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in a Convex Mirror'***

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The mirrors in Elizabeth Bishop's "The Gentleman of Shalott" and John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" reflect more than the objects deliberately described. Through the use of mirrors and subtle optical imagery, Bishop and Ashbery question the realities of objects presented in their poems. Both poets refer to earlier works of art that, in themselves, refer to mirrors and perception. For Bishop, Tennyson's line from "The Lady of Shalot," "The mirror cracked from side to side," provides a loose framework for her poem, borrowing the mirror image and poem's title with a change of gender. For Ashbery, a small and relatively obscure sixteenth-century self-portrait by Francesco Parmigianino—painted as if it were the reflective surface of a circular convex mirror—provides the visual image and basis for the poem (Stamelman 607).

Both Bishop's and Ashbery's optical terminology suggest not only that they are aware of the visual element in their poems, but that they actively pursue this element. They refer to mirrors, for example, with terms correlating with historical science's labeling of a mirror. Bishop calls the mirror a "looking-glass" (10), which not only doubly reinforces the mirror's visual role, but also is the term used by Descartes, de Fermat, and other historic scientists of optics to describe a mirror. Ashbery similarly acknowledges the historical roots of a mirror, as he, too, uses the term "looking glass" (75). Additionally, he describes words to be mere "speculation"—seemingly without scientific grounding or proof—but adds a line to explain its usage and etymology: "From the Latin *speculum*, mirror" (69). This reference to the speculation of his words, just as the mirrored reflection could be considered speculative or a mere reflection, begins Ashbery's complex

introspection and questioning of reality presented in the poem. Ashbery later makes direct reference to the historical science of optics when he lists three elements of the Parmigianino painting, evident to him beyond the pinpoint smile of the portrait and “all [Parmigianino] saw in the glass”:

.... In the circle of your intentions certain spars

Remain that perpetuate the enchantment of self with self:

Eyebeams, muslin, coral

(72)

Along with the physical material of muslin and a coral ring, Ashbery lists “Eyebeams,” which could be viewed not only as physical “old beams” in the painting, but as the translated Greek term for the method of vision. Early Greek thinkers, including Plato and Euclid, believed that light rays emanate from the eye and intercept external objects, which are only then seen by the observer (Wade 16). Ashbery seems to acknowledge this theory again in the poem, when he describes the soul as “swim[ming] out through the eyes” (68). Ashbery’s inclusion of eyebeams within the painting could be viewed as a simultaneous nod to the early optical thinkers, as well as to the modern knowledge that light travels from the seen object to the eye, as the “eyebeams” originate in the object, the painting. Similarly, Bishop intertwines scientific theory with her depiction of the mirror. Concerning the geometrical placement of the gentleman in front or in back of the mirror, she comments, “There’s little margin for error, / but there’s no proof, either”(10)—aligning the man with the mirror in terms of a precise yet unproven science, with its minimal margin of error and demand for proof.

In both poems, the subject is affected by the properties of perspective. The description of the relationship of the subject to the mirror reveals the poets’ awareness of laws of optics. In “The Gentleman of Shalott,” Bishop describes the glass, or mirror, as stretching down the middle of the man, or more precisely, down his “edge,” which reflects the image as, presumably, a whole man:

The glass must stretch
down his middle,
or rather down the edge.

(10)

The “middle” line—or in this case, the “edge”—refers to the “normal” line in optics, which lies exactly between the incident ray (the incoming light ray) and the reflected ray that is reflected off the surface of the mirror. Bishop’s inclusion of this line is not particularly significant on its own, as this reflective law is quite simple to observe. Yet she includes further hints at her underlying knowledge of the science of optics:

But he’s in doubt
as to which side’s in or out
of the mirror

(10)

Bishop was aware of a further aspect of the Law of Reflection—that at least some part of the incoming light wave remains in the same medium. In other words, the reflected light wave differs slightly from the incoming light wave, so the object’s appearance in the mirror does not retain the same amount of light or clarity as the actual object. This phenomenon results in “spherical aberration” in mirrors and lenses—an effect that limits the clarity and sharpness of the images that are formed by the mirror (Wade 49). This phenomenon explains why Bishop used the words “in” and “out” to describe sides, rather than the more common “right” or “left.” She is most likely referring to the actual light waves coming in or going out from the mirror’s surface. Bishop further refers to the clarity of the actual object

with its reflection, describing the man as lacking the ability to see any slight difference in clarity or color:

Which eye's his eye?

Which limb lies

next the mirror?

For neither is clearer

nor a different color

than the other

(10)

This lack of visual discernment by the man begins the overriding mood of mere satisfaction or settling in the poem. The man seems satisfied with half a body, as long as the mirror doesn't "slip" and he "can walk and run." Yet as the Law of Reflection implies, the change of direction from a light wave reflected from a mirror causes changes to the wave that not only affect clarity, but color. Bishop therefore knows that one "side" of the man must be more clear and of a slightly different colour, thereby hinting that the man is not aware of reality, or worse, doesn't seem eager to discover this reality.

Similarly, Ashbery's apparent knowledge of convex mirrors enhances his poem's overall meaning. Even if the object is located directly in front of the convex mirror—"at a 180-degree angle"—the object in the mirror will appear smaller and farther away than it actually is, since convex mirrors include wider fields of view than do flat mirrors. Ashbery describes this phenomenon towards the beginning of his poem:

. . . . The surface

Of the mirror being convex, the distance increases

Significantly

(68)

Beyond his acknowledgment of the structure of the convexity, Ashbery seems to portray further awareness about the laws surrounding light reception and reflection from a convex mirror. In a stanza containing images of the circular, Ashbery brings up negativity and positivity. The curvature of a convex mirror, opposite the direction of concavity, makes its focal length a negative number. In essence, the length of the focus is defined to be minus the distance between the image and the point of reflection. Therefore, the focal length of a concave mirror, in which objects would be larger, is always positive—and the focal length of a convex mirror is always negative.

Moving outward . . .

. . . to the bathed, aired secrecy of the open sea.

This is its negative side. Its positive side is

Making you notice life and the stresses

That only seemed to go away

(75)

Ashbery, then, is identifying the negative with the “open sea” and “moving outward,” which would correspond with the negative focal lengths of a convex mirror that widens the scene and makes things look farther away. He corresponds the positive with narrowing the scene—“notic[ing] life” closer—as with a concave mirror.

Light waves, and their crucial position in visual perception, are also included in the poems. Bishop only indirectly refers to the effect of light—with her comments on clarity and colour, whereas Ashberry directly refers to waves. In describing Parmigianino’s image on the mirror, Ashbery writes,

. . . the density of light
 Adhering to the face keeps it
 Lively and intact in a recurring wave
 Of arrival

(68)

The image of the portraitist's face gains liveliness, or the appearance of reality, through the recurring wave. This wave could be read as the light waves that are actually reflected on the mirror's surface and produce the mirrored image—essentially as the only live or moving elements touching the mirror. Toward the end of the poem, Ashbery unmistakably refers to light waves in the sense of optics. In an apparent game of Russian roulette with a telescope, Ashbery places the observers of the painting as looking through the wrong end of a telescope. If a telescope brings distant images into sight, looking in the wrong end would seem to bring close images into sight. He writes:

There is room for one bullet in the chamber:
 Our looking through the wrong end
 Of the telescope as you fall back at a speed
 Faster than that of light to flatten ultimately
 Among the features of the room

(82)

Ashbery seems to imply that if the painting's circular scene of convexity were suddenly shifted to a different lens—that of a reversed telescope rather than a reflective mirror—the distortions would suddenly disappear into flatness. The large hand, in its self-aggrandizing gesture, would suddenly become restricted to a natural perspective alongside the rest of the painter's body. The immediacy of the

change in perspective is evident through the use of light speed: “a speed / Faster than that of light” (82).

This desire of Ashbery to flatten or change the perception of the unreal, distorted image in the mirror underlies a message common to both his and Bishop’s poems—that the self is not accurately reflected or represented in images. Bishop ends her poem with the quoted sentence, “Half is enough” (11), a hollow statement that not only implies that half is probably not enough, but that another half is missing. That the gentleman did not say it directly—he had to filter the quote through Bishop—also reinforces the absence of the true individual. In Ashbery’s poem, the painter is reflected in the mirror, then painted onto a wooden canvas, then reflected yet again in the poem. As Richard Stamelman points out, the painter’s self is a “triple reflection,” signifying the illusions that so commonly are perceived as realities. However, Ashbery doesn’t seem to be criticizing self-portraiture itself, but the process of this self-portraiture (Edelman 95). According to Lee Edelman’s interpretation of the poem, Ashbery is doubting the representation of the self, suggesting that any self-depiction will be distorted or convexed.

Through the use of optical imagery, both Ashbery and Bishop imply that a final focus of their poems is their own self. The reversal of the telescope could actually focus not on the painting, but Ashbery’s own eye. His following lines,

Chosen, meant for me and materialized

In the disguising radiance of my room.

We have seen the city; it is the gibbous

Mirrored eye of an insect

(83)

Ashbery places himself in the same position as the painter-portraitist. “But the hand holds no chalk,” as he is not a painter, and the painter is not the subject.

Instead of a painting studio, the scene is his own room; the convex mirror is replaced with the “mirrored eye of an insect,” reminiscent of the spherical “globelike” scenes mentioned throughout the poem—circles of scenes outside of Parmigianino’s circular painting. Bishop’s “The Gentleman of Shalott” could refer to her own self, as the female lady of Shalott is replaced with a gentleman only half viewed in his reality—correlating with Bishop’s private lesbian lifestyle (Jarraway 250). Yet beyond this gendered reading, the gentleman could refer to Bishop’s sense of self and her role as a poet. Instead of directly admitting her own perceptions of inferiority, she admits her shortcomings “in modesty” through a half-being, half reflected in a mirror, then filtered through her own poetic voice: “He wishes to be quoted as saying” (11). That Bishop and Ashbery chose to reflect themselves and their roles as poets through the use of reflective mirrors and optical devices reinforces the view that poetry is a reflection not only of the objects presented poetically, but of the poets themselves. Both Bishop and Ashbery, poets writing during and after the New Critical wave, seemingly attempted to disregard or hide the self-poet. The implications of encountering the poets’ selves through subtle optical imagery could change the way we view Bishop and Ashbery, their poetics and selves.

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First Response

This is a succinct and thoughtful essay on poems (one each) by Elizabeth Bishop and John Ashbery that focus on the poets’ use of images of reflection. The essay argues for considerable precision in the handling by the two poets of optical imagery; it describes a variety of purposes served by this imagery, and it concludes with the suggestion that, au fond, the poets use images of reflection in a meta-poetic way.