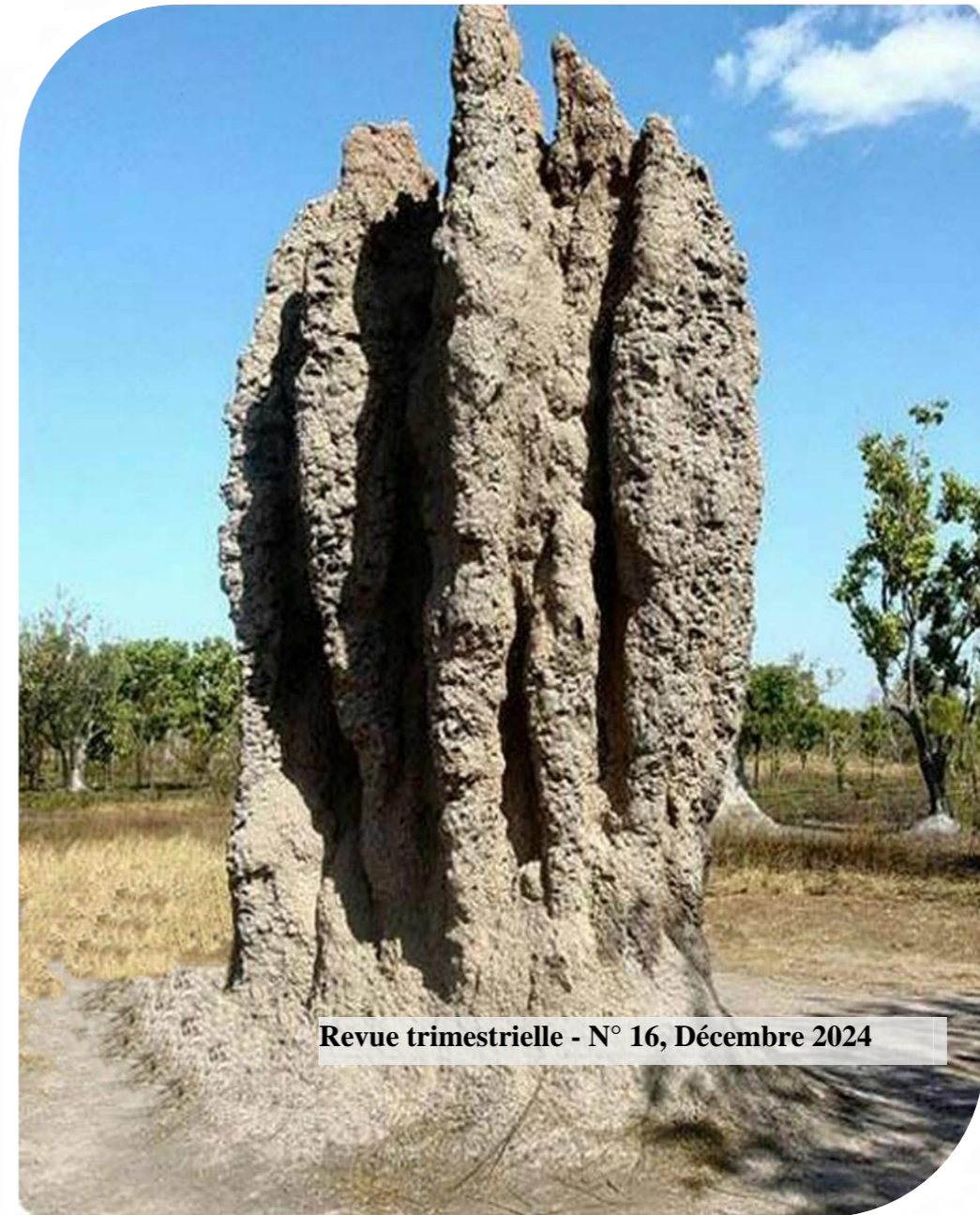


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La Revue Dama Ninao nous renvoie à la Civilisation de l'Universel du poète sénégalais Léopold Sédar Senghor, qui prône la porosité des âmes avec l'acceptation de l'autre, de ce qu'il dispose d'utile pour mon avancement : sa civilisation, sa culture, sa langue ... Elle se fonde notamment sur la philosophie de Paul Ricœur qui préconise la perception de Soi-même comme un autre. Considérer soi-même comme un autre aux yeux de l'autre, nous amènerait à faire taire nos distensions et ressentiments afin de redimensionner notre espace, reconstruire notre histoire et notre société.

La Revue Dama Ninao s'est inspirée de la nature. Des insectes en miniature nous produisent de bels chefs-d'œuvre architecturaux, conjuguent leur génie créateur et leur force dans la patience et dans la tolérance. Ils créent des œuvres monumentales qui dépassent l'entendement humain, les termitières. A cet effet, la nature semble nous parler, nous guider, nous instruire dans le silence. Seules ces créations nous interpellent sans autant faire de nous des disciples. Comme la termitière qui, pour la plupart du temps, est une composante de maillons surgissant de la même matière, la Revue Dama Ninao se veut une termitière scientifique dont les enseignants-chercheurs en sont les maillons.

Au confluent de diverses sciences, la Revue Dama Ninao se propose de promouvoir la recherche scientifique et universitaire en impulsant le dialogue interdisciplinaire, le dialogue entre divers champs disciplinaires et divers contributeurs du monde universitaire.

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La revue Dama Ninao, de par son nom qui signifie « entente », a pour objectifs :

- de matérialiser le monde universitaire qui est un creuset où « le fer aiguise le fer », les échanges se croisent, puis s'entremêlent pour aboutir à une reconstruction des connaissances scientifiques individuelles dans la collectivité ;
- de promouvoir la recherche scientifique et universitaire en impulsant le dialogue interdisciplinaire, le dialogue entre divers champs disciplinaires et divers contributeurs du monde universitaire.

La revue Dama Ninao a une portée scientifique et sociale. A cet effet, elle publie tous les articles relevant des Lettres, Arts et Sciences Humaines et s'intéresse aux études et théories littéraires, linguistiques, sociologiques, philosophiques, anthropologiques et historico-géographiques sur appel à contribution thématique (colloque) ou varia. Elle est un espace de rencontre, de construction et de reconstruction des réseaux relationnels et scientifiques.

Professeur Koutchoukalo TCHASSIM

Université de Lomé

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**BRIDGING REALITY WITH ARTISTIC REPRESENTATION IN
POSTMODERNIST POETRY: ASHBERY'S SELF-PORTRAIT IN A
CANVAS MIRROR**

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Abstract: Many artists' imagination picturizes the creation of new world because portraying reality as a phenomenal experience constitutes a great challenge in the artistic and poetic world. This essay evaluates Ashbery's Self-Portrait in a Canvas Mirror to establish that the poet criticizes realist movement. Based on the stylistic analysis, the study comes up with findings that Ashbery's poetry most accurately showcases the difference between poetic reality and tangible reality. Interestingly enough, both artistic and poetic worlds are not meant to be taken as the ultimate truth because artists' mind has less capacity to capture the concrete reality. As a matter of fact, art should not be confined to realistic portrayals but rather serve as a medium for exploring deeper truths about existence. With creativity and imagination, artists should be able to transcend realistic confinement.

Keywords: Reality, representation, art, poet, truth, artistic world.

Introduction

"Realism is a complete failure, and the two things that every artist should avoid are modernity of form and modernity of subject-matter." (O. Wilde, p. 1091)

John Ashbery's poem *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* corroborates reality and the limitations of artistic representation. Building on Parmigianino's painting, Ashbery delves into the complexities of self-identity and perception. He challenges traditional conceptions of realism, focusing on a faithful depiction of real life. His poetry critiques the idea that art can objectively mirror reality. In this way, the poet suggests that artistic representations are inherently distorted and often delusive. By juxtaposing ambiguity and fragmentation, Ashbery encourages readers to get

involved with a more dynamic appreciation of truth that acknowledges the subjective nature of experience.

In this essay, we examine Ashbery's contribution to modern and postmodern poetry and his unique ability to convey the dichotomy between reality and artistic representations. We use stylistics, which "is the proper study of literature" (S. Stockwell and S. Whiteley, 2014, p. 1), to analyze Ashbery's poetic works. In this exploration, we will first examine Ashbery's criticism of traditional realism, where we will uncover how Ashbery rejects the straightforward representation. We, therefore, advocate Ashbery's belief that realism often curtails the rich tapestry of human experience. The poet propounds that true artistic expression must transcend mere imitation of the phenomenal world. This gives room for a more profound, thorough examination of realities. The second section focuses on the imagination and truth. We will consider how Ashbery's vivid imagery and innovative language showcase the tension between perception and phenomenon. Based on his poetry, Ashbery articulates that there is no fixed truth. It is, instead, a flexible construct shaped by human experiences and interpretations. Doubtless, Ashbery's poetry challenges readers to rethink both art and reality. This collaboratively engages meaning that transcends conventional limits.

1. Ashbery's Criticism of Realism

Ashbery rejects any straightforward representation of the matter advertised by realists. He argues that traditional notions of Realism often fail to capture the complex human existence. For him, poetry should mirror the fragmented nature of thought and perception. This can enable ambiguity and multiple interpretations. Ashbery predicts our idea of multiple consciousness (K. Avono, 2018). The poet's broader artistic philosophy solicits the creation of "a counterfeit reality more real than reality."

In his rejection of realist principles, Ashbery defamiliarizes commonplace experiences and phenomena. This defamiliarization renders these experiences and phenomena suddenly unrecognizable to a potential reader. The poet's widely confirmed intricate style now constitutes his most vital asset to challenge Realism,

paving the way for postmodernists. His complex style demonstrates “a provocative reversal of power, a show of agency and resistance” (K. Darling, 2021, pp. 11-12). Still, the difficulty in Ashbery’s writing reveals his dissociation from experimental and familiar things and topics, which makes them appear strange to respond to realist practitioners. Then, phenomena should not always be the only concern of poetry. For Douglas Crase, the “difficulty is that his poetry is so public, so accurately a picture of the world we live in, that it scarcely resembles anything we’ve ever known. Just so, the present is indeed a world none of us has ever known, because the words to describe it can be put together only after the fact. When the poet does put them together the combination comes as a shock” (D. Crase). Poets and artists are invited to break themselves free from the realist cocoon. By so doing, they can be more creative and exceptional. De facto, Ashbery’s poetry showcases a criticism of the realist movement. By transforming the familiar into the unfamiliar and defamiliarizing the commonplace experiences and phenomena, Ashbery removes the barrier of Realism to champion the reader’s contribution to creating meaning. Therefore, meaning should not be fixed in a poem but rather dynamic to allow readers to collaborate. The poet challenges Realism as a movement regarding accuracy in the phenomenal world. Even though tenants of this movement believe that everything they produce as works of art should be inclined toward the absolute truth, there is always that delusive side we often encounter as we come into contact with these works.

Suppose Realism in artistic and literary works generally attempts to represent things truthfully without artificialness and by avoiding speculative fiction and supernatural elements. In that case, it can be inferred that it cannot utterly represent things accurately because an attempt at terminology does not strongly convince us that art can ultimately be truthful. However, the problem is that facts can also fail to correspond to the truth. Again, the question arises when considering the type of facts which these realists are addressing. However, can we avow that the poet is unaware of this realistic juxtaposition of truth and facts? In this case, works of art, according to Realism, encourage the practice of being faithful to the sensory world.

Hence, the poet or the artist is expected to depict what is seemingly truthful to the external world. Ashbery's use of the idiom "no longer" needs careful consideration. According to Merriam-Webster, the idiom "no longer" is used to say that something that was once true or possible is not now actual or possible. This proves the poet's criticism of Realism. To lay more emphasis, Arya Aryan (2022, p. 6) reveals:

The term "anti-representation" or "anti-referentiality" is mostly associated with modernist and especially the avant-garde's mode of art which tries to totally break from the outside world and previous conventions. Practitioners and supporters of the view, instead, aim at writing a work of art which is extremely auto-representational by constantly killing any illusion of realism. They regard language not as a medium to reality, as the representational view requires, but as a target.

On these grounds, it should be understood that Ashbery puts the garment of the avant-garde on with the intention of demonstrating his break from the outside world. Burlesquing the realist practitioners, the poet stages Parmigianino, who helplessly practices the modernist anti-representation. When we judge the painting with Parmigianino's actual image, we can see the big difference between both. While encouraging this break from the outside world, Ashbery still writes in "The Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" that

We don't need paintings or
Doggerel written by mature poets when
The explosion is so precise, so fine. (1975, p. 79)

These lines constitute Ashbery's straightforward refusal of the conventional poetry proposed by realists. Here, the poet alludes to two critical images that require a deep focus: "paintings" and "doggerel." According to *Merriam-Webster*, doggerel stands for verse "loosely styled and irregular in measure especially for burlesque or comic effect." With this definition, Ashbery uses this terminology as a metonymy for poetry. What is profound about Ashbery in the above lines is that he uses the generic "we," which includes all individuals concerned with art, painting, and poetry. The negation in the first line demonstrates Ashbery's strong dissatisfaction with precision on fundamental issues. On declaring this, the poet manifests that there is no need to

produce something that is so precise and fine. The poet does not discuss the aesthetic side of artistic production. Instead, he addresses this illusory and daring desire to portray reality accurately in art. In this way, he maintains that we should no longer acknowledge the existence of the representation of reality in poetry. Even the verb “exist” and the noun form “existence” shows Ashbery’s questioning of Realism. Therefore, poets, as well as painters, are free to explore their inside world in order to come out with something artistically beautiful because, as he says: “What is beautiful seems so only in relation to a specific / Life, experienced or not, channeled into some form / steeped in the nostalgia of a collective past” (p. 77). Beauty matters for life. Consequently, poets and painters need to harness the aesthetic side of art more to enable life on earth.

Inevitably, “as a method Realism is a complete failure, and the two things that every artist should avoid are modernity of form and modernity of subject-matter” (Wilde, p. 1091). A close consideration of Oscar Wilde’s above quote from his “The Decay of Lying” infers that the Realist movement always has something to be reconsidered. Here, Wilde admonishes the artists in general to be free from focusing on the realistic principles that forcefully hinder them from putting their imaginative skills into practice. The artist or the poet is called to test his/her creativity, letting his/her mind travel in Plato’s imaginary worlds to bring about something new and different from whatever exists in the tangible world. That is why “A great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form, like an enterprising publisher” (p. 1083). Wilde champions the artist who is not profoundly influenced by the external world and who does not copy nature as Plato and Aristotle believed. However, a great artist needs to be purely imaginative, telling lies about the phenomenal world using his or her imagination because “imagination is essentially creative, and always seeks for a new form” (p. 1083).

Initially, according to *Literary Movement for Students*, the realist movement originated in 1850 in Europe and quickly spread to Russia and the United States. Realists sought to portray factual elements with simplicity and clarity from an objective and unbiased perspective (2005, p. 654). Nevertheless, this seems more like

a discouragement of creativity because, with these assertions, Realism is proven to have little to do with imagination since there should not be imaginary implications in the works of art, according to realists. And again, literature or art, in general, must anticipate life and not produce an objective and unbiased work that imitates nature because literature “does not copy it (life), but it moulds it to its purpose” (O. Wilde, p. 1084). This redresses the realists’ endeavor to imprison creativity relating to artistic works.

In this way, John Ashbery is still influenced by the expressionist movement. According to this movement, writers and artists distort objective features of the sensory world using Symbolism and dream-like elements, illustrating alienating and often emotionally overwhelming sensibilities. There is a sense of image distortion in the works of the expressionists. Parmigianino’s portrait fails to respect realistic principles. Moreover, Ashbery reveals this discrepancy between the artist’s painting and the artistic movement of the time. This means that Realism has weaknesses. Representing factual things in a work of art is much more challenging. Despite the realist artist’s struggle to portray the truth, his or her work often fails to represent what is initially intended to be done faithfully. Ashbery reveals the problem of Francesco’s self-portrait, which no longer “produces an objective truth.” The truth in the painter’s realistic work is frequently distorted because the image does not depict the fact as it is.

To emphasize and clarify his point on the concept of Realism, Ashbery uses codeswitching. This might also be known as a loanword, which transpires when the poet uses the Portuguese word “bizarria.” This terminology describes something that presents a bizarre, freakish, or whimsical look. For instance, when something is freakish, it means that the thing is very unusual or unexpected, especially unpleasant or strange. You can understand, therefore, that the realistic work presents a bizarre and odd look to the audience. And this look makes the work very illusory. It does not show any truth. The Realism in the work is far from being truthful. The portrait only fails our expectation of discovering the truth. In short, John Ashbery wants to tell the

readership that Realism in art and poetry is illusory. According to the poet, there is only an illusion of reality in art and poetry.

Ashbery draws our attention to the failure of Realism, just like Wilde does, by repetitively claiming that “realism is a complete failure” (O. Wilde, p. 1080). The realists believe that any work of art should look closely at the real thing. But there is always difficulty in portraying the real thing as it usually is. Art always leaves something untold about reality. And that is often left to the reader or the viewer to fill that gap. According to Richard Stamelman in his robust study, Ashbery repeatedly questions the idea of representing all that one sees. Thus, he uncovers the illusions of totality and detemporalized wholeness that such representations contain. The poet alluded the painter who boisterously “set himself / With great art to copy all that he saw in the glass” (J. Ashbery, p. 68). Paintings like the Parmigianino’s 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 (R. Stamelman, 1984, p. 616).

2. The Complexity of Mental Picture and Truth

Ashbery probes the intricacies of the mental picture and the truth in describing it. He utilizes vivid imagery and metaphors to showcase the difficulty between appearance and essence. For the poet, while art can capture moments, it cannot telescope the truth of experience. Art becomes. Therefore, a “reflection once removed” highlights the difference between palpable experience and artistic representation. This notion translates to the instability of meaning and the role of language in shaping the reader’s consideration of reality according to postmodern ideas.

Interestingly, transposing reality into the artistic picture is always complex. This complexity often drives many creative writers to escape the real. Consequently, they end up drawing an artificial portrait of reality. The artificialness is evidenced in almost every artistic work. This is also John Ashbery’s concern in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* singles down to the problem of truth and Realism. Evidence does not

permanently reside in the painting or the poem. For the author's output is always influenced by imagination. And we know that imagination is not synonymous with truth. It might be a mirage of the truth. I use the terminology "mirage" to stress the illusory side of the truth conveyed. In "Absolute Clearance," the speaker uses a precise anecdote to showcase this difficulty in portraying the absolute truth:

He sees the pictures on the walls.

A sample of the truth only.

But one never has enough.

The truth doesn't satisfy. (p. 12)

The poet's anecdote here yields a profound and clear-cut situation demonstrating the complexity of truth or reality. Even though the title of this poem is more declarative (R. Kostelanetz, 1976) in the sense that it points to the poet's wish to portray an image of absolute precision, the first stanza exposes the poet's difficulty in capturing this absolute truth. Here, the reader witnesses the speaker described as viewing the pictures on the walls. Shockingly, the truth is only a sample, defined as a representative part or a single item from a larger whole or group, especially when presented for inspection or shown as evidence of quality. The poet employs this term to debunk the so-called cocooned truth in the pictures. Truth is ephemeral because one thing considered valid today can be challenged tomorrow. That is why the speaker believes that the "truth doesn't satisfy." When we look closely at the four lines, the poet uses the declarative form – each line ends with a complete stop. It can be inferred that the poet is very assertive in what he is saying. Presumably, one can never come to the whole and absolute truth; it is not eternal in this sense. Every bit of truth is questioned over time. That is the reason why one can never have it to the full. In fact, there is always dissatisfaction in almost every truth.

Ashbery's "truth doesn't satisfy" is a parody of Blaise Pascal's thought on the limit of truth. According to Pascal, "Truth on this side of the Pyrenees, error on the other side" (*Great Books of the Western World*, p. 290). With this groundbreaking opinion, Pascal divulges the flickering side of truth. What is true here in Togo is not necessarily evident in other countries. Truth shifts from one location to the other and

from one person to another. That is why a piece of art or literature can have different interpretations based on the background of criticism. This is supported by the scholars of reader-response criticism who focus on readers' responses to literary texts (L. Tyson, 2006, p. 61). When Ashbery's first stanza and Pascal's opinion are put side by side, it can be concluded that truth is not eternal. It is because of the ephemeral aspect of truth that the speaker states that it is not satisfying. Because they are dissatisfied with the truth, individuals need more facts because the truth is multifaceted and complex.

Blaise Pascal admits to the complexity of truth. He confirms in his *Pensées* that the "Truth is so obscure in these times, and falsehood so established, that, unless we love the truth, we cannot know it" (*Great Books*, p. 343). For him, subjective and objective truth is so obscure because it is always complicated to prove the truthfulness of something in different locations. What is true in a given location can be presented as a falsehood in another. For example, scientists generally tell us that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. However, this cannot be proven in all locations worldwide because the same scientists, precisely Galileo, revealed to humanity that the earth constantly rotates around the sun. Furthermore, this spinning of the earth around the sun, if this is indeed evident, nullifies the former thought about the setting and the rising of the sun. Therefore, the sun does not rise or set because it seems motionless. Considering Pascal's conception of the obscurity of the truth, one can say that it becomes complicated to see and apprehend when something appears obscure. This centralizes the complexity of whatever is considered authentic. Emphatically, the mathematician uses the adverb "so" to amplify the condition of the truth. This adverb means here very much, which accounts for the importance of truth's obscurity.

Still, in "Absolute Clearance," the poet uses the simile of the eagle. Eagles are well known for their powerful eyesight. They have a powerful capacity to view things from far away. It is even believed that the average eagle has a visual acuity more potent than the human eye. This means that an eagle should always perceive the prey. This visual acuity that eagles are endowed with places them among the great predators of all time. Consequently, it is challenging for the prey to escape the eagle's

claws because almost all the prey's movements are easily perceived by the eagle. Therefore, by using this simile, Ashbery would like to compare the viewer or the reader to an eagle. The poet employs words like: *eyes*, *sees*, and *looks*. Out of these three words, one is used as a noun in plural (*eyes*) and the other two are used as verbs conjugated in simple present. A close consideration of these words confirms that the poet refers to viewing. In fact, an eagle can see as clearly as possible, even from a long distance. This viewing capacity enables the eagle to spot the actual image of the prey in order to grab it as soon as it reaches the ground. However, in the final stanza, the speaker describes the eagle's desolation: "Like the eagle / That hangs and hangs, then drops" (p. 13). There is a repetition of the verb "to hang" which signifies "to hover or remain stationary in the air" (*Merriam-Webster*). This verb shows that the eagle in this stanza could not spot any prey despite its long period of hovering. The repetition, therefore, in this verse stresses the eagle's despair. Eagles like hovering since they often use the storm as a springboard to move high in the air, but the fact that the poet repeats the verb "hang" demonstrates that this hovering is not something to be compared to the ordinary hovering of the eagle. Instead, this uncovers the desperation of the eagle as it is in the air, looking for prey to catch in vain.

If the eagle finds a prey that can quench its hunger, it will not stay long in the air. Finally, with that mighty visual capacity, the eagle drops helplessly after searching for the prey, but to no avail. The transitive verb "to drop" in the verse also means "to give up" or "to abandon." It is evident, therefore, that the eagle is disappointed, which is why it decides to abandon the search for prey. Despite the eagle's powerful visual capacity, it cannot localize the prey this time. Emphatically, the poet closes the poem with the image of the disappointed eagle, which is surprisingly translated in the poem's closing with the verb "drops." This is clear evidence that Ashbery portrays the issue of blurred vision. Definitely, in viewing, we do not always capture the accurate picture. We are sometimes confronted with the reflection of a blurred picture. Indeed, we cannot conclude here that there is no prey for the eagle on the ground when it is hovering in the air. There might be some rodents on the very spot at the

very moment. However, the problem is the eagle's incapacity to view the pure reality continuously.

Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" epitomizes this discrepancy between the picture and the painter's proper intention. Actually, the poem alludes to Francesco, the painter who has drawn a portrait of himself. In this poem, we witness the problem of reflection. The painter's reflection or representation fails afterward to harmonize with the actual image of this skillful painter. To demonstrate his skills, Francesco decides to paint his own portrait, which he views in the convex mirror. However, the speaker of the poem recounts:

Chiefly his reflection, of which the portrait
Is the reflection once removed.
The glass chose to reflect only what he saw
Which was enough for his purpose: his image (p. 68)

Ashbery's imagery tone in this poem presents a situation whereby the painter confidently decides to draw his portrait viewed from a convex mirror. With this narrative style, Ashbery demonstrates a counterfeited representation of an actual image. Art and poetry depend on imagination. And we know that with the mind, we can only have the ideal representation of something because the external thing is often distorted in the mind of the viewer to the point that the copied image becomes something very new and far different from the original. In this regard, Francesco boisterously set himself with *great* (emphasis mine) art "to copy all he saw in the glass" (p. 68). The derisive use of the adjective "great" amps the poet's desire to mock artistic representations. In fact, art cannot utterly represent reality because of its massive inclination toward beauty. The verb "copy" even suggests the painter's incapacity to reproduce the authentic self. In essence, copying carries a sense of fakeness. This means to make a similar or identical version of the original. A copy may highly be identical to the original, but it is not, in fact, the original. Presumably, the copy of something will always be incompatible with the original. The mirror in this anecdote stands for the poet's entourage. This, therefore, encompasses the poet's environment. Whatever the poet tries to copy from society will never jibe with reality

as it is daily experienced. That is, the picture always fails to represent what really exists adequately.

Indeed, creative writers and artists often take inspiration from their environment to produce any piece of work. Nevertheless, the copy of what they view in society does not always carry the proper image. The “glass chose to reflect only what he saw.” With this personification, the poet marks a very precise message. The mirror as an object is endowed with the free will – that human aptitude to decide upon which actions to choose. Even though the mirror is monitored depending on how the object is placed for a perfect reflection, the painter’s convex mirror managed to choose. One cannot deny the fact that the reflection in the mirror will not correspond to the painter’s own self. We can also infer that the glass only reflects the painter’s misshapen image because at the end of the day the painting reflects only a deflated being, different from the original. Richard Stamelman illuminates us as he comments “Self-Portrait.” For the critic, “Art and life ... cannot coincide. Only a representation that is self-consciously aware of its limitations; points to what it may have excluded or the possibility of have forgotten; that fights a ‘will-to-endure’ like that Parmigianino’s painting; that is not afraid to let the artist’s out of its imprisonment and wreck the picture surface” (Stamelman, 1984, p. 620). There is always a huge gap between life and the artistic world. The artist’s portrait or the poet’s poem cannot exhibit life experiences. Moreover, when the artist tries to usurp difference, his or her work will end up wrecking the picture’s surface; that is, the picture yields itself to destruction. Initially, the painter wants to draw his own portrait and contemplates his image in a convex mirror. Surprisingly, the choice force transpires as the picture refuses to represent the genuine person candidly. In fact, the new picture contradicts the painter’s own portrait.

Right from the outskirts of “Self-Portrait” and precisely the first two lines, the speaker clearly notes that “the right hand / Bigger than the head” (p. 68). Normally, there should not be a comparison between the head and the hand because both present visible dissimilarities. Even if both hands are put together they can never equalize the head. For the head always appears bigger than the hand. However, in the poem, the

reader can see an extravagant description of the right hand. To let the reader fully comprehend his message, the poet emphasizes the hand by insisting on the “right.” The poet uses this hyperbole to depict how distorted this painting is. The hyperbole helps the poet to highlight how much the picture exaggerates the painter’s painting. In fact, the great art of copying has deformed the painter’s right hand. Therefore, it is clear-cut that the picture on the canvas differs from reality. This is a vital sign that art or poetry can never congruently portray the real. One thinks that Ashbery’s description of the painter’s hand, which is bigger than the head, alludes to the exaggerated form of painting or the work of art. To stress this further, John Stuart Mill explains how a poet can exaggerate his description of a lion. He submits that

If a poet is to describe a lion, he will not set about describing him as a naturalist would, nor even as a traveler would, who was intent upon stating the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. He describes him by imagery; that is by suggesting the most striking likeness and contrasts which might occur to a mind contemplating the lion, in the state of awe, wonder, or terror, which the spectacle naturally excites, or is, on the occasion, supposed to excite. Now this is describing the lion professedly, but the state of excitement of the spectator really. The lion may be described falsely or in exaggerated colours, and the poetry be all the better; but if the human emotion be not painted with the most scrupulous truth, the poetry is bad poetry, i.e. is not poetry at all, but a failure. (quoted in M. Abrams 322)

Ashbery’s comment on the painter’s hand, which is more significant than the painter’s head, demonstrates the fact that artists do not always depict the nature of things as they appear as we perceive them. Actually, the artist’s hands, guided by the geniuses of inspiration, take much more part in his creative process than the reasoning mind of reliable representation that the artist’s head symbolizes. Suppose an artist fails to apply this exaggeration in his or her work. In that case, the poem or the work of art will definitely fail to epitomize a good and artistically authentic work, or precisely, according to Mill, the poem can be characterized as inadequate. Thus, a significant need is to view a picture or read a poem with this awareness of the deformation of reality to convey his or her artistic truth.

Actually, drawing or painting requires a high level of skill from the drawer, but the truth of the matter is that despite his or her powerful skills, drawing always

presents some sides or shapes that do not match the real object being painted. This incongruence of the portrait leads the beholder to view something different from the original. Regarding this incongruity, the speaker of “Self-Portrait” becomes even more flabbergasted because of this inharmoniousness between the picture and reality. He states: “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” (p. 81). The term “otherness” and the expression “not-being-us” take a clarifying stand in this poem. In fact, otherness translates to difference, which is again amplified by the juxtaposition of not being us. With this, the speaker convinces us that there is always some sense of otherness in the description of reality.

Actually, the problem of otherness being highlighted here does not precisely imply the difference that always appears while comparing oneself to another person. Nevertheless, the poet’s use of otherness informs the reader about how different the painter’s picture is from the authentic self of the painter. The poet blatantly guides us to grasp the meaning of what he is saying as he emphatically precises that the only thing we can see in the mirror – talking about the portrait – is the “Not-being-us” or this otherness. The mirror ultimately proves its inability to reflect the real object. A close look at one’s image in the mirror often presents this sense of otherness. Something in the mirror convinces us that the image we are looking at appears primarily different. For instance, Richard Stamelman summarizes this analogy by commenting on Ashbery’s poem. Thus, he highlights:

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. (R. Stamelman, 1984, p. 620)

Stamelman insists on the problem with Parmigianino’s self-portrait. The painting of this highly talented painter presents an image that refuses to demonstrate the liveliness of the painter. In actual fact, as Stamelman believes, the portrait does not reflect a reality lived or experienced but that which was staged. This lets us suppose

that an image is not reality and that the picture often differs somewhat from reality. Boastingly, Parmigianino wanted to do something extraordinarily accurate. Nevertheless, he ended up fooling himself and the viewer with his painting. Is it not visible in this way that John Ashbery raises the question of Narcissus' blindness? Considering Narcissus' mythology, one is forced to question why that can be possible. One believes that Narcissus does not recognize his true self in the reflection. The image as reflected in the water does not jibe with Narcissus' picture. He is obsessed with his beauty and turns down Aphrodite's proposition. His self-centeredness makes him lose his life. This mythological portrayal of Narcissus' death strengthens the dichotomy between the image and reality. Ashbery's use of this mythological figure showcases the complexity of reality. The person who curiously wants to capture the reality based on a given image is likely signing his or her death penalty. This is to prove that it is impossible to view reality in pictures or descriptions. Roland Barthes beautifully puts it this way:

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 "my-self" 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. (p. 607)

Barthes establishes the fact that our image often differs from ours. This author believes in his dynamism. He wants his image to be mobile, but the image is heavy, immobile, and stubborn. This means that a painted self on a canvas might show some transformation. However, the self is never stable. It changes over time. That is the reason why Barthes strongly desires a mobile image of his self but is shocked by his thousand changing photos. The pictures are different. The question is why pictures of the same person change as the individual ages. The issue concerning the changing representation of a given person is so natural and undeniable. To wrap the whole thing together, one can boldly say that the image always differs from the authentic self.

In Plato's shoes, one believes poetry often deviates from reality. Although a poem appears genuinely natural, it cannot substitute reality. This is because the artist or the poet represents the metaphor of God, as it is widely believed. In dealing with his or her work, the artist or the poet becomes the creator by principally applying the Creator's creation model. In this way, he cannot replicate the tangible world. Commenting on the assumption that art should reflect nature through mimesis as the early dominating school of thought, Abrams claims that he (the critic)

was at once confronted by the conspicuous fact that the image is rarely a facsimile of any single object or event in the external world, and sometimes presents to the spectator a kind of being for which there is no precedent whatever in the world of sense. This deviation of art from reality has always been a cardinal problem for aesthetic philosophy, and the main basis for the charge by writers indifferent or hostile to art that it is trivial, or positively mischievous. (M. Abrams, 1953, p. 35)

Abrams' conviction demonstrates that the image or the poem rarely represents a facsimile of the object or event existing in the external world. In this sense, art gives the viewer something that has no likeness in the world of sense. To stress, art's deviation from reality is an undeniable fact we must consider carefully. We should bear in mind that the poet, though a product of nature, will always deviate from the reality perceived in the sensible world to create something beautiful that can give pleasure to the reader. As said earlier, art has the duty to create a sense of pleasure in the viewer. Unless this end is met, the artist fails in his or her assignment.

In addition, the book's story needs to portray reality effectively. To substantiate, a close reading of Ashbery's "Oleum Misericordiae" showcases Ashbery's revelation of the story's facade. In truth, we can never take it for granted that any story in a work of art is a replica of life as it is. Suppose an author plans to be very realistic in a story. In that case, he or she ends up robbing it of the story's reality because there is always a dichotomy between the reality of the story that is always different than the one of the external reality. For Oscar Wilde, "There is such a thing as robbing a story of its reality by trying to make it too true" (p. 1074). Being too influenced by the external reality makes the poet or the artist fail his or her

assignment. Further, Wilde claims: “Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a mirror. She has flowers that no forests know of, birds that no woodland possesses. She makes and unmakes many worlds, and can draw the moon from heaven with a scarlet thread” (p, 1082). Oscar Wilde’s words are persuasive. It is erroneous and even dangerous to take what is happening in a work of art as the total truth regarding the external world. It is often essential to consider the piece of art as a whole world different from the author’s world. In fact, there is a possibility of creating something that is not visible in the world of the living in the work of art. Although the author finds his or her inspiration from the external world, the work carries its own perfection. Any external judgment should consider the art’s perfection irrespective of its seeming resemblance with the real.

Returning to Ashbery’s “Oleum Misericordiae,” we see the poet’s confession about how he cannot adequately write the real story that he was told probably in his society. The speaker of this poem declares that “my story goes well / The first chapter endeth / but the real story, the one / they tell us we shall probably never know / Drifts back in bits and pieces” (p, 66). The poet’s work goes well, but the problem arises right after the first chapter. The real story drifts back in bits and pieces, and this prevents the author from engraving the whole story in his work. The story even refuses to be imprisoned in the pages of the poet’s book. Is it not the same as the poet alluding to Parmigianino’s painting? Can we not infer that the convex mirror is the poet’s book? Ashbery’s speaker explains, “The glass chose to reflect only what he saw” (p. 68). This metaphorical rendering demonstrates Art’s incapacity to portray the external world’s reality wholly. For “In literature we acquire distinction, charm, beauty and imaginative power. We don’t want to be harrowed and disgusted with an account of the doings of the lower order” (O. Wilde, p. 1075). Therefore, it is always important to consider this distinction between the literary work and the external world.

Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated that Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* critically examines realism by conceding its inherent limitations and the complexities of self-representation. His rebuttal of the straightforward artistic representation defies the notion that art can faithfully reproduce the very essence of reality. Instead, he encourages artists to embrace ambiguity and fragmentation. This enables multiple interpretations and deeper engagement from the reader. By defamiliarizing ordinary experiences, Ashbery critiques the realist movement and calls for artists to liberate themselves from restrictive conventions. He also encourages them to dig into the imaginative possibilities of their craft.

Moreover, Ashbery's mental imagery underlines the tension between perception and truth. He highlights that reality is often subjective and shaped by individual experiences. His use of vivid language and innovative metaphors reveals that artistic representation is not merely an imitation of life but a complex interplay between the external world and internal consciousness. Even though realists believe that artistic works should be inclined toward the absolute truth, there is always that delusive side we often encounter as we come into contact with realistic works. Specifically, literary realism represents reality by portraying mundane, everyday experiences. However, Ashbery cautions that something is always left untold despite the artist's highly appreciated skills and mastery. Moreover, this tendency compromises the realists' standards. Through *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, Ashbery submits that art should not be confined to realistic portrayals but rather serve as a medium for exploring deeper truths about existence. With creativity and imagination, artists can transcend realists' confinement. Therefore, their works can resonate with life's complexities. Hence, Ashbery positions himself as a focal point in modern poetry, transiting to postmodernism, for his insights into reality and representation continue to inspire readers and artists.

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