

Everything You Ever Need to Know About Ashbery in XX Pages

General Background

Published in 1975, divided into six verse paragraphs of unequal length for a total of 552 lines. It is a meditation on a self-portrait by Italian Renaissance painter Francesco Mazzola "Il Parmigianino" and also by extension on the role of art and representation in human life. Thom's conclusion is a great introduction to the themes of the poem so I'm just going to give it to you:

Conclusion

Ashbery is concerned with two main processes in this poem:

The work of the apprehending mind with even reoccurring doubt

The paradox of living in passing time which we do both automatically and consciously

Both of these themes are treated as content and as form. Thus we have moments when the poet talks about the paradox of time and moments when the poem enacts some of these difficulties (i.e. revising and recurring words, phrases, etc).

We could compare Ashbery to Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach* as both seem to be concerned with carving a space to act despite the lack of solid knowledge of experience that modern man possesses.

Overarching Themes/Considerations

relationship of poetry to art Masterplots points out that the artistic portrait reflects only the exterior, while the poem eschews the exterior to reveal only the interior mind. Yet the poet has no explanation of the painter's inner being, his thoughts, except what the poet can "read" in the painting. Where the painting is circumscribed and fixed, the poem is loose and fluid. This is crucial to considering whether both works of art are truly insufficient -- can the interior of the mind be more accurate and reflective of the universal than a single exterior glance? Or do both capture a moment too precisely and thus isolate their meaning too stringently?

nature of art Ashbery's central question seems to be what are the limitations of art. Comparing this poem to Browning's two monologues by artists would help us unpack these questions still further. (i.e....) The major problem for Ashbery in stating that art (poetry and visual) can represent universal values is that each represent a single moment within a changing individual; as such, time, which runs together (see his use of the cities and his conflation of them with each other), also separates. as Thom puts it, this poem opens and concludes with the representation of "the distortion and artifice of art" using the metaphor of the hand : the hand that is a "shield" or a "greeting" or, finally, "the shield of a greeting" but still too large for the painting and too small for nature. That hand is crucial (if you don't have the portrait on your book cover, it's worth looking at) because it is that dominant image, subtle yet obtrusive, that represents the distortion of the remainder of the portrait; it tells us that everything else is slightly off. The Hand also

represents a sort of world-weariness because the poet realizes that his observations on the failures in art are well-known and that no one can stem the tide. Might we compare this to Eliot's *Wasteland* where poetry shores up the ruins of society? Is Ashbery's poem a cry of despair, or a challenge for change? Finally, Ashbery's inclusion of certain mundane details (akin to Eliot's "do I dare to eat a peach" in *Prufrock*) reflects a greater sense of making art out of everything -- but also paired with the realization that such does not help man to discover the world of experience.

identity Ashbery's poem ranges from evaluating how the self-portrait can help us to understand the individual, to a realization that it cannot because each individual perceives things differently and this separation of perception restricts the mimetic and universality of art. The question of whether art distorts or accurately reflects reality -- and whether or not we can accurately perceive that -- dominates the poem. While the focus is primarily on the distortion and loss that the portrait represents, it is at first represented as a space for man to recognize his own soul. As this ideal is disintegrated, we realize that insight into man's condition is not the problem -- it is the ability to abstract that knowledge, to generalize it. As the portrait, the poem represent a single moment's reflection in time it is impossible to gain insight into the whole of man through it.

mirror/speculum Ashbery puns on the Latin word for mirror (*speculum*) and our current usage of speculate. The central question of Ashbery's meditation is whether the mirror image (and by extension self-reflection, self-understanding) is speculation or reality.

recollection/forgetfulness I find the Museum to be the most specific place from which to evaluate the relationship of the poem to history. There we have a place where people visit, but hurry to leave at closing time; you can not live here, but you can visit. But the concept of a museum itself -- where art is classified, placed into hierarchies and isolated from humanity except as an exception, something that we value but don't read (kind of like Ashbery from what I hear!) -- is problematic when it is contains historical objects which are supposed to speak to us, but cannot because there is no common ground. Here the museum facilitates this memory and this loss and tropes itself. I think this idea in the poem would connect with Browning's "Andrea del Sarto" because he discovers that he cannot live with his model -- that art is simple, abstract and separate while life congeals one's ambitions.

[from Kristiane s notes] *Breakdown in contemporary communication = the necessity of "occasional poetry"*

-focus of occasion = reaction to the breakdown of communication in contemporary society: in order to communicate in a postmodern setting, we have to have a context or occasion that allows for mutual understanding (ie Ashbery's poetry foreground the necessity of background against which and in which communication takes place)

--instead of being mimetic of the breakdown, it challenges its reader to a greater engagement: It attempts in its difficult reassertion of context and occasion to make more

genuine communication possible (which is only possible if the reader is willing to work for it)

--Ashbery's sense of occasion embodies a commitment to democratic communication which is a challenge to, not a legitimization of, a society which makes it increasingly difficult

Form & Style

Ashbery writes the poem in unrhymed blank verse, but his innovations come with his use of disjunctions throughout the poem. Each paragraph represents an interruption to the stream of consciousness that is expressed and explored by the musings on the portrait. The jumps are not laid out for the reader; instead they appear unconnected and only as they progress (and turn again into the center as the poem concludes) does one realize the poem is tightly interwoven and only mimics stream of consciousness. (How can this be connected with the theme?) Yet not everything is explained, leaving room for absences, contradictions and ambiguities. Thom points out that Ashbery frequently presents one side of the equation and then the next in an attempt to undercut the notion of a stable definition or understanding of an object. This is his example:

**Is there anything
To be serious about beyond this otherness
That gets included in the most ordinary
Forms of daily activity**

**This otherness, this
"Not-being-us" is all there is to look at
In the mirror, though not one can say
How it came to be this way.**

Kristiane adds this great analysis of Ashbery's use of the lyric form: Lyric: updates old lyric form (crystallization of a moment in time, an epiphanic realization) to a form in which the poem is not a verbal artifact but a kind of living system. This leads us to questions of genre: what is the lyric doing in the past, how does it become transformed and so forth?

Plot (Thanks, Kristiane!)

6 verse paragraphs:

1. Parmigianino's right hand appears to be thrust forward "as though to protect/ What it advertises."
- Describing the painting, the poet is also interpreting it, finding in it several paradoxes: a surface which appears to have depth, a "soul [that] is not a soul," and "Affirmation that doesn't affirm anything."
2. The painting becomes a "mirror" for the poet's thoughts. By painting a picture of himself, Parmigianino has captured for the future the illusion of the present moment, an illusion which the poet tries to duplicate in words.

3. In the third verse paragraph, the poet meditates on the present depicted in the painting, until his experience of the painting becomes like a dream. The poet awakens from this “dream” into his own present, less fixed and idealized than the present in Parmigianino’s painting. **It is easier, the poet says, to imagine the future or to remember the past than to gain perspective on the chaotic and elusive present.**
4. At first the painting appears to be an optical illusion, a mirror reflecting the poet’s own face rather than Parmigianino’s. Recognizing that illusion, the poet imagines that he has surprised the painter at his work. As the poet looks into the painting, he is looking into Parmigianino’s world and therefore into the past.
5. Ashbery sees Parmigianino’s self-portrait as a metaphorical mirror in which each viewer, including those in the future, may find things that are as much in the viewer as in the painting.
6. The “explosion” of details here and now is “so precise, so fine,” that “We don’t need paintings or/ Doggerel written by mature poets.” Yet the present, with “no margins,” seems not to exist when contrasted with “the portrait’s will to endure.”

Past Exams (questions truncated)