



## Concepts of Self and Soul in Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"

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### Abstract

*The present paper revolves around concepts of self and soul in John Ashbery's lengthy poem, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror". The elicitation of these concepts have shown that, despite being a postmodern text, Platonic concepts of self and soul abound in the poem. The analysis of the concepts shows that Ashbery juxtaposes Platonic concepts with postmodern notions of self and soul. The paper argues the result of such juxtaposition is leveling the hierarchies of traditional/modern in order to reach a state of balance. The methodology of the paper is both analytical and critical. It is analytical as it attempts to explain specific concepts rather than merely describe them. The critical dimension of the methodology examines the facts and theoretical concepts in the postmodern context of the poem. The main tool of this study is textual analysis and literary interpretation.*

**Keywords:** Ashbery, Concept, Self, Soul, Postmodernism, Plato.

### Introduction

The ideas of soul and self have always had a special appeal in religious and philosophical thinking. There are several compelling reasons for this fascination, the most obvious of which is that the idea of self is the basis of man's identity and man's life depends on soul. One's belief or disbelief in any one of them shapes the way s/he positions him/herself in the world, defines, and constructs his/her sense of being, and determines moral, social, and political relations. Despite the inherent appeal of the ideas of self and soul, the concepts are not simple, and they are fraught with problems. The controversy at the heart of the matter relates to the roles of self and soul in developing human civilization. Throughout ages, philosophers, theologians, psychologists, sociologists, linguists, and historians have tackled with the notions of self and soul. A glance over the history of civilization reveals the materializing force of Western development has pushed aside the idea of soul and given a corporeal base to the idea of self.

The argument of this paper is that, despite the significant changes in Western thought from classical antiquity through the modern and postmodern era, the belief in soul has retained its vitality and the idea of self has proved to be as slippery as the concept of soul. Under the influences of Marxism, Darwinism, Existentialism, Freudianism, and subsequent psychological, socioeconomic, and biological determinisms, the ideas of self and soul have been challenged, reformulated, and even discarded. However, the traditional concepts of self and soul have not perished away and they continue to exert a powerful force in the portrait that postmodern man moulds for him/herself. As a sample, this argument is to be investigated in a long postmodern poem, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror", composed by the American poet, John Ashbery.

Ashbery is back grounded by a culture that takes for granted the elimination of soul and the fracture of self in the postmodern era. By contrast, the present analysis of "Self-Portrait" evinces Platonic concepts of soul and self lie at the thematic core of the poem. These concepts of self and soul are extracted to re-appraise their powerful force in this poem as a hint to prove their inevitable presence. Moreover, the presence of these concepts along with postmodern notions of self and soul accords the whole poem a central tension to which the poem owes its dynamism. The detection of this contrast comprises the other objective of the poem.

**Literature Review:** Ashbery's poem, "Self-Portrait", has mostly been approached as his linguistic experimentations<sup>1-3</sup>. Jody Norton is among the few who have addressed the issue of soul in the poem. First, the critic contends "Self-Portrait" can "in part" be taken as "an elegy for the soul – for a time when the soul existed by virtue of its own Wittgensteinian self-certainty, its own assumption of self"<sup>4</sup>. Then she goes on to vote for its being an elegy for "the mirror stage – for a time when one lived in the simple assumption of one's own existence"<sup>4</sup>. The substitution of soul with Lacanian "mirror stage" signifies the substitution of soul with self. The critic does not provide how either self or soul is conceptualized in the poem.

The other critic to mention is David Hurd who takes the poem's allusions as instances that "prove" the existence and importance of "an absorbent self" in "Self-Portrait"<sup>5</sup>. Hurd further argues the poem's language is also absorbent like the self it presents<sup>5</sup>; he thereby concludes this poem is "both an immaculate instance of art telling the history of its own coming into being, and a radical manifestation of the self- (not other-) absorbed artist"<sup>5</sup>. Hurd later on privatizes the poem's portrait of soul which is

"sealed off from the factors outside it and so, by definition, incommunicable"<sup>5</sup>. The present paper attempts to give an alternative vision of the concept of self and soul in "Self-Portrait".

Since the paper claims "Self-Portrait" deploys Platonic concepts of soul and mixes them with postmodern notion of fractured self, the paper suffices only to these concepts. But before going to Platonic concepts, some points need to be made about the theoretical nature and notion of concept itself. Vyvyan Evans distinguishes between conception and perception and argues perception consists of three stages of sensation (the brain changes external energy to recognizable neural codes), perceptual organization (the brain organizes the sensory information and forms it into an object of perception), and identification and recognition (the brain brings past experiences and conceptual knowledge to interpret the percept). Perception is thus sensation-based<sup>6</sup>. By contrast, concepts represent schematizations, "formed by abstracting away points of differences in order to produce representations which generalise over points of similarity"<sup>6</sup>. Evans continues that such process of schematization is never static, "they continue to be updated and thus evolve as the human perceiver continues to be exposed to new experiences"<sup>6</sup>. Unlike percepts which are the product of on-line processing, "resulting from a stimulus array perceived in the 'here-and-now'", concepts can be activated during off-line processing, "they can be recalled in the absence of the percept(s) which may have given rise to them"<sup>6</sup>. The other feature of concepts is their being related to one another in a systematic way and form a structured knowledge "inventory" which Evans calls as human "conceptual system". Thus concepts constitute "theories" concerning a particular entity<sup>6</sup>.

As notified by Lorenz, Platonic concepts of soul arise out of "affinity argument" which responds back to the idea of soul's destruction after death. According to this argument, soul is conceptualized as being simple and indivisible. Being simple means it has no parts to which it can be divided. When something is indivisible, it is indestructible and immortal. Thus Plato contrasts soul with body. Body is perceptible and perishable, while soul is intelligible and exempt from destruction (Lorenz "Ancient Theories of Soul")<sup>7</sup>. This contrast renders soul as being unchangeable and immaterial (Martin and Barresi)<sup>8</sup>. Plato takes the soul not only as being "essentially alive" (original emphasis, Martin and Barresi)<sup>8</sup> but "a life principle, whose essential function is to animate the physical" (Martin and Barresi)<sup>8</sup>. In Friedenberg's words, for Plato, the dead body is only an image, "its essence is the soul"<sup>9</sup>. The soul gives life to an entity.

In the *Phaedo*, Plato attributes cognitive and intellectual features to soul. In this sense, desires and affectations of the body are controlled by the soul. It is much broader than the mind because unlike the mind, the soul distinguishes the animate from the inanimate. In his *Republic*, Plato sheds a great deal of light on the main features of soul conception. These

features are responsible for an organism's life, for cognitive and intellectual functions, and for moral virtues such as justice and courage. *Republic* attributes to the soul the function of "caring for things, ruling and deliberating (and all the things of this kind)" (Lorenz "Ancient Theories of Soul")<sup>7</sup>. But all these are given a moral base so that they become human activities. Hence, human attributes are caring for the right sorts of things in the right way, controlling oneself in a proper way, and deliberating about how to act.

Dividing the soul into the rational, spirited, and appetitive parts, Plato contends only the rational part survives bodily death. The reason is related to knowledge and truth. The spirit is attached to honor, recognition, and esteem by others. Appetite is primarily attached to bodily needs like drink, food, and sex. Thus *Republic* integrates all mental and psychological functions within the concept of the soul. Plato's notion of the rational deserves to be pondered here. Far from being solely self-oriented, reason for Plato has a basic moral load for it takes into account the welfare of others as well (Martin and Barresi)<sup>8</sup>. The last important concept of the soul in Platonism is its being ever in motion; he goes so far as attributing soul's immortality to its fluidity (Martin and Barresi)<sup>8</sup>.

Plato regards one's essential self as one's soul which is rooted in the changeless realm and ensures personal eternity. A glance over the history of Western civilization shows the gradual rise of scientism and scientific outlook resulted in the replacement of the concept of soul with that of the self. This is the point to which Martin and Barresi refer when they set modern physical science as the backdrop against which self must be explained. They explicate, "whereas for Plato, and then subsequently for Platonic Christianity, the soul is something intrinsically unified . . . in our own times the soul's descendent, the self, has become theorized as something that lacks unity and that itself requires an explanation"<sup>8</sup>. Introducing the self as "the soul's descendent" has itself a history, a summary of which would follow.

As notified by Martin and Barresi, European philosophers of the seventeenth century used to think about the self as the ancient philosophers did: "The self was the soul, an immaterial substance"<sup>8</sup>. By the end of the eighteenth century, the self had become a mind under the force of the new empirical human nature. The West's preference for self and its disregard of soul would logically enough yield much richer scientific scholarship on self as compared to soul. Self has been approached and defined from different perspectives, mostly psychoanalytic. As a science, psychoanalysis has formally emerged by the theories of Sigmund Freud. Freud equals self with "ego", the reason-based part of psyche which is always threatened by "id", the instinct-driven constituent of the unconscious part. The emergence of ego-psychology in the 1930s with its emphasis on the importance of context in the formation of self relativizes the notion of self.

While Freud privatizes self, his disciple and critic, Carl Jung, gives it a much more public domain by introducing the notion of "collective unconsciousness" as "the unifying principle within the human psyche" (Samuels, Shorter, and Plaut)<sup>10</sup>. In an era dominated by alienation of man, Jungian analytical psychoanalysis was not procured the way Freudian notions were welcome. For Jung the most important archetype is the self itself. As Martin and Barresi notify, Jung calls development toward the self "individuation" which entails "transcending all opposites, so that the various aspects of one's personality are expressed equally"<sup>8</sup>. In addition to the scientific mood of the time, the political consequences of Jung's concept of the self were also avoided especially that it did away with the rising sense of nationalism at vogue then. For the sexist and racist West, the implications of Jungian notion of self proved pernicious as it levels down the hierarchies in terms of race, gender, age, nationality, etc. and brings unites human soul with the Infinite.

In Martin and Barresi's observation, the occurrence of World War I and II hit a death blow to the notion of soul and contextualized the concept of self and thereby identity. By this time, soul has already been exiled, regarded as outmoded like religion. Self faced a drastic fracture and got multiplied; hence, there emerged social self, political self, economic self, cultural self, religious self, etc. Identity, ego, conscious, and unconsciousness were given firm roots in the context, the corporeal body-politic, in which the individual got trapped<sup>8</sup>. The post structural psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, reformulates man's unconsciousness as "linguistic construct" and his contemporaneous thinker, Michel Foucault, sees man entangled in the discursive field from which s/he sees no way out. Self is now no more given even a relative sense of freedom and is instead defined and formulated by "technologies of self". Foucault concentrates his studies on the overlap and interactions between "techniques of domination" and "techniques of self" and argues one has to take into account "the points where the techniques of self are integrated into structures of coercion or domination". He further adds, "The contact point, where the individuals are driven [and known] by others is fled to the way they conduct themselves [and know themselves]. It is what we can call, I think, government" (Foucault)<sup>11</sup>.

Against such a backdrop, there gradually arises a trend toward the long-forgotten soul. Berke and Schneider aptly define self as the subject (agent, or I) and object (or me) of activity and focus on conscious experience<sup>12</sup>. However, when they come to discuss the relation between self and soul, they draw upon Schneider's personal experience of near-death accident in 1973 and thereupon conclude the overlap between the domains of the two<sup>12</sup>. For them, soul is "one's primary, undifferentiated, potential . . . the central, invigorating core of one's existence"<sup>12</sup>. Their view of soul as the converging point between personal consciousness with cosmic consciousness<sup>12</sup> sounds mystical and differs from Jungians' approach which disregards the non-humans. However, Berke and Schneider do not address the role of body in self-soul relation.

Mary Whiton Calkins defines psychology as "science of self"<sup>13</sup> and attempts painstakingly to discuss the nature of self. She views self distinct from body, but related to it<sup>13</sup>. Following Dr. Judd, she agrees to take self as "the center of all possible forms of relationship [. . .] to other selves, to the physical world," as it is featured by "consciousness"<sup>12</sup>. She goes on to enumerate certain features of self. For her, self is persistent in direct consciousness of one's identity as "the same ego then as now"<sup>12</sup>. Secondly, self is inclusive of ideas, functions, and experiences<sup>13</sup>. Thirdly, self is unique as "individualizing consciousness and . . . a distinguishing character of certain experiences, notably of emotion and will"<sup>13</sup>. The fourth fundamental feature of self is its relatedness, that is, self-other relation. We believe Calkins's scientific gesture to the issue of self suffers its own delimitations, as self, ego, identity, or consciousness cannot be easily analyzed in a scientific way, detached from the scientist. Psychology, in her own words, deals with "the concept of *immediate experience*" (original emphasis; Calkins)<sup>13</sup> and anyone's "immediate experience" may be exposed to others' disavowal. Thus there runs an ironical tone in her void scientific attempt to grasp the concept of self. Modernist and postmodernist artists have portrayed figures and characters that particularly lack the fundamental characteristics she enumerates for self, namely, persistency, inclusiveness, and uniqueness. Only the last feature, relatedness of self, has not been entirely disavowed. While in self-other relations, she secures for self sort of sense of autonomy, postmodernists deprive self of this and enchain it to its milieu.

In another essay titled "Self and Soul", Calkins compares the concept of self with the doctrine of soul as presented by seventeenth-and eighteenth-century philosophers. She draws on the philosophical notions of Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, and Leibniz to attribute the same four features of self to soul, and she takes on herself the task of avowing "boldly the partial identity of the concept of self with the Cartesian and Berkeleian conception of spiritual substance"<sup>13</sup>. Then she refers to two main points of difference between soul and self; for her, soul is subordinated to body and it is "needlessly empty and abstract"<sup>13</sup>. The implication of soul being subordinated to body is the degradation of soul with respect to body. Soul's being "needlessly" empty and abstract signifies the writer's contemptuous view on the concept of soul provided by traditionalists. At the end, she implicitly justifies her preference for modern personalism based on self over traditional doctrine of soul. She refers to two significant defects of the concept of soul, stating the traditional doctrine conceives soul "either after a material analogy or as endowed with mere negations of corporeal characters; and that it tends to rob the concept of soul of its concrete predicates"<sup>13</sup>.

The fact that materialist thinkers like Locke, Descartes, Leibniz, etc. have approached the concept of soul from a materialistic perspective shows these thinkers' resistance to thinking otherwise; their insistence on their body-based concepts emanates from their firm faith in man's rationalizing powers at

that time which are held in suspicion at this time. This suspicion puts all those views under question. Calkins's contemptuous view of soul being "needlessly" empty shows first her positivism, and second, her limitations of reasoning. She subordinates soul to body; while in most cultures and traditions, soul-body relation is viewed the other way around. Furthermore, if one is to believe soul's receptivity of others, it should necessarily be empty and abstract; if soul is to be concrete, its potential would be restricted to corporeal territorialities. If it is to be full, it would have no space for others within her. Thus, emptiness and abstractness are soul's needful features.

The postmodern era has taken for granted the fall of the soul due to dominance of science, and is now witnessing the fall of the self, which was once believed to fulfill the mission of the lost soul. This mission could be nothing other than "providing unity and direction to the human person, as well as being the vehicle for persistence both during life and after bodily death" (Martin and Barresi)<sup>8</sup>. The present paper attempts to show how self-soul dialogism is reformulated in John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait". Jennifer Ashton aptly takes this poem as one of the "foundational documents of postmodernism"<sup>14</sup>.

## Methodology

The methodology adopted here is analytical and critical. It is analytical in the sense that it attempts to explain specific concepts rather than merely describe them. The critical dimension of the methodology examines the facts and theoretical concepts in the cultural, social, and historical context of the poem. It also deals with the way the poet approaches the postmodern concepts of self and soul. The main tool of this study is textual analysis and literary interpretation. The textual analysis entails a close reading of "Self-Portrait" with a focus on its explicit and implicit concepts of self and soul. The following analysis is divided into two parts: in the first part concepts of soul and in the second part concepts of self are extracted. There are two types of soul concepts: the traditional (Platonic) and the postmodern ones. Plato conceptualizes soul as being fluid, simple, indivisible, incorruptible, essential life-force, changeless, immaterial, intelligible, and immortal. These coexist with the (post)modern rendition of soul as being captive, fixed, restricted, and impotent. The second part deals with concepts of self as being fragmented, multiple, changeable, material (body-bound), divisible, and protean. A comparison and contrast between these two sets of concepts reaches us to the point of the poem's source of dynamism.

## Analysis

"Self-Portrait" comprises six long stanzas of varying lengths. All through the poem, the word "soul" occurs only 5 times in the first stanza and the word "self" appears 4 times in the second stanza. Therefore, most of the concepts are implicit and should be extracted interpretatively. For the sake of clarity, this section is divided into two parts: the first part focuses on the concepts of soul, and the second part deals with self concepts.

**Concepts of soul:** In the first mention of soul, it is conceptualized as a fluid entity, a being which is always on move and restless. Ashbery, however, presents this concept against its postmodern notion which is counter-Platonic. The poet writes, "The soul establishes itself"<sup>15</sup>. The concept of soul as self-established entity is the point here. Semantically, "to establish" means to confirm, fixate, set up, constitute, make clear the validity of something, and place something. What is common to all these is the groundedness of the soul, its being fixed, and unchangeable. The statement bears an epistemic stance and has a final certitude about the knowledge it imparts to the audience about the soul. However, this gesture to certainty does not endure long because it is immediately followed by a rhetorical question which starts with the concessive, "But": "But how far can it swim out through the eyes/And still return safely to its nest?"<sup>15</sup>. The concept of soul as an established entity runs counter to its fluidity as it "swims out" and returns to its place. This contradiction may pinpoint the failure of the artist to capture the soul in his art. Metaphorizing soul as a swimming fish always in motion is Platonic and accentuates the narrator's hesitations or the artist's failure to freeze soul in his art.

The other counter-Platonic concept of soul is its captivity. Aware of the convexity of the mirror, the speaker refers to the distance the mirror creates. Seen through the convex mirror, "the soul is a captive"<sup>15</sup>. In another register, the portrait of the soul as a captive is not a hint at its being really a captive but at the distortion the lens, the mirror, makes to the soul while presenting it. What's more, the distance of which the speaker speaks can be the philosophical lens of the time with its scientific claim to objectivity that fails to give an authentic portrait of the soul. Therefore, the concept of soul as a captive is a postmodern distorted vision of the soul which contrasts the traditional concepts.

The same sense of arrestedness describes the captivated soul as being "treated humanely, kept/In suspension, unable to advance much farther/Than your look as it intercepts the picture"<sup>15</sup>. The features attributed to the soul such as being "treated humanely", being "kept" in suspension, restricted and "unable to advance" are all reminiscent of the way Modernists used to describe the helpless state of man's self relegated to an animal state and caught up in the wheels of modernity. The speaker comments on this as having "stupefied" Pope Clement and his court who committed themselves to a promise. The promise was to make the soul "stay where it is,/Even though restless . . ./Longing to be free, outside . . ."<sup>15</sup>. The restlessness of the soul and its yearning for freedom is acknowledged; these refer to its fluidity. The speaker states the promise to fixate the soul was never materialized. This does not mean the soul gets free or is presented in a better way, because the speaker reveals the pitiful secret of the soul: "that the soul is not a soul,/Has no secret, is small, and it fits/Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention"<sup>15</sup>. These present the postmodern concepts of the soul. The negative comparison that these lines make between

postmodern soul and traditional one shows how the soul in the postmodern age has got shrunk and become deprived. By way of negation, the speaker reveals the Platonic concepts of soul as being vast, ungraspable, and mysterious. When the poet laments the soul fits its hollow perfectly<sup>15</sup>, he is obliquely bemoans the shrunken state of the soul in his age.

Another Platonic concept of soul is implicitly expressed in its being described as “life englobed”<sup>15</sup>. This metaphor is highly suggestive; soul is all encompassing, so it embraces and gives life to the whole globe. Taken as a shape, being englobed symbolizes its perfection like a circle; it is ubiquitous as a life-force. This concept countersigns the postmodern concepts of soul which present it as a captive. Therefore, the englobed soul cannot be restricted to its hollow, is not small, and its room is beyond “our moment of attention”<sup>15</sup> because it embraces the whole cosmos. In this sense, although the previous lines captivate soul in the frame of the mirror, it is exactly vice versa here, since it is the soul which is mirror itself; it does not just reflect but it gives life to self. Envisaged thus, soul is the source of life and gives life and identity to the other.

The third stanza metaphorizes soul as a “flow” – a basically Platonic concept – contained in a room “like an hourglass /Without varying in climate or quality”<sup>15</sup>. The fact that it does not vary in climate or quality reminds one of Plato’s soul-concept as being unchangeable and incorruptible. Furthermore, the metaphor of “hourglass” draws affinities between soul and time in being fluid, protean, and inevitable. Concurrently, the narrator refers to the fact that one is not aware of the presence of soul, and habit is the *raison d’être*, “just as one /Gets accustomed to a noise that /Kept one awake but now no longer does”<sup>15</sup>. One feels a tinge of critical note in this, as if the narrator is complaining of everydayness which results in ignoring the soul. The only time one pays attention to soul and cares about its presence is time of death, “(Except perhaps to brighten bleakly and almost/Invisibly, in a focus sharpening toward death—more of this later)”<sup>15</sup>. Significantly enough, this point is referred to in parentheses. This punctuation leaves its own impact on the sentences contained. Usually, some extra point, or a further explanation, the omission of which does not harm the main sentence, is put in parentheses. Ironically, the issue of death is everyman’s main concern in life which needs further accentuation. This punctuation may imply different things. On the one hand, it may show the narrator’s deliberate escape from death, trying to forget his mortality; on the other hand, it may be a strategy to balance the heavy laden death issue by making it a parenthetical point. Associating this soul-concept with the issue of death is Platonic concern which strives to prove the immortality of soul in time of bodily death. The claim that in time of death the soul brightens bleakly and almost invisibly can be taken as the poet’s critical note on the modern man’s estrangement from his own soul.

The stanza also deals with unconsciousness which is conceptualized as “the vacuum of a dream”<sup>15</sup>. Dream is

associated with sleep and sleep has affinities with death. So once again, the implicit footprints of soul can be detected here. Yet this vacuum does not remain empty; it is continually replete with other dreams. The reason is that the source of dreams has got trapped or captivated. We may take the source of dreams as the forgotten soul since only the fluid soul “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”<sup>15</sup>. The slum could be soul’s abode which has suffered ignorance and lack of care in the modern age.

Another Platonic issue which bears an implicit concept of soul is Ashbery’s deployment of Plato’s key terms such as form and ideal. Claiming realism does no longer produce an objective truth, but “a *bizzaria*”, Freedberg is quoted to contend the distortion of objective truth does not give a “feeling of disharmony” since “The forms retain/A strong measure of ideal beauty”<sup>15</sup>. There is a point in selecting the verb “retain” here. The semantic expansion of “retain” includes preserve, keep safe, something that has already been there. Also, it denotes keeping in memory. All these denotations imply the preexistence of ideal beauty before real life. Put in another way, ideal beauty is not created but retained; it has already existed there in man’s mind. For Plato, only soul is capable of understanding the Form and the Idea. One can draw an identification between ideal beauty and soul which, based on traditional views, preexists bodily or corporeal life. This ideal beauty is fed by “our dreams, so inconsequential until one day/We notice the hole they left”<sup>15</sup>. The hole our ironically “inconsequential” dreams left is reminiscent of the vacuum of soul. The dreams are merely ironically insignificant, because the following lines express their importance: “They were to nourish/A dream which includes them all, as they are/ Finally reversed in the accumulating mirror”<sup>15</sup>. The narrator goes on to justify why these dreams used to seem strange, “because we couldn’t actually see them”<sup>15</sup>.

The repetition of the statement, “The forms retain a strong measure of ideal beauty”, is Ashbery’s hint at the importance of the link between form and idea. This somehow brings onstage Platonic World of Ideas and the relation Plato draws between the Ideal world and the practical life. While for Plato the detached Ideal world reaches us through imitation, for Ashbery the very distorted forms retain in themselves that ideal beauty. Dreams like art distort the ideal beauty, “reversed in the accumulating mirror”, and simultaneously retain it. Joyfully, the narrator asks, “Why be unhappy with this arrangement, since/Dreams prolong us as they are absorbed?”<sup>15</sup>. When dreams are absorbed, they help us touch the ideal beauty; hence we are prolonged in the sense that we get immortal. In this process of absorbing dreams, Ashbery detects a life-force, which is the Platonic concept of soul, “Something like living occurs, a movement/Out of the dream into its codification”<sup>15</sup>.

The Platonic view of soul as immortal is the other soul-concept which occurs in Ashbery’s long poem. The narrator himself as if in doubt about the nature of soul takes up the tone of a scientist

approaching this unlikely challenger, saying, "If it dissolves now/Into dust, that only means its time had come/Some time ago"<sup>15</sup>. Soul being dissolved into dust may bring with itself a long history of philosophical controversies regarding the (im) mortality of soul after bodily death. But immediately the narrator, as if observing some strange event, calls out, "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"<sup>15</sup>. Soul thus stands for immortality especially that it brings metamorphosis. Here the grammatical structure is quite suggestive. The statement: "it,/ Not we, are the change" is not grammatically correct; it should be: "it, /Not we, is the change." This grammatical lapse here identifies "we" with "it" and renders both prone to change. The identification of "we" with "it" is reiterated in the following lines, "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"<sup>15</sup>. The word "globe" here harks back to the first stanza in which soul is described as "life englobed". The narrator comes to a new understanding of himself in the globe, seeing himself and others as "a part of it"<sup>15</sup> capable of living "in it as we have done"<sup>15</sup>. Life would no longer seem a mere chance, but "in an orderly way that means to menace/Nobody"<sup>15</sup>. Viewing oneself as only "a part" of the globe, not the master of it and living in an orderly way which threatens nobody all imply man's spiritual capability to stretch beyond one's self or body and embrace "others" peacefully without discriminating them.

Another concept of soul is its being a free entity. While in the second stanza the narrator orders soul to stay where it is, now he acknowledges, "The locking into place is 'death itself'"<sup>15</sup>. Previously, he tried to forget soul, but now he is aware "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"<sup>15</sup>. Before, he used to construct his self out of his personal history, but now that he finds himself connected to the entire cosmos, he asserts, "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"<sup>15</sup>. The words "collective past" remind one of Jungian collective unconsciousness and his notion of individuation. This narrator is no longer an isolated island locked into himself suffering alienation, as he detects his roots in ancient times. The sunset for him is meaningful as "others felt this way long ago." Thus the mirror is no longer his, and the vase "is always full/Because there is only just so much room/And it accommodates everything"<sup>15</sup>. Multiplicity and plurality, oneness in all, are the issues the narrator arrives at in his self- and soul-contemplation: "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"<sup>15</sup>.

Going back to history, the narrator notifies, the force of love was at a time taken as the substitute for soul; but love-experiences have their own lapses and they give "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"<sup>15</sup>. The other concept of soul is taking soul as the light in people's eyes, "since the light/Has been lit once and for all in their eyes/And is present, unimpaired, a permanent anomaly, /Awake and silent"<sup>15</sup>. The implicit metaphor that compares soul to light pinpoints soul's being unchangeable, incorruptible, and indivisible (all Platonic). This point is further supported by the following adjectives like "present", "unimpaired", and "permanent". Table-1 summarizes the Platonic and postmodern concepts of soul.

**Table-1**  
**Platonic concepts of soul in contrast to postmodern concepts**

Platonic concepts of soul	Postmodern concepts of soul
Free	Captive and arrested
Fluid and in flow	Fixed and established
Englobed, all-inclusive	Restricted, small, confined to hollow and slum
Ideal beauty and life-force	Realism
Immortal	Mortal and subject to change

## Concepts of self

In conceptualizing self also, Ashbery juxtaposes traditional concepts with postmodern images. He adopts different strategies to develop his self concepts; of his strategies, one can refer to contextualizing, relativizing, metaphorizing, contradiction, and bringing self into interplay with soul. The whole poem is his attempt to arrive at sort of self-portrait. In the first stanza, he adopts a Platonic reasoning and takes self as an imitation of an imitation twice or thrice removed from the Idea: "Chiefly his reflection, of which the portrait/Is the reflection, of which the portrait/ Is the reflection once removed"<sup>15</sup>. Representing self as a replica taking after an Idea bears a point of consequence; here the narrator's implicit allusion to Plato obliquely acknowledges there exists an Idea, a Form, and that Idea which proves to be nonrepresentable and ungraspable is nothing other than soul itself.

History of epistemology in the West has distinguished between self and soul. In the encounter between self and soul, self is the manifest, soul is the latent; self is imitation, soul is Idea; self is graspable, soul is elusive<sup>8</sup>. However, far from highlighting the opposition between self and soul, Ashbery's lines bring rapprochement between the two and even try to identify self with soul. Thus just as soul is non-representable, self is also not to be portrayed easily. This point is developed in three ways. First, in a Platonic key tone self is argued to be a reflection of a reflection and is thus removed from its real being. Second, the convexity of the mirror by means of which self is to be

portrayed hints at the inevitable distortion made to the subject. Third, the poet's means of expressing himself is language which itself distorts everything. In this sense, he views promises in "This thing, the mute, undivided present" (original emphasis)<sup>15</sup> and wishes "if the way of telling/Didn't somehow intrude, twisting the end result/Into a caricature of itself"<sup>15</sup>. He complains that even artists and poets suffer from this distorting force, rendering their works completely different from what they had originally intended them to be. Simultaneously, however, he is well aware that the only thing he has access to is "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"<sup>15</sup>. He acknowledges everyone has his own understanding of the world, and concurrently each one's explanation proves to be incomprehensive and reductive. What he suggests is "Aping naturalness" as the first step "toward achieving an inner calm". Yet even in this he does not find a redeeming force, as it "often /Remains a frozen gesture of welcome etched/On the air materializing behind it,/A convention"<sup>15</sup>. Just as he targets habits, he runs against convention and the process of conventionalization. Implicitly, these lines offer him no chance for redemption as everything, even soul itself, gets conventionalized.

Putting self into interplay with soul is the poet's other strategy for conceptualizing self and bringing it to rapprochement with soul. Self in this stanza is a forgetting one; it is the self which tries in vain to ignore soul, "As I start to forget it/It presents its stereotype again"<sup>15</sup>. The paramount point here is that this stereotype is described as being "unfamiliar". The oxymoron, "unfamiliar stereotype" refers to a long history of ignoring soul and its conventional concepts in the West. In Vasari's words, the Renaissance historian, soul is described as "the face . . . issued from hazards . . . 'rather angel than man'"<sup>15</sup>. The face having issued from hazards crosses out the biblical story of Adam and Eve and their Fall. In the following sentence, the narrator generalizes the point using the pronoun "we", stating, "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"<sup>15</sup>. Then the narrator focuses on artist calling him an alchemist whose approach to the work of art is not in a "detached, scientific spirit" but to surprise the audience.

Ashbery at times develops his self concepts by contrasting them to soul concepts. But then these oppositions are resolved. The painter's hand that seeks to present soul is "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"<sup>15</sup>. This metaphoric contrast between soul as a whale and self as a ship is based on the metaphor "deep is big and main, but surface is small and minor". Yet the eyes are confined only to the surface. When the narrator cries, "But your eyes proclaim/That everything is surface"<sup>15</sup>, he is actually targeting the fact-based outlook which sticks myopically to the surface and cannot accept the invisible. The exploratory urge of the poet however

bars him from prioritizing one over the other. Thus he puts under question the surface and the concept of superficial contending, "there are no words for the surface, that is, /No words to say what it really is . . . / . . . then there is no way out of the problem of pathos vs. experience"<sup>15</sup>. In this way he discards the contrast between surface and depth, soul and self, major and minor, pathos (emotions) and experience (scientific experiment) by nullifying demarcations set between them; he views the whole as being "stable within/Instability, a globe like ours"<sup>15</sup>. The word "globe" here is reminiscent of the concept of soul as life englobed and may imply sort of resemblance between soul and whole which is paradoxically "stable within/ Instability"<sup>15</sup>. This justifies quite well the posture of the artist which is "neither embrace nor warning/But which holds something of both in pure/Affirmation that does not affirm anything"<sup>15</sup>. The state of pure confirmation which confirms nothing is a dialectical one which helps Ashbery step beyond the binaries.

The other strategy Ashbery utilizes for depicting self is contextualizing and thereby relativizing the concept of self. Here self is situated in the present between past (memories) and future (expectations). The stanza implies one's self is composed of one's memories, interactions with other people; this affirms self is constructed by way of the other. Contemplating on the events of yesterday and the friends he had met, the narrator mentions, "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"<sup>15</sup>. These lines bear Bakhtinian and Lacanian notions of self which arise out of self-other relation.

Self concept is, like soul, featured by contradiction; it is conceptualized as the chaos "which organizes everything"<sup>15</sup>. Unlike the Lacanian theories, the second stanza ends with the attestation not of self-other relation but of self-self relation, "In the circle of your intentions certain spars/Remain that perpetuate the enchantment of self with self:/Eyebeams, muslin, coral"<sup>15</sup>. Self-self relation deprives self from its subjectivity and simultaneously prevents the second self from getting objectified.

When the self-portrait is almost over, the narrator gets aware of its presence as an "other"; he addresses it in the second point of view and thus personifies or metaphorizes it. Far from stupefying it, this "you" feels "like one of those /Hoffman characters who have been deprived/Of a reflection"<sup>15</sup>. The narrator, however, does not suffice to this portrait. Rather, he distinguishes between his different selves; one is the self which is part of him and is "supplanted by the strict/Otherness of the painter in his /Other room"<sup>15</sup>. The other self is the ignorant one which was asleep when the picture was over or when it had snowed. Addressing this self, he says, "there is no reason why you should have/Been awake for it"<sup>15</sup>. The other one is self expressed in paint and brush on the canvas; still another self is the one which is expressed through the poet's language. However, the fact that all these selves are developed within a

single body poem bearing the title “Self-Portrait” instead of “Self-Portraits” is suggestive of their oneness despite disparities. Table-2 summarizes Ashbery’s rhetoric strategies used for conceptualizing self.

**Table-2**  
**Ashbery’s rhetoric strategies for conceptualizing self**

Major Rhetoric strategy: juxtaposition	Ground of juxtaposition
Interplay with soul	Ignorance of soul by self
Contrasting	Surface/depth; manifest/latent
Relativizing	Multiplicity
Contradiction	Self-self relation
Metaphorizing	Personification of the portrait

## Discussion

As the analysis shows, Ashbery juxtaposes Platonic with (post)modern concepts of soul and self. The rhetoric technique of juxtaposition has accorded his thematic concerns technical experimentation and novelty. However, his experimentalism is far from tradition-breaking avant-gardism of modernism. This accounts for his being categorized as a “postmodern” poet in the sense that Blasing defines it: “‘postmodern’ marks a historical and a poetic difference: it describes any poetic practice that questions modernist assumptions”<sup>16</sup>. Accordingly, Blasing aptly ranks Ashbery among those experimentalists who “do not buy into the modernist reification of poetic techniques and its underlying humanist belief in the values of progress, modernity, science, and natural truth”<sup>16</sup>. Ashbery writes in a time when novelty has already become an old value; thus it comes as no surprise that the past and the traditional offer novelty. This justifies his resort to traditionalists like Plato and invoking his concepts in his portrait of self and soul. Simultaneously, however, he retains the conceptual impacts of his own postmodern age. Therefore, he jumbles together perspectives, styles, and periods. The immediate aftermath of his technical experimentalism is that he levels down the modernist polarities of old/new, canonical/avant-garde. As the elicitation of self-soul concepts evinces, Ashbery comingles both types of concepts not for privileging one over the other but for casting critical light on each through the other. This critical light is in charge of rendering the poem a textual site of tension between tradition and innovation, between the past and the present. This feature is another proof of the poem’s being a postmodern one since it resembles Andreas Huyssen’s view of postmodernism as operating in a field of tension between conservation and renewal (Huyssen<sup>17</sup>; also qtd. in Blasing<sup>16</sup>). This study takes the tension as the dynamic force that lies at the thematic and rhetoric core of “Self-Portrait”.

“Self-Portrait” revolves around the problem of representation. It draws on two types of figuration: painting and poetry. Its ekphrasis gives his theme an interdisciplinary base. The fact that he tries to conceptualize the ideas of self and soul by juxtaposing Platonic concepts and the postmodernist ones shows how slippery these ideas are, on the one hand, and on the other hand, it reveals the restrictions of means of expression which are either paint and brush or words. His political context is the post-War-II America which has risen as an imperial world power. His intellectual context is marked with contradictory discourses of self and identity constructed in language. Language is no longer viewed as a simple “neutral” means of communication; rather it is presented as a site of power struggle and ideological clashes. Ashbery is exposed to such views and thus his poetic language and experimentations are far from being innocent.

His postmodern concepts of self and soul can be approached as his critical comments on socioeconomic and political urges of his time. The postmodern concepts of soul as being captive, arrested, objectified to be fixated, small, and confined to its hollow reflect the scientific and objective worldview of his time that has “othered” soul. The commanding tone in “the soul has to stay where it is” and “It must move as little as possible” is a textual gesture to the political-imperial monopoly of his American context. The declarative statement about the truth-laden mission of the mirror in “The glass chose to reflect only what he saw/Which was enough for his purpose” (p.188)<sup>15</sup> reminds one of the stereotyping policies that the imperial United States has adopted with respect to his imperialized “Others”. Ashbery countersigns these by representing Platonic concepts of soul, its fluidity, freedom, elusiveness, and all-embraciveness. However, this should not be taken as his preference for the traditional, or the whole poem would be either mystified or politicized. Rather, what he is seeking in such juxtapositions is depolarizing the anti-soul ethos of his time by exposing their polarity and alterity. Such a rhetorical strategy helps communicate an important objective and that is showing the arbitrariness of these concepts. Since “Self-Portrait” claims no given concept as the final rendition of self and soul, it can be concluded that the poem represents the concepts or duplicates them with a difference to show that they could be different, they could be thought and presented otherwise and therefore they must be changed.

## Conclusion

The elicitation of metaphors of self and soul in his lengthy poem, “Self-Portrait”, stands as a proof of Ashbery’s postmodernism. It is shown that his major rhetorical strategy is juxtaposition which enables him to re-configure traditional concepts of self and soul with their postmodernist equivalents. The fact that the poet does not take side with this or that set of concepts is a gesture to his main political-aesthetic objective and that is to show the arbitrariness of the concepts. This helps him de-totalize the supportive and discursive systems and



immobilize their codes. The ending lines of the poem are highly suggestive as they depict the moments after self portrait finishes:

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. (p. 204)<sup>15</sup>

The word “remembrance” yokes into the text the past. While Ashbery’s turn to the past may be taken as his critical distance from the present, the past is not to play the redeeming role for the future. Rather, the metaphor “cold pockets/Of remembrance” opens up a historical perspective from which the conceptualization of self and soul becomes apparent. In this way, Ashbery is not giving the traditional concepts a historical or metaphysical authority. “Self-Portrait” becomes the locus of tension between different regimes of conceptualization none of which is prioritized and thus owes its dynamism to sufficing to “whispers out of time”.

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