



UiO: University of Oslo

Painting With Words

*The Union of Verbal and Visual Representation in
Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"*

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Master's Thesis in Literature in English

60 Credits

UiO: University of Oslo

Faculty of Humanities

16.11.2020

Abstract

This study aims to demonstrate how Ashbery's ekphrastic poem *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975) manages to verbally represent Parmigianino's painting of the same name, in a manner that in effect bridges our understanding of the gap between verbal and visual representation. The purpose of this is to shift the academic discourse surrounding ekphrasis (the verbal representation of visual representation) from the presumed intrinsic differences between verbal and visual representation to the more general value and implications of their combined presence in a work of art. To achieve this goal, this thesis draws upon the reader-response theory of Wolfgang Iser to identify how Ashbery's viewer-response can be found within the poem, and to prove how this viewer-response functions as a model for the reader's reader-response of the poem. To further illustrate the interrelation between visual and verbal representation, this thesis uses Jacques Lacan's theories of psychoanalysis to discover the ways in which Ashbery manages to mimic the visual elements of Parmigianino's painting in his poem. To conclude, this thesis compares the ekphrasis found in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* with influential theories surrounding ekphrasis and to other poets' use of ekphrasis; and argue that Ashbery manages to unite the seemingly different art forms of verbal and visual art through his poem, since both forms ultimately consists of language.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Juan Christian Pellicer for agreeing to be my supervisor and for guiding me through this process.

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1.1 Introduction

Visual art and verbal art are two seemingly very different art forms. Where one hangs on the wall or occupies physical space, the other occupies the insides of a book. Where one is made out of visual and physical components which is directly accessible to the viewer, the other is made out of language and is only truly visualized inside the reader's mind. In this thesis, however, I will attempt to demonstrate how Ashbery's ekphrastic poem, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), manages to verbally represent Parmigianino's painting of the same name, in a manner that in effect bridges our understanding of the gap between verbal and visual representation. The purpose of this is to shift the academic discourse surrounding ekphrasis (the verbal representation of visual representation) from the presumed intrinsic differences between verbal and visual representation to the more general value and implications of their combined presence in a work of art. To achieve this, I will firstly provide with a general analysis of the poem and go through it, section by section, to uncover its contents and to reveal the most prominent themes and motifs in the poem. In the third chapter, I will draw upon Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theories to identify Ashbery's own viewer-response to Parmigianino's painting, and reveal how his viewer-response functions as a model for Ashbery's implied reader's reader-response. In the fourth chapter I will look more intimately on the ways in which Parmigianino's self-portrait functions as a form of convex mirror for Ashbery in his poem, and how Ashbery manages to adopt the visual elements of Parmigianino's painting into his poem. To do this, I will rely on psychoanalysis and Jacques Lacan's approach to literature, as seen in his *Seminar on The Purloined Letter* (1972). The concepts introduced by Lacan that I will rely most heavily on, is his application of Freud's idea of the "repetition automatism" to literature, and Lacan's ideas surrounding the bordered relationship between the signifier and the signified. When the extent of Ashbery's mimesis of Parmigianino's self-portrait has been made clear by the previous chapters, I will begin to look at ekphrasis and go through some influential academic works on the subject, which I will then compare to what I've established about Ashbery's poem. The works about ekphrasis that I will be primarily concerned with in this chapter is, G. Pardlo's *Framing our Ground* (2011), James A. Heffernan's essay *Ekphrasis and Representation* (1991), and Laura Clarridge's *Why They are Not Painters* (2015) (with a particular emphasis on Heffernan). In the penultimate chapter, I will compare the ekphrasis of Ashbery's poem with Mina Loy's *Brancusi's Golden Bird* and Frank O'Hara's *Why I'm Not a Painter*, to look at some of the ways in which verbal

representation can represent visual representation. At the end of this chapter I will attempt to overcome the last obstacle between the unification of verbal and visual art, by arguing that visual art is a form of visual language. The final chapter is the conclusion, where I summarize my findings and hopefully prove my thesis statement.

2. Analysis of Self-Portrait in a Convex-Mirror

2.1 Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror

Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror is the title of John Ashbery's poetry collection from 1975 as well as the title of its last poem. The collection is the only single book to have won all three of the following prestigious awards: the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Ashbery borrows the title from Parmigianino's mannerist painting *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (c. 1524), where the young painter attempted to capture all that he saw in a convex mirror. The poem is largely centred around the painting, more specifically around the thoughts that the painting inspires in the poetic persona, and as such it is considered an ekphrastic poem.

2.2 Form and Style

Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* is a long poem in free verse. It consists of 552 lines divided into six strophes of unequal length, the longest being its concluding strophe. Critics have read it as a mannerist work of art, a reading likely inspired by its similitude to Parmigianino's mannerist painting – with its distortions of perspective and its exaggerated qualities such as its frequent use of enjambment and obscured portrayal of the self. However, the poem seems to make more sense read as an expressionist work of art, partly due to the fact that it fits better with the cultural movements of Ashbery's time, and partly due to how the distortions of perspective are used to conjure forth specific emotional responses in its readers, like an abstract expressionist work of art like, say, Munch's *The Scream* (1893). Additionally, the poem celebrates and stays faithful to the subject's subjectivity, which can be considered a key element of expressionist art. *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* has no consistent poetic rhythm or rhyme scheme. Its style resembles a form of stream-of-consciousness where each line is presented as the poetic persona's (who we learn is Ashbery since he frequently draws attention to his own life and the creation of the poem, and as such I will be using the term poetic persona and Ashbery interchangeably throughout the thesis) unfiltered thoughts. The poem shifts between Ashbery's thoughts about the painting, about everyday life, art criticism,

art in general, things he has read, etc. In the following section I will go over the contents of the poem section by Section.

2.3 Summary of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*

2.3.1 Section One

The opening lines of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*: “As Parmigianino did it, right hand / Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer / And swerving easily away, as though to protect / What it advertises [...]” (247), immediately connects the poem to Parmigianino’s self-portrait and begins to describe the features of the painting. In the following lines this sort of description is continued by pointing out the various elements of the painting: “A few leaded panes, old beams, / Fur” (247), etc. After briefly summing up the visual elements in the painting, Ashbery discusses Parmigianino’s creation of the painting by quoting Italian painter and architect Giorgio Vasari, mentioning how the painter had a “ball of wood to be made / By a turner” (247) which he then had cut into two pieces and had it brought into the size of the convex mirror, which would serve as his canvas. Following this description of the creation of the painting, the persona of the poem begins to identify more details of the painting, on how the lighting on the face makes it appear life-like: “The time of day or the density of the light / Adhering to the face keeps it / Lively and intact in a recurring wave / Of arrival” (247), and on how the artist managed to capture emotion in the figure’s eyes: “[...] there is in that gaze a combination / Of tenderness, amusement and regret, so powerful / In its restraint that one cannot look for long” (248). In the midst of these observations about the details of the painting, the persona voices his thoughts on the soul he perceives in the eyes of the painted figure:

The soul establishes itself.
But how far can it swim out through the eyes
And still return safely to its nest? The surface
Of the mirror being convex, the distance increases
Significantly; that is, enough to make the point
That the soul is the captive, treated humanely, kept

In suspension, unable to advance much farther
Than your look as it intercepts the picture. (247-248)

While these relatively short and seemingly displaced digressions about the soul also function as compliments on Parmigianino's artistry, their primary function is to introduce the reoccurring motif of digression, and to present predominant themes such as the power of art, the limits of representation and self-reflexivity. Moving back to the more literal facts of the painting, the persona begins once again to comment on the distorting effects on the hand in the surface of the painting, but quickly recedes back into a more metaphysical discussion on the nature of our reality:

[...]the whole is stable within
Instability, a globe like ours, resting
On a pedestal of vacuum, a ping-pong ball
Secure on its jet of water.
And just as there are no words for the surface, that is
No words to say what it really is, that is not
Superficial but a visible core, then there is
No way out of the problem of pathos vs. experience. (249)

The poetic persona seems to suggest, here, that no matter how realistic or perfect the artist manages to contain or capture a moment of time in his art, it is exactly this perfection that separates the artwork from the real-life moment. The whole moment is stable and organized within the painting in an otherwise instable and unorganized reality – an issue about representation that Ashbery will turn to repeatedly throughout the poem.

2.3.2 The Second Strophe

In the second strophe the persona turns his attention away from the painting and begins a more serious discussion about the self, art and time; before tying it all back to Parmigianino's self-portrait. The opening lines: "The balloon pops, the attention / Turns dully away [...]" (249), tells the reader that the persona will now shift his attention away from the self-portrait,

and functions as comments on the interaction between viewer and artwork and on the fleeting impressions of art. The self-portrait can only occupy the viewer's (in this case the persona's) attention for so long, and his attention now drifts towards the clouds, to the "friends / Who came to see [him]" and "of what yesterday / Was like" (250). These innocent remembrances quickly turn into more serious existential meditations on the concept of self. The persona wonders:

How many people came and stayed a certain time,
Uttered light or dark speech that became part of you
Like light behind windblown fog and sand,
Filtered and influenced by it, until no part
Remains that is surely you. (250)

The use of "you" here makes it unclear whether the persona is addressing Parmigianino, the reader, or a more general "you" as in all of us; however, the existential nature of the statement leads me to interpret it as the latter. This constant shift in and obscured use of personal pronouns is not exclusive for this section of the poem, which contributes to the poem's complexity and underlines the uncertainty and instability of the notion of the "self" (which is more directly addressed in the most recently quoted verse lines). However, the addressee is not always unknown, as seen in the following excerpt where the persona directly addresses Francesco Parmigianino:

Whose curved hand controls,
Francesco, the turning seasons and the thoughts
That peel off and fly away at breathless speeds
Like the last stubborn leaves ripped
From wet branches?"
I see in this only the chaos
Of your round mirror which organizes everything
Around the polestar of your eyes which are empty,
Know nothing, dream but reveal nothing. (250)

The persona compares the distortions of the painting, that "organizes everything" neatly

around Parmigianino's eyes, with life itself, and identifies a similar feeling of distortion present in his own reality. The persona:

[...]feels the carousel starting slowly
[...] desk, papers, books,
Photographs of friends, the window and the trees
Merging in one neutral band that surrounds
[Him] on all sides. (250)

The question is then "Whose curved hand controls" the shifting of time, this carousel? Are we, like Parmigianino in his self-portrait, both the object and the subject of our reality? This anxiety surrounding time and the nature of our reality could be read as a form of response to postmodern secularism, where there is no higher power to turn to and everyone is victim to the "chaos / Of [Parmigianino's] round mirror". The persona's answer to this chaos is Parmigianino's portrait. "My guide in these matters", the persona states, "is your self, / Firm, oblique, accepting everything with the same / Wraith of a smile[...]" (250). In this section of the poem, Ashbery engages in a dialogue between postmodernity and the modernist tradition, in the sense that he presents and acknowledges the anxiety caused by the chaos of modernity through the expressing of the englobing and overwhelming effects of thoughts about time and the self that "[m]erg[es] in one neutral band that surrounds / [Him]"; on the other hand, in Parmigianino's self-portrait, in art, he finds a way to accept this chaos. The paralysing anxiety expressed by the persona, is a trope in modernist literature, and the accepting of the chaos of our reality is a trope in postmodernist literature. The second strophe ends with the persona addressing how Parmigianino has only been partially successful in capturing a moment of time in his painting, since it is impossible to "perfect and rule out the extraneous / Forever" and to "perpetuate the enchantment of self with self" (251) without revealing the artificiality of the artwork.

2.3.3 The Third Strophe

The third section continues to deal with the difficulties of capturing today in art, as it is near impossible to gain perspective on the present.

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 [...]. (251)

Tomorrow is easy, in the sense that it has not yet happened and is therefore something that the subject feels is under his control. Today, on the other hand, is uncharted since it is filled with promise and possibilities and as such is hard to map out, and today is desolate since we don't have the luxury of distance or hindsight to gain perspective and to see what it is filled with. Ashbery moves on and meditates on the potential contained within a room, and notes that rooms should be "the vacuum of a dream" but instead:

Becomes 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 [...]. (252)

This short commentary on the difference between dreams and reality echoes Ashbery's distinction between art and the real world in the first strophe of the poem, since dreams here are, like art, too distant and beautiful like a "cabbage-rose" from the "slum" that is reality. Continuing this meditation on dreams and reality, Ashbery begins to quote Sydney Freedberg's analysis of the self-portrait, and his idea of how "Realism in this portrait / No longer produces an objective truth, but a bizzaria . . ." (252). This is not only the case for the portrait, but also for dreams. Ashbery states that this is not something to be unhappy about, "since / Dreams prolong us" (252) and when dreams are compared to and become "absorbed" into our reality, "something like living occurs" (252).

2.3.4 The Fourth Strophe

In the relatively short fourth section of the poem, Ashbery turns again more directly to Parmigianino's painting, and comments on how it fits into its artistic movement, "The consonance of the High Renaissance / Is present, though distorted by the mirror" (253). The poetic persona also focuses on the effect that Parmigianino's "extreme care in rendering / The velleities of the rounded reflecting surface" (253) might have on the viewer. The effect is that of displacement, in the sense that the viewer might for a second be fooled to believe that it is a convex mirror-image of himself that he is looking at and not a painting. Ashbery uses an outdated pop-culture reference when explaining this phenomenon, when he compares this experience to what "one of those / Hoffman characters who have been deprived / Of a reflection" (253) might have felt. This is a reference to writer Ernst Hoffman (commonly known as E. T. A. Hoffman) who wrote fantasy and science-fiction novels in the early 1800s. This feeling of displacement emphasizes once again the poem's anxiety surrounding the uncertainty and the instability of the "self". Additionally, this displacement Ashbery comments on, reveals how Ashbery treats Parmigianino's painting like a mirror – which I will be discussing at length later in this thesis.

2.3.5 The Fifth Strophe

The fifth section begins with Ashbery recounting some of the biographical history surrounding Parmigianino and Rome: "Rome where Francesco / Was at work during the Sack: his inventions / Amazed the soldiers who burst in on him; / They decided to spare his life, but he left soon after;" (254). He then moves on to other cities, such as Vienna, "where the painting is today" (254), and to New York, "Where [the persona] [is] now" and "which is a logarithm / Of other cities" (254). In this manner, this section of the poem continues to shift between thoughts about Parmigianino's painting and Parmigianino's life to thoughts about the persona's own life and his poem. Because of these shifts in thought, the fifth section strengthens the correlation and connection between painter and poet, and between the painting and the poem. Additionally, this strophe of the poem signals a slight tonal shift, as some of the primary tensions of the poem seem to get relieved and resolved. The poetic persona states that "[...] something new is on the way, a new preciousness / in the wind [...] / [...] / This wind brings what it knows not, is / Self-propelled, blind, has no notion / Of itself" (254). This new movement in art, or excessive refinement in art, that is on the way, threatens the classicality

and legacy of Parmigianino's painting, but the persona assures him that his painting still might just have something to offer. This is best illustrated in the following lines:

Your argument, Francesco,
Had begun to grow stale as no answer
Or answers were forthcoming. If it dissolves now
Into dust, that only means its time had come
Some time ago, but look now, and listen:
It may be that another life is stocked there
In recesses no one knew of; that it,
Not we, are the change; that we are in fact it
If we could get back to it, relive some of the way
It looked, turn our faces to the globe as it sets
And still be coming out all right. (255)

2.3.6 The Sixth Strophe

In the final section Ashbery turns his attention away from Parmigianino's self-portrait and instead turns his attention inward as he begins to meditate more freely on the topics he has already introduced throughout the poem. He opens the sixth strophe with a brief discussion on how art affects the recipient and the very nature of art with the lines: "A breeze like the turning of a page / Brings back your face: the moment / Takes such a big bite out of the haze / Of pleasant intuition it comes after" (255), and "What is beautiful seems so only in relation to a specific / Life, experienced or not, channelled into some form / Steeped in the nostalgia of a collective past" (255-56). Art lingers in the recipient's mind, coming back to him in moments of random recollection or by association, as seen in the second strophe: "My guide in these matters is your self, / Firm, oblique, accepting everything with the same / Wraith of a smile[...]" (250). Art only seems beautiful in its imaginative value to connect us to a collective past, to momentarily free us from the reality of the present moment. This ties into the sixth strophe's meditation on the present and its relation to art and the past:

[...]All we know
Is that we are a little early, that

Today has a special, lapidary
 Todayness that the sunlight reproduces
 Faithfully in casting twig-shadows on blithe
 Sidewalks. No previous day would have been like this.
 I used to think they were all alike,
 That the present always looked the same to everybody
 But this confusion drains away as one
 Is always cresting into one's present.
 Yet the "poetic," straw-colored space
 Of the long corridor that leads back to the painting,
 Its darkening opposite--is this
 Some figment of "art," not to be imagined
 As real, let alone special? Hasn't it too its lair
 In the present we are always escaping from
 And falling back into, as the waterwheel of days
 Pursues its uneventful, even serene course?
 I think it is trying to say it is today
 And we must get out of it even as the public
 Is pushing through the museum now so as to
 Be out by closing time. You can't live there. (257)

The section of the poem feeds into Ashbery's previous meditations on the uncapturable quality of the present, on how this "lapidary / Todayness" cannot, like a soul, be contained in a work of art that tried to freeze the present in time. What these attempts at capturing the present, or art if you will, does provide however, is that they too exist in the present and they function as present reminders that "it is today" (257). The mention of how the public "[i]s pushing through the museum so as to / Be out by closing time"(257) stresses how he, the reader of his poem and every observer of art is not just invested in the artwork, but is also a part of the present, the world around us; and this in turn shapes our understanding of art. He continues to express the limitations of art in capturing the truth of a specific moment, and concludes that what these attempts always ends up as is the "'it was all a dream" / Syndrome, though the "all" tells tersely / Enough how it wasn't. Its existence / Was real, though troubled" (261). Attempting to capture a moment in time in art, then, is not necessarily a hopeless and pointless endeavour. There is value to it. For in, these attempts we might discover something about that moment and our moment, we might discover "cold pockets / Of remembrance, whispers out of time" (261).

2.4 The Logic of the Digressions

The constant digressions and shifts in thematics throughout the poem serve as a model for the cognitive processes that artworks can rouse in the human consciousness, but it is also what constitutes Ashbery's own poem as a work of art in its own right. In *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, the persona constantly shifts between his observations about Parmigianino's self-portrait, art in general, art history, art criticism, everyday thoughts and to larger existential thoughts on time, the self, and reality. The transitions are not forced and are for the most part sprung from the persona's thoughts on the painting. An example of one such transition can be found in the first strophe, when the persona begins his digression on the "soul" of the painting. He states that "[t]he soul establishes itself" (247), but this digression follows his acknowledgement of the painting's realism: "The time of day or the density of the light / Adhering to the face keeps it / lively and intact[...]" (247). From this, we can see the logical thought connection between the self-portrait's realism and the persona's sudden discussion on the soul. Parmigianino is so successful in painting himself, that it is almost as if he has managed to contain his very soul within the portrait. The rest of the poem, to some degree, manages to keep this pattern; and as a result, Ashbery's *Self-Portrait* becomes an accurate representation of human consciousness, as it manages to mimic the potential cognitive processes of a human that is inspecting a work of art. This becomes increasingly complicated throughout the poem, as the persona, or should I say Ashbery, is acutely aware that the same cognitive processes that he is experiencing and recording when he is regarding Parmigianino's painting is also happening to the reader of his poem.

2.5 The Title

A lot can be discerned from Ashbery's choice of title for the poem alone. The title is borrowed from Parmigianino's self-portrait, a painting where the artist sat down and copied

“with great art” what he saw in a convex mirror. Parmigianino’s use of the title semantically makes sense, since it is quite literally a self-portrait of the reflection of himself in a convex mirror, and he even went so far that he attempted to mimic the form of the mirror in his choice of framing and canvas. According to Vasari, who Ashbery quotes in the poem:

[...]Francesco one day set himself
To take his own portrait, looking at himself from that purpose
In a convex mirror, such as is used by barbers . . .
He accordingly caused a ball of wood to be made
By a turner, and having divided it in half and
Brought it to the size of the mirror, he set himself
With great art to copy all that he saw in the glass, (247)

This mimicking of the convex mirror in shape is what makes Parmigianino’s title work for his painting. It explains the shape of the painting as well as it explains the distortions and unnatural proportions present in the self-portrait. Ashbery’s use of the title, however, makes less immediate sense since it indicates that text can take on the same kind of visual properties as a painting. Another way to look at it is to think of the title as a tool for contextualising Ashbery’s poem, by providing the reader with a direct link to the painting that he refers to throughout the poem. This interpretation feels insufficient given the fact that the entire poetry collection is also titled after Parmigianino’s painting; and the painting is certainly not explicitly present in any of the other poems in the collection. Additionally, there is an inherent expectation in readers of poetry for titles to be read metaphorically. This, as Lee Edelman states in his essay *The Pose of Imposture: Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”* (1986: 97), is an assumption that Ashbery has challenged before, and is perhaps best seen in his poem titled *The Cathedral Is* which consists of a single line: “Slated for demolition”. In this poem Ashbery integrates the title into the poem, in the sense that the title directly engages with and is completed by the following line. From this poem, it is safe to say that Ashbery is certainly not afraid to experiment with the function of titles and to disrupt reader expectations. However, the opening line of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* doesn’t operate in the same manner as the one in *The Cathedral Is*. “As Parmigianino did it, [...]” stresses the close relation between the poem and the painting and indicates that the poem will mimic Parmigianino’s painting in some way. Edelman states that, “[b]y presenting his poem

under the name of Parmigianino's painting, Ashbery seems to indicate that the earlier work of art serves, in some sense, as the model for his artistic endeavour" (1986: 96). The problem here, however, is that there are countless ways to interpret a work of art and as such there isn't one singular logical way for Ashbery to "model" his work after Parmigianino's self-portrait. Therefore, one must first figure out Ashbery's viewer-response to the painting in order to identify this model. Additionally, there are of course great scepticism surrounding the extent to which verbal art can mimic visual art – a scepticism that I will throughout this thesis attempt to appease. The problems posed by the differences between verbal and visual representation aside, in what way can we consider Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* a self-portrait in a convex mirror?

3. Ashbery's Viewer-Response to Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*

If one were to choose a textual equivalent of a self-portrait, the first thing to come to mind would probably be autobiography, since it is also a creative endeavour where the person attempts to capture himself on the page. Additionally, autobiographies also include the same kind of posing as self-portraiture does, in the sense that the writer and the artist is free to choose how to present themselves to the reader and viewer. However, autobiographies as a literary genre is not exclusively entitled to the exposing and creation of the self, even though their approach is perhaps the most explicit. I argue that parts of the artist and the self can be discerned from every work of art and every interpretation of art. Creative works, whether or not you're the reader or viewer of it or the creator, have a tendency to expose some of our inner workings and thoughts; and this becomes especially clear in in the theory of the literary field devoted to the role of the reader and viewer of art. In this section of the thesis I will briefly summarize reader-response theory, present Wolfgang Iser's version of it, and apply these theories to Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*.

3.1 Reader-Response Theory

The discipline of the literary field devoted to the role of the reader is called reader-response theory (or reader-response criticism). Reader-response theories emphasize the authority of the reader of a literary work and argues that the reader is just as important as the author. It surfaced sometime during the late 60s and shifted the critical perspective from the text itself to the reader. The most acknowledged and practiced approach to literature of that time was New Criticism, an approach that encouraged the students of literature to understand literature as self-contained and as a self-referential aesthetic object. In other words, it was a formalist movement, that directed its attention towards the text itself, and not its context or author. Many criticized the theory for dulling the powers of literature by not focusing on how it affects humanity and how it relates to the human condition. Think of it this way, if one were only to focus on the text itself and the fictional reality it depicts, one would neglect one of fiction's most powerful aspects – its undeniable correspondence to the real world. This is where reader-response theory comes in, because when we recognize the authority of the reader, we also recognize the fact that literature is played out in the imagination of its readers... and so, too, is its meaning.

Literature is language, and as all language it is prone to miscommunication. Human beings interpret language differently, because we are inhabited by differing predispositions, and have different experiences. Naturally, we are prone to project these dispositions and experiences onto the piece of literature we are reading in order to constitute meaning. This tendency is the culprit behind why someone's reading of "good" literature is never completely identical to anyone else's reading. Two people can be reading the same poem, and where one is moved to tears the other is moved to sleep. Why? Because literature's ability to move the reader is heavily influenced by the reader's personal experiences (as we will see in Ashbery's viewer-response to Parmigianino's self-portrait). These differing interpretations and varying degrees of appreciation for the same work of art are not exclusive to verbal art that relies on language such as literature, but is also something that happens with visual art. People can have different interpretations of paintings and sculptures even though everything is there for the eyes to see (though, as I will later point out, everything can be considered language). This human tendency to see art differently makes understanding and talking about art problematic, for who are we supposed to turn to to get the answers we seek? This is the question at the heart of reader-response theory.

3.2 Wolfgang Iser

There are a great number of varieties of reader-response theories. Everyone within the theoretical branch of reader-response criticism acknowledges that a text's meaning derives from a reader through the process of reading. The difference between these theories usually reside in their answers to the question of authority of literary meaning and the extent of the reader's role as a meaning constructor. Some critics believe that the author and his choice of words is what largely determines the reader's interpretation, and these critics can be said to practice "objective-criticism". In other words, these critics integrate the ideas of the formalists, and New Criticism into reader-response theory. On the other side, are those who believe that the reader is the primary creators of meaning, and that a text's continuity of meaning can be found when comparing individual interpretations. These critics belong to the school of "subjective-criticism" and their front figure is David Bleich. Additionally, there are also some critics whose theories lie somewhere in between these two schools, and their

primary representative is Wolfgang Iser, whose theory attempts to unite the two opposing schools. Wolfgang Iser believes that meaning is not something that is simply found in a text, it is something that happens in the interaction between reader and text. Meaning is therefore not something that the reader creates out of nothing, and it is not something that just resides in a text, it is something that is created by a reader from the information he draws from the text and from the experiences and attitudes within himself. Iser states in his essay *Interaction Between Text and Reader* that:

[...] literary work[s] ha[ve] two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic pole is the author's text, and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader. In view of this polarity, it is clear that the work itself cannot be identical with the text or with its actualization but must be situated somewhere between the two. (Iser, 1524)

This is one of the key parts of Iser's version of reader-response theory. The author builds the framework for the reader's interpretations and this is what separates his theory from the others, because he claims the authority of literary meaning is shared equally by the author (the text) and the readers. Iser effectively illustrates this interaction between text and reader by comparing it to constellations:

The impressions that arise as a result of this process will vary from individual to individual, but only within the limits imposed by the written as opposed to the unwritten text. In the same way, two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The 'stars' in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable. (Winter, 1972: 287)

What allows the reader to join the "stars" of literature together in variable ways, is according to Iser, the "blanks" or the unsaid in the text. Wolfgang Iser coined the term "negativity" as a concept in literature. Negativity refers to the unformulated background of a text of fiction, that can be found in the text's "blanks" – the unwritten that can provide greater substance to the written. Iser believes that negativity is what allows words to transcend their literal

limitations, and the very existence of it is what makes personal and varied interpretations of a single literary work possible. Think of it this way – if the motivation behind an action or the meaning of a vague metaphor in a literary work is not explicitly stated, it opens up the possibility for the reader to fill the gaps with their own interpretations of what is written in that particular section and in earlier passages. Additionally, the “blanks”, that Iser mentions, could very well serve as a reason for why different interpretations of visual art are possible. There are arguably even more blanks present in visual works of art than there is in literature, which makes sense if we are to take the cliché “a picture says more than a thousand words” literally. Visual art usually doesn’t explicitly say anything in language and as such it could be considered one big blank, which means that the viewer is forced to apply his own language to it in order to make sense of the thing; and as we have addressed, our language is determined by our experiences and predispositions.

The action of applying one’s own language to make sense of a painting is essentially what all writers of ekphrastic literature do, and Ashbery’s *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* is perhaps one of the most extreme cases of this process. The poem in itself is structured and formulated in a way that mimics the cognitive processes of a person who is applying his own language to make sense of and fill in the “blanks” of Parmigianino’s painting. The poem is essentially one long viewer-response to Parmigianino’s painting, describing the thoughts that arise in the poetic persona’s mind when faced with the self-portrait; and as such Ashbery’s viewer-response is easily accessible. The constant digressions between the self-portrait, art history, art criticism, thoughts about the everyday and thoughts about larger more existential issues, are displays on how a viewer or receiver of art might attempt to make sense of the work of art and how the receiver of art relate what he sees or reads with what he has experienced. Ashbery’s interpretation of Parmigianino’s self-portrait relies heavily on the “negativity” of the self-portrait – the unformulated background of the painting. This is perhaps best seen in the reoccurring prosopopoeia of Parmigianino or the soul of the figure that is supposed to represent him:

The soul has to stay where it is,
Even though restless, hearing raindrops at the pane,
The sighing of autumn leaves thrashed by the wind,
Longing to be free, outside, but it must stay

Posing in this place. It must move
As little as possible. (34-39)

The primary concern for Ashbery, then, is the self-portrait's inability to capture being – to capture the soul that is not present in the painting but that resides within the human Parmigianino that the self-portrait is supposed to represent. To Ashbery, the self-portrait fails to properly capture the pregnant moment it is supposed to portray since it cannot capture the entirety of the moment. It doesn't capture all the small distractions of everyday life that likely played a part of said pregnant moment – the “sighing of autumn leaves” or the raindrops hitting the windowpanes. However, in the figure's gaze there lies remnants that hints at these things, and as such it hasn't managed to “perfect and rule out the extraneous / Forever” (251). These are aspects of the painting that aren't explicitly stated or portrayed in the self-portrait but is Ashbery's or the persona's way of filling the “blanks” of the painting. In these interpreted blanks, one can see how Ashbery's reader-response is influenced by the concerns and the intellectual movements of his time. From this, it becomes clear how Ashbery, while looking at Parmigianino's attempt at capturing his reality, is inadvertently drawn back into Ashbery's own reality, which, he himself addresses in the poem, is the natural course of art since “[y]ou can't live there [in art]”.

3.3 The Implied Reader

Now that I have introduced reader-response criticism in general, Wolfgang Iser's version of it, and investigated parts of Ashbery's viewer-response to the self-portrait; I will now elaborate on Iser's idea of the “implied reader” to see how Ashbery and the readers of his poem fits into Iser's characterization of the receiver of art. Critics have put forth, similarly to reader-response theories in general, a large number of varying models of the “reader”, by this I mean that they have attempted to ascertain the specific qualities of a reader. In this section I will not attempt to define all of these models, I will focus primarily on Wolfgang Iser's “Implied reader”. In *The Act of Reading* (1978) Iser characterizes (34) his Implied reader as someone that, “embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect – predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself”. This characterization echoes the overarching ideas of his reader-response theory, in the way that

his implied reader is a concept that happens in the interaction between reader and text. The text lays down the predispositions necessary to actualize its meaning in its structure, and when the reader is faced with its inviting structure he is compelled to immerse himself in this interaction; and somewhere in this interaction he will be invited to embody the predispositions needed to constitute meaning. It sounds complicated but, put easily, his theory is that works of literature usually employ a great deal of literary tools that can merge the real reader's qualities with the implied reader's, and this is how a text accomplishes its intended effect on the reader. Iser's concept of the implied reader helps tame the chaos surrounding the "true meaning" and the success of a text, since it doesn't surrender to a belief that everything in art is subjective and that there is no right or wrong interpretations; and this makes it both easier and more rewarding to discuss literature and art.

3.4 Ashbery as The Implied-Viewer

Correspondingly to reader-response theory in general, the concept of an implied reader does not exclusively apply to literature alone and can be applied to all forms of art. Even though the literary tools employed by writers to exercise their intended effect on readers is perhaps more prominent than the ones used by visual artists, since their works consists of words and language, the visual arts have a great deal of tools to accomplish the same effects. The visual artists can apply colours to invoke specific emotions in the viewers of his painting, he can use light and shadow to highlight certain aspects, and he can even portray body language. A talented artist can use his composition to lead the viewer's eyes in the way that he wants by use of lines, curves and colours to create focal points. In Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* the distortions bend the room and the extremities of Parmigianino around his eyes, which makes his eyes the painting's focal point and naturally draws the viewer's eyes to them. This is addressed in Ashbery's poem, where he states: I see in this only the chaos / Of your round mirror which organizes everything / Around the polestar of your eyes[...]" (250). The two aspects of the self-portrait that the persona in the poem addresses the most are the eyes (the focal point) and the hand that's "[b]igger than the head, Thrust at the viewer" (247) and in the foreground of the painting. These are the two most prominent parts of the painting, and as such you could say that Parmigianino is successful in leading the eyes of his viewer. Another tool that Parmigianino uses to provoke a specific effect in the viewer is his choice of framing and canvas. In shaping his self-portrait like a convex mirror, Parmigianino attempts to conjure forth a feeling of displacement in the viewer. When viewing the painting the

viewer might be fooled into recognizing the painting as a mirror, and as an effect, the viewer, like the pope's court in Vasari's history of the painting, might get "stupefied by it" (248), in the sense that one fails to recognize oneself in the mirror. The painting is successful in exercising this effect on Ashbery, as seen in the fourth section of the poem:

What is novel is the extreme care in rendering
The velleities of the rounded reflecting surface
(It is the first mirror portrait),
So that you could be fooled for a moment
Before you realize the reflection
Isn't yours. You feel then like one of those
Hoffmann characters who have been deprived
Of a reflection, except that the whole of me
Is seen to be supplanted by the strict
Otherness of the painter in his
Other room. We have surprised him
At work, but no, he has surprised us
As he works. [...] (253)

This feeling of displacement creates a more intimate bond between artwork, artist and viewer, because for a slight second the viewer is fooled to believe that Parmigianino's self-portrait is a mirror. This can invoke a feeling of connection in modern viewers of the painting to the human in the self-portrait, even though they are separated by nearly 500 years. This mirroring effect that Parmigianino intentionally or not employs, invites for a great deal of self-projection. Ashbery indulges in this form of self-projection already from the opening line of the poem, "As Parmigianino did it", which stresses the close relation between Ashbery and Parmigianino as both artists and humans. From there the self-projection can be seen in the prosopopoeia of Parmigianino and the frequent and at times confusing shifts in personal pronouns from "me", to "you" to "us". All of this creates an uncertainty around who the persona is talking on behalf of – is he embodying himself, Parmigianino, the reflection of Parmigianino, or the readers of the poem? All of this mirrors the self-portrait's concept of the distorted self, and underlines the inherent anxiety in the poem surrounding the idea that there is no complete and fully formed "self" (as illustrated in the lines "until no part / Remains that is surely you"). It can be said, then, that Ashbery "embodies all those predispositions necessary for [Parmigianino's self-portrait] to exercise its effect" (Iser, 1978: 34), since

through the poem Ashbery's viewer-response to the self-portrait becomes clear. Moreover, his viewer-response displays how Parmigianino is successful in mimicking a convex mirror and in fooling the implied viewer into believing his self-portrait to be a convex mirror, since while Parmigianino "sat down with great art / To copy all that he saw in the mirror", Ashbery sat down with great art to copy all that he saw in the self-portrait. And just as the mirror distorts Parmigianino's self, the self-portrait distorts Ashbery's sense of self. This is how Parmigianino's self-portrait serves as a model for Ashbery's poem, and how Ashbery created a poem "As Parmigianino did it".

3.5 The Implied Reader of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*

We've now gone over Ashbery's own viewer-response to Parmigianino's self-portrait as seen in his poem, but there is also the matter of the implied reader of Ashbery's poem to think about. Which begs the question, what literary tools do Ashbery himself employ to exercise his intended effect, and how do these affect the implied reader's interpretation of the poem? I've already touched upon this, but one of the primary tools that Ashbery uses to make his poem conceptually similar to a self-portrait, is the motif of digression. These digressions shape the poem into poetry that simulates the cognitive processes that art can inspire in the viewer's or reader's mind. This in turn makes his poem into both a self-portrait of the poetic persona but also into a form of convex mirror since the reader of the poem might just recognize the same cognitive processes at play in his own mind while reading Ashbery's poem. When Ashbery shifts his attention away from the painting and starts thinking about "Who came to see [him]," and "of what yesterday / was like" (250), the reader is inclined to ponder the same things while reading his poem. In this way Ashbery guides our thoughts similar to how Parmigianino guides our eyes. Additionally, the way in which Ashbery examines Parmigianino's self-portrait makes reading the poem into a verbal equivalent of viewing the painting. The difference here is that the implied reader is looking at the painting through the poetic persona's eyes, and as such the implied reader's understanding of the painting is shaped by the poem and not by the painting that physically exists in Vienna. The implications of this is that Ashbery's *Self-Portrait* frames both the reader's reader-response to his poem and the reader's viewer-response-by-proxy of Parmigianino's painting. By revealing his viewer-response to Parmigianino's self-portrait, Ashbery in effect lays down the

predispositions necessary for the implied reader to understand Ashbery's own *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* by providing the reader with a model for understanding.

3.6 Chapter Summary

From the title and the opening line of the poem ("As Parmigianino did it[...]"), Ashbery makes it clear that Parmigianino's painting of the same name plays an important part in the poem, and that he in some shape or form attempts to model the poem after the painting. In order to identify said model, Ashbery's own interpretation of, or viewer-response to, the painting had to be examined. By using Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory, Ashbery's poem served as a prime example of how meaning is created by the viewer and reader of art and how it is to some extent dictated by the facts of the artwork. In Parmigianino's distorted self-portrait in a convex mirror, Ashbery saw, through his postmodern goggles, just that. In Parmigianino's realistic rendering of his eyes, Ashbery sees a "captive soul" but, "the pity of [the painting's] smarts" is that it is not in fact a soul, only paint, only and illusion. The painting in itself doesn't display a soul, the soul is something that Ashbery finds in the negativity of the painting, in the unpainted, in what he sees in the realistic gaze of the figure. Parmigianino's choice of framing for his self-portrait, makes the painting in itself appear like a convex mirror, which Ashbery believes creates a feeling of displacement in the viewer. This is one of the ways in which Parmigianino to some extent dictates Ashbery's interpretation of his painting, and shows part of Ashbery's viewer-response to Parmigianino's painting. Since *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* is a work of art in its own right, one also has to consider the implied reader's reader-response to Ashbery's poem. Investigating how Ashbery interpreted Parmigianino's self-portrait also latently reveals how Ashbery attempts to make reading his poem into a verbal equivalent of his viewing of the painting. Ashbery manages to create the same feeling of displacement in his own readers by mimicking the cognitive processes of the self, and by obscuring personal pronouns so that it isn't quite clear who he's speaking to and on behalf of. This is one of the ways in which Ashbery conceptually translates the visual elements of Parmigianino's painting into his own poem (an idea that I will investigate at length in later passages). The effect of the mirroring that is taking place in the poem, makes it so that Ashbery's own viewer-response to the painting functions as a model for his reader's reader-response to his poem, which in turn emphasises the close relation between the visual

and the verbal arts.

4 Psychoanalysis, Repetition Automatism, and The Bordered Relationship Between The Signifier and The Signified

Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* is a heavily self-reflexive ekphrastic poem that reverberates with anxieties surrounding the notion of self and the human psyche, and as such it possesses a natural affinity to psychoanalysis. As with most 100-year-old theories and fields, psychoanalysis as a clinical treatment and as a field in psychiatry, has been on the decline for years. In the article "Is Psychoanalysis Still Relevant to Psychiatry?", (2017) Joel Paris investigates the recent history of Psychoanalysis. By looking at contemporary debates and by summarizing recent attempts to resurrect psychoanalysis, she concludes that:

[...]the modern revisions of psychoanalysis do not offer a coherent response to critics. It is difficult to see how any of the current responses to criticism can save psychoanalysis from a continued and lingering decline. Analysis has separated itself from psychiatry and psychology by teaching its method in stand-alone institutes. The field may only survive if it is prepared to dismantle its structure as a separate discipline and rejoin academia and clinical science. (Paris, 2017)

The future Paris paints of psychoanalysis as a clinical practice looks grim, but what about its future as a part of the humanities?

Psychoanalysis and literary criticism have been star-crossed (or rather, as I will argue in this section, star-abetted) lovers ever since the birth of psychoanalysis. Freud used literature to exemplify and illustrate his concepts, take for instance his idea of the Oedipus complex, which takes its name from the classic tragedy written by Sophocles around 429 BC. A potential reason for why psychoanalysis and literary criticism go well together and have a natural affinity with one another, is because both (to some extent) seek to unveil "hidden meanings" and narratives. Or in other words, they both seek to analyse and to listen intently in order to expose the patient's or the text's inner workings. In the article, Paris (2017) briefly covers psychoanalysis as a part of the humanities and states that this relationship only further

alienates psychoanalysis from the field of psychiatry (as this relationship underlines its lack of empirical evidence and scientific support).

Psychoanalytic literary criticism come in many forms, but they all revolve around the premise that literature can tell us something about the psyche. At the most basic level, one can use psychoanalysis to investigate the psyche of a character in a literary text, or even investigate the psyche of the author by analysing the text and its metaphors and general content (though this approach is heavily frowned upon by most scholars). The problem with, and perhaps the appeal of, these two approaches is that they open up for infinite amounts of interpretations that are hard to prove and hard to dismiss. Take for instance Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Many critics have argued that Hamlet's suffering is rooted in his Oedipus complex – in his jealousy towards his uncle who has wooed his widowed mother. This reading is very interesting and significant for the reader's and the audience's understanding of the play, but it is also difficult to prove. In his essay titled *Hamlet and His Problems*, (1919) T.S Eliot states that *Hamlet* is an "artistic failure" since Shakespeare failed to give Hamlet an objective correlative (an outlet for a particular emotion expressed through an act, a symbol, etc) for his complicated feelings towards his mother (guilt, disgust, and perhaps even lust). The problem here is that no matter how interesting T.S Eliot's critique is, he still commits the intentional fallacy when he assumes with certainty what Shakespeare tried to convey through the character of Hamlet... and this is often the case with this psychoanalytic approach to literature. In order to map out the psyche of a fictional character or the author of a work, one is often forced to make long leaps in interpretation which leaves your argument vulnerable with little evidence. To illustrate what I mean by "long leaps in interpretation", allow me to put forth a simplified example of how one of these leaps would look in an analysis of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*: Antonio is too kind and willing to help Bassanio, therefore Antonio must love Bassanio in a non-platonic way. It is perhaps because of these kinds of leaps in interpretation that the sciences have turned their back on psychoanalysis and why we have humorous clichés like "you say one thing then you mean your mother" that makes the public roll their eyes at psychoanalysis.

4.1 Lacan's *Seminar on The Purloined Letter*

However, as stated in the previous topic sentence, there are other forms of psychoanalytic literary criticism and Jacques Lacan's approach is a lot more complex than the one previously mentioned and bears a natural affinity to Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* and to the theories surrounding ekphrasis (as we will see later on in this thesis). Lacan wasn't really interested in the field of literary criticism per se. He, like Freud, applied literature to psychoanalysis by using literature to illustrate concepts and ideas within the field of psychoanalysis. He did, however, leave behind new ways to think about literature. In his *Seminar on The Purloined Letter* (1972), Lacan's approach is perhaps best illustrated, as he directly engages with Poe's short story, *The Purloined Letter* (1844). Lacan analyses the short story, especially focusing on two scenes and the similarity of the sequences. The scenes from *The Purloined Letter* (1844) he is the most interested in, is the scene where the queen receives a letter containing sensitive information that the king must not see. When the minister arrives, he sees that the queen is trying to hide the letter in plain sight from the king, so he then snatches it and replaces it without her being able to do anything about it – since she cannot risk the king knowing about the letter. The second scene is when detective Dupin visits the minister and sees the letter in question hidden in plain sight. He then snatches it and replaces it with another letter. Lacan explains that their similarity lies in the very structure of the scenes, or in the formula which is described in the following manner:

Thus three moments, structuring three glances, borne by three subjects, incarnated each time by different characters. The first is a glance that sees nothing: the King and the police. The second, a glance which sees that the first sees nothing and deludes itself as to the secrecy of what it hides: the Queen, then the Minister. The third sees that the first two glances leave what should be hidden exposed to whoever would seize it: the Minister, and finally Dupin.
(Lacan, 1972: 44)

The formula consists of two triads of characters with three different glances. Lacan then goes on to connect the repeating nature of these two scenes with Freud's concept of the repetition automatism. The concept could be summed up as a psychological phenomenon where a person repeats an act (usually a destructive one) or event or its circumstances repeatedly. This

process of compulsive repeating is usually driven by an unconscious desire. The formula of *The Purloined Letter* is related to this, because, “their [the characters’] displacement is determined by the place which a pure signifier – the purloined letter – comes to occupy in their trio. And that is what will confirm for us its status as repetition automatism.” (Lacan. 1972: 45) In other words, the letter in the short story can be read as one of these unconscious desires that forces the characters to repeat the event presented in the first scene. The police adopts the role of the king in the second scene when the minister has stolen the letter, in the sense that they cannot see the letter; the minister has adopted the role of the queen as he is the one in possession of the letter, and Dupin adopts the role of the minister from the first scene since he sees through the minister’s hiding tactic. The repetition automatism, Lacan believes to be at play here in this story, is closely related to one of his main hypotheses: “the unconscious is the discourse of the Other” (Lacan. 1972: 45). Which, summed up, could be characterized in the following manner: human beings are split between an accessible conscious side, and an inaccessible unconscious side that consists of a series of drives and forces. One of these drives and forces is desire. Desire is, to Lacan, something that cannot be satisfied and something that all our needs become. It is a feeling of missing something, an absence, that we desperately need to fill. The unconscious, then, reveals itself in its continuous attempt at filling the absence left by our desire. In terms of the story, one could say that our unconscious is the letter – a force that governs behaviour – and it reveals itself through the behaviour of the characters. The psychoanalyst then, is the one who holds the third position in the triad presented in this essay. This is because he, like the minister in the first scene and like Dupin in the second, is able to spot the otherwise inaccessible and hidden unconscious (the letter) through the patient’s (the queen’s and lastly the minister’s) behaviour.

This idea of the inaccessible unconsciousness is closely tied to Lacan’s idea of the bordered relationship between the signifier and the signified – which is very important in his *Seminar on The Purloined Letter* (1972) and is partly what makes Lacan’s psychoanalysis relevant when investigating ekphrastic literature. Lacan draws on the ideas of semiotics and especially on the ones from Ferdinand de Saussure’s book, *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), where he explained that a sign was more complicated than just a sound-image, it was also a concept in its own right. He divided the sign into two parts, the signifier and the signified. The signifier is a sign that is supposed to denote something, take for example the word “apple”. The signified is the thing that the signifier is supposed to denote, in this example the fruit that

exists in the real world - the apple we can touch and taste. To Saussure, the signifier and the signified are equally important and both is what makes up a sign. This is where Lacan departs from Saussure. To Lacan, there is a border between the signifier and the signified, and we can never escape the world of the signifier. This is because of language. Language obstructs our ability to perceive the signified (the real) because the signified is translated to us by use of language. In that sense, words cannot reach their meaning, since the image the signifier creates in our consciousness is never the same as the thing that exists in the outside world. The apple in my head will never be the same as the apple on my kitchen table. To illustrate this, take for instance the embedded story in James Joyce's *The Dead* (1914) about Johnny the horse. In the short story, Gabriel tells the other guests of the party the tale of his grandfather's horse named Johnny. Johnny used to work at Gabriel's Grandfather's mill. One day when his grandfather decided to take Johnny out for a stroll they passed "King Billy's statue" (Joyce, 1914) a statue where King Billy sits on a horse. Upon seeing this statue, Johnny began to circle around it over and over again, if it was out of love or because Johnny thought he was back at the mill again – Gabriel does not know. This example functions as both a metaphor for Lacan's proposed relationship between signifier and signified and as an example of repetition automatism. One could read the horse as the signifier and the statue as the signified, this would show how the signifier is stuck in a loop around the signified and is unable to connect with it. Another interpretation could be reached if one were to read the statue as a signifier and the horse and the person the statue is supposed to portray as the signified. This interpretation highlights the inaccessible nature of the signified and our (if we are to be read as Johnny) inability to reach the signified through the signifier. This interpretation fits with Lacan's description of the signifier. He states that a signifier is, "a unit in its very uniqueness, being by nature symbol only of an absence" (Lacan, 1972: 54). The statue, then, is only a symbol of an absence for Johnny, perhaps the absence of love in this example. With this in mind, the interrelation between Lacan's theory of the signifier and signified and his theory of the unconscious can be seen. Since this embedded story could also easily function as an example for how Lacan defined the unconscious (as I explained in the previous paragraph) if we just replace Johnny with a person and the statue with their unconscious desires, we can see how the unconscious is inaccessible and how it shows itself in Johnny's behaviour. Furthermore, this embedded story functions as a prime example of the repetition automatism that Lacan describes if we were to believe that the horse started circling around the statue because it believed the statue to be connected to the mill somehow. In the face of something similar (in this story, the statue of King Billy somewhat resembles a horse mill in shape and

size) the horse responds, like us, by doing what he knows and what he has always done; even though it doesn't benefit him. The signifier dictates its behaviour.

4.2 The Repetition Automatism in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*

The story of Johnny the horse from *The Dead* functions as a simple illustration of Lacan's understanding of repetition automatism and his definition of the bordered relationship between signifier and signified, but these ideas are also manifested in Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. First off, there's the matter of the repetition automatism at play in the poem. As addressed in the previous chapter, Ashbery's primary endeavour in the poem is to verbally mimic what Parmigianino did in his self-portrait, which is revealed in the opening line. Where Parmigianino attempted to capture all that he saw in the convex mirror in his painting, Ashbery attempted to capture all that he saw in the painting in his poem. Thus, both conceptually are instances where they aimed to represent the self, to the best of their ability, as they saw it in a different representation. The self that Parmigianino saw in the mirror is not Parmigianino's true self. It was a reflection, and a distorted one at that, that was not truly able to capture his being. This is not only revealed through the unnatural propositions of Parmigianino's body and the room behind him, but also, as addressed in Ashbery's poem, in the mirror's inability to capture the soul – the entirety of Parmigianino's being. This pattern is repeated in Ashbery's *Self-Portrait* where he addresses how the self-portrait's mirror-like qualities creates a feeling of displacement, where one at once recognizes oneself in the self-portrait while simultaneously not recognizing oneself in it. This is underlined, as stated earlier, in the poem's frequent shifts in personal pronouns and in Ashbery's self-projection onto the painting, where he ascribes his own thoughts to Parmigianino, or the figure that is supposed to represent him. Another pattern that is repeated in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* is how it, like Parmigianino's painting, draws attention to its own creation. Where Parmigianino paints himself in the process of painting the self-portrait, Ashbery writes about himself writing the poem. The self-reflexivity at play in the poem is layered to the extent that it can hardly even be called mere "self-reflexivity" anymore, since it is a representation of another representation (the self-portrait) of a representation (the convex mirror) of the self. This has many implications, but as the poem suggests, the primary one is that "the surface / Of the mirror being convex, the distance increases / Significantly" (248), which can be read as a comment on how these layers of representation only increases the distance between the

representation and the self. Edelman supports this interpretation of the poem in his essay *The Pose of Imposture: Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"* (1986):

[...] the inadequacy of that term [self-reflexive] to the situation at hand becomes obvious if one attends carefully to the system of displacement here at work. For if the representation of "self" is, in fact, a representation of the representation of the "self," and *that* representation is, in turn, an interpretation of some other representation of some other "self," the identity of the "self" is too gravely in doubt to allow this process to be explained away as neatly "self-reflexive" (96).

Moving back to the repetition automatism at play in the poem, another aspect of the painting that is repeated in Ashbery's *Self-Portrait* is how it provides the reader with a model for how to understand the work of art. By shaping his self-portrait like a convex mirror, Parmigianino provides the viewer with an explanation of what it is he is looking at – a convex mirror-image of Parmigianino, which explains the distortions of the painting and affirms its realism. Similarly, Ashbery, by analysing the painting, provides the reader with a clear model for how to understand his poem. By stating what he sees in the painting and addressing that he will do with his poem what Parmigianino did with his self-portrait, he explicitly points at the aspects of the painting that the reader should be paying attention to in his poem. Yet another pattern that is repeated can be found in the styles of the two works of art. Parmigianino's self-portrait is a mannerist work of visual art, which was the predominant artistic style during the latter part of the High Renaissance (around the beginning of the 1500s). The style is characterized by its distortions, playful perspectives and its exaggerated qualities. This characterization fits neatly to Ashbery's poem as well, with its distortions and playful perspective. However, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* is better described as an expressionist work of poetry, since its distortions aren't simply an experimentative expression but rather a tool used to generate specific emotional responses in his readers; and it also corresponds better with the intellectual movements of Ashbery's time. The repeated aspect in their choice of style, then, lies not necessarily with the similarities between them, but rather in the fact that both Parmigianino and Ashbery used contemporary styles (though, arguably expressionism wasn't too contemporary in the 70's) for their works, making their self-portraits engage with the cultural movements of their time. The act of trying to connect their self-portraits to their time reveals part of both artists' unconscious desire to, as Ashbery puts it, "perpetuate the enchantment of

self within self”, or to somehow make parts of themselves everlasting. Ashbery directly addresses this desire in the sixth strophe of the poem, where he states: “Our time gets to be veiled, compromised / By the portrait’s will to endure. It hints at / Our own, which we were hoping to keep hidden” (258). In Parmigianino’s self-portrait Ashbery recognizes the human desire to endure – our fear of being forgotten. And how, in trying to satisfy this desire or fill this absence with art, we are unsuccessful. Lee Edelman defines this desire, or “secret” in the poem in the following manner:

Like Parmigianino’s painting, then, Ashbery’s text has a “secret” that is hidden or “sequestered” (*SP*, p. 68) by being “too plain” (*SP*, p. 69) – a secret that it protects by advertising. What is simultaneously hidden and exposed here is the textual inscription of a nostalgic desire: a desire for presence that will disallow absence or loss, a desire to escape from the pose or positioning of differential language and to break free into something outside the constraints of textuality (1986: 107).

Edelman argues that the secret in the poem, is its own desire to transcend the constraints of textuality, and its fear of becoming a hollow representation of what once was. To illustrate this, Ashbery quotes Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* when describing the frustrations of capturing a moment of time in art, or in “The locking into place” (255) that happens in representation: ““There cannot / Be a pinch in death more sharp than this”” since “Mere forgetfulness cannot remove it / Nor wishing bring it back” (*SP*, 255). The act of making oneself “everlasting” through art, then, is a double-edged sword. For while the artwork is unaffected by the seemingly inevitable outcome of being forgotten since it physically exists somewhere, it also conjures forth a sadness and frustration rooted in the fact that the self in the self-portrait and the moment it depicts cannot be reached, it is only a shadow of what once was that cannot be interacted with. The realization of this, is what makes up part of the tension in the poem, since the poetic persona – Ashbery – is acutely aware of this but still repeats Parmigianino’s seemingly hopeless endeavour and attempts too to “perpetuate the enchantment of self within self” through his poem. Which, in turn, reveals how Ashbery compulsively repeats the evidently pointless behaviour of Parmigianino and every artist before him. The circle continues as they carry on trotting around King Billy’s statue.

4.3 The Signifier and The Signified in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*

Now that the repetition automatism at play in both the painting and the poem has been identified, I will describe the significance of Lacan's concept of the bordered relationship between the signifier and the signified present in the painting and in the poem. Lacan's core issue with the nature of the signifier, corresponds with Ashbery's problems with representation in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. They are both centred around the inadequacy of representation, on how the signifier or representation is "by nature symbol only of an absence" (Lacan, 1972: 54). For Lacan, this inadequacy is best seen in language. Language shapes humans' perception of the external and internal world, but in essence language as signifier is insufficient, and cannot truly give justice to what it is supposed to signify. The apple in our head can never be quite the same as the apple that lies on our kitchen table. This is not necessarily just because of the materiality of the apple on our table, but rather because of how the word "apple" is not enough to encapsulate the particular shape, taste or texture of this specific apple whilst simultaneously relating it to other distinct apples; and as a result we can't truly perceive the particularities of the apple on our table, it is simply an apple. I am now entering the realm of the controversial linguistic-relativity hypothesis, that argues that a language's structure and words shapes its speakers' view of the world. The theory is often supported by the cliché that Inuit have more than 100 words for snow, which has later become known as the "Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax" because of an article published by Geoffrey K. Pullum (1989) with the same name on the inaccuracy of this cliché. However, later studies on the subject, and particularly one done in 2010 by Igor Krupnik and Ludger Müller-Wille, has supported the fact that Inuit languages have many more root words for snow than, for instance, English. This tells us that Inuit peoples have/had a closer relationship to and a broader understanding of snow and ice. I digress, but the fact of the matter is that we could make up hundreds of more words for apple in an attempt to more accurately encapsulate the particularities of specific apples, but the very nature of language and the inherent differences between our internal worlds and the external world restricts our ability to truly and fully represent being. This is also a theme in Ashbery's *Self-Portrait*, for in Parmigianino's realistic representation of himself and the mirror, the poetic persona sees the self-portrait only as a symbol of the absence of the particularities of Parmigianino's "self" and of the moment he tried to capture. In an attempt to fill this absence, Ashbery projects himself onto the canvas, to provide it with a more fulfilled sense of self. By envisioning the entirety of

the moment, of the thoughts that might have occurred in Parmigianino's mind whilst making the self-portrait, Ashbery inadvertently reveals his own desire for art to be able to represent being. In terms of psychoanalysis, this would align with Lacan's belief that the effects that the signifier has on the subject, constitute their unconscious. The unconscious in Ashbery's poem is perhaps most clearly revealed in the persona's realization of the "secret" of the painting.

The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts,
Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,
Has no secret, is small, and it fits
Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention. (*SP*, 249)

The persona acknowledges that what he sees in the painting is in fact not a soul, not a complete "self", and since the persona treats Parmigianino's painting as a metaphorical convex mirror in his poem, this observation about the painting is in effect also an observation about himself and his poem. The "self" or the "soul" that Ashbery possesses and that he attempts to capture in his poem by looking at the painting, suffers from the same artificiality as the one he sees in the painting. Lee Edelman, in his *The Pose of Imposture: Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"*, reads the quotation from the poem above in the following manner:

The text purports to reveal here that the secret of Parmigianino's painting, like its own secret and, indeed, like the secret of all representations of the self – including those acts of consciousness through which the self is represented to itself *as* itself – lies in the absence, or more precisely, in the fictionality of any autonomous self. The "hot tears" provoked by the knowledge that the painting contains no "soul," no living presence, bemoans as well the absence or hollow at the centre of all selfhood, the difference or division that Lacan, for instance, in his "Mirror Stage," sees as constitutive of identity itself. Thus when the poet undertakes to portray himself – and in so doing to render himself both subject and object at once – he recognizes the impossibility of defining any indivisible identity. (Edelman, 1986: 101)

The "Mirror Stage" that Edelman mentions, refers to Lacan's perhaps most famous theoretical contribution. His theory surrounding the "Mirror stage" has come to encompass a lot of different things. In its early years, in its conception around the 1930's, the theory was used to

describe a moment in children's development where they for the first time recognize themselves as a viewable object outside of themselves, an idea which he presented in his unpublished 1936 paper *Théorie d'un moment structurant et génétique de la constitution de la réalité, conçu en relation avec l'expérience et la doctrine psychanalytique*. But this moment, he argues in his 1949 speech (which he read at the Sixteenth International Congress of Psychoanalysis): *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function* (Lacan, 2002), leads to "an alienating identity that will mark his [the child's] entire mental development with its rigid structure" (97). The rigid structure here, refers to his concept of the "Fragmented body", where one's sense of self suddenly consists of both a self that is an object and a self that is the subject. I won't digress further into Lacan's theory of "The Mirror Stage", but it is relevant to *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* and Edelman's interpretation of it, since the poem is concerned with the idea of the fragmented self, as the poetic persona seems to recognize this division between self as object and self as subject in both himself and in Parmigianino's self-portrait. The disturbance between the thinking subject and the self as viewable object emphasizes the objective self's inadequacy as signifier for the thinking subject. The body is not enough to encompass, signify and represent all that the self is, and in this line of thought is where the root of the realism of Parmigianino's self-portrait lies.

4.4 The Significance of the Mirror

I have, throughout this thesis, paid a lot of attention to the ways in which Ashbery treats Parmigianino's painting as a metaphorical mirror, but I have yet to address the reasons why it serves this function for the poetic persona. In Parmigianino's self-portrait, the distortions caused by the mirror disturbs the realism of the portrait, since these distortions makes the artist's hand disproportionate to his body, and the room bend in unnatural ways. Parmigianino circumvents this issue by framing his painting in a way that made it look like a convex mirror, which effectively explains his portrait, not as a realistic representation of himself, but rather as a realistic representation of a convex mirror. For the poetic persona in *Self-Portrait*, however, it is exactly this distorted rendering of the self that makes it an accurate representation of the self for Ashbery. Parmigianino's distorted portrayal of himself, triggers an unconscious anxiety in the poetic persona, that is fuelled by the realization that his own "self" is no more complete than the one depicted on Parmigianino's painting. It can then be said that it is precisely because of Parmigianino's distortions of the self that the poetic persona

is able to recognize a “self” in the portrait. Since the very idea of “self” is unstable and unreliable, in the sense that there is no single inherent and unchanging self within us. There is the thinking subject that resides somewhere unknown in our brains, and then there is a body that is unable to express and signify the entirety of the thinking subject. Additionally, the self is shaped and formed by our experiences and the conversations we have with the people around us that become a part of us “until no part / Remains that is surely you” (Ashbery, *SP*, 250). This idea of the absorbing and susceptible nature of our being, is further emphasized in the poetic persona’s frequent use of other people’s thoughts in his own discussions. He frequently quotes Vasari, Sydney Freedman and even Shakespeare throughout his poem, which shows how the self is shaped by others and the external world. In Parmigianino’s self-portrait, then, Ashbery sees a self that merges with his external surroundings, and where our internal world and external world “boil down to one / Uniform substance, a magma of interiors” (250), where the external world is organized “around the polestar of [our] eyes which are empty” (250). In essence, the convex mirror represents representation in both the painting and in the poem. The convex mirror distorts the object it reflects, which can serve as commentary on how all representation ultimately fails to truthfully mimic what it represents. As addressed in the poem, representation cannot truthfully represent being or capture a moment just like signifiers cannot encapsulate the entirety of the signified. However, Ashbery states in the second section that: “My guide in these matters is your self, / Firm, oblique, accepting everything with the same / Wraith of a smile[...].” (250). Consider the space between “your” and “self” here. The correct form is “yourself” but the spacing between “your” and “self” stresses Parmigianino’s ownership of his self and the persona’s insistence on the existence of a “self”. On a surface level, the self-portrait portrays a person painting a representation of himself by looking at a convex mirror that is not representative of how he looks in the real world, and his smile tells the viewer that he is content with this. This interpretation of the self-portrait allows us to see how the self-portrait can serve as the poetic persona’s guide for his own poem, since it encourages Ashbery to accept the fact that trying to accurately represent the self is a fool’s errand, and that the distortions that inevitably occur in representation should be celebrated. On a more symbolic level, the self-portrait can represent the subjective experience of a fragmented self. Interpreted this way, the distorted self-portrait can be said to be a painting where the subjective internal world of the figure has manifested itself in the external world. If there is no “true self”, and we are all just products of our environments, the self-portrait can be said to capture this experience of merging with the external world. In this interpretation, Parmigianino’s accepting response to these feelings is

what guides Ashbery in his poem. In such an interpretation, the inaccuracy of the representation is paradoxically also the thing that makes it accurate, since it manages to capture subjective experience in a way that even the real external world cannot. It can be said, then, that in these representations, like in dreams, “something like living occurs” (252).

4.5 The Breaking of The Cycle

Returning to the story of *The Purloined Letter* and Lacan’s interpretation of it, is the characters in this story also stuck in a never-ending loop, in a repetition automatism, or do we get the feeling that the cycle is broken at the end? To address this question, we need to look at what Dupin does with the letter once he obtains it. Before I pursue this line of inquiry, however, I will look more closely at what Lacan says of possessing the letter. He says: “In truth, it is a position of absolute weakness, but not for the person of whom we are expected to believe so.” (Lacan, 1972: 64). The position of absolute weakness lies with the one possessing the letter, because the letter loses its power as soon as it is used, and the loss of the letter comes with dire consequences. For the minister, the possession of the letter only gives him power because the queen believes he is a person that is capable of anything. This, however, is a double-edged sword since it only makes the queen more desperate to get it back, and since he cannot use the letter it is only a matter of time before it is returned to its original addressee. In the short story, possessing the letter is also a position of weakness since that means to adopt the queen’s position in the triad, and this “transforms him more and more in the image of her who offered it to his capture, so that he now will surrender it, following her example, to a similar capture.” (Lacan, 1972: 65). The inevitability of the letter’s return is also expressed in the title, as Lacan points out by investigating the etymology of the word “purloined”. Lacan says:

To purloin, says the Oxford dictionary, is an Anglo-French word, that is: composed of the prefix "pur", found in purpose, purchase, purport, and of the Old French word: loing, loigner, longé. We recognize in the first element the Latin "pro", as opposed to ante, insofar as it presupposes a rear in front of which it is borne, possibly as its warrant, indeed even as its pledge (whereas ante goes forth to confront what it encounters). As for the second, an Old French word: loigner, a verb attributing place au loing (or, still in use, longé), it

does not mean au loin (far off), but au long de (alongside); it is a question then of putting aside, or, to invoke a familiar expression which plays on the two meanings: mettre à gauche (to put to the left; to put amiss). (Lacan. 1972: 59)

With this in mind, it almost seems as if Poe himself participates in the repetition automatism present in the short story as he hides the contents of his short story in plain sight – in its title. Moving back to the question of what Dupin does with the letter once he possesses it, does he too shift his position as third in the triad to the second now that he is the one in possession of the letter? Does he hide it in plain sight? No, he hides it locked inside a drawer in his desk, effectively breaking the cycle of the repetition automatism. This makes sense from a psychoanalytic perspective, since Dupin, from the start, is the only one that recognizes that there is in fact a mirroring of acts (a repetition automatism) at play here (which is why he is able to find the letter), and - as I am sure many psychiatrists would agree - one has to be aware of one's own repetition compulsion in order to break out of the cycle. In Dupin's passing off the letter to the precinct lies an indication that the queen will also pass the letter to the king, since Dupin holds the position of the queen in the triad, and the precinct holds the position of the king. On the other hand, Dupin has already severed the triad and the repetition automatism, so this question remains unanswered. Finally, the distinction between Dupin and the minister/queen is also highlighted by the fact that Dupin was able to draw use of the letter (in this case he managed to gain 50.000 francs).

Dupin's severing of the cycle of repetition, begs the question if the same feeling of resolution can be found in Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. As addressed in the earlier subchapter, the repetition automatism in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* is a seemingly conscious decision on Ashbery's part, as exposed in the opening line "As Parmigianino did it" (247). From the start, the poem is self-aware of how it mimics Parmigianino's self-portrait, and as addressed in the previous paragraph, the awareness of one's compulsive repetition is the first step to breaking the cycle. However, even with its self-awareness of the fact, the poem reverberates a sense of hopelessness surrounding art's ability to truthfully capture a moment. However, even with the knowledge of this inadequacy Ashbery continues to turn back to the painting and the moment it tried to capture, and ends up attempting to do the same with his poem. The reason for this, is that in his meditations on the painting and life, Ashbery discovers the inherent value of art, which does not necessarily lie in its ability to represent

being, or to capture a moment. Its value lies in its connection to us, to our present and to our past. In the interaction between the self-portrait and Ashbery, Ashbery discovers truths about himself, life and art, that Parmigianino himself didn't necessarily attempt to convey. This is why Ashbery "go[es] on consulting / This mirror that is no longer [his]" (*SP*: 256)

5 Ekphrasis

Ekphrasis is a literary concept that dates back to, at the very least, around 800BC with Homer's eighteenth book of the *Iliad* describing, at length, the scenes portrayed on the shield of Achilles. The word ekphrasis means "to speak out". There are countless definitions of the concept, but in its most basic form, according to Leo Spitzer, ekphrasis refers to a literary genre that contains: "poetic description[s] of a pictorial or sculptural work of art" (qtd. in Krieger, 2019). Ekphrasis, then, can be said to be the intertwining of the visual and the verbal arts. There is a plethora of examples throughout history of reverse ekphrasis, where a picture depicts a scene from literature, but ekphrasis and reverse ekphrasis have different effects and is faced with very different problematics; which is why I focus solely on ekphrasis in this thesis. Even though the concept of ekphrasis itself has been around for around 2800 years, the academic discourse surrounding ekphrasis is relatively underexamined in modern times, but it experienced somewhat of a renaissance when it became the topic of discussion at the Tenth International Colloquium on Poetics at Columbia University in 1986. Since then, a decent body of academic works has been dedicated to ekphrasis, but not as much as one would imagine considering how prevalent it has been in poetry for the last couple of centuries. Why is this? James A. W. Heffernan states in his essay, *Ekphrasis and Representation*, (1991:1) that: "[t]his does not mean [...] that scarcely anyone is writing about the literary representation of visual art; it simply means that scarcely anyone is using the word *ekphrasis* to do so – even in the discussion of such paradigmatically ekphrastic poems as Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn." I believe Heffernan is correct in his assessment of the situation, for in all my years of literary studies, not once did the word ekphrasis emerge, even in classes about ekphrastic poems such as *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1820) or Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975). Which is strange, seeing as how prevalent it appears in the poetry of the last couple of centuries and seeing as how important it is for the discourse surrounding art. But what does it matter that no one is using the word ekphrasis in research about the relationship between the verbal arts and the plastic arts? For one, it matters because it makes it problematic to connect and find sources on the subject if we can't categorize and sort it under one specific term. Secondly, as Heffernan puts it (1991:2), "ekphrasis designates a literary mode, and it is difficult and if not impossible to talk about a literary mode unless we can agree on what to name it". Another problem surrounding ekphrasis is, as briefly mentioned earlier, that there are countless differing definitions of what ekphrasis is. Some are all-encompassing and argues that all poetry is

ekphrastic (Pardlo, 2011), some argue that ekphrasis is simply, “a creative process that involves making verbal art from visual art” (Scott, qtd. in Burwick, 1995: 217), while others are more restrictive such as Heffernan’s definition: “*Ekphrasis* is the verbal representation of graphic representation” (1991: 3). With all these differing and sometimes contradictory definitions it is no wonder that scholars steer clear of using the word ekphrasis while discussing the relationship between the verbal and the plastic arts; because this ambiguity only serves to weaken the term. Additionally, if you do choose to use the term, you will have to either state which definition you will use or make your own definition which only adds fuel to the already unnecessarily large fire. In the following passages I will attempt to tame this flame by going through and discussing the research on ekphrasis and connect these ideas to Ashbery’s *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, in order to map out the ekphrasis in Ashbery’s poem.

5.1 Gregory Pardlo’s *Framing Our Ground*

“All poems are translations; all translations are ekphrastic; therefore, all poems are ekphrastic” (Pardlo, 2011:722), this is the syllogism at the heart of Pardlo’s short essay *Framing Our Ground*, and his primary argument for the value of ekphrastic poetry for poets. Pardlo is a Pulitzer prize-winning contemporary American poet, writer and professor; known for works such as *Totem* (2007), and *Digest* (2014). His essay, *Framing Our Ground*, starts with a short summary of the history of museums and how their evolution into public state institutions lead to the production of more ekphrastic poetry as well as more notoriety to ekphrasis as a concept. Pardlo argues that, “[e]kphrastic poetry is once again at such a crossroads” (721), since the art of the museums is now available to the public online on our smartphones, tablets and computers; and a similar increase in both amount and notoriety of ekphrastic poetry is inbound. However, he states, “despite these technological advances, the logic of presentation – the logic of the museum – remains constant and continues to guide the design and proliferation of web-sites”, since museums have perfected the art of framing (721). He points out how the presentation of the artwork (lighting, organization, choice of room, and the artworks presented around it) has a direct influence on our experience and interpretation of the piece of art; and that is something the people who run web-sites dedicated to the presentation of art must take into account when choosing their layout. For example, exhibiting Van Gogh’s impressionistic masterpiece, “Starry night” (1889), next to Caravaggio’s baroque masterpiece, “Judith Beheading Holofernes” (c. 1598), would severely affect the viewer’s impression of both paintings, and shift the attention

from the specific genius of each individual painting to the great changes in style throughout art history, due to their difference in method, mood and general expression. Furthermore, Pardlo argues that:

Similarly, as poets we must be attentive to the ways our environment informs and conditions our experience of the objects that populate our poems. We must be attentive to the ways we as poets function like museum curators, practitioners of experience design and purveyors of cabinets of curiosities for our readers. The ekphrastic poet, that is to say all poets, must become an expert in the art of framing. (721)

The ekphrastic poet, then, must consider the surrounding influences and the emotional context in which they encounter the work of art, in order to truly understand their impression of the artwork and to truthfully represent the artwork in their poetry. Additionally, they must consider the same things within their own ekphrastic poetry. In what tone am I representing the artwork in my poem? What's the emotional context? Should I truthfully represent the artwork as it is, or should I omit certain aspects of it and project something else upon it entirely? These are questions that the poet should ask himself in order to become - like the curator - an expert in the art of framing.

Following this section, Pardlo starts to meditate on the idea and definition of ekphrasis. He questions whether or not poems about music, movies or dances could be considered ekphrastic, and even if poems about bridges and postcards too could be considered ekphrastic (722). They are, after all, verbal representations of visual and auditory representations. Additionally, he briefly discusses John Hollander's distinction between "notional" and "actual" ekphrasis from Hollander's *The Gazer's Spirit* (1995), where "notional" ekphrasis is poetry that describes something that does not exist in our real world or has perished over the course of time, and where "actual" ekphrasis refers to poetry that represents something existing and available in our time. Pardlo continues:

But the very question as to whether or not there is an outside referent to the poem reflects that inhibiting anxiety with which poets often contend. Just how much

license does poetic license permit? Can we concoct objects out of thin air for use in our poems? If we do, are we breaking the rules? What are the rules anyway? We are conditioned to value accuracy and veracity to the detriment of our imaginative abilities. But we can turn this shortcoming to our favor with the use of a simple, democratizing—though fanciful—syllogism: *all poems are translations; all translations are ekphrastic; therefore, all poems are ekphrastic.* (722)

The anxiety that Pardlo presents here, is the uncertainty of how much autonomy the poet really has, and how free one is to depart from the grounds of reality. Does Homer, when describing the shield of Achilles, break the “rules” by describing in detail an object that does not exist and is impossible to properly visualize? Maybe in the sense that the shield then lacks a referent in the real world, but at the same time the referent simply becomes the image that Homer’s own description of it produces in the reader’s mind; and that image is “real” too is it not? Pardlo can claim that all poems are translations, “because the poet “translates” into his or her own tongue the yet-embodied poem floating somewhere in the reaches of psychic space” (722). With this logic, the mind’s image of Achilles’ shield can then be said to be equally real as anything that already exists in our physical realm. However entertaining this line of thinking is, it also brings with it a chaos that perhaps overcomplicates both writing and identifying ekphrastic poetry. What’s more important about the authenticity of Homer’s description of Achilles’ shield as ekphrastic is the way in which he treats it as a real-life object - in the way that he emphasises its materiality by stating the substances it consists of. The belief that the object being described occupies physical space eases the reader and poet and grounds the poem to reality, or as Pardlo says it, gives the poem “*truthiness*” (722). Additionally, ekphrastic poetry is, according to Pardlo, the easiest type of translation to evaluate the success or failure of, “because we are comforted by the corroborating presence—real or imagined—the object has in the world” (722). We can easily juxtapose the descriptions and effects of the poem to the sensory experience of the artwork that the poem attempts to represent; and this is not the case for all poetry as poems more often than not do not focus on a single tangible object. The benefits of ekphrastic poetry, then, is that it is in some ways easier to analyse and measure the success of, as well as easier to write – since the reader and auteur gains an accessible point of reference. Pardlo concludes his essay in the following manner:

[...]writing and studying ekphrastic poetry helps us begin to develop the critical tools that give our poems a sense of rootedness and durability. In other words, although there are many profoundly complex and nuanced examples of ekphrastic poems, when we examine and discuss the foundations of ekphrasis in a workshop, we are addressing one of the cornerstones of lyric poetry: the image. Following this logic, we may start to believe all poems are indeed ekphrastic. (723)

While Pardlo's essay is primarily concerned with the benefits of reading and writing ekphrastic poetry for the poet, he also provides scholars interested in ekphrasis as a concept with a few key insights on the nature of ekphrasis. By drawing attention to the similarity between the ekphrastic poet and museum curators he gives the reader of an ekphrastic poem a new approach for comprehension, and that is to investigate how the poem frames the painting. With the concept of framing an artwork in a poem in mind, one can more easily identify how the poet uses the artwork in the poem. Is the poem some sort of tribute to the artwork, or does the poet use the artwork to merely underline the subject and theme of his own poem? Does he highlight the beauty of it and represent the facts of the thing, or is the artwork used as a contrast to or as an example of its similitude to the themes and motifs inherent in the poem? In Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, this gets more complicated, as its ekphrasis embodies all of these to some extent. The poem is a tribute to it in the sense that the painting moulds the poem and reverberates throughout the poem, and the painting is also used to underline specific subjects and themes in the poem, though these subjects and themes stems from Ashbery's viewer-response to the work of art. Additionally, Ashbery highlights the beauty of it and presents the facts of the painting, but this is considered "the pity of its smarts" (SP, 248) since it only emphasizes the painting's inability to truly represent being, which underlines its similarity to Ashbery's own poem. In this regard, Ashbery's *Self-Portrait* is likely one of the "many profoundly complex and nuanced examples of ekphrastic poetry" (Pardlo, 2011: 723) that Pardlo refers to. Additionally, Pardlo introduces new ways of thinking about ekphrasis and the "real" in his essay. He flirts with the idea that all poetry is ekphrastic, because they are verbal representations or, as he would call them, "translations" of the yet-embodied poems floating somewhere in the poet's mind. While this idea is used in the essay only to highlight the relevance of ekphrasis for all poets, since ekphrastic poetry forces us to think about "one of the cornerstones of lyric poetry: the image" (723), it is relevant in this thesis because it makes us

question and broaden our definition of what representation truly is. It also helps us see how visual art can be considered visual language and how Ashbery's conceptual translations of visual elements into verbal language allows him to mimic a painting in a poem, which I will get into later on.

5.2 James A. W. Heffernan's *Ekphrasis and Representation*

James A. W. Heffernan proposes another definition for ekphrasis in his essay "Ekphrasis and Representation" (1991). His suggested definition is that, "*Ekphrasis* is the verbal representation of graphic representation" (3). This definition is partly a response to Krieger's and Davidson's definitions of ekphrasis. Heffernan finds Krieger's definition from 1967 too broad and diffuse, and sees Davidson's distinction between "classical" and "contemporary" ekphrasis as problematic (3). Therefore, he argues that, "[i]f ekphrasis is to be defined as a mode, it needs to be sharp enough to identify a certain kind of literature and yet also elastic enough to reach from classicism to postmodernism, from Homer to Ashbery" (3). Heffernan, then, serves as a sort of middleman for the differing views of ekphrasis and helps clarify the concept by providing us with a simple yet elegant definition for further research. This definition does, however, exclude literature about texts; so how can we still consider Homer's description of Achilles' shield as an example of ekphrasis using this definition? The shield, after all, is not technically a graphic object, seeing as how it doesn't exist outside the text. The answer for this is that the shield is an imagined object with graphic representation, like the urn in Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1820). In other words, the actual spatiality of the object doesn't matter, as long as it is treated as an actual existing object in the text. For example, Homer does this by drawing attention to what the shield represents, for instance, the cattle, and the specific materials used in the representation (tin and gold).

Moving on, Heffernan distinguishes ekphrastic literature from pictorialism and iconicity, as he believes that pictorialism's and iconicity's purpose is to represent natural objects as they are, whereas ekphrasis aims to, "represent representation itself" (4). He also points out the frequent use of prosopopoeia -the personification or envoicing of an abstract or dead thing- that seems to inhabit the majority of ekphrastic poetry (6). Additionally, this use of personification is closely tied to the tendency of ekphrastic literature to ascribe narratives to

static works of visual art, and this tendency is, as Heffernan states, something that, “persists in the ekphrastic literature of every period” (6). Perhaps this tells us something about the different restrictions and possibilities of visual and verbal art, or perhaps this only tells us something about the human need of narratives for comprehension, but either way it is a tendency that allows us to link ekphrastic literature from the classical period to today and that, in itself, is valuable. Heffernan’s take on this is that, “the history of ekphrasis suggests that language releases a narrative impulse which graphic art restricts, and that to resist such an impulse takes a special effort of poetic will” (6), a “special effort of poetic will” that, as he will show us, Keats and Shelley mustered in their work. Before that, however, Heffernan argues briefly on how he believes that picture titles and art criticism should be included in a truly comprehensive theory of ekphrasis, since it is quite literally writing about graphic representation, and as such deserves a mention (7-8).

The remaining half of the essay is dedicated to an analysis on how Keats and Shelley use the ekphrastic traditions Heffernan has presented to reflect on the nature of representation in their “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and “Ozymandias”, starting with the former. In “Ode on a Grecian Urn” he identifies in Keats’ use of ekphrasis an anomaly in the ekphrastic tradition. For while Keats does indeed indulge in the impulse to ascribe narratives to works of visual art, he does so in an unusual manner. Take for instance the prosopopoeia of the lovers on the urn, the persona in Keats’ poem does not visualize the moment after or before the “pregnant moment” depicted on the urn, but rather envisions the frustrations of the figures on the urn that will never reach each other and kiss, “Bold lover, never, never, canst thou kiss” (Keats, qtd. in Heffernan, 1991: 10). In other words, it is not the characters that the figures represent on the urn that gets personified, but rather the unchanging figures on the urn themselves. Read like this, Keats’ poem can be interpreted as a commentary on the failure of graphic representation to truly represent animation.

When analysing Shelley’s “Ozymandias”, Heffernan points out Shelley’s ironic stance in the poem towards the claimed permanence and imperishability of graphic art (13). Shelley’s poem is about a traveller finding a ruined sculpture of the king Ozymandias with the words: “My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings! / Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and Despair!” (Shelley, qtd. in Heffernan, 1991: 13) inscribed on the pedestal. The irony here is self-

explanatory, but Heffernan points out another interesting aspect of Shelley's poem: "Shelley makes manifest what virtually all ekphrasis latently reveals: the poet's ambition to make his words outlast their ostensible subject, to displace graphic representation with verbal representation." (15). However, Shelley ultimately ends up questioning the permanence of writing too, since if we are to see the stone writing on the pedestal as a form of perished verbal art, then how is Shelley's poem written on paper supposed to last? With all this in mind, Heffernan concludes the essays with the lines:

Neither verbal narrative nor graphic stasis can fully represent being; neither words nor sculpture can make absolute claims to permanence, stability, or truth. In these two ekphrastic poems, then, Keats and Shelley use the verbal representation of graphic art as a way to reveal the ultimate inadequacy of all representation. (16)

Many of Heffernan's ideas and observations surrounding ekphrasis can be found in Ashbery's *Self-Portrait*, which I will in the following section point out, but what's more important here is how Ashbery challenges Heffernan's concluding remarks in his poem, as he reveals that the very purpose and value of representation does not necessarily lie in its ability to "fully represent being", which in turn questions the "ultimate inadequacy of all representation". Through *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, Ashbery more or less displays Heffernan's point that, "the history of ekphrasis suggests that language releases a narrative impulse which graphic art restricts, and that to resist such an impulse takes a special effort of poetic will" (6). The poem starts off, not by objectively describing the painting, but by providing the painting with an imagined universe - by giving it a narrative:

As Parmigianino did it, the right hand
Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer
And swerving easily away, as though to protect
What it advertises. A few leaded panes, old beams,
Fur, pleated muslin, a coral ring run together
In a movement supporting the face, which swims

Toward and away like the hand
Except that it is in repose. (1-8)

This tendency to animate the painting is a predominant feature of the poem and is the tool that enables Ashbery to use the painting as a springboard into many different meditations on divergent topics, while simultaneously keeping the painting as the root of his poem. This kind of ekphrasis echoes the ekphrasis at play in Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, in the sense that it usually animates, not the person the portrait represents, but rather the static figure in the portrait, or as Ashbery puts it: "the reflection [of Parmigianino] once removed" (247). This is perhaps best seen in the passage where he discusses the trapped soul in the painting.

The soul has to stay where it is,
Even though restless, hearing raindrops at the pane,
The sighing of autumn leaves thrashed by the wind,
Longing to be free, outside, but it must stay
Posing in this place. It must move
As little as possible. (34-39)

The persona in the poem treats the soul of the portrait as a living thing, as he imagines it hearing the outside world and yearning for it. This prosopopoeia of the portrait's figure releases the portrait from its seemingly inherent stasis, in the sense that it prescribes a living soul to the paint that is supposed to represent Parmigianino's reflection. It addresses the same frustration as Keats' does in his *Ode on a Grecian Urn* with its lovers forever unable to embrace each other, but where Keats' also romanticizes the blessing and the beauty of this stasis, Ashbery instead channels postmodern modes of thought in his poem, since he is more concerned with addressing how the soul of the painting is an illusion and that all representation is ultimately fake; as hinted at in the following verse lines:

But there is in that gaze a combination
Of tenderness, amusement and regret, so powerful
In its restraint that one cannot look for long.
The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts,
Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,

Has no secret, is small, and it fits
Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention.
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.
We see only postures of the dream,
Riders of the motion that swings the face
Into view under evening skies, with no
False disarray as proof of authenticity.
But it is life englobed. (248)

No matter how realistic Parmigianino paints a soul in the figure's eyes, the soul of the painting is nothing more than an illusion, projected upon the painting by the viewer. There is no soul and there is no life in the painting, only paint, and that is the truth of all paintings and art in general. This idea of the distance between reality and verbal and visual art is further elaborated in the lines: "But your eyes proclaim / That everything is surface. The surface is what's there / And nothing can exist except what's there" (249). In this regard, the ekphrasis in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* functions more like the ekphrasis in Shelley's *Ozymandias* in the sense that it constantly questions the permanence and the truth of Parmigianino's representation of his "self", and any "self" for that matter. Ashbery's poem, however, seemingly does not reveal "the poet's ambition to make his words outlast their ostensible subject, to displace graphic representation with verbal representation" (Heffernan, 1991: 15). For in this commentary, however, there lies an appreciation for the visual work of art that is more similar to the one displayed in Keats' *Ode*. Therefore, the competitive tension between verbal and visual art is not as prominent in Ashbery's poem as it is in Shelley's. Throughout the poem Ashbery draws attention to the positive aspects of Parmigianino's self-portrait, such as his realistic rendering of the eyes and the life-like lighting on his face. Additionally, despite commenting on how futile it is to try and capture a moment in time in art, and how "the locking in place" in art is "a pinch / in death", Ashbery still attempts the same apparently futile thing as Parmigianino did – to represent the unrepresentable. And in the act of attempting to mimic Parmigianino's representation, Ashbery inadvertently reveals that he sees an inherent value in the attempt. When Parmigianino one day "set himself / With great art to copy all that he saw in the glass", to represent a representation, he revealed a truth about all representation. That truth is that while "neither verbal narrative nor graphic stasis

can fully represent being”, it can represent the *experience* of being, more fully than even real life itself can. For Parmigianino’s absurdly large hand and the distorted room that’s organized “[a]round the polestar of [his] eyes which are empty” (Ashbery, 1974: 250), communicates a truth to Ashbery about the “self” that even the “pregnant moment”, that the self-portrait attempts to capture, could not communicate even if we were there to witness it. This is what is revealed to the reader through Ashbery’s representation of Parmigianino’s representation of the mirror’s representation of the self. The large hand protects and hides the self’s creation of the self, and the distorted room reveals how the self merges with the external world. For while each layer of representation further detaches it from reality (since it has to abide by the rules of its own medium), these layers also add a new layer of truth to the object they represent. The new layers of truth that these layers of representation add to the “self” that they are attempting to represent, is the truth of how the “self” captured on these artificial representations, is, in itself, artificial in nature. Hence, these unnatural distortions generated by all these layers of representation paradoxically only accentuates their fidelity to the realism and naturalness of the ostensible object – the self. This truth is not something that organically resides in the representations, but rather something that is reached, like Iser believes and as Ashbery displays in his viewer-response to Parmigianino’s self-portrait, in the interaction between reader/viewer and the work of art.

6 The Divide Between Visual and Verbal Art

We've now addressed how Heffernan interpreted the use of ekphrasis in Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn* and Shelley's *Ozymandias* as a way of revealing the inadequacy of all representation in its ability to represent being, and how Ashbery challenges this assumption with his use of ekphrasis in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*; but one question that remains unanswered about ekphrasis is to what extent text can represent graphic art and vice versa. Heffernan's take on the similar struggles and problems of both verbal and visual representation does close the gap between the two mediums to some extent, in the sense that they are both equally distant to reality. But on a surface level, visual art and verbal art are too different in nature to be aligned simply by sharing the same weakness. Where verbal art consists solely of text and language that is transferred and played out somewhere in the reader's or listener's mind, visual art is an object that exists materially somewhere and that can be viewed presumably without the use of language. Additionally, each medium has its own set of rules, limitations and tools. How then, can ekphrastic poetry circumvent these issues and attempt to verbally represent the visual?

6.1 Ekphrasis as a Repetition Automatism

The repetition automatism that Lacan presented in his *Seminar on the Purloined Letter*, is one of the ways in which we can see the similarity between visual and verbal art, since it is present in both creative endeavours, and in ekphrastic literature we see this presence more clearly. For as we've seen in *Self-Portrait from a Convex Mirror*, a predominant tendency in ekphrastic literature is that the poem in some way or another starts to mimic the work of art that it represents, similarly to how artists usually attempt to mimic objects and scenes from the natural world in their works. From this tendency, we can identify that there is a form of repetition automatism at play in ekphrastic literature in general, similar to the one in Poe's short story and in Ashbery's *Self-Portrait*, between the poet, the artist and the subject matter. This raises two questions: how does this repetition automatism manifest itself in ekphrastic poetry? And why do the poets attempt to repeat the patterns seen in the visual artworks? I will address the first question first, by looking at two other 20th century American poets and compare their approach to the one we've seen in Ashbery's *Self-Portrait*.

Mina Loy was a British-born poet and artist that contributed to the launch of the modernist revolution in poetry in the United States in 1912. Loy was a respected and celebrated poet and gained acclaim from goliaths such as Ezra Pound (as seen in some of his letters to Marianne Moore) and William Carlos Williams (as seen in his prologue to *Kora in Hell* (1920)). She is perhaps best known for her short poems titled *Love Songs* (1915), but I will look at her unpublished ekphrastic poem titled *Brancusi's Golden Bird* in this section and compare her approach to mimicking visual art in text with Ashbery's. In Mina Loy's *Brancusi's Golden Bird* (1922), Loy describes Brancusi's minimalist masterpiece sculpture that became, as Loy puts it in her poem, "the aesthetic archetype" (2) of minimalism. The sculpture is, as its title suggests, a golden bird. The bird, however, is stripped of its most defining features, so much so that it is nearly impossible to recognize it as a bird without the title of the sculpture. Loy perhaps describes the sculpture best as a:

lump of metal
a naked orientation
unwinged unplumed
 —the ultimate rhythm
has lopped the extremities
of crest and claw
from the nucleus of flight
[...] —bare as the brow of Osiris— (8-20).

Like the sculpture, Loy's poem is also lopped of its extremities, with its heavy use of enjambment, lack of punctuation, and its concise use of words. Additionally, the poem also flirts with iconicity, as the frequent line breaks and enjambments provides the poem with aesthetic curves that mimics the curve of Brancusi's sculpture. What's interesting here, is that the sculpture borrows the use of language to realize its mimesis (since it is the title that allows us to see it as a bird), while the poem uses visual cues to mimic the sculpture, and in effect it mimics the bird that the sculpture represents. This is an example of how the verbal and the visual arts can come together and create a symbiotic relationship. Mina Loy's *Brancusi's Golden Bird* is a minimalist poem about a minimalist sculpture, that shows how the sculptor Brancusi and the poet Mina Loy manages to achieve the same expression in two different

mediums by using different methods of omission, and this displays how ekphrasis has the power to narrow the gap between the visual and the verbal.

Moving back to the repetition automatism at play in ekphrastic literature, in Mina Loy's poem we see how this repetition can manifest itself, but why is it present in ekphrastic poetry in the first place? According to Lacan, this compulsive pattern of behaviour is connected to our subconscious desires, so what desire can we identify here? As stated earlier, Heffernan believes that, "what virtually all ekphrasis latently reveals: [is] the poet's ambition to make his words outlast their ostensible subject, to displace graphic representation with verbal representation" (Heffernan, 1991: 15). To him, then, there is a conflict between the visual and the verbal arts, and some sort of inferiority complex plaguing the poets; so by mimicking the visual artworks in their poetry, the poet essentially attempts to prove how words can achieve the same effect and express the same thing, and perhaps they might even succeed in surpassing the visual artwork in expressive power in the process. Another way to look at it, is to consider Lacan's analysis of the repetition automatism present in *The Purloined Letter* and see Brancusi's idea of a bird and Moy's idea of his sculpture as the letter – as signifiers. When planning to make a sculpture of a bird, Brancusi got this impulse of stripping away all of its extremities for his representation of the bird. When writing her poem about Brancusi's sculpture, Mina Loy repeats this pattern of behaviour by removing all the extremities from her poem. By repeating the same behaviour, they produce the same outcome, similarly to the characters in Poe's short story. In *The Purloined Letter*, one character hides the letter, then one character finds the letter, and then this pattern repeats itself. In the sculpture and in the poem, the sculptor and the poet omit the extremities of their subject and by doing so they manage to capture the very essence of their subject. It is through the mimicking tendencies of ekphrastic literature like this that we can see the presence of a repetition automatism in ekphrastic literature. However, this kind of ekphrasis and method of repetition is different from the one we saw in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. Mina Loy's poem relies more on iconicity in order to achieve its mimesis of the sculpture, than what Ashbery does in his poem. There is, of course, a case to be made for the presence of iconicity in Ashbery's poem, with its frequent use of enjambments and line breaks that could be interpreted as a visual attempt at portraying the distortions of Parmigianino's self-portrait, but that is either way not the primary force of mimesis in his poem. No, the main force of mimesis in Ashbery's *Self-Portrait* lies in his way of conceptually translating visual elements into text. In order for Loy

to capture the essence of Brancusi's bird, she manifested the curves of the sculpture in the structure of her poem and translated the omitting of the bird's extremities into the stripping away of words and punctuation in her poem. In this sense, Brancusi's Golden Bird was an easier artwork to visually mimic than Parmigianino's self-portrait purely based on its shape and its minimalist aesthetic. Ashbery, then, had to adapt in order to fulfil the repetition automatism. To make a "self-portrait" in text, he changed the meaning of "self" from the material self – the self that can be seen in the mirror – to the thinking self – the self that sees itself in the mirror. To capture this self, he, like Parmigianino, had to find a way of realistically portraying it. Where Parmigianino used concise brushwork to make his portrait look as life-like as possible, Ashbery used words to make the thoughts of the poetic persona appear as life-like cognitive processes of someone who is thinking about art and the self. In this regard, Ashbery's approach to translating visual elements into text is more conceptual than Loy's more literal approach, and this conceptual approach can also be seen and even explained in one of Ashbery's contemporaries' poetry – namely Frank O'Hara's.

There are, as we have seen in the previous passages, plenty of differing views as to what ekphrasis really is. Most scholars agree to some extent that ekphrasis is simply an example of verbal representation of visual representation, or a recreation or reimagining of an existing visual artwork through text. Laura Clarridge sees it differently though, in her thesis *Why They are Not Painters: Ekphrasis and Art Criticism in the Twentieth Century* (2015), she argues that ekphrasis is: "a hybrid genre between art and criticism that poets use to interrogate the value and function of images in their respective contexts" (2). This view aligns itself with Pardlo's view of ekphrasis, and underlines Heffernan's belief that art criticism should be considered as ekphrastic. Additionally, this proposed view of ekphrasis is valuable in the sense that it adds a bit of nuance to our understanding of it as a concept and as a tool. In the essay Clarridge investigates how a group of prominent twentieth century poets used ekphrasis to, as she says, "interrogate the value and function of images" (2). These poets are, Marianne Moore, W. H. Auden, William Carlos Williams and Frank O'Hara (who, as I stated at the end of the previous paragraph, is the one I will be focusing on in this paragraph). The prominent New York School poet Frank O'Hara was intimately connected with the art scene of his time's New York. Laura Clarridge states in her *Why They Are not Painters: Ekphrasis and Art Criticism in the Twentieth Century* (2015) that, "For him [O'Hara], creating art and being around artists was life, as these activities defined how he chose to spend his time, both

professionally and personally” (144). This appreciation and his interconnection with the visual arts can be difficult to identify in his poetry, for as Clarridge states, “that he often treated art in his poems in humorous, ironic or off-handed ways was actually testament to its grave significance for him” (144). O’Hara’s approach to ekphrasis differs from the ekphrasis that I’ve covered in this thesis, to an extent that makes it elude most critics’ characterization of ekphrasis. Firstly, O’Hara avoids describing the works of art that he writes about, which makes it problematic to call the poetry “verbal representation of graphic representation” (Heffernan, 1991:3). Secondly, as Clarridge puts it, “O’Hara’s attention often strays from the object and its semantic centrality to the poem” (145). This is also the case for Ashbery in his *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, since he frequently digresses away from the painting, but the difference here, as I have discussed, is that these digressions function as a way of mimicking Ashbery’s interpretation of Parmigianino’s self-portrait. Ashbery’s way of conceptually translating visual elements of the painting he discusses can also be found in O’Hara’s poem *Why I’m Not a Painter* (1955):

I am not a painter, I am a poet.
Why? I think I would rather be
a painter, but I am not. Well,

for instance, Mike Goldberg
is starting a painting. I drop in.
"Sit down and have a drink" he
says. I drink; we drink. I look
up. "You have SARDINES in it."
"Yes, it needed something there."
"Oh." I go and the days go by
and I drop in again. The painting
is going on, and I go, and the days
go by. I drop in. The painting is
finished. "Where's SARDINES?"
All that's left is just
letters, "It was too much," Mike says.

But me? One day I am thinking of
a color: orange. I write a line
about orange. Pretty soon it is a
whole page of words, not lines.
Then another page. There should be
so much more, not of orange, of

words, of how terrible orange is
and life. Days go by. It is even in
prose, I am a real poet. My poem
is finished and I haven't mentioned
orange yet. It's twelve poems, I call
it ORANGES. And one day in a gallery
I see Mike's painting, called SARDINES

In the poem, O'Hara refers to Goldberg's painting titled *SARDINES* and provides the reader with a narrative of its creation and compares this process to his own process of creating the poetry collection titled *ORANGES*. It's a nuanced poem, in the sense that it describes the premise of two separate works of art, the painting *SARDINES* and the poetry collection *ORANGES*, whilst simultaneously presenting its own premise through these descriptions. What, *SARDINES*, *ORANGES* and *Why I'm Not a Painter* have in common is how they "each juxtapose a title to a work that is seemingly unrelated to that title" (Clarridge, 2015: 151). In the poem, O'Hara starts off by creating an expectation through the title that he will explicitly address why he's not a painter, but what he ends up doing is exactly what he described Goldberg doing in his *SARDINES* and what he himself did in his *ORANGES* – he started with an idea then abandoned that idea and paid homage to the original inspiration for the work of art, which, in this case and in the others addressed, was through the title.

What this discord between title and subject matter creates, is a contradiction and a poetic "I" that is unstable and hard to pin down. For in saying that he is not a painter, and then describing and showing through his poem that he undergoes the exact same process as a painter that paints his painting, he emphasizes the close relation between the visual and the verbal arts, whilst simultaneously underlining that the two are entirely separate. The poetic persona is essentially saying that even though he and Goldberg share the same creative process, *ORANGES* is still poetry and Goldberg's *SARDINES* is still a painting, thus he is a poet and Goldberg is a painter. Additionally, O'Hara doesn't mention any of the visual elements in Goldberg's painting, except for the word *SARDINES* that's scribbled upon the abstract expressionist painting, which indicates that O'Hara attempts to express that words cannot capture anything but the words in visual art. The poem doesn't provide the static painting with a narrative, which as we have seen is a predominant feature in ekphrastic literature. But what this intentionally or not results in, is that O'Hara captures another element

of the painting in his poem, which further contradicts the point he is seemingly trying to make about the inherent difference between poetry and painting. Instead of giving the motifs of the painting a narrative, O'Hara shifts the attention away from what the painting depicts and focuses on the narrative surrounding its creation; and this is a prominent feature in abstract expressionist painting. In the paintings of Jackson Pollock, for instance, all the paint splashes and his drip technique reject the types of narratives people traditionally ascribe to paintings in order to make sense of them, and instead shifts the attention towards the narrative of creation. Each splash tells its own story. The narrative of creation is also present in Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, as he attempts to mimic the same process of self-creation as Parmigianino underwent when creating his portrait, the difference between O'Hara's and Ashbery's poem, in this matter, is how Ashbery achieves this by use of prosopopoeia and self-projection whereas O'Hara uses conversations and interactions with Goldberg to do the same. Thus, Ashbery's poem is more easily accepted as ekphrastic due to its more direct interaction with the painting in question. With all of this in mind, the only reason why O'Hara is not a painter, then, is simply because his work is not made of the physical substance paint.

6.2 All Art is Language

The problem with O'Hara's point is that if we are to accept that his poem is not like a painting simply because it isn't made of the same physical substance, we cannot accept Ashbery's *Self-Portrait* as a self-portrait, or any ekphrastic poetry as representative of the visual art that they represent for that matter. This simple and seemingly small difference frustrates the attempts of many artists to verbally represent visual representation. However, what Ashbery has taught us through his use of ekphrasis in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, is that the unification of the verbal and the visual arts can be achieved by conceptual translation, which leads me to believe that the same could be done for the differences between what visual and verbal art is made of. In many ways, which I will now argue, visual art can be broken down to visual language.

Paula K. Eubanks argues in her article *Art Is a Visual Language* (1997), as the title suggests, that art can be considered a visual language. She starts off by listing various definitions of what a language is, and then compares these definitions to establish the essence of language.

For instance, she refers to Lois Bloom who defined language as “a code whereby ideas about the world are expressed through a conventional system of arbitrary signals for communication” (Lahey, 1988, qtd in Eubanks, 1997:31). She then compares this to other definitions and identifies the common elements between them, which she states are: “signals and symbols with conventional meanings; a code or system that organizes the set of symbols; and the use of this system for communication” (31). From these common elements, we see that the essence of language is a lot like the essence of all visual representation. Visual art also employs symbols that carry meanings (for instance metaphors), the system that organizes these symbols is the paint and the canvas which is used to communicate with the viewer of the visual work of art. Eubanks perhaps explains this similarity best: “the symbols with conventional meanings are [...] the elements of art [...]” and “[t]hese are organized by a code, [...] or the principles of design in visual language” (31). These symbols and the way in which they are designed is what generates the artworks meaning for the viewer. The problem with this comparison, as she later explains, is that “[w]hile art has some rules, there is no system of correct application, no structure by which one can judge whether or not a work of art is right or wrong. Returning to Bloom’s definition of language, art may lack enough agreed upon conventions to be considered a conventional system of signals, and accepted as a language universally” (32). On the other hand, as she points out by discussing the counter-views (specifically the one of Arnheim (1969)) to this position on visual language, art can be considered superior to conventional language in the sense that it “comes closer to the original stimulus” than verbal language since it is linear, sequential, and one dimensional, by comparison (Eubanks, 1997: 33). This echoes Lacan’s view of language as a system that obstructs and limits our ability to purely and truthfully perceive what’s in front of us and corresponds with Ashbery’s own issue with language in *Self-Portrait*: “That is the tune but there are no words. /” he states, “The words are only speculation / [...] / They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music” (Ashbery, 250). However, if we look more closely at the verbal language and the visual language expressed in *Self-Portrait* and in the painting with the same name, we see that the languages are similar in nature, and that this language is not as restrictive as conventional language which allows the receiver to interpret its meaning more freely. By looking at Ashbery’s viewer-response to Parmigianino’s painting we see what words and meanings that the painting communicates to Ashbery, but as he himself states, “the words are only speculation” (250). In this regard, the visual work of art in the poem functions as a more loosely structured language than the ones we speak every day, where its meaning is more intimately connected to the receiver’s “self” (his experiences and his personality). This

too, is the case for the language in an expressionistic work of poetry like Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, where his use of personal pronouns is obscured and it is never truly clear what "it" it is he refers to... he leaves that to his readers to determine. Viewed this way, visual and verbal art seem to consist of the same kind of language, and as such it becomes clear that visual art can be considered visual language. This is also what Eubanks concludes her article with. "Art is a visual language", she states, "with receptive and expressive components, in which ideas are both spoken and heard" (34).

7 Conclusion

This thesis aimed to demonstrate how Ashbery's ekphrastic poem *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975) manages to verbally represent Parmigianino's painting of the same name, in a manner that in effect bridges our understanding of the gap between verbal and visual representation. To achieve this outcome, I briefly summarized the poem section by section in order to present my intended readers with my general understanding of the poem. By relying on Iser's reader-response theory I was able to identify Ashbery's own viewer-response to Parmigianino's self-portrait in the poem, which in turn revealed how his viewer-response functioned as a model for his own reader's understanding of his poem. By drawing on psychoanalysis and Lacan's theory surrounding the repetition automatism in Poe's short story and his idea of the bordered relationship between the signifier and the signified presented in his *Seminar on The Purloined Letter* (1972), I was able to identify the presence of a similar repetition automatism at work in Ashbery's poem, which in turn allowed me to identify the ways in which Ashbery conceptually translated or mimicked the visual elements of Parmigianino's painting in his poem. This later revealed that ekphrastic poetry in general has the same inherent presence of a repetition automatism. Additionally, Lacan's theories allowed me to delve deeper into the shared themes and motifs of the poem and the painting, which further emphasised my point that verbal representation and visual representation can express the same things and in similar ways. In the following chapter, I began my more general discussion on ekphrasis as a phenomenon and how it is shaped in Ashbery's poem. In order to map out its various definitions I looked other scholars' work on the subject and looked at their theories to identify the kind of ekphrasis we can see at work in Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. In Pardlo's *Framing Our Ground* I found new ways of thinking about representation that helped me think about Ashbery's conceptual translation of visual elements as valid translations, and that helped me gain a broader understanding of ekphrasis as a phenomenon. Later, I looked at Heffernan's definition of ekphrasis as "the graphic representation of visual representation" (1), and his interpretation of Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn* and Shelley's *Ozymandias* as ekphrastic poetry that reveals that "[n]either verbal narrative nor graphic stasis can fully represent being" (17). This helped me identify the presence of the same concern in Ashbery's *Self-Portrait*, but Ashbery's use of ekphrasis suggests that the primary value of representation is not necessarily its ability to represent being, but rather its ability to accurately represent the *experience* of being, which challenges Heffernan's branding of this aspect of representation as "the ultimate inadequacy of all

representation” (17). This discovery led me to investigate some of the ways in which other poets managed to capture the visual elements of graphic art in their ekphrastic poetry. In Mina Loy’s *Brancusi’s Golden Bird* I discovered how her approach for mimesis relied more heavily on iconicity than Ashbery in his *Self-Portrait*. In Frank O’Hara’s *Why I’m Not a Painter* I identified the same kind of conceptual translation of visual elements, and O’Hara’s seemingly contradictory refusal to unite poetry and the visual arts based on the substance that they were made of. This ultimately led me to find a way in which we could break down verbal and visual art into the same substance. By taking a page out of Ashbery’s book, I conceptually translated visual art into visual language by looking at the similarities between language and art.

Now that we’ve broken down how visual art can be translated into visual language, it becomes easier to digest that verbal art, which also consists of language, can represent visual art. But what is the significance of this unification? What can it contribute to future research on the subject of ekphrasis? For one, this unification is significant in the sense that it answers one of the inherent questions raised by ekphrastic poetry: to what extent can verbal art represent visual art? Or as Murray Krieger attempted to put into question in his influential book *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (1992), what are “the pictorial limits of the function of words in poetry” (Krieger, 2019: ch. 1)? The answer is that there are no limits since images are, in essence, a language. This is why ekphrastic poetry, like we’ve seen in Ashbery’s *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, is able to verbally mimic the visual elements of the paintings they attempt to represent, at least if we are willing to accept the conceptual translations necessary to realize this mimesis. Another side-effect of the unification of visual and verbal representation, is that once the attention is shifted away from their intrinsic differences, it becomes clear that each seemingly distinctive layer of representation adds a new layer of truth to the object or concept they are representing, which in turn can tell us something interesting about the very nature of representation. In Ashbery’s poem, these layers of representation show us how the departure from reality paradoxically ties it closer to the subjective experience of reality, which in turn makes it qualify as an accurate portrait of the “self”. Future studies could apply the same principles as I have to identify similar patterns of representation in the large body of ekphrastic work that we have available to us today, and in doing so might just broaden our understanding of what representation is and what it can tell us about art and our reality.

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