The Double-Turn Images In Ashbery's "Self-Portrait of a Convex-Mirror"

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I

In this postmodern world, one is likely to be a victim and victimizer of a label. John Ashbery is often labeled in a systematic postmodern denomination although the spirit of postmodernism tends to be a disclaimer of naming and referentialility. By making him a distinguished postmodern poet, the critics can comfortably couch his difficult poems in a postmodern context and obviates the interpretation of their meaning. John Ashbery is all at once highlighted and disregarded in this "poetics of paradox."

His most notable long poem, "Self-Portrait in a Convex-Mirror," sometimes is ensnared in such a double-edged criticism. Traces of postmodern spirits are manifest in the lines. The loosely structured, or one might say, the disintegrated relationship between images and stanzas, renders no excuses for the critics to kill this monster for yielding a "meaning." The critics might claim: this poem is a chaos, and the poetical verve is to create this powerful chaos. For these critics, to intend to unravel this enigma-like words and images is literally to drag oneself to the pit of logocentrism. Images are mostly the distortion of reality and words refer to nothing but themselves.

In a sense these critics' assumption holds some "truth" (a taboo word in some postmodern context). In the "Self-Portrait of a Convex-Mirror," a large portion of the poem deals with the dubious meaning of the words and the questionable referentialility of images. The title itself already smacks of this deconstructive tendency of words and images. A portrait in a convex mirror is definitely not a reflection
of the figure of the self and thus the self-portrait is just a portrait, nothing about
the self. Poetical language seems to resort to that rhetoric, as Paul de Man sug-
gests, which in most cases refers only to itself. However, this paper tries to ex-
pound on a notion that in this poem while Ashbery's images disrupt the anticipated
construction they also deconstruct the easily assumed deconstruction. In other
words, while the images seem to follow a rhetorical reversal to foil traditional
referentiality, they even more aggressively embark on a double turn of that reversal
to assert a significance that is not completely meaningless. This paper will first
discuss the postmodern or deconstructive rhetorical turn and then proceed to exam-
ine how a second turn anchors the poem in a "constructive" context. Finally, the
paper will ground these double-turn images in the interplay of Heidegger's disclo-
sure and withdrawal.

II

The poem begins with an image, "the right hand /Bigger than the head,
thrust at the viewer /And swerving easily away, as though to protect /What it ad-
vertises" (LL. 1-4). In a convex mirror, the "disfiguration" or the distorted pro-
portion of the human body implicitly turns back to question the function of the
mirror. If the mirror swells outward to catch the image of the object, it no
longer can reflect the object. Anita Sokolsky observes rightly that "the portrait's
illusion of convexity proclaims its depth to be delusive, and thus distorts the ap-
parent naturalism of art-as-mirror" (240). The mythical true-to-life realism over-
shadows the function of mirror glossed in the traditional epithet. However, any as-
sumption of delusive actualized reflection often exposes itself to distortion. Vissar-
ion Belinsky, the champion in Russian realistic literature in the 19th century, for
instance, unconsciously reveals vulnerable viewpoints and the paradox of realism
when he consciously and resoundingly addresses the image of "a convex glass." He
proclaims that the realistic poetry is "the true and genuine poetry," a convex glass,
which "mirrors in itself, from one point of view, life diverse phenomena, extracting
from them those that are necessary to create a full, vivid, and organically unified
picture" (42). The images caught by the convex glass naturally twist the object rather than reproduce its truthful appearance. With this kind of reflection, the reproduction of "a full, vivid, and organically unified picture" is possible only in illusion. Obviously, it is a "unified" picture of the signifier rather than the signified.③

However, Belinsky's convex glass which "mirrors in itself" ironically pre-echoes the postmodern notion of imitation or mimesis. Derrida asserts that pure mimesis is an impossibility, as he defines the activity of Mallarme's Mimique: "The Mime mimes reference. He is not an imitator; he mimes imitation" (Of Gramatology 219). The artist or the poet mimes only the function of imitation rather than the objective objects. In the case of Ashbery’s lines, the disproportion of the hand and the head deflates the reflection function of the mirror, and the swerving away of the hand seems to withdraw a truth that it itself just pronounces. The mirror seems to mirror the function of mirroring, not the realistic human body. Brian McHale's all-embracing observation in his Postmodernist Fiction can be cited as a conclusion in this respect:

For the real world to be reflected in the mirror of literary mimesis, the imitation must be distinguishable from the imitated: the mirror of art must stand apart from and opposite to the nature to be mirrored. A mimetic relation is one similarity, not identity, and similarity implies difference—between the original object and its reflection. (28)

While the lines in the poem disfigure the human body, the images of the hand and the head mandate a further speculation. Why are these two parts of human body chosen in the poem? Does this hint at the simultaneous opposition and collaboration of, manual and mental work? John Shoptaw remarks: "Parmigianino's mirror painting illustrates a paradox of priority: the head moves the hand that draws the head" (179). Moreover, larger in size, does the hand contribute more than the head? Does the creation of work of art rely more on the instinctive undertaking than on mental deliberation? The last question renders itself to a
double twist of poetical language. If the work of art is created more out of the instinctive leap (suggested by the hand), it trespasses the designated line (provided by the head). On the one hand, this twisting away or disjunction lands itself in the deconstructive or postmodern soil; on the other hand, this implication of postmodern view is already an articulation of meaning. McHale points out that the appearance of the individuals in the fictional worlds are the ones "who have existed in the real world" (28). Jonathan Loseberg in his discussion of Derrida points out that "mimesis itself is a dually significant process, entailing both the process of truth as unveiling and the process of truth as corresponding" (104). Loseberg's comment itself is also a dual process. He echoes Derrida's notion that mimesis only mime another mimesis; imitation imitates or corresponds to reference "without introducing a referent or an original behind the imitation" (104-05). However, there is a truth unveiled although this is not a reflection of the truth of the referent. In Ashbery's convex mirror, at least a proclaimed truth or meaning for deconstruction or postmodernism is "mirrored."

In this poem, the images about the meaning of words take the primary position in the poem.

That is the tune but there are no words.
The words are only speculation
(From the Latin speculum, mirror):
They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music. (LL.47-50)

There is no correlation between the tune and the words and words are not sufficient to materialize the content of the music. A postmodern critic might have concurred upon the notion that the absolute music of Mozart is superior to the title music like "Fate" or "Pastoral" of Beethoven, not to mention Lizst's program music. However, while likely to be cited to buttress the disjunctive concept, Ashbery's lines do construct a meaning to reinforce the postmodern deconstruction. In fact, the word can be felt to create a sensation:

Whispers of the word that can't be understood
But can be felt, a chill, a blight
Moving outward along the capes and peninsulas
Of your nervures and so to the archipelagoes
And to the bathed, aired secrecy of the open sea. (LL.275-79)

The clause "that can't be understood" again seems to qualify the concept of the incommunicable referent which is laid bare by literary language. However, the first line refers to the inaudibility of whispers, rather than an empty content of the word. Moreover, although the word is inaudible, it can be felt as a chill, a blight moving over the body. The analogy between the body and an island creates images that transcend the borderline between the explicable and the inexplicable and redefines mimesis. No provable resemblance can justify the analogy between the ends of the body, like toes or fingertips, and the capes and peninsulas. Yet, this analogy is authorized by poetical creation that is not exclusively in postmodernism. Since its being in the human world, the poetic image has squatted the boundary of the real and the unreal. The power of poetry is to create images that absorb the force of the real to make the convincing unreal. In Ashbery's lines, the word-image "nervures" critically initiates the marriage between the real and the unreal. The veins of the human body are comparable to the rivers or roads of an island. The archipelagoes are metaphorical to diverse human bodies. The sensation vibrates to the end of the body to reach others; the rivers or the roads reach the capes and peninsulas to another island in the sea. The sea, however, is "open," emitting uncodable secrecy, partially a metaphor of mysterious wor(l)d.

The deconstruction-affiliated postmodernism is inclined to assert the nature of self-reflexiveness in language. Typical concept about language is often put as: language refers only to itself. Gerald Graff's statement characterizes a typical deconstructive contention: "language is by definition incapable of referring to anything external to its own systems" (173). However, Derrida and de Man, the spotlighted deconstructive thinkers respectively in France and the U.S., have reservations about this proclamation. Derrida denies his work as a declaration that "there is nothing beyond language" ("Deconstruction and the Other" 123). Paul de Man "never renounces referentiality" although he "problemizes it, undermines it, explodes it--yet
preserves it" (Leitch 188). Loseberg in his discussion of Paul de Man states, "poetic language that, in the very fissures of its imagery, states its own separation from the natural world, a separation that is the founding truth of the ontologically prior consciousness, even if it knows its priority only in the issues of poetic imagery" (109). A "truth" or referred meaning is set forth in a negative, complex detour of poetic language.

Ashbery’s images in a sense smack of this kind of dialectics of construction and deconstruction. As James Mccorkle points out, in Ashbery’s world of text, "everything slides toward apocalypse and undifferentiated mess" (54). It is like a dream verging on the real and the unreal, the possibility and impossibility. In fact, images of dream appear and reappear in the "Self-Portrait of a Convex Mirror." The artist himself becomes "the dreaming model" (L. 106) when he is painting himself. "Dreams prolong us as they are absorbed? /Something like living occurs, a movement/Out of the dream into its codification" (LL. 205-07) The dreamer absorbs and dissolves the dream and yet its existence is prolonged by the dream. The dreamer also attempts to codify the dream to unravel its mystery. Existence is a continual movement from the known to the unknown. One lingers in his life, "receiving /Dreams and inspirations on an unassigned /Frequency" (LL. 496-98). The coming and going of dreams cannot be definitely assigned. Its ungraspable attribute evokes an inviting and retreating entity. To ask an ontological question about human existence often ends in a "it was all a dream" syndrome. (LL. 533-34).

The world of the dream results in worlds in collision. The memory of a face becomes the "white precipitate of its dream" which "In the climate of sighs flung across our world, /A cloth over a birdcage" (LL. 324-25). The world established in Ashbery’s poetic language is a tropological one at the next door with a threshold not to be trespassed. This is a rhetorical or allegorical world as suggested by Paul de Man, a world that extends an enchanting gesture of invitation and yet elicits a response of hesitation and resistance. The interface between this world and that "world" exists only in rhetoric or allegory. The white precipitate dissolves eventually into nothing and yet the duration of its existence will intrude into the human world when the climate of our mood exposes its moment of vulnerability.
It is like the black cloth blocking the sight of a bird in a cage. One is blindfolded by the dream and yet one cannot resist the charm of the dream. The untenable dream remains as a world there, sustaining itself in a metaphorical image or allegory.

If one ventures to enter a dream, one will be lost in the dissolution of the white precipitate. A wakening from the dream will lead the dreamer into an unanswerable question: did he ever really experience what happened in the dream? Did the dream world really exist? What has been there seems to be under erasure. What can be answered probably again is that "it was all a dream" syndrome. What can be proved is nothing but a vertiginous being. Moreover, to attempt to enter a dream is only to find the dream world moving toward infinite regress. "They were to nourish /A dream which included them all, as they are /Finally reversed in the accumulating mirror" (LL. 194-96). To nurture a dream is to have a simulacrum of all-embracing comfort. Yet, the world of the dream is delusive. When approached, the dream retreats and the dreamer's movement is reversed in the mirror. The image not only expounds on the inaccessibility of the dream, it also again questions the mimetic function of the mirror. In the mirror, just as the right will appear as the left, so does coming appear to be going.

The reversed order brings two worlds in conjunction and disjunction. Ashbery's images demonstrate its momentum in the rhetoric zone. Apropos of dream, a very powerful passage suffices to convey the turning and double turning of rhetoric.

What should be the vacuum of a dream
Becomes continually replete as the source of dreams
Is being tapped so that this one dream
May wax, flourish like a cabbage rose,
Defying sumptuary laws, leaving us
To awake and try to begin living in what
Has now become a slum. (LL. 180-86)

The images on the one hand move from nothing to something and on the other
hand dissolve something into nothing. Moreover, in these opposite movements, something emerges out of a seeming nothing. The vacuum of a dream becomes full as the source of other dreams is being drained. Thus, there are dual oppositional forces: the empty becomes full and the full becomes empty. This particular dream will grow and "flourish like a cabbage rose." The word-image "wax" connotes linguistic conflicting echoes. It suggests the phenomenon of the wax and wane of the moon; it implies the wax of the burning candle. Therefore, it waxes like a moon and it dissolves like a burning candle as time lapses. Are the petals of the cabbage rose made of this dissolved wax, plump and yet fragile? Does this pompous growth expose its own frailty while defying "sumptuary laws"? With this dream as a source of comfort, "we" can begin to live in "what has now become a slum." A hope is encouraged by a dream of dubious substance. This is the double nature of Ashbery's images.

However, this double nature does not dismiss reality although it doesn't reproduce reality. Strictly following the above word-images, Ashbery's lines proceed:

... Sydney Freedberg in his "Parmignianino" says of it: realism in this portrait
No longer produces an objective truth, but a bizarria. . . .
However its distortion does not create
A feeling of disharmony. . . . (LL. 186-90)

The definition of reality that is "distorted" in art (for Parmignianino) and in words (for Ashbery) positions itself easily in a postmodern context. It is bizarre and yet it "does not create a feeling of disharmony." The statement sums up Ashbery's situation in the "convex-mirror." Freedberg's commentary corresponds to a poetics that Ashbery affirms to articulate after a series of word-images of double turning. What is full is to be emptied out; what is empty is to be full.

Ashbery's images mandate "close reading" which sometimes is a taboo because it is labeled as an outmoded strategy of New Criticism. However, without close reading, poetics of postmodernism can easily become politics of ideology. While sometimes Ashbery's images lead the reader or the critic into a world in infinite
regress, a "world" suddenly emerges in the backwardness of the regress like in an accumulating mirror. The mirror disorients the viewer into the reversed direction and yet at the same time the mirror creates a world of the reality of that reversal. Paul de Man asserts that "the wisdom of the text is self-destructive... but this self-destruction is infinitely displaced in a successive rhetorical reversals which, ... keep it suspended between truth and the death of this truth" (115). Poetic language suspends in the floating realm of truth and non-truth. While some postmodern critics tend to simplify this notion into a privileged non-truth or dead truth, rhetoric does not easily settle down with it. It successively reverses what is truth and what is non-truth. The self-destructive text demolishes the reality and then it demolishes this non-reality to create a reality. Harmony is created out of the reversal of disharmony in poetic images.

Truth and reality are correlated with self, the self created in the text and the self creating "truth" and reality in the text. Images of self in this poem play a double role. On the one hand, they try to dissolve a self by twisting it in a convex mirror. The reflection of the self therefore is not the self. This self is similar to what Martin Gloege characterizes the postmodern self, a self of its debunking and its annihilation (59). On the other hand, the finished portrait does create a self, an integrated self out of disintegration, a composite self of both the painter and the painting, a self moving from the realistic world into the artistic world. The question of the self is like the question of the author. Roland Barthes asserts, when "the author enters his own death, writing begins" (142). However, the question of the author and writing, as McHale points out, is likely stuck in an "uncomfortable circularity, and one that hinges on the strangely amphibious ontological status, the presence/absence, of the author" (198-99). As McHale's discussion of the author, in this poem, behind the self of painter with a brush in hand, lies the superior reality of the painting itself, but behind the reality of painting must lie the self of the painter who has produced it. The same can be applied to the self of Ashbery, the writing Asbery and the writing itself in this complicated circularity.

However, in this poem, the self often comes to terms with the other:
. . . . 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. (LL. 237-42)

With a "trace" of Derrida's supplantmentarity, the other "supplants" the self and displaces it. The reversibility of self and other further affirms this disappearance of the self in a postmodern context. The reversible subjectivity is counterpoised with intersubjectivity which Derrida and many deconstructionists have endeavored to challenge. As Shoptaw maintains, "In Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait' otherness mirrors, defines, and sometimes displaces the central self" (182). However, although the above quoted lines endorse what Peter Baker says of Derrida, "Derrida's writings call for deconstruction as a form of resistance to intersubjective violence" (5), a reader with further careful reading will find this will be subject to anther turning. The reversibility of subjectivity is a form of intersubjectivity. Ashbery's images create a multiple embedded worlds in which rhetoric or metaphorical images of the painter and the painting, the poet and the poem, turn and double-turn the reality. It turns reality into unreality and it also turns unreality into reality. The other displaces the self but it does not completely replace and erase the self. The self still marks its existence in "trace." This trace is probably a "transcendental or metaphysical subject" (96) as John Koethe suggests. For Ashbery, as David Kalstone rightfully affirms, "Alive in its present, and determined as a Jack-in-the-Box, that self pops up when any moment of poetic concision threatens to obliterate it" (187).

Thus the phenomenal double turn steers the progression of most Ashbery's images in "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." There is a double turn of the image of the wave which breaks against the rock: "And we realize this only at a point where they lapse /Like a wave breaking on a rock, giving up /Its shape in a gesture which expresses that shape" (LL. 198-200). The wave against a rock gives up a shape and yet takes on a gesture of shape. There is a double turn of the image
of memory: "the tale goes on /In the form of memories deposited in irregular /Clumps of crystals" (LL. 114-16). Memories are irregular and fleeting and yet they sparkle like crystals. There are two interpenetrating sides of memory. One, the past is unrecoverable because of "lapses of memory /Of principal witness" (LL. 376-77). The other, memory weakly survives the disintegrated chalk powder:

. . . . 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. (LL. 548-52)

The image of chalk tries to write something and yet what is written down in chalk is easily to be erased. Moreover, even the chalk itself will diminish into merely the flying powder. The seeming negative view of memory then suddenly emits a vague light with uncertain halo. In particular time and space, memory being left cold in the corner emerges, and breathes life, though feebly, from the flow of time. The memory in these images cannot be described as a rejuvenated energy, but it does hint at its weak existence.

Images of memory, images of life and death (LL. 327-29; 316-17), images of time (LL. 151-52; 309-11; 400-04; 410-13), images of space or universe (LL. 343-46), all display these double turn of negation and affirmation. It is not a binary opposition; rather, it is an interpenetration that dissolves and affirms one and the other. Referring to "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," Stephen Paul Miller points out, "Ashbery's poem itself goes far in explicating and defetishizing the false opposition between the referential and the nonreferential" (163). To access this world of conjoined conjunction and disjunction, concealment and unconcealment, one will be liable to ask an ontological question.

The overview of "Self-Portrait in a Convex-Mirror" of course easily leads the reader to notice that the disjunction or fissure strings most of Ashbery's narrative lines. Therefore this poem appears to Harold Bloom as "the breaking of form" (115-26). Does not a broken form of a poem try to suggest a meaning? A ques-
tion of "meaning" seems to upset some postmodern poetics. However, when David Shapiro finds in Ashbery's poetry an order out of disorder, a meaning of meaninglessness, his perception is anchored in a postmodern context. Shapiro points out that in Ashbery's poetry there is an emanation of "much confidence in a new threshold for incoherence and randomness, leading to affirmations of freedom" (32), Ashbery's affirmation of freedom out of randomness underscores an implicit meaning which is waiting to be unraveled to deal with the "ontology" of postmodernism.

According to Brian McHale, the dominant of postmodernist fiction is ontological. A postmodernist will ask what a world is, what happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in conjunction or when boundaries between worlds are violated, what the mode of existence of text is, what the mode of existence of the world the text projects? (10). If these are ontological questions, a further speculation will shed light on the question of being because there is always being-in-the-world. Therefore, Dick Higgins poses the questions: "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" Postmodernism in affiliation with deconstructive convention is liable to affirm a dispersal of being. The ontological question seems to be nostalgic of a Heideggerian Being that some postmodernists have made effort to deconstruct. Irony plays an essential role in postmodern poetics although this New Critics' most garnered term is subject to deconstruction. Linda Hutcheon in her *A Poetics of Postmodernism* rightly remarks that postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon: one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concept it challenges (3) Some postmodernists have insight into the subversion of a concept and yet is blind to its previous installation. A being leaves its trace in the world and the question which of the selves "is to do it" unavoidably touches the ontological Being.

Images of memory, life, death, time and space are what a being is situated in a world. All of these deal with an implicit meaning of existence. Postmodernists tend to put existence under erasure; meaning thereby is problematized. To challenge institution, convention, definition of subjectivity and creativity and so forth (Hutcheon 8-15), one, as Peter Baker points out, sometimes tends to cite Derrida as
a nihilist (12). However, as Baker quotes from Derrida, as stated above, Derrida denies that nothing is beyond language, nothing is beyond text (17). In viewing Ashbery’s meaning in meaninglessness, a further thinking of Paul de Man’s poetics will be illuminating in this light. As a response to Graff’s criticism of Paul de Man, Jonathan Losebery observes, "A sign’s lack of coincidence with meaning hardly entails its having no meaning; indeed noncoincidence implies a meaning with which not to coincide" (111). Rodolphe Gasche alleges that de Man "seems to assume that foundation upon essence may be restored by an adequate reflection of a constitutive divergence" (206-08). If there is an essence as foundation although it is achieved through "constitutive divergence," de Man’s poetics is marked with trace of Heideggerean ontology. In fact, as critics point out, de Man’s concept undergoes the phenomenological course and in some case still subtly smacks of the flavor absorbed on the way. His critique of Heidegger’s Dichtung as "the formal structure of representing" (2) (175) therefore might expose a double turn of its own rhetoric turn.

III

Heidegger’s philosophy of Being has been diversely received in this postmodern age. While his early concept of Being and ontology are often brought up for deconstruction, his later thinking of language and Being are recognized as a source or bifurcation of the stream of postmodernism. The main issue mainly hinges on his philosophy of Being. In fact, even the Being in his early phase deserves a postmodernist’s attention. Being is only grounding without a ground; it "precludes a definitive revelation of any being" (Spanos 445). "The Being of entities ‘is’ not itself an entity" (Heidegger, Being and Time, 26). The working toward Being is an effort to materialize it as an entity; however, "Dasein is an entity which does not just occur among other entities" (Being and Time 32). Heidegger attests clearly: "only in so far as Dasein has been disclosed has it also been closed off" (Being and Time 265). This simultaneous disclosure and withdrawal of Being later develops into a primary space in his philosophy of Being and Being of language.
In *On the Way to Language*, Heidegger writes that "the being of language nowhere brings itself to word as the language of being" (81). Then he proceeds:

There is some evidence that the essential nature of language flatly refuses to express itself in words—in the language, that is, in which we make statements about language. If language everywhere withholds its nature in this sense, then such withholding is in the nature of language. (Ibid)

Elsewhere he also says that "language itself is conceptually grasped—but grasped in the grasp of something other than itself" (119). Language withdraws and yet "something in which the withholding of the being of language—speaks" (*The Nature of Language* 81). The interplay of withdrawal and disclosure or the concealment and unconcealment appropriates the Being or the Being of language as being something nearly nothing. However, something is articulated out of this seeming nothing. This double-movement serves as the force of turning in his poetics (dichtung).

In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, with focus on the nature of poets and poetry, Heidegger's poetics also demonstrates this interplay of concealment and unconcealment. Dichtung therefore is a destructive turning against traditional aesthetics, and accordingly it can be incorporated into a postmodern context. A passage from "... Poetically Man Dwells. ...," might suffice to "reveal" this turning and double turning:

the poet, if he is a poet, does not describe the mere appearance of sky and earth. The poet calls, in the sight of the sky, that which in its very self-disclosure causes the appearance of that which conceals itself, and indeed as that which conceals itself.

(225)

The true poet does not copy the natural reality. Rather, he reveals what is invisible, to make the concealed unconcealed. However, what is to be unconcealed will conceal itself as it is unconcealed. "Presence or disclosure thus has," as Timothy Clark observes, "paradoxically, a structure of withdrawal. In what is disclosed dis-
closure itself is erased" (34).

In the disclosed disclosure, however, for Heidegger, Being is articulated, though not revealed. Being or Being of language plays such a double role. Being can be articulated only through its erasure. A poet is one who explores the concealed while understanding the being of the explored often withholds itself.

No matter in the early *Being and Time* or in the later *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Heidegger keeps asking an ontological question about Being although he recognizes Being is ungraspable. But "falling into" the world prompts Being to ask "what is to be done in it?" although this kind of question only leads individual entity to appropriate himself in the world without the assurance of the revelation of Being and the Being of the world.

Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex-Mirror" displays this Heideggerean interplay of disclosure and withdrawal and with ontological understanding this intricacy of self or being situates himself in the world of double-turn imagery. Falling into the world and therefore confronted by the world, the self is unavoidably involved in ontological questions of time and space. In this poem, "today" often appears as an intersection of the points where being lends itself to the temporal and spatial maneuver. It is "today" so that it suggests an urgency at this particular here and now. The uncertainty of today scatters the poem:

... It doesn't matter
Because there are things as they are today
Before one's shadow ever grew
Out of the field into thoughts of tomorrow.

Tomorrow is easy, but today is uncharted,
Desolate, reluctant as any landscape
To yield what are laws of perspective
After all only to the painter's deep
Mistrust, a weak instrument though
Necessary. (LL. 147-56)
The blank between the two separate sections is a rift, a rupture or a turning. While in the preceding section, things are ascertained and therefore are to be valued today before one is "thrown into" the shadow of the uncertain tomorrow. However, the blank between the sections reverses the certainty and uncertainty. Now tomorrow is easy, yet today is uncertain, unexplored in its concealment. Today is even delusive as a landscape that a painter mistrusts because it cannot yield laws of perspective. The images of landscape again address the polemics of mimesis. A discrepancy always exists between the natural world and recreated world in art, and for Ashbery, in poetry.

Then the landscape is compared to be "a weak instrument though necessary." This image is important in the sense that this unveils the ontological relation between art (or poetry) and reality. To create a world that will parallel or even oppose the world in reality is based on the latter although it is to be crossed out or erased or deconstructed in the created world. Today’s landscape or reality is an instrument; it is weak and yet it is necessary.

However, even this instrument is fleeting. Strictly following the above images, the poem proceeds:

... Of course some things
Are possible, it knows, but doesn't know
Which ones. Some day we will try
To do as many things as are possible
And perhaps we shall succeed at a handful
Of them, but this will not have anything
To do with what is promised today, our
Landscape sweeping out from us to disappear
On the horizon. (LL. 156-64)

Again, what is ascertained and promised is subject to reversal. In addition, even the instrument, landscape, disappears. The image seems to imply the sunset whose disappearance casts the viewer-painter into darkness. The lines proceed with turning
and double turning. Today thus is mostly overshadowed in uncertainty because the occasional positive phase cannot guarantee its extension into a definite future. Elsewhere this uncertainty shrouds human beings as an undisposable fate. "Our time gets to be veiled, compromised /By the portrait's will to endure" (LL.411-12); "Today has no margins, the event arrives /Flush with its edges, is of the same substance, /Indistinguishable" (LL. 421-23). "Veiled" and "indistinguishable" sum up the uncertainty. All the substance will become homogeneous and the event is just a tedious repetition. Ironically, sameness obscures the distinction of individuals; uniqueness gives way to characterless sameness. Life will continue in this insipid cycle to adumbrate the living world.

However, the lines, "Our time gets to be veiled, compromised /By the portrait's will to endure," also turns the above speculation another way around. An implicit positive force seems to infiltrate the veil, and it is the portrait's will. Though compromised, the work of art sustains itself through the test of time. The portrait is a metaphor for all kinds of art, including Ashbery's poetry. Just as the poem begins with the painter-Parmigianino's mirror and continues with Ashbery's own mirror, what the portrait refers is also what this poem intimates. It is the living world for the entire painter, the poet, and other artists. Harold Bloom observes in "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" that brooding "on aesthetic forms, Ashbery attains to a poignant and characteristic sense of 'something like living'" (121). It is such a living world that the being of the artists and works of art have to come to terms with.

Today is the time that a poet inscribes his being in his writing space at the present duration. With the transference of the imaginary thinking from the painter to the poet, this poem, as an articulation of the moments of creation, announces Being of imagery through its withdrawal. Today is buried in multitudes of uncertain days, but in a certain moment or duration, one comes to a special "distinguishable" today:

Today has that special, lapidary
Todayness that the sunlight reproduces
Faithfully in casting twig-shadows on blithe
Sidewalks. No previous day would have been like this. (LL. 379-83)

Todayness, the being of today, seems to be momentarily disclosed without withdrawal. This is the moment that a being can peep at Being. The light and shadow on the blithe sidewalks create this "special" day that distinguishes itself from other days. Homogeneity in turn backgrounds this uniqueness. The lines seem to steal and freeze a moment from time-flow. The moment is spatialized in the writing like the self-portrait in the convex-mirror. However, in reality, time continues to flow by, and the enchanting picture of light and shadow will disappear into obscurity. Humans again have to confront this stale world only with disclosed Being at unique moments. Being is to be uncovered with an understanding that Being is grounded in the world. In this postmodern age, at a certain unique moment, one will hear these unconcealed words in concealment: "Being-true as Being-uncovering, is in turn ontologically possible only on the basis of Being-in-the-world" (Being and Time 261).
Notes

1. Robert Penn Warren in his "Pure and Impure Poetry" dwells on the critics' propensity to kill the poem-monster for a discovery or establishment of meaning. In this way the critics often superimpose an extraneous meaning upon the poem and therefore kill the poem itself. See Warren 981-92.

2. See Paul de Man's concept of his deconstructive rhetoric in his Allegories of Reading.

3. In fact the "unified" can hardly be applied to a postmodern or deconstructive concept of the signifier in which the signifier is always floating.

4. This is Heidegger's major idea in his Being and Time.

5. This is quoted by McHale (10).

6. Baker quotes Derrida respectively from "Deconstruction and the Other" 123, and "Deconstruction in America" 15.

7. Paul de Man's phrasing probably echoes what Heidegger himself uses in the title of Section 2 of Being and Time, "The formal structure of the question of Being."

8. This is a well-accepted notion regarding Heidegger's philosophy. See for instance, Kuchler 1-53; Clark 1-63.

9. Clark, for instance, devotes a chapter to discuss Heidegger's dichtung as a turning against aesthetics (20-63).

10. For Heidegger, understanding is an ontological cognizance as opposed to epistemological knowing. This is specified in his Being and Time, Sections 32 and 33.

11. Heidegger states explicitly that Being falls into the world. This "fall into" or "fallenness" tinges Being with existential stoicism. A similar term is "throw into" or "thrownness." See Being and Time, Section 38.

Works Cited


-----. "Deconstruction in America" (interview). *Critical Exchange* 17 (1985), 1-33.


