

Connection and Heterogeneity in John Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*: - A study in light of Rhizome Theory and within the canon of Postmodernism

Ashutosh Biswal
MPhil Research Scholar,
Department of English,
School of Languages,
Ravenshaw University,
Cuttack, 753002, Odisha, India.
biswalashutosh5@gmail.com

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore “connection” and “heterogeneity” in John Ashbery’s Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror in the light of Rhizome Theory propounded by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (inspired by Jung) and clinical psychoanalyst Felix Guattari. Parmigianino’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” is the main source for the poem with the same title. Ashbery’s reflections come forth by way of his critical appreciation of Parmigianino’s painting. The painting also serves as a vehicle for Ashbery’s odyssey of self-exploration and self-knowledge. This paper describes how the dimensions of “connection” and “heterogeneity” of rhizome theory play out in Ashbery’s Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror. While the principle of connection is about the kind of connections that will produce something new which is indiscriminate and non-hierarchical, the principle of heterogeneity is about what kinds of objects will produce something new. The primary object undergoes a transformation in Parmigianino’s self-portrait which is achieved through the technique of mannerist art which involves self-reflexivity and heterogeneity.

Key Words: Postmodernism, Rhizome Theory, Self-reflexivity, Mannerist art

Introduction:

Postmodernism describes a broad movement that developed in the mid- to late 20th century across philosophy, the architecture and criticism which marked a departure from modernism.

However, it can be described as a set of critical, strategic and rhetorical practices employing concepts such as difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum, and hyper reality to destabilize other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty, and the univocity of meaning. Among all this concepts connection and heterogeneity can be called to be as one, which Deleuze and Guattari call "lines of flight," or the tendency toward change. This is where something new is created. The tree, the author explain, has become the dominant ontological model in Western thoughts, exemplified in such fields as linguistics (e.g. Chomsky), psychoanalysis, logic, biology and human organization. All these are modeled as hierarchical or binary systems, stemming from tree or root from which all else grows. Unlike the tree, whose branches have all grown from a single trunk, the rhizome or the postmodernism has no unique source from which all development occurs and it refers to a cultural, intellectual, or artistic state lacking a clear central hierarchy or organizing principle and embodying extreme complexity: contradictions, ambiguity, diversity, inter – referentiality. Connection and heterogeneity can be called to be as a complete negation to the old fixed structure of hierarchy and a step which will produce something new.

Jean-Francois Lyotard gave a vivid explanation of expansion of new ideas in his book *The Postmodern Condition : A Report on Knowledge* as , postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities, it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. “Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy”. Paralogy is the ongoing creation of meaning. You say something and it inspires me to say something in return. Consensus, Lyotard tells us, is merely a stage in our conversation. What conversation can give us can be much more valuable than that. It can bond us to the process of a dialogue that requires both our parts, and when it works successfully it can awaken our minds to an unending expansion of new ideas. That's paralogy. (p.23, introduction – xxv)

Rhizome's entry to the world of theory began with the psychologist Carl Jung. His introduction to *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections* includes the following reference to rhizome:

Life has always seemed to me like a plant that lives on its rhizome. Its true life is invisible, hidden in the rhizome. The part that appears above the ground lasts only a single summer. Then it withers away-an ephemeral apparition. When we think of unending growth and decay of life and civilizations, we cannot escape the impression of absolute nullity. Yet I have never lost the

sense of something that lives and endures beneath that eternal flux. What we see is blossom, which passes. The rhizome remains. (p.17)

Though Jung paved the way with this quote, the figures responsible for rhizome as a term in media theory are French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (inspired by Jung) and clinical psychoanalyst Félix Guattari, who together developed an ontology based on the rhizome in works such as *Rhizome introduction* (1976) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980).

The concept of rhizome and its principles are clearly defined by Brent Adkins in his book *Deleuze and Guattari's A Thousand Plateaus A Critical Introduction and Guide*, which gives a clear understanding to the readers, the details of which are discussed below:

Adkins discussion begins with artist, philosopher and the concept of creation as:

How is it possible to create something new? Artists struggle with this problem all the time. For them it is a battle against cliché. The artist does not begin with a blank page or a blank canvas. The canvas is not white but black, covered with every past style, color, and shape. The artist's first task is to scrape away all the accumulated layers of cliché so that something new can be created. The philosopher faces a similar difficulty with regard to concepts. Thought is bound not only by its venerable history but also the good sense (single direction) and the common sense (stable entities) that it seeks to replicate. These strictures make the creation of new concepts very difficult. In terms of the continuity thesis, thought also has a tendency toward stability, and philosophy has tended to amplify this tendency rather than ameliorate it. (p. 22)

Adkins gives an analysis of the concept of rhizome what Deleuze and Guattari says in *A Thousand Plateaus* as:

They begin the opening plateau, "Rhizome," by calling into *Rhizome* question the very notion of a book. They want to write a new kind of book, not a book that reproduces what we already know, but a book that creates something new and is itself something new. A book that merely reproduces good sense and common sense reproduces the hoariest cliché for thought itself, the tree. The tree is a marvel of stable, hierarchical organization. Lines of descent are always clear, as is the process of differentiation. Logic uses trees. Biological species are organized according to trees. Linguistics is quite fond of trees.

Trees reveal the deep structure that lies behind the messiness of reality. Trees are so useful that it's hard to think without them. It is even difficult to conceptualize what thought would be like without trees. What is the opposite of a tree? For Deleuze and Guattari the opposite of a tree is a rhizome. We encounter rhizomes all the time. Potatoes are rhizomes. Grass is a rhizome. Colonies of aspen trees are rhizomes. Rhizomes do not propagate by way of clearly delineated hierarchies but by underground stems in which any part may send additional shoots upward, downward, or laterally. There is no hierarchy. There are no clear lines of descent. A rhizome has no beginning or end. It is always in the middle. All that is required to grow potatoes is burying the discarded skin of a potato. They simply begin again wherever they are. The key to the rhizome, and the reason Deleuze and Guattari take it up as a way of thinking about not only books but things in general, is that the rhizome continually creates the new. It is not predictable. It does not follow a linear pattern of growth and reproduction. Its connections are lateral not hierarchical. What this means for *A Thousand Plateaus* is that "each plateau can be read starting anywhere and can be related to any other plateau" (TP 22). Not only do Deleuze and Guattari want to create new concepts in this book, they want to enable readers to create their own new concepts by making new connections. The ideal book for Deleuze and Guattari is a single fiat sheet. On this sheet lines can be drawn that would connect various points in the text. These lines would be new concepts. They wouldn't represent or reproduce anything. They would, by virtue of their traversing the plane of the book, create a territory that would spawn other lines, other concepts, other connections (TP 9). (p. 23)

Brent Adkins analyzes the principle of connection in his book *Deleuze and Guattari's A Thousand Plateaus A Critical Introduction and Guide* and states that

"In order to make something into a rhizome, one must not make connections based solely on hierarchy, but rather experiment with new connections not predicated on hierarchy. A rhizome multiplies connections, follows the "and," pursues connections that transform it, creates something new. A rhizome has no up or down, right or left. It is always in the middle. What might we be able to do with a book, *A Thousand Plateaus* for instance, if we did not suppose that it must be read in the order it was written? What kinds of connections

might we be able to make by asking, What can this book do?, rather than, What is the authorial intent behind this book? The kinds of connections that we might make Deleuze and Guattari call "lines of flight," or the tendency toward change. This is where something new is created." (p. 24)

"If the principle of connection tells us the kind of connections that will produce something new (promiscuous and non-hierarchical), then the principle of heterogeneity tells us which kinds of objects will produce something new. The principle of heterogeneity proposes that not only should we experiment with connections when making a rhizome, but that these connections should be among wildly diverse things. There is no requirement that portions of one book be connected with other portions of the same book, or even other books. To create a rhizome be promiscuous; connect a portion of *A Thousand Plateaus* with a plant, with a feeling, with a song, with a mathematical formula. An assemblage is the interconnection of wildly diverse things. The example that Deleuze and Guattari give here is language. Language is not pure, connected only as a series of hierarchical signs. To see language as a rhizome is to see it as a heterogeneous mixture of words, things, power, and geography. "Language stabilizes around a parish, a bishopric, a capital. It forms a bulb. It evolves by subterranean stems and flows, along river valleys or train tracks; it spreads like a patch of oil" (TP 7). Of course, Deleuze and Guattari note, it's possible to treat language as a hierarchical connection between homogeneous elements. To do so, however, is to reassert the discontinuity of word and thing. (p. 25)

"We see that there really is nothing left to write about," says John Ashbery. Rather than demand to "make it new," Ashbery's poems often prefer to present themselves as the "late echo" of the poem's title. The way in which connection and heterogeneity works in rhizome theory, the same traces of it is found in Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, which signifies how Ashbery describes, Parmigianino a great Italian painter is creating a new form of painting having connection with the old school of the Mannerist movement of previous artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael. This was a style that was notable for its spatial incongruity and elongated forms. It played with the idea of artificial, rather than natural qualities within art. Parmigianino had a massive stylistic influence on Mannerism and sixteenth-century graphic art in general. He successfully managed to

combine in his own work the graceful and elegant style of the great masters with a new sense of movements and a striving for a sensuous beauty beyond nature. Many of his paintings contain within them mysterious ambiguities and conceal strains and tensions of the time.

Analysis:

Self-Reflexivity an act of creating poetry

“Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” is a work in which the poet examines, through the course of the poem, his own act of creating poetry. This is known as self-reflexivity, and it features prominently as both theme and device in Ashbery's poem. The work is very much *about* its own self-reflexivity. Repeatedly, Ashbery calls attention to the creation not just of art, but of *his* creation of *this* work of art. Additionally, he discusses that this is being done in other works of art as well, particularly in Parmigianino's self-portrait. In the Parmigianino painting, the artist calls attention to the methods by which he accomplished his artistic achievement by having selected such a peculiar format—a painting of a reflection. Furthermore, the mirror is not a simple flat mirror, but a convex mirror. The choice appears to have been made for the sake of artifice alone. Ashbery also notes that Parmigianino's is “the first mirror portrait.” Ashbery's own self-reflexivity can be observed in the statements he makes throughout the poem. Repeatedly he refers to his own actions, nestled as they are within his descriptions of Parmigianino's portrait and his reaction to the work. His attention wandering, he notes

“I think of the friends
Who came to see me, of what yesterday
Was like.” (71)

and then uses this as a bridge back to the poem. His memories of yesterday intrude

“on the dreaming model
In the silence of the studio as he considers
Lifting the pencil to the self-portrait.” (71)

He draws attention back and forth, from the painting, to his own life, and back again to the artwork that inspired his meditation.

Coming back to his own perspective, Ashbery not only comments on his own response to Parmigianino's painting, but discusses his creation of a poem about it. He speaks of the exact present moment of writing, in

“New York
Where I am now.” (75)

Ashbery emphasizes his continued desire to derive meaning and substance from art:

“I go on consulting
This mirror that is no longer mine
For as much brisk vacancy as is to be
My portion this time.” (77)

Ashbery's self-reflexivity is demonstrated through his fascination with *today*, with his attempts to depict the truth and meaning of the present moment, and his willingness also to portray his process.

“All we know
Is that we are a little early, that
Today has that special, lapidary
Todayness.”
“I used to think they were all alike,” (78)

Ashbery goes on: “That the present always looked the same to everybody.” He speaks then of being drawn back, as if down a corridor, toward art, toward the painting, wondering what “figment of ‘art’” it is trying to express, then suggests “I think it is trying to say it is today.” The expression of, and experience of the present moment is conflated with artistic expression when Ashbery observes that

“Today has no margins, the event arrives
Flush with its edges, is of the same substance,
Indistinguishable.” (79)

He also meditates on the failure of art to convey that which the artist intends, and in doing so calls into question his own ability to accomplish the same task. “Often” Ashbery says,

“he finds
He has omitted the thing he started out to say
In the first place.” (80)

In pointing out our “otherness” as a viewer of art, he emphasizes the existence of the reader of his poem, of the reader's perception of his own art.

Isolation and Connection

Ashbery quotes Italian painter and architect Giorgio Vasari's claim that Parmigianino set out to copy all that he saw, which was, Ashbery notes,

“Chiefly his reflection, of which the portrait
Is the reflection once removed,
The glass chose to reflect only what he saw

which was enough for his purpose: his image.” (68)

What Ashbery notices about the painting is that the artist in fact depicted only the distorted largeness of his own person (“the right hand / Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer”). The background, save for a glimpse of the window, is practically empty. The artist himself is the entire world, or globe of the poem, one that is organized

“around the polestar of your eyes which are empty
Know nothing, dream but reveal nothing.” (71)

The self that Ashbery describes portrayed in the painting has become symbolically isolated, by its own hand, from the rest of the world. The artist's own self-involvement has led to its isolation, Ashbery seems to be saying, whereas his own work of art, the poem, seeks to use art to identify connection, to the world, to reality, to a consciousness of the present moment. While Parmigianino's portrait is encapsulated and isolating, this very nature of the artwork prompts Ashbery's philosophical meditations on his own reaction to art, and his place within his own world, which, conveyed to the reader, is an invitation to do the same. Parmigianino's isolation inspires Ashbery's attempt to connect himself to *today*, to his life in New York, which he describes. Through his interaction with the artwork, and his understanding of the possibilities of the reader's reaction to his poem, Ashbery emphasizes both the isolating and connecting nature of art.

Mannerism

The term Mannerism refers to an artistic style beginning to be popular during the later years of the High Renaissance (a period of advanced artistic achievement) in Italy, during the early 1500s. Mannerist works of art were highly individualistic and featured distortions of

perspective and qualities that were artificial or exaggerated rather than naturalistic. Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* is itself an example of a Mannerist piece and Ashbery's poem has similarly been described as Mannerist for its own distortions of perspective: the reader is in effect viewing Parmigianino's portrait from Ashbery's point of view, which is shaped by his own intentions. Like Mannerist paintings which drew attention to themselves as artificial creations through exaggeration, Ashbery draws attention to his own work of art by examining his own act of creating it. It should be noted as well that some scholars view Ashbery's technique as a critique of Parmigianino's Mannerist work. While both pieces are works of self-representation, Ashbery strives to analyze Parmigianino's as well as his own methods of self-portrayal, thereby distinguishing his approach from Parmigianino's by his attempt to eliminate not the self-reflexivity of the work, but the narcissistic and limiting qualities he finds in the painting.

Many Mannerist artists, including Parmigianino, were keen to exploit and employ differing perspectives and conflicting spaces; they dismantled the Renaissance works that promoted a sense of orderly space.

Parmigianino was just twenty one years old when he completed this self – portrait and it astounded Renaissance Italy. This work clearly demonstrated Parmigianino ability to manipulate optical illusions for his own purpose and it immediately wowed the Papal court and gained him several religious commissions.

The Mannerist movement was initially a reaction against classicism, and the harmonious works of previous artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael. It was a style that was notable for its spatial incongruity and elongated forms. It played with the idea of artificial, rather than natural qualities within art.

Parmigianino had a massive stylistic influence on Mannerism and sixteenth- century graphic art in general. He successfully managed to combine in his own work the graceful and elegant style of the great masters with a new sense of movements and a striving for a sensuous beauty beyond nature. Many of his paintings contain within them mysterious ambiguities and conceal strains and tensions of the time.

During his short career, Parmigianino completed a vast body of work, including small panels and large – scale frescoes, sacred and profane subjects, portraits, and drawing of scenes from everyday life and of erotica. He is also credited with inventing etching and was one of the first artists to engrave his own work, distributing it through Italy and Northern Europe.

This technique of mannerism or mannerist art is quite similar to the principle of heterogeneity which Deleuze and Guattari discusses in the book *The Thousand Plateaus* where, to create a rhizome be promiscuous or non-hierarchical and connect a portion of *A Thousand Plateaus* with a plant, with a feeling, with a song, with a mathematical formula. An assemblage is the interconnection of wildly diverse things. Here, the painting or self portrait of Parmigianino is the primary object which produces something new, a new technique of art form that is, self reflexivity.

Review of Related Paper:

In 2004 literary critic, Harold Bloom in his book *Comprehensive Research and Study Guide* on “John Ashbery” has discussed, “Of the many contemporary heirs of Whitman and of Stevens, John Ashbery seems likeliest to achieve something near to their eminence. Yet their uncertainty as to their audience is far surpassed in the shifting; stances that Ashbery assumes. His mode can vary from the apparently opaque, so disjunctive as to seem beyond interpretation, to a kind of limpid clairvoyance that again brings the Emersonian contraries together. Contemplating Parmigianino’s picture in his major long poem, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, Ashbery achieves a vision in which art, rather than nature, becomes the prisoner of the soul:

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, lust it must stay
Posing in this place. It must move as little as possible.
This is what the portrait says.
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.

Whitman’s Soul, knowing its true hour in wordlessness, is apparently reduced here and now to a moment only of attention. And yet even this tearful realization, supposedly abandoning the soul to a convex mirror, remains a privileged moment, of an Emersonian rather than

Paterian kind. Precisely where he seems most wistful and knowingly bewildered by loss, Ashbery remains most dialectical, like his American ancestors”.

“The simple diction and vulnerable stance barely conceal the presence of the American Transcendental Self, an ontological self that increases even as the empirical self abandons every spiritual assertion. Where Whitman and Stevens are at once hermetic and off-hand, so is Ashbery, but his throw away gestures pay the price of an ever-increasing American sense of belatedness”.

In 1979, poet, literary critic, and art historian David Shapiro explains in *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry*: “From the beginning of the poem to the end the poet reenacts both a meditation upon the painting ... and a meditation on the unfolding of his own vital poem.” “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” is often described as unique in its ability to verbally convey the visceral, visual impact of the painting, rather than simply describing the physical details of the image, or discussing the manner by which it was created.

In a *Journal of Modern Literature* essay published in 1976, shortly after the publication of Ashbery's poem, Fred Moramarco comments that Ashbery is able “to explore the verbal implications of painterly space, to capture the verbal nuances of Parmigianino's fixed and distorted image. The poem virtually resonates or extends the painting's meaning. It transforms visual impact to verbal precision.” Moramarco goes on to explore the way Ashbery attempts to “record verbally the emotional truth contained in Parmigianino's painting.”

Richard Stamelman, in his 1984 essay for *New Literary History*, maintains that Ashbery emphasizes the differences between Parmigianino's act of self-portrayal and the way Ashbery represents himself in the poem. Commenting that Ashbery approaches art from a postmodern standpoint, Stamelman identifies Ashbery's position as one in which “painting and poetry can represent nothing other than their own difficult, often thwarted efforts at representation.”

Catherine Dominic is an author and freelance editor. In his 2008 essay “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” in *Poetry for Students*, Dominic explores, “the way the relationship between order and chaos, as portrayed in Ashbery's “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” functions as a parallel to the relationship between representation and experience. “The self-reflexive nature of Ashbery's “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” (its tendency to refer to itself and its own act of having been created) is a much analyzed feature of the poem. Often the focus of such studies is on the way Ashbery discusses both the limitations and possibilities of artistic representation of any kind. Alternatively, many critics emphasize the ways in which Ashbery

compares and contrasts Parmigianino's visual act of self-representation with the poet's own written act of self-representation. Yet the notion of representation functions in another way in "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." Ashbery uses the debate regarding the merits and limitations of Parmigianino's visual representation (and his own verbal act of representation) as a means of exploring, in a philosophical manner, the themes of order and chaos".

"Ashbery's explorations transcend a literary analysis of self-reflexivity and extend into philosophical territory. The notion of ideal forms is a Platonic one, as is the idea that our soul possesses knowledge, or truth, that we have forgotten".

Conclusion:

John Ashbery is an outstanding literary figure and a rare genius in late-twentieth-century American poetry. Critical and popular momentum for Ashbery's poetry culminated in 1975 when his book of verse, *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, won a Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Award, and a National Book Critics Circle Award. "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" is counted among the masterpieces of late-twentieth-century American poetry, and it is certainly regarded as Ashbery's personal masterpiece. The work is ostensibly a meditation on Parmigianino's painting, offering lengthy observations on Parmigianino's artistic technique and skill. It also delves into themes such as the nature of art, poetry, and artistic expression, and explores such philosophical issues as the nature of personal identity and the soul. Ashbery once said, "What I like about music is its ability to be convincing, to carry an argument through successfully to the finish, though the terms of the argument remain unknown quantities." Fortunately, Ashbery's verse is musical enough to withstand paraphrase, regaining the feel of an "unknown quantity" on every reading.

As we know an assemblage is the interconnection of widely diverse things. The fragments in the poem range from a variety of subject splinters and quotations of art criticism, and from narrative elements to an alternation between painting and poem, Parmigianino and Ashbery, past and present, spatiality and temporality, all of which amalgamate within Ashbery's masterpiece. This fragmentation is eventually extended to a philosophy of life. The universe itself is built up of "sawtoothed garments." Human beings, seen as parts, "clumps of crystal," are bound to their individual knowledge and experience, and as a result, are restricted in their possibilities and limited in their action. However, life is open-ended like the poem and the concentric advancement of days permanently expand a life, broadens its horizon and endows it with new experiences.

And this, in essence, is the life of the post-modern mind itself in our times.

Works Cited:

1. Adkins, Brent. *Deleuze and Guattari's A Thousand Plateaus A Critical Introduction and Guide*. Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2015. (22-25).
2. Ashbery, John . *Self- Portarit in a Convex Mirror*. Carcanet Press Ltd. Manchester, 1977. (68-83).
3. Deleuze, Gillies and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus : Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis ; University of Minnesota Press, 1987. (7-8).
4. Dominic, Catherine. Critical Essay on “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2008.
5. Harold, Bloom,ed. *Comprehensive Research and Study Guide “John Ashbery”*. Chelsea House Publishers. Philadelphia, 2004.
6. Jung, C.G. *Memoirs, Dreams and Reflections*. New York : Vintage Books, 1965.
7. Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester University Press. 1984. (23,xxv).
8. Moramarco, Fred, “John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara: The Painterly Poets,” in *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 5, No. 3, September 1976, pp. 436-62.
9. Stamelman, Richard, “Critical Reflections: Poetry and Art Criticism in Ashbery's ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,’” in *New Literary History*, Vol. 15, No. 3, Spring 1984, pp. 607-30