

The Mirror, Displacement, and Representation:
Considering Michel Foucault, John Ashbery, and Alfred Steven's *In the Studio* (1888)

In "Las Meninas," Michel Foucault traces sightlines, spectacle, and the unseen within Diego Velázquez's eponymous painting to introduce his inquiry into the instability of representation in modern disciplines.¹ The 1656 painting presents Infanta Margarita, daughter of King Philip IV of Spain, flanked by various courtesans as well as the artist himself. At the approximate center of the painting is a mirror reflecting an image of the king and queen in a position that appears comparable to the viewer. The mirror, Foucault argues, "shows us nothing of what is represented in the picture itself. Its motionless gaze extends out in front of the picture, into that necessarily invisible region which forms its exterior face" (7-8). Foucault posits the mirror as a focal point within the painting that disrupts its spatial relations and dislocates the viewer's natural line of sight. In "Las Meninas," the mirror "cuts straight through the whole field of the representation, ignoring all it might apprehend within that field, and restores visibility to that which resides outside all view" (8).

Less than a decade after the publication of Foucault's seminal essay, John Ashbery debuted the masterful "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" (1974). Taking Francesco Parmigianino's painting as a departure point, Ashbery's poem is a lingering meditation on existential ephemerality. Like Foucault, Ashbery focuses on the mirror within the painting to investigate representation and displacement. The speaker of the poem gracefully digresses and returns to the mirror to explore themes of memory, language, time, and the nature of the soul: "...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" (68-69). Here, Ashbery expresses the captivity of the soul as if it were suspended in amber, confined and distanced by the receding reflection of the convex mirror. Recalling Foucault's reference to the mirror's "motionless gaze," not only is the soul of the artist captured within image of the mirror, it is doubly bound by the interception of Parmigianino's "look" or gaze in the process of artistic production: the making of the self-portrait: "The soul has to stay where it is/Even though restless, hearing raindrops at the

¹ Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, 1966.

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.” (69) Ashbery’s ekphrastic writing lends voice to Parmigianino’s self-portrait while at the same time articulating the poet’s own experience and observations. The poem is then a portrait within a portrait, or perhaps several portraits within a portrait as Ashbery shares a series of anecdotes culled from the past, both historical and personal. The accumulation of these poetic snapshots (or maybe poetic brushstrokes is a better analogy) creates a literary *mise en abyme* within the text, mirroring and departing from the narrative frame of Parmigianino’s painting.

Yet, like Foucault’s reading of the mirror in “Las Meninas,” the mirroring that occurs within Ashbery’s text cuts through the field of representation to illuminate “that which resides outside all view” (8):

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. (77)

The speaker apprehends the beauty of experience only in relation to an otherness (in image or form) that resides in the past. It is through this (stream-of-consciousness) connection to the past that the speaker is able to locate meaning in the present moment. However, as the metonymy of meaning continues through time, passed along a chain of signifying moments in the poem, it distorts and extends beyond the field of direct representation to shed light on what remains yet unseen: “...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...” (77).

Taking cues from Foucault and Ashbery, I'd like to consider Alfred Stevens' painting *In the Studio* (1888) within the context of representation and displacement. The painting portrays a female model, painter, and visitor posed in a room that historically has been read to be Stevens' own studio.² The room is filled with a number of exotic objects, including a parasol, a fan, and an oriental tapestry. On the walls hang paintings of varying sizes (9 total), and on the easel rests the unfinished painting of what historians believe to be *Salomé*, "a freely interpreted version of the painting by Henri Regnault that was the sensation of the 1870 Salon."³ At the model's feet lies an animal skin resembling one featured in Regnault's original *Salomé*. And across the room is what appears to be another unfinished painting, barely visible behind the arm of the couch. The studio looks to be in disarray, with bureau drawers ajar and an open portfolio on the floor. Amongst the paintings on the wall, a convex mirror in a gilt frame looks out. The mirror cuts between the women, positioned between the model on the left, and the painter and visitor on the right. It hangs above and to the left of the viewer's natural line of sight. Given the mirror's primary placement, one might expect it to reflect an image of the artist. Yet only the dark smudge of a coal stove in the mirror's foreground is visible, occluding any semblance of the artist in shadow and refraction.

Critics have noted, "The mirror extends the painting's spatial illusion outward. It circles behind us and puts us in the picture, a frequent hook in images of artists at work."⁴ But while Stevens employs the mirror to maximize the scene and project what lies behind the viewer, he opts not to render a likeness of himself within the mirror's gaze. Its reflection remains dimmed and opaque, repeating nothing. What does repeat are the multiple paintings within the painting. Many of these are thought to be reproductions of Stevens' own work, at least one of which is easily recognizable as a portrait of Sarah Bernhardt. If we assume the paintings are his own, one wonders what Stevens had in mind when he cast the painter as female. A closer examination of the scene may offer a clue. The action within the painting exists in the exchange of the female gaze between model, visitor, and painter. What's curious is that not one of them is looking at the portrait of *Salomé*. The visitor is studying the model as if she alone were the work of art. And the painter too seems to be

² <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/437755>

³ Ibid.

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/05/arts/design/05pain.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

looking on as if pleased with her work. The model returns the visitor's stare, triangulating the gaze between the women.

Keeping in mind that Stevens was welcoming to female students, and is renown for his ability to capture the emotional complexity of his female subjects,⁵ it would seem the artist is celebrating women as the inspiration behind and reason for his work. It's not the artwork that is being appreciated in the painting, but the model herself. Moreover, the fact that the painter of *Salomé* is female might suggest Stevens' own identification with the fairer sex, as well as the unrecognized talent of women as artists. The painting reads as if Stevens is taking a bow in honor of women and their creative potential. Each of the women who inhabit the studio may be seen as a female archetype, representing beauty (the model), creativity (the painter), and curiosity (the visitor). While one might expect to see the artist applauding himself within *In the Studio*, it is women who are privileged in the painting. This shift in representation can be located in the mirror.

The function of the mirror takes on renewed signification as we consider the proliferation of the female gaze in the painting (from the portraits of upper class Parisian women gazing out from their place on the wall to the interplay between model, visitor, and painter). Contemporary feminist theory has traditionally read the gaze to signify the patriarchal objectification of women in film and other media.⁶ Yet while it's seemingly impossible for Stevens to elude the implications of the male gaze when portraying female subjects, the convex mirror within the painting may offer a means of egress. Rather than painting himself in the mirror's reflection, Stevens paints a "mundane" coal stove. In doing so, he aligns himself with something commonplace and domestic, a stark contrast to the luxuriousness of the scene that lies opposite. As Foucault states of *Las Meninas*, "the mirror shows us nothing of what is represented in the picture itself. Its motionless gaze extends out in front of the picture, into that necessarily invisible region which forms its exterior face" (7-8). Likewise, the curved mirror in Stevens' painting reveals nothing but a coal stove in place of where the artist should be. The artist's gaze then becomes distorted and recedes into the mirror's shiny surface. By displacing his representation as artist within the painting, Stevens makes what I consider to be a valiant attempt to avoid female objectification and to distinguish women as sentient and invaluable subjects.

⁵ http://www.avictorian.com/Stevens_Alfred.html

⁶ For instance, see Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 1975.