

SELF-PORTRAIT IN A CONVEX MIRROR by John Ashbery

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. It is what is  
Sequestered. Vasari says, "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,"  
Chiefly his reflection, of which the portrait  
Is the 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  
Glazed, embalmed, projected at a 180-degree angle.  
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. 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 a captive, treated humanely, kept  
In suspension, unable to advance much farther  
Than your look as it intercepts the picture.  
Pope Clement and his court were "stupefied"  
By it, according to Vasari, and promised a commission  
That never materialized. 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. 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.  
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.  
One would like to stick one's hand  
Out of the globe, but its dimension,  
What carries it, will not allow it.  
No doubt it is this, not the reflex  
To hide something, which makes the hand loom large  
As it retreats slightly. There is no way  
To build it flat like a section of wall:  
It must join the segment of a circle,  
Roving back to the body of which it seems  
So unlikely a part, to fence in and shore up the face  
On which the effort of this condition reads  
Like a pinpoint of a smile, a spark  
Or star one is not sure of having seen  
As darkness resumes. A perverse light whose  
Imperative of subtlety dooms in advance its  
Conceit to light up: unimportant but meant.  
Francesco, your hand is big enough  
To wreck the sphere, and too big,  
One would think, to weave delicate meshes  
That only argue its further detention.  
(Big, but not coarse, merely on another scale,  
Like a dozing whale on the sea bottom  
In relation to the tiny, self-important ship  
On the surface.) But your eyes proclaim  
That everything is surface. The surface is what's there  
And nothing can exist except what's there.  
There are no recesses in the room, only alcoves,  
And the window doesn't matter much, or that  
Sliver of window or mirror on the right, even  
As a gauge of the weather, which in French is  
Le temps, the word for time, and which  
Follows a course wherein changes are merely  
Features of the whole. 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 it is not  
Superficial but a visible core, then there is  
No way out of the problem of pathos vs. experience.  
You will stay on, restive, serene in  
Your gesture which is neither embrace nor warning  
But which holds something of both in pure  
Affirmation that doesn't affirm anything.

The balloon pops, the attention  
Turns dully away. Clouds  
In the puddle stir up into sawtoothed fragments.  
I think of the friends  
Who came to see me, of what yesterday  
Was like. A peculiar slant  
Of memory that intrudes on the dreaming model  
In the silence of the studio as he considers  
Lifting the pencil to the self-portrait.  
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. Those voices in the dusk  
Have told you all and still the tale goes on  
In the form of memories deposited in irregular  
Clumps of crystals. 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.  
I feel the carousel starting slowly  
And going faster and faster: desk, papers, books,  
Photographs of friends, the window and the trees  
Merging in one neutral band that surrounds  
Me on all sides, everywhere I look.  
And I cannot explain the action of leveling,  
Why it should all boil down to one  
Uniform substance, a magma of interiors.  
My guide in these matters is your self,  
Firm, oblique, accepting everything with the same  
Wraith of a smile, and as time speeds up so that it is soon

Much later, I can know only the straight way out,  
The distance between us. Long ago  
The strewn evidence meant something,  
The small accidents and pleasures  
Of the day as it moved gracelessly on,  
A housewife doing chores. Impossible now  
To restore those properties in the silver blur that is  
The record of what you accomplished by sitting down  
"With great art to copy all that you saw in the glass"  
So as to perfect and rule out the extraneous  
Forever. In the circle of your intentions certain spars  
Remain that perpetuate the enchantment of self with self:  
Eyebeams, muslin, coral. It doesn't matter  
Because these are things as they are today  
Before one's shadow ever grew  
Out of the field into thoughts of tomorrow.

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. Of course some things  
Are possible, it knows, but it doesn't know  
Which ones. Some day we will try  
To do as many things as are possible  
And perhaps we shall succeed at a handful  
Of them, but this will not have anything  
To do with what is promised today, our  
Landscape sweeping out from us to disappear  
On the horizon. Today enough of a cover burnishes  
To keep the supposition of promises together  
In one piece of surface, letting one ramble  
Back home from them so that these  
Even stronger possibilities can remain  
Whole without being tested. Actually  
The skin of the bubble-chamber's as tough as  
Reptile eggs; everything gets "programmed" there  
In due course: more keeps getting included  
Without adding to the sum, and just as one  
Gets accustomed to a noise that  
Kept one awake but now no longer does,  
So the room contains this flow like an hourglass  
Without varying in climate or quality  
(Except perhaps to brighten bleakly and almost  
Invisibly, in a focus sharpening toward death--more

Of this later). What should be the vacuum of a dream  
Becomes continually 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. Sydney Freedberg in his  
Parmigianino says of it: "Realism in this portrait  
No longer produces an objective truth, but a bizarria . . . .  
However its distortion does not create  
A feeling of disharmony . . . . The forms retain  
A strong measure of ideal beauty," because  
Fed by our dreams, so inconsequential until one day  
We notice the hole they left. Now their importance  
If not their meaning is plain. They were to nourish  
A dream which includes them all, as they are  
Finally reversed in the accumulating mirror.  
They seemed strange because we couldn't actually see them.  
And we realize this only at a point where they lapse  
Like a wave breaking on a rock, giving up  
Its shape in a gesture which expresses that shape.  
The forms retain a strong measure of ideal beauty  
As they forage in secret on our idea of distortion.  
Why be unhappy with this arrangement, since  
Dreams prolong us as they are absorbed?  
Something like living occurs, a movement  
Out of the dream into its codification.

As I start to forget it  
It presents its stereotype again  
But it is an unfamiliar stereotype, the face  
Riding at anchor, issued from hazards, soon  
To accost others, "rather angel than man" (Vasari).  
Perhaps an angel looks like everything  
We have forgotten, I mean forgotten  
Things that don't seem familiar when  
We meet them again, lost beyond telling,  
Which were ours once. This would be the point  
Of invading the privacy of this man who  
"Dabbled in alchemy, but whose wish  
Here was not to examine the subtleties of art  
In a detached, scientific spirit: he wished through them  
To impart the sense of novelty and amazement to the spectator"  
(Freedberg). Later portraits such as the Uffizi  
"Gentleman," the Borghese "Young Prelate" and  
The Naples "Antea" issue from Mannerist

Tensions, but here, as Freedberg points out,  
The surprise, the tension are in the concept  
Rather than its realization.  
The consonance of the High Renaissance  
Is present, though distorted by the mirror.  
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. The picture is almost finished,  
The surprise almost over, as when one looks out,  
Startled by a snowfall which even now is  
Ending in specks and sparkles of snow.  
It happened while you were inside, asleep,  
And there is no reason why you should have  
Been awake for it, except that the day  
Is ending and it will be hard for you  
To get to sleep tonight, at least until late.

The shadow of the city injects its own  
Urgency: 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;  
Vienna where the painting is today, where  
I saw it with Pierre in the summer of 1959; New York  
Where I am now, which is a logarithm  
Of other cities. Our landscape  
Is alive with filiations, shuttlings;  
Business is carried on by look, gesture,  
Hearsay. It is another life to the city,  
The backing of the looking glass of the  
Unidentified but precisely sketched studio. It wants  
To siphon off the life of the studio, deflate  
Its mapped space to enactments, island it.  
That operation has been temporarily stalled  
But something new is on the way, a new preciousity  
In the wind. Can you stand it,

Francesco? Are you strong enough for it?  
This wind brings what it knows not, is  
Self--propelled, blind, has no notion  
Of itself. It is inertia that once  
Acknowledged saps all activity, secret or public:  
Whispers of the word that can't be understood  
But can be felt, a chill, a blight  
Moving outward along the capes and peninsulas  
Of your nervures and so to the archipelagoes  
And 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, but now,  
As this new mode questions, are seen to be  
Hastening out of style. If they are to become classics  
They must decide which side they are on.  
Their reticence has undermined  
The urban scenery, made its ambiguities  
Look willful and tired, the games of an old man.  
What we need now is this unlikely  
Challenger pounding on the gates of an amazed  
Castle. 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:  
Nerves normal, breath normal. Since it is a metaphor  
Made to include us, we are a part of it and  
Can live in it as in fact we have done,  
Only leaving our minds bare for questioning  
We now see will not take place at random  
But in an orderly way that means to menace  
Nobody--the normal way things are done,  
Like the concentric growing up of days  
Around a life: correctly, if you think about it.

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.

The locking into place is "death itself,"  
As Berg said of a phrase in Mahler's Ninth;  
Or, to quote Imogen in Cymbeline, "There cannot  
Be a pinch in death more sharp than this," for,  
Though only exercise or tactic, it carries  
The momentum of a conviction that had been building.  
Mere forgetfulness cannot remove it  
Nor wishing bring it back, as long as it remains  
The white precipitate of its dream  
In the climate of sighs flung across our world,  
A cloth over a birdcage. But it is certain that  
What is beautiful seems so only in relation to a specific  
Life, experienced or not, channeled into some form  
Steeped in the nostalgia of a collective past.  
The light sinks today with an enthusiasm  
I have known elsewhere, and known why  
It seemed meaningful, that others felt this way  
Years ago. I go on consulting  
This mirror that is no longer mine  
For as much brisk vacancy as is to be  
My portion this time. And the vase is always full  
Because there is only just so much room  
And it accommodates everything. The sample  
One sees is not to be taken as  
Merely that, but as everything as it  
May be imagined outside time--not as a gesture  
But as all, in the refined, assimilable state.  
But what is this universe the porch of  
As it veers in and out, back and forth,  
Refusing to surround us and still the only  
Thing we can see? Love once  
Tipped the scales but now is shadowed, invisible,  
Though mysteriously present, around somewhere.  
But we know it cannot be sandwiched  
Between two adjacent moments, that its windings  
Lead nowhere except to further tributaries  
And that these empty themselves into a vague  
Sense of something that can never be known  
Even though it seems likely that each of us  
Knows what it is and is capable of  
Communicating it to the other. But the look  
Some wear as a sign makes one want to  
Push forward ignoring the apparent  
Naïveté of the attempt, not caring  
That no one is listening, since the light  
Has been lit once and for all in their eyes



And is present, unimpaired, a permanent anomaly,  
Awake and silent. On the surface of it  
There seems no special reason why that light  
Should be focused by love, or why  
The city falling with its beautiful suburbs  
Into space always less clear, less defined,  
Should read as the support of its progress,  
The easel upon which the drama unfolded  
To its own satisfaction and to the end  
Of our dreaming, as we had never imagined  
It would end, in worn daylight with the painted  
Promise showing through as a gage, a bond.  
This nondescript, never-to-be defined daytime is  
The secret of where it takes place  
And we can no longer return to the various  
Conflicting statements gathered, lapses of memory  
Of the principal witnesses. All we know  
Is that we are a little early, that  
Today has that 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.  
The gray glaze of the past attacks all know-how:  
Secrets of wash and finish that took a lifetime  
To learn and are reduced to the status of  
Black-and-white illustrations in a book where colorplates  
Are rare. That is, all time  
Reduces to no special time. No one  
Alludes to the change; to do so might  
Involve calling attention to oneself

Which would augment the dread of not getting out  
Before having seen the whole collection  
(Except for the sculptures in the basement:  
They are where they belong).  
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.  
We don't need paintings or  
Doggerel written by mature poets when  
The explosion is so precise, so fine.  
Is there any point even in acknowledging  
The existence of all that? Does it  
Exist? Certainly the leisure to  
Indulge stately pastimes doesn't,  
Any more. Today has no margins, the event arrives  
Flush with its edges, is of the same substance,  
Indistinguishable. "Play" is something else;  
It exists, in a society specifically  
Organized as a demonstration of itself.  
There is no other way, and those assholes  
Who would confuse everything with their mirror games  
Which seem to multiply stakes and possibilities, or  
At least confuse issues by means of an investing  
Aura that would corrode the architecture  
Of the whole in a haze of suppressed mockery,  
Are beside the point. They are out of the game,  
Which doesn't exist until they are out of it.  
It seems like a very hostile universe  
But as the principle of each individual thing is  
Hostile to, exists at the expense of all the others  
As philosophers have often pointed out, at least  
This thing, the mute, undivided present,  
Has the justification of logic, which  
In this instance isn't a bad thing  
Or wouldn't be, if the way of telling  
Didn't somehow intrude, twisting the end result  
Into a caricature of itself. This always  
Happens, as in the game where  
A whispered phrase passed around the room  
Ends up as something completely different.  
It is the principle that makes works of art so unlike  
What the artist intended. Often he finds  
He has omitted the thing he started out to say  
In the first place. Seduced by flowers,  
Explicit pleasures, he blames himself (though  
Secretly satisfied with the result), imagining

He had a say in the matter and exercised  
An option of which he was hardly conscious,  
Unaware that necessity circumvents such resolutions.  
So as to create something new  
For itself, that there is no other way,  
That the history of creation proceeds according to  
Stringent laws, and that things  
Do get done in this way, but never the things  
We set out to accomplish and wanted so desperately  
To see come into being. Parmigianino  
Must have realized this as he worked at his  
Life-obstructing task. One is forced to read  
The perfectly plausible accomplishment of a purpose  
Into the smooth, perhaps even bland (but so  
Enigmatic) finish. Is there anything  
To be serious about beyond this otherness  
That gets included in the most ordinary  
Forms of daily activity, changing everything  
Slightly and profoundly, and tearing the matter  
Of creation, any creation, not just artistic creation  
Out of our hands, to install it on some monstrous, near  
Peak, too close to ignore, too far  
For one to intervene? This otherness, this  
"Not-being-us" is all there is to look at  
In the mirror, though no one can say  
How it came to be this way. A ship  
Flying unknown colors has entered the harbor.  
You are allowing extraneous matters  
To break up your day, cloud the focus  
Of the crystal ball. Its scene drifts away  
Like vapor scattered on the wind. The fertile  
Thought-associations that until now came  
So easily, appear no more, or rarely. Their  
Colorings are less intense, washed out  
By autumn rains and winds, spoiled, muddied,  
Given back to you because they are worthless.  
Yet we are such creatures of habit that their  
Implications are still around en permanence, confusing  
Issues. To be serious only about sex  
Is perhaps one way, but the sands are hissing  
As they approach the beginning of the big slide  
Into what happened. This past  
Is now here: the painter's  
Reflected face, in which we linger, receiving  
Dreams and inspirations on an unassigned  
Frequency, but the hues have turned metallic,

The curves and edges are not so rich. Each person  
Has one big theory to explain the universe  
But it doesn't tell the whole story  
And in the end it is what is outside him  
That matters, to him and especially to us  
Who have been given no help whatever  
In decoding our own man-size quotient and must rely  
On second-hand knowledge. Yet I know  
That no one else's taste is going to be  
Any help, and might as well be ignored.  
Once it seemed so perfect--gloss on the fine  
Freckled skin, lips moistened as though about to part  
Releasing speech, and the familiar look  
Of clothes and furniture that one forgets.  
This could have been our paradise: exotic  
Refuge within an exhausted world, but that wasn't  
In the cards, because it couldn't have been  
The point. Aping naturalness may be the first step  
Toward achieving an inner calm  
But it is the first step only, and often  
Remains a frozen gesture of welcome etched  
On the air materializing behind it,  
A convention. And we have really  
No time for these, except to use them  
For kindling. The sooner they are burnt up  
The better for the roles we have to play.  
Therefore I beseech you, withdraw that hand,  
Offer it no longer as shield or greeting,  
The shield of a greeting, Francesco:  
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, an invitation  
Never mailed, the "it was all a dream"  
Syndrome, though the "all" tells tersely  
Enough how it wasn't. Its existence  
Was real, though troubled, and the ache  
Of this waking dream can never drown out  
The diagram still sketched on the wind,  
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. All things happen  
On its balcony and are resumed within,  
But the action is the cold, syrupy flow

Of a pageant. One feels too confined,  
Sifting the April sunlight for clues,  
In the mere stillness of the ease of its  
Parameter. The hand holds no chalk  
And each part of the whole falls off  
And cannot know it knew, except  
Here and there, in cold pockets  
Of remembrance, whispers out of time.