it has just built, always presenting itself as different from what it has just disclosed about itself. Ashbery denies that a coherent, unified, unchanging self, like the one Parmigianino has “Glazed, embalmed, projected at a 180-degree angle” (“SP,” p. 68) in his painting, can exist, let alone be represented. Yet there is a positive, enlightened side to this blind Narcissus. He is not prey to the solipsism, the “enchantment of self with self” (“SP,” p. 72) that the poet identifies in the Parmigianino painting. So taken is the Narcissus of the myth (and Parmigianino for that matter) with himself that he withdraws from the world, denying anything beyond the border or frame of his own reflection. But Ashbery’s Narcissus, on the other hand, forced as he is to make his way gropingly in the world—searching unconsciously for a self-image he can never see or know while remaining ignorant of the reasons for his wanderings—is a Narcissus who by sheer necessity is conscious of time and place; he struggles to live and understand among the meaningless signs of a dark world.

For Ashbery perception and reflection are a matter of seeing in a glass darkly, if at all. While Parmigianino’s sixteenth-century *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* presents an image of artistic unity that expresses faith in the representability of world and self through art, Ashbery’s critical re-vision of the painting reveals what is a stilled and detemporalized scene of reflection. In Ashbery’s postmodernist (and self-reflexive) view, painting and poetry can represent nothing other than their own difficult, often thwarted efforts at representation. By means of this critical meditation Ashbery so completely demystifies the traditional notions of self and representation that by the end of the poem Parmigianino’s convex painting is flattened and pushed back into the dead past; self-portraiture is stripped of authority and authenticity; and knowledge appears as no more than the random coalescence of fragments. No wonder, then, that Ashbery’s demy-

thologized Narcissus, having lost sight of the reflection that had been the center of his life, wanders in blindness and in doubt.

In a lecture he delivered in 1951 on the relationship of poetry to painting, Wallace Stevens argued that because the “sister arts” had a common source in the imagination and because they appeared as a humanistic presence in an age of disbelief, they offered “a compensation for what has been lost.”⁹ For Ashbery such confidence in the imagination’s powers of recuperation would be unthinkable. No representation, no artwork, no poem, in his opinion, could compensate for what had been lost. Poetry might try to describe the losses, or indicate the extent of the absence, or tentatively express that “vast unravelling / Out toward the junctions and to the darkness beyond” (“Pyrography,” *HD*, p. 10) that defines the temporal passage of contemporary experience; but it cannot restore the reality of what existed before the unravelling, before the loss. The illusionistic techniques of painting, the fictive strategies of narrative, the compact wholeness of a poem, the attraction of art as an “exotic / Refuge within an exhausted world” (“SP,” p. 82) are designed to hide the loss and incompleteness associated with temporal existence. By artifice the ruins are shored. But the artist’s hand, as Ashbery observes in “Self-Portrait,” cannot control the turning seasons, the thoughts that flood the mind, the sorrows that break the heart, or the desires that inhabit the unconscious. Faced with the realities of loss, death, absence, and indeterminacy as they exist in the comings and goings of events, feelings, and thoughts in daily life, art is unable to create either a single image that could be called perfect or a single truth that could be considered final, as the last lines of “Self-Portrait” declare:

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 a poem whose ironic title would seem to call into question the Renaissance notion of the resemblance between poetry and painting—a poem called “And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name”—Ashbery writes:

You can’t say it that way any more.
Bothered about beauty you have to
Come out into the open, into a clearing,
And rest.

(*HD*, p. 45)

A coming out into the open is what Ashbery's poetry is: an opened poetry that lifts the protective veil of artifice from works of poetic and artistic representation, thus opening up their surfaces 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. Because *ut pictura poesis* insists on the superiority of art to life, and because it suspends the rhythms of life and death that define mortal existence, Ashbery cannot accept the Renaissance ideology behind the concept. In his postmodernist view, art can only represent the problematic and precarious nature of its reflection of the world. Any representation must look not only outward to the world it tries unsuccessfully to reflect, but inward to the forms and strategies it employs. Poems represent and chronicle the creative act that produces them. "Something / Ought to be written," he tells himself in "And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name," "about how this affects

You when you write poetry:
 The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind
 Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire
 to communicate
 Something between breaths, if only for the sake
 Of others and their desire to understand you and desert you
 For other centers of communication, so that understanding
 May begin, and in doing so be undone.¹⁰

Every element in a representation is both made and unmade; every reflection of reality is subjected to a critical evaluation and disrupted. What matters above all is the desire to represent and communicate, a desire that prevails even when representations have to be repeated again and again, even when meanings are fugitive and understandings tentative and self-negating. It is not the content of the representation but the act of representing that has potential meaning. In terms of the poem, it is the act of speaking rather than the meaning of what is spoken that is significant. The new poetic art Ashbery announces lets no perception, no event, no reality pass into representation without first being called into question, without first becoming a critical reflection.

II

As a rhetorical term *ekphrasis* denotes any vivid, self-contained, autonomous description that is part of a longer discourse; it is generally accepted, however, to refer to the written imitation of a work of plastic art. The shield of Achilles as described by Homer in Book

XVIII of the *Iliad* is the first ekphrastic representation; and there have been innumerable examples since then: the final act of *The Winter's Tale*, Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Baudelaire's "Le Masque," Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium," Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar," Williams's *Paterson V*, and Lowell's "Marriage," to name only a few.¹¹ *Ekphrases*, although they may refer to real or imaginary works of art, are first and foremost texts: artistic works translated into words and put in the service of a metaphorical, rhetorical, emblematic, allegorical, or moral intention. Auden's ekphrastic recreation, for example, of Achilles' shield, contrasting the pastoral and socially harmonious images of Homer's original to the images of a brutalized and war-ravaged countryside engraved in a contemporary shield, makes an explicitly moral statement about the nature of human conduct in the twentieth century. Other poets have used *ekphrases* to describe allegorically the nature of art or poetry; one need only think of Keats addressing the eternal urn, or Baudelaire reacting with horror when an anamorphic statue of an elegant and sensuous woman reveals a hidden face in great anguish ("Le Masque").

The importing of a work of plastic art into a poem by means of rhetorical and poetic description imparts to the literary work a spatiality and immobility it normally does not have. *Ekphrasis* tends to still the temporal activity, the forward momentum, of the poem, Murray Krieger argues in his essay "*Ekphrasis* and the Still Movement of Poetry; or, *Laokoön* Revisited."¹² The imitation of a work of plastic art in literature enables the poet to find a metaphor, an emblematic correlative, by which to embody the dialectical relationship between spatiality and temporality that every poem implicitly presents and which Krieger calls "poetry's ekphrastic principle" (p. 6). *Ekphrasis* involves the use of "a plastic object as a symbol of the frozen, stilled world of plastic relationships which must be superimposed upon literature's turning world to 'still' it" (p. 5). The "ekphrastic dimension of literature," he writes, is evident "wherever the poem takes on the 'still' elements of plastic form which we normally attribute to the spatial arts" (p. 6). The ekphrastic object is a metaphor for the way the poem celebrates and arrests its movements. Krieger shows that poetry is simultaneously frozen and flowing, that it orders "spatial stasis within its temporal dynamics" (p. 24) by creating a spatial roundness and circularity through internal relations, echoes, and repetitions that unroll in time. *Ekphrasis* makes evident, therefore, "the spatiality and plasticity of literature's temporality" (p. 5).

Yet how striking the difference is between Ashbery's perpetually moving poetic world in "Self-Portrait" and the stilled temporal move-

ment of poetry as Krieger describes it. The ekphrastic presence, in Ashbery's poem, of the Parmigianino painting, with its air of eternal completeness and static perfection, does not still the poem's temporal flow. In fact, the painting becomes the occasion for an escape from spatial immobility, a departure from the time-bounded stillness of poetry's ekphrastic principle. Parmigianino's overly centered convex painting cannot stop the centrifugal motion of the self-decentering poem, the multiple displacements of which occur in harmony with the temporal changes of the poet's errant consciousness that thinks, feels, and speaks in concert with the rhythms of Being. By bringing an ekphrastic object into the poem and then refusing to allow it to do what it normally would do—namely, according to Krieger, to immobilize and transfix the poem until it too becomes an object—Ashbery keeps his poetic expression free from the contamination of art's immobility, something that his prosy, conversational, run-on, nonrepetitive style of writing also succeeds in doing in regards to the potentially stalling effect of poetic diction, syntax, and prosody. It is the interiority enacted in "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" that makes ekphrastic immobility impossible; the ekphrastic object is perpetually in movement, swerving in and out of the poet's consciousness; it never has time to lie still, to settle or harden into a solid object. Ashbery's decentered representation of the sixteenth-century painting and his mobile, discontinuous *ekphrasis* call into question the stillness and the temporal petrification of artistic representation and the very idea of temporal immobility itself, for as Ashbery writes in reference to the stilled scene in a photograph, "one cannot guard, treasure / That stalled moment; it too is flowing, fleeting" ("Syringa," *HD*, p. 70).

"Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" belongs to that group of ekphrastic poems that self-reflexively make a statement about the nature of poetry or art. Ashbery's poem initiates its mirroring of the Parmigianino painting in the following way:

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.

("SP," p. 68)

In these fragmentary perceptions, none of which make a complete sentence except for the last, Ashbery quickly sums up the painting's features. Quoting Vasari, he explains how Parmigianino had a wooden convex surface made equal in size to his convex mirror and "set himself / With great art to copy all that he saw in the glass" (p. 68). Ashbery will repeatedly question this idea of representing *all* that one sees, thus uncovering the illusions of totality and detemporalized wholeness which such representations contain. Paintings like the Parmigianino self-portrait hide the fact that they have come into existence through arbitrary selections made by the painter from among his perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. Ashbery is aware of the important events and impressions that had to be left out in the process of creating the representation—"this leaving-out business," he calls it in an early poem ("The Skaters," *RM*, p. 39)—exclusions that point to the unreality and the solipsism of totalized representations.¹³

The reductiveness of the Parmigianino self-portrait is not the only flaw Ashbery has discovered; there is also the painting's lifelessness, its static unreality. Repeatedly, Ashbery refers to the protected, embalmed, sequestered, imprisoned face of the painter, surrounded at the painting's base by the large, curved right hand, which is elongated and slightly distorted by the convex surface. This hand both welcomes and defends, seeming simultaneously to move out to greet the viewer and to retreat, "Roving back to the body of which it seems / So unlikely a part, to fence in and shore up the face" (p. 69). The painting represents an autonomous and complete life within its convex globe. But the price paid to bring forth this unified and coherent image is high: it entails the deadening of the painter's spirit and the sacrifice of his freedom. In representing himself, Parmigianino has had to exclude much about his life and world that must have defined him as a person. He has had to reduce his being to a miniature image which conforms to the limits of an artful and timeless prison. Parmigianino's is a cautious self-portrait, and in his striving for a perfect, idealized expression of himself, he distorts the meaning of human existence:

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

("SP," p. 69)

The representation freezes one moment in the painter's life and presents it (falsely, Ashbery implies) as representative of that life, its

perfect and essential embodiment. Everything is purified, filtered, self-contained; this is a curtailment of human possibility that moves Ashbery to tears of sympathy:

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)

It is the immobility of the Parmigianino painting, its changeless and unmoving reality, that Ashbery questions. He will have nothing to do with "monuments of unageing intellect." The chaos of life can submit to no artistic control:

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? I see in this only the chaos
Of your round mirror which organizes everything
Around the polestar of your eyes which are empty,
Knowing nothing, dream but reveal nothing.

("SP," p. 71)

Art, Ashbery suggests, is a convention in which artist and viewer agree to suspend disbelief and to pretend that the representation is a coherent, complete re-presentation or reorganization of reality. An art like Parmigianino's gives the illusion of plenitude, but beneath the surface—and surface is all there is—lies nothing:

And the vase is always full
Because there is only just so much room
And it accommodates everything. The sample
One sees is not to be taken as
Merely that, but as everything as it
May be imagined outside time—not as a gesture
But as all, in the refined, assimilable state.

("SP," p. 77)

To Ashbery the painting's fullness is fundamentally empty: "I go on consulting / This mirror that is no longer mine / For as much brisk vacancy as is to be / My portion this time" (p. 77).

In addition to the vacancy of the self-portrait, Ashbery criticizes the painting for the homogeneous, undifferentiated image of self it presents. The uncanny contradictoriness, the decentered and dispersed movement, the plurality of the self are radically transformed by all attempts to sum up, contain, or represent a life:

I feel the carousel starting slowly
 And going faster and faster: desk, papers, books,
 Photographs of friends, the window and the trees
 Merging in one neutral band that surrounds
 Me on all sides, everywhere I look.
 And I cannot explain the action of leveling,
 Why it should all boil down to one
 Uniform substance, a magma of interiors.

(“SP,” p. 71)

The Parmigianino painting is such “a magma of interiors,” created by the reductionist heat of the representative process, by the miniaturization of self-portrayal. It boils down all differences—desires, feelings, thoughts—to a fatal sameness. The Ashbery poem, on the other hand, contains a plethora of interiors. These are related but autonomous spaces that are uncolonizable and irreducible; as the poem advances into the uncharted present, they drop away, replaced by new ones.

By its movements, swervings, turnings, its abandonment of and return to the Parmigianino painting, Ashbery’s poem is always cresting into a present moment, ready not only to narrate or report what is on the poet’s mind at a given instant but to comment on it at the same time. The temporal dimension of consciousness is always the present. Only what exists in the flow of the present can be expressed in language. Words crest into the present “like arrows / From the taut string of a restrained / Consciousness” (“Litany,” *AWK*, p. 68), carrying with them the poet’s thoughts about living and being. Words and consciousness enjoy a rare and short-lived intimacy. But their ability to contain the flood tide of the present, to hold it still enough to put a frame around it (like Parmigianino’s englobed life), is defeated, for, as Ashbery explains, “Today has no margins, the event arrives / Flush with its edges, is of the same substance, / Indistinguishable” (p. 79). Knowledge is problematic in Ashbery’s work because it is not easily mined from passing experiences. It is often no more than a tautology, for, as Ashbery observes, what we can know of today is only its “special, lapidary / Todayness that the sunlight reproduces / Faithfully in casting twig-shadows on blithe / Sidewalks” (p. 78).

Ashbery's poetic representation of Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait* calls the painting from out of the past and places it in the present of the poet's consciousness, where it becomes the locus for speculative thought and deconstructive reflection. By both representing and critically dismantling the painting (and, by implication, the aesthetic confidence and ideological faith it manifests in the portrayal of a self), Ashbery writes an *ekphrasis* turned against itself. But it is more than Parmigianino's self-portrait or the Mannerist aesthetic that Ashbery deconstructs. He aims at demystifying the notion of an idealized and totalized representation. In rejecting Parmigianino at the end of the poem, asking him to return to the sixteenth century—literally speaking, the poet deflates the painting's convexity, its protruberance into the present ("Therefore I beseech you, withdraw that hand, / Offer it no longer as shield or greeting, / The shield of a greeting, Francesco" [p. 82])—Ashbery dismisses the concept of a perfectly representative mimesis:

Aping naturalness may be the first step
 Toward achieving an inner calm
 But it is the first step only, and often
 Remains a frozen gesture of welcome etched
 On the air materializing behind it,
 A convention. And we have really
 No time for these, except to use them
 For kindling. The sooner they are burnt up
 The better for the roles we have to play.

("SP," p. 82)

The only representation that Ashbery would appear to welcome would be the impossible one that would coincide perfectly with its subject: a portrait, for example, indistinct from the changeable life it sought to represent. This representation would have no margins, no frame; it would arrive flush with the edges of the event to be copied. Original and copy would thus be identical. "Perhaps no art, however gifted and well-intentioned," Ashbery writes in *Three Poems*, "can supply what we were demanding of it: not only the figured representation of our days but the justification of them, the reckoning and its application, so close to the reality being lived that it vanishes suddenly in a thunderclap, with a loud cry" ("The Recital," *TP*, p. 113). In an early poem, a sestina entitled "The Painter," Ashbery describes the artist's ideal state, where "nature, not art, might usurp the canvas" (*ST*, p. 54). A painter tries to copy the sea, first dipping his brush into the water and then, when that fails, praying that the water would "rush up the sand, and, seizing a brush, / Plaster its own portrait on

the canvas.” The painter’s wish for this unmediated representation, for a portrait expressing “itself without a brush,” is an impossible dream. Art and life, he comes to realize, cannot coincide. Only a representation that is self-consciously aware of its limitations; that points to what it may have excluded or the possibility of things it may have forgotten; that fights a “will-to-endure” like that so evident in Parmigianino’s painting; that is not afraid to let the artist’s hand break out of its imprisonment and wreck the picture surface—only an *ekphrasis* self-consciously deconstructing the mode of its own self-presentation, only a reflection critically multiplying the mirror images it contains so that finally the backing of the looking glass shatters, and the world enters with its “sawtoothed fragments” (“SP,” p. 70), its heterogeneity and its impermanence—only this kind of self-negating and self-disordering representation can hope to give tentative expression to what Ashbery calls the “mute, undivided present” (“SP,” p. 80). If representation cannot mirror the infinite possibilities of otherness, if it cannot meditate on difference instead of similarity, if it cannot express what is simultaneously self and other, present and absent, remembered and forgotten, one and many, then it is fated, like Parmigianino’s self-portrait, to reflect images of a life not lived but staged, immobilized, and englobed.

Ekphrasis, therefore, enables Ashbery to animate verbally, to lend words to Parmigianino’s sixteenth-century painting so that the work comes alive and speaks in the present of the poet’s consciousness:

This past
Is now here: the painter’s
Reflected face, in which we linger, receiving
Dreams and inspirations on an unassigned
Frequency. . . .

(“SP,” p. 81)

In keeping with the etymological roots of the Greek word *ekphrasis*, meaning “to speak out,” Ashbery transforms the mute self-portrait into language. The painting’s accession to speech permits it to merge with the other discourses of Ashbery’s consciousness, giving it an ambiguity, even an obscurity, it never had before; for once it becomes part of consciousness, the painting enters a world not of enlightenment or clarity, but of indetermination. Re-presented as language, the painting loses its edges and clearly marked borders; it surges into the unframed present, where it is now subject to the poet’s unlimited speculation and to the infinity of language. Transformed into words the painting can now be expressed through an inexhaustible series

of descriptions. Ekphrastic reincarnation transforms the enclosed, fully coherent, and englobed sixteenth-century painting into an open, decentered, postmodernist text.

Ashbery's *ekphrasis* of the Parmigianino *Self-Portrait* is an imitation of a work of plastic art for the purposes of critically demystifying that work and all similar representations that are blind to the ideological conventions and aesthetic fictions that make them possible. This *ekphrasis*—at once the re-presentation and the deconstruction of a painting—is torn from within by contradiction. It offers an analogy between poetry and painting in the tradition of *ut pictura poesis* but then questions the resemblance; it shows similarities between poet and painter and then rejects the comparison; and it expresses a nostalgic desire for wholeness and completeness in artistic representation which it then shows to be impossible. What the “speaking out” of the ekphrastically reproduced painting asserts is that no assertion is possible:

You will stay on, restive, serene in
 Your gesture which is neither embrace nor warning
 But which holds something of both in pure
 Affirmation that doesn't affirm anything.

(“SP,” p. 70)

Through the critical, deconstructive reflection of the Parmigianino painting, Ashbery presents a counterexemplum, a model of how *not* to make art, how *not* to perceive reality, how *not* to represent the world and the self. The mirroring of the Parmigianino self-portrait through the poet's own act of mental self-portrayal—a cinematic representation of the weavings, meanderings, stops, and starts of his mind—produces a negative reflection which, in the discontinuous, fragmentary, often disrupted way it is written, dramatically enacts a new mode of self-representation in keeping with the random, aleatory rhythms of temporal reality. The painting's certitude, so evident in its confident presentation of the painter's fixed self-image, is undone within the indeterminate, self-displacing world of Ashbery's poem. Thus an *ekphrasis* is constructed and then deconstructed by the poet's dialectical consciousness, in which representations of sameness, similarity, and the self can be perceived only in the light of otherness, where they appear perpetually different. It is to this question of otherness, as it is found in the poem, that we shall now turn our attention.

III

“Language,” writes Roland Barthes, “is a skin: I rub my language against the other.”¹⁴ This is the tactile and erotic pleasure of an aroused, amorous language when it surrounds and animates the image of a loved person, the other who occupies the lover’s being and consciousness; the lover’s discourse embraces the image of the other who is the object of attention and reflection. In a similar fashion, Ashbery’s language and consciousness in “Self-Portrait” are made to rub against the image of otherness embodied and reflected in the Parmigianino self-portrait. The poet’s language greets the other, inviting him into the poem, giving him words of self-description to speak, and the other (in this instance, the painted image of Parmigianino) comes to life in a new milieu and context. It is this fundamental otherness of the self that renders impossible any complete self-portrait. The self is always other than what has been said or is being said about it. Ashbery reveals the innumerable and complex discourses, counterdiscourses, and metadiscourses, spoken and unspoken, conscious and unconscious, that every moment of consciousness and reflection holds. Alterity is everywhere: in the folds of language, in images of the world, in representations of self. As he says in “Self-Portrait,” “This otherness, this / ‘Not-being-us’ is all there is to look at / In the mirror” (p. 81).

Like Barthes, whose own self-portrait *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* denies the possibility of a locatable, motionless self—“in the field of the subject,” he writes, “there is no referent”¹⁵—Ashbery recognizes that a totalized, possessable self is a fiction; no anterior, unified, fully formed, autonomous self exists beyond the borders of the poem or representation to serve as its symbol or referent; the self arrives flush with its edges, its existence coinciding with its expression. Constantly subject to revision and displacement, the self is a matter of decentered signifiers, not of fixed signifieds.¹⁶ Accordingly, Ashbery’s criticism of Parmigianino’s self-representation centers on the painting’s overdetermined referentiality. Presenting as it does the image of a coherent, immobile, encapsulated self, the self-portrait is a pure signified. What we see is the eternal image of the painter, the quintessential Parmigianino—“Tel qu’en Lui-même enfin l’éternité le change”¹⁷—no longer a person but a work of art, a symbol. The changing self has hardened into an immobile representation, an “Identity.” In looking at the painter’s angelic face, one forgets that he once lived in a world subject to the vagaries of time and chance, and not in this “bubble chamber,” as Ashbery calls it (p. 72). We forget that the painter lived in difference, always other than whatever image

he happened to capture in his paintings; this is an awareness of difference that Ashbery in his own self-portrait will not suppress. For him self-portrayal means a changing, fluctuating, protean, self-denying, open-ended process that no one poem could ever hope to represent or contain.¹⁸ Unlike Parmigianino's, Ashbery's self-image resists being placed in a represented space, resists fitting "Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention" (p. 69), as he says in the poem. A decentered self can be expressed only by a decentered representation, and then only in passing.

The poet, Baudelaire once remarked, has the uncanny ability of entering into the soul of a person he may espy in a crowd, and for a moment enjoys the privilege of being both himself and this Other.¹⁹ One would think that Ashbery in his own presentation of self might have the same desire to identify with the being of his significant Other, Parmigianino, for he is clearly drawn to the figure of the painter: having, for example, taken the painting into his poem; having borrowed its title for his own work; having looked at the world from Parmigianino's point of view; having lingered in the painter's reflected face; having posed questions to the painting as if he and the painter were engaged in conversation; and finally, having shed tears of pity before the young painter's deadened gaze. In one of the poem's many digressive passages where the poet, allowing the painting to slip from the center of his consciousness, pursues other thoughts, Ashbery thinks of the past and those persons, events, and impressions that may have influenced and defined his identity:

I think of the friends
 Who came to see me, of what yesterday
 Was like. A peculiar slant
 Of memory that intrudes on the dreaming model
 In the silence of the studio as he considers
 Lifting the pencil to the self-portrait.
 How many people came and stayed a certain time,
 Uttered light or dark speech that became part of you
 Like light behind windblown fog and sand,
 Filtered and influenced by it, until no part
 Remains that is surely you. Those voices in the dusk
 Have told you all and still the tale goes on
 In the form of memories deposited in irregular
 Clumps of crystals.

("SP," p. 71)

There is every reason to believe that Parmigianino is one of these "friends," too, and that his painting, because of its longstanding pres-

ence within the poet's consciousness, has left a mark. As light and fog blend, so Ashbery's identity may have become fused with that of the painter.

In some respects Parmigianino's angelic face is Ashbery's specular image. But the painting, as Ashbery represents it, also dramatizes the play of identification and alienation associated with specularly. Ashbery regards an estranged alter ego, in some ways like him (especially insofar as the aesthetic of Parmigianino's painting has a certain nostalgic appeal, touching a responsive chord in the poet who knows, however, the illusoriness of such fictions of artistic wholeness) and yet in other ways very different. Simultaneously, Ashbery draws toward and withdraws from the portrait, like the defensive and welcoming Parmigianino whose curved hand at the edge of the convex painting is both a shield and a greeting (p. 82). Parmigianino is at once a mirror image of the poet and the double from whom the poet wishes to separate himself. He is the specular Other that Ashbery is attracted to and that nonetheless he feels compelled to attack. The painter as this estranged alter ego represents the authority, the tradition, even the law of artistic representation that Ashbery welcomes and then criticizes. The icon of authoritative representation (the Mannerist painting, that is) is brought into the poem through ekphrastic description and then shattered in what could be seen as an Oedipal situation of reflective and critical doubling, in which the poet's ambivalent identification with the Other occasions his awareness of difference. As he tersely remarks at the beginning of "Litany": "I wish to keep my differences / And to retain my kinship / To the rest" (AWK, pp. 3–4).

No encounter with the Other is more revealing of this ambivalent dialectic of identification and alienation, of similarity and difference, than a scene in the poem where Ashbery fantasizes for an instant that he has seen his own reflection in the Parmigianino painting:

What is novel is the extreme care in rendering
 The velleities of the rounded reflecting surface
 (It is the first mirror portrait),
 So that you could be fooled for a moment
 Before you realize the reflection
 Isn't yours. You feel then like one of those
 Hoffmann characters who have been 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. We have surprised him
 At work, but no, he has surprised us

As he works. The picture is almost finished,
 The surprise almost over, as when one looks out,
 Startled by a snowfall which even now is
 Ending in specks and sparkles of snow.
 It happened while you were inside, asleep,
 And there is no reason why you should have
 Been awake for it, except that the day
 Is ending and it will be hard for you
 To get to sleep tonight, at least until late.

(“SP,” pp. 74–75)

Ashbery goes from a sudden (almost hallucinatory) identification with Parmigianino to a recognition of the painter’s diacritical otherness. But what strikes him most about the painting is the power of its otherness to enthrall him. The poet is no longer the perceiving subject but the object of perception; he is dragged into the *other* world of the painting. Because of the concentrated attention needed to study a work of art—a contemplation so absorbing that nothing else exists but the representation before one’s eyes—Ashbery is pulled away from the world, and when he returns is bewildered by what has transpired in his absence. He thus finds himself literally and figuratively “taken in” by the painting. Ironically, Ashbery is put in the same position of self-absorption that Parmigianino must have been in when composing his self-portrait, a world-denying posture that Ashbery has been criticizing from the start of the poem. It is this pulling away from the temporal world in order to paint, write, or read, this abstraction of self from daily life, which the poet considers one of the dangers of artistic representation. He avoids it by energizing his poem with multiple displacements, interruptions, and dislocations. The windows of the poem should be left open to the world, Ashbery suggests, to let in the changing light of the day, the passage of the hours, the turning of the seasons: the laughter, the tears, the noise, and the silence.

In “Self-Portrait” Ashbery considers two kinds of otherness: first, that represented by the specular Other whom the poet addresses, mirrors, criticizes, and finally abandons; second, the otherness that thwarts artistic intention by making a work swerve in an unforeseen direction. In a poem or narrative there is always a certain random thrust in the act of telling which twists “the end result / Into a caricature of itself” (p. 80). Things are finally brought to a conclusion, Ashbery observes, “but never the things / We set out to accomplish and wanted so desperately / To see come into being” (p. 80). Ultimately, this kind of otherness is the true and hidden subject of every representation; it is also what identifies living and being in the world:

Is there anything
 To be serious about beyond this otherness
 That gets included in the most ordinary
 Forms of daily activity, changing everything
 Slightly and profoundly, and tearing the matter
 Of creation, any creation, not just artistic creation
 Out of our hands, to install it on some monstrous, near
 Peak, too close to ignore, too far
 For one to intervene? This otherness, this
 "Not-being-us" is all there is to look at
 In the mirror, though no one can say
 How it came to be this way.

("SP," pp. 80–81)

Every poem is not only a record of what has been expressed, but also a chronicle of what might have been said; it presents "the history of its own realized and unrealized potentialities."²⁰ There is never a single representation but only an endless series of representations, for nothing can ever be told in full: "voices in the dusk," Ashbery writes, "Have told you all and still the tale goes on" (p. 71).

Representation cannot therefore exclude the reality and otherness of Being-in-the-world. A time, a place, a life have to be sensed behind the backing of the mirror; history cannot be shut out. "It is difficult," Ashbery writes in the poem "Tapestry," "to separate the tapestry / From the room or loom which takes precedence over it. / For it must always be frontal and yet to one side" (AWK, p. 90). This is what distinguishes his mental self-portrait from Parmigianino's convex representation. It presents an image of the self neither round nor centered nor fixed in time and space. It is a biased portrait, for sure, but one that is also seen from a bias. It contains a representation of the "actions of a mind at work or at rest,"²¹ including self-reflexive commentaries, judgments, and interpretations of those actions. The view is thus both frontal and from the side. And Ashbery's self-portrait is to the side of conventional representation as well; it is off the mark, decentered, paradoxical in comparison with Parmigianino's salient portrait, which, to have its full convex effect as it surges out to welcome the observer, must be viewed head on, face-to-face. Ashbery's concern with what is marginal or peripheral to a representation—what occupies a space either to one side of the frame or beyond it—reveals therefore a fascination with otherness: an openness to the life that is perpetually moving on the *other* side of art.²²

IV

Ashbery's rejection of the prison house of form, his denial of the illusions of artistic representation (its deceptive sense of perfection and unity), and his assertion that knowledge is always fragmentary evolve in his poem from a critical analysis and interpretation of Parmigianino's sixteenth-century *Self-Portrait*. Where Parmigianino's painting imprisons the soul and sequesters being in a fixed, unified, finished portrait, Ashbery's poem acknowledges the imperfectness and radical incompleteness of life by presenting a stream of random associations, thoughts, and impressions that point to the fundamental discontinuity of self. The Mannerist painting orders the chaotic experience of everyday life by means of polished forms that immobilize the changing rhythms of life and enframe the world. But the post-modernist poem abides by a principle of uncertainty; it is mimetically faithful to the centrifugal expansiveness of consciousness. Since it brings fragmentary sensations and experiences together into a precarious coalescence that signifies something different from what had originally been intended, the poem represents the very idea of otherness.

Paintings and poems are representations or, as Ashbery suggests, "speculations," mirrorings that contain critical reflections. By placing his own portrait, with its preference for aleatory, discontinuous, and decentered visions of reality, against Parmigianino's static representation, Ashbery creates a field of infinitely possible reflections and counterreflections. Thus he illustrates the inconclusiveness of past forms of representation and questions the act of artistic and poetic self-expression by which subjectivity comes into being.

After reading a poem that has rendered the very concept of representation problematic, that has uncovered the deceptive illusions behind the ordering of temporal experience through art, and that has revealed the fundamental otherness of perception and consciousness, how then can the critic possibly conclude his discussion of "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," especially when that discussion has involved his reflection (in the visual and mental senses of that term) of a reflection (Ashbery's poem) of a reflection (Parmigianino's portrait) of a reflection (the painter's mirror image)? How can the critic bring to an end an interpretation of a poem that denies closure in favor of an infinitely reflective openness? The answer may be found in a question Ashbery asks in "Litany": "How," he writes,

Do we live from the beginning of the tale
To its inevitable, momentary end, where all

Its pocket's treasures are summarily emptied
On the mirroring tabletop?

(AWK, p. 28)

The question contains its own answer, for the end, which is no end, is always deferred by reflection, by the “mirroring tabletop” on which all the bits and pieces, the pocket treasures, are displayed.

So in the end, having reached the point where reflection has been raised to the fourth power—the critic reflecting the poet reflecting the painter reflecting the mirror—the criticism and interpretation brought forth by this essay will be continued in the mirroring and meditating of those who, having read it, are asked to carry what it says to yet a higher power of reflexivity. The interpretations, the representations, the reflections are endless. Even Ashbery, at one point in “Litany,” wishes that the speculations would cease:

As a last blessing
Bestow this piece of shrewd, regular knowledge
On me who hungers so much for something
To calm his appetite, not food necessarily—
The pattern behind the iris that lights up
Your almost benevolent eyelash: turn
All this anxious scrutiny into some positive
Chunk to counteract the freedom
Of too much speculation.

(AWK, p. 42)

But as Ashbery knows only too well, and as “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” has revealed, this wish cannot be fulfilled. The anxious scrutiny of a painting, a poem, a representation, a self, a life discloses nothing solid: no chunks, no truths, no final meanings. In the end, one is left only with “A new kind of emptiness, maybe bathed in freshness, / Maybe not” (“Valentine,” *HD*, p. 62) and the infinite *mise en abyme* of critical reflection.

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NOTES

1 Roland Barthes, *Note sur la photographie* (Paris, 1980), pp. 26–27. All translations from the French are mine.

2 Sydney J. Freedberg, *Parmigianino: His Works in Painting* (1950; rpt. Westport, Conn., 1971), pp. 104 ff.

3 John Ashbery, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (New York, 1975), pp. 68–83; hereafter cited as *SP* for the volume and "SP" for the poem. Other books of poetry by John Ashbery are abbreviated in the text as follows: *AWK*: *As We Know* (New York, 1979); *HD*: *Houseboat Days* (Harmondsworth, 1977); *RM*: *Rivers and Mountains* (New York, 1966); *ST*: *Some Trees* (1956; rpt. New York, 1970); and *TP*: *Three Poems* (New York, 1972).

4 Louis A. Osti, "The Craft of John Ashbery: An Interview," *Confrontation*, 9 (Fall 1974), 87. In a more recent interview with Piotr Sommer, Ashbery explains that this kind of mimesis reproduces the way experience and knowledge come to most people: "I think we're constantly in the middle of a conversation where we never finish our thoughts, or our sentences and that's the way we communicate, and it's probably the best way for us, because it's the one that we have arrived at." "John Ashbery in Warsaw," *Quarto*, May 1981, p. 14.

5 The term is Harold Rosenberg's in "Portraits: A Meditation on Likeness," his introduction to Richard Avedon, *Portraits* (New York, 1976), n. pag.

6 Harold Bloom, "The Breaking of Form," in Harold Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York, 1979), p. 37.

7 Among the important studies that deal in full or in part with "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" are: Charles Altieri, "Motives in Metaphor: John Ashbery and the Modernist Long Poem," *Genre*, 11 (Winter 1978), 653–87; Harold Bloom, "The Breaking of Form," pp. 1–37; Alfred Corn, "A Magma of Interiors," rev. of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, *Parnassus*, 4 (Fall/Winter 1975), 223–33; Douglas Crase, "The Prophetic Ashbery," in *Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery*, ed. David Lehman (Ithaca, 1980), pp. 30–65; John W. Erwin, "The Reader Is the Medium: Ashbery and Ammons Ensphered," *Contemporary Literature*, 21 (Autumn 1980), 588–610; David Kalstone, *Five Temperaments* (New York, 1977), pp. 176–85; Laurence Lieberman, "Unassigned Frequencies: Whispers Out of Time," *The American Poetry Review*, March/April 1977, pp. 4–18; Charles Molesworth, " 'This Leaving-Out Business': The Poetry of John Ashbery," *Salmagundi*, 38/39 (Summer/Fall 1977), 20–41; David Shapiro, *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York, 1979), pp. 4–10.

In addition, for a discussion of the influence on Ashbery's work of modernist aesthetics in painting and poetry, see Fred Moramarco, "John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara: The Painterly Poets," *Journal of Modern Literature*, 5 (September 1976), 436–62; Marjorie G. Perloff, " 'Transparent Selves': The Poetry of John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara," *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 8 (1978), 171–96; and Leslie Wolf, "The Brushstroke's Integrity: The Poetry of John Ashbery and the Art of Painting," in *Beyond Amazement*, pp. 224–54.

Finally, for general studies of Ashbery's poetry in addition to some of the works cited above, see Harold Bloom, *Figures of Capable Imagination* (New York, 1976), pp. 169–208 (on Ashbery's misinterpretation of his precursors, especially Stevens, and his struggle to avoid "the aesthetic of the privileged moment"); Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth Century Poetry* (New York, 1978), pp. 154–59 (on the disruption of meaning and the suspension of external reference); Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton, N.J., 1981), pp. 248–87 (on the presence in Ashbery's poetry of mystery, enigma, obscurity, and the aleatory); and Helen Vendler, "Understanding Ashbery," *The New Yorker*, 16 March 1981, pp. 108–36 (on the pleasures and difficulties of reading Ashbery). Also, Bonnie Costello, "John Ashbery and the Idea of the Reader," *Contemporary Literature*, 23 (Fall 1982), 493–514, which appeared after this essay was accepted for publication.

8 William Butler Yeats, "The Statues," *The Collected Poems* (New York, 1956), p. 323.

9 Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York, 1951), p. 171.

10 *HD*, pp. 45–46. Commenting on the poem's final line in his interview with Piotr Sommer, Ashbery observes: "That to me is the way understanding comes about, it's a sort of Penelope's web that's constantly being taken apart when it's almost completed; and that's the way we grow in our knowledge, and experience" (*Quarto*, p. 14).

11 For a study of the history of *ekphrasis*, see Jean H. Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago, 1958), esp. pp. 17–29. Also, Svetlana Leontief Alpers, "Ekphrasis and Aesthetic Attitudes in Vasari's *Lives*," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 23, Nos. 3–4 (1960), 190–215.

12 In *The Poet as Critic*, ed. Frederick P. W. McDowell (Evanston, 1967), pp. 3–26; rpt. in Murray Krieger, *The Play and Place of Criticism* (Baltimore, 1967), pp. 105–28.

13 Because of what it does not include, the poem, Ashbery suggests, is always an incomplete fragment of the moment or the life that has created it. It is a "part of something larger than itself which is the consciousness that produced it at that moment and which left out all kinds of things in the interests of writing the poem, which one is nevertheless aware of in the corners of the poem." "Craft Interview with John Ashbery," in *The Craft of Poetry: Interviews from The New York Quarterly*, ed. William Packard (Garden City, N.Y., 1974), p. 127.

14 Roland Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (Paris, 1977), p. 87.

15 *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris, 1975), p. 60.

16 The expressive self is its own referent. As Roland Barthes remarks, "in writing myself . . . I am my own symbol, I am the history that befalls me: within the freewheeling of language, there is nothing to which I can compare myself" (*Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, pp. 60–62). The self is also perpetually effaced by new images or representations: "What I write about myself is never *the last word*." Every essay or book or paragraph is nothing more than "an additional text, the last in the series, not the ultimate, meaningful one: text added to text, which does not ever explain any thing" (p. 124).

17 Stéphane Mallarmé, "Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe," in *Oeuvres complètes*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris, 1945), p. 70.

18 Denis Donoghue has observed that since Ashbery assumes that reality can be converted ("spirited away") into poetry, he does not write poems but a type of unending poetry: "A poem by Mr. Ashbery, even when it offers itself as one page and 16 lines, is really a slice of meditation. At any moment his work is less a particular poem than poetry, or a long poem in progress." "More Poetry Than Poems," *The New York Times Book Review*, 6 September 1981, p. 6.

19 Charles Baudelaire, "Les Foules," *Le Spleen de Paris*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris, 1975), I, 291.

20 This is Ashbery's description of the art of Saul Steinberg, in his review "Saul Steinberg: Callibigraphy," *Art News Annual*, 36 (October 1970), 53.

21 "Craft Interview with John Ashbery," in *The Craft of Poetry*, p. 118.

22 For a further discussion of the phenomenon of otherness in poetic representations, see my "The 'Fatal Shadow' of Otherness: Desire and Identity in the Poetry of Guillaume Apollinaire," *French Forum*, 8 (May 1983), 147–61; and my "Le Cri qui perce la musique: Le Surgissement de l'altérité dans l'oeuvre d'Yves Bonnefoy," *Sud* (forthcoming, 1984).