

MARK IRWIN

The Poem as Concept

About halfway through John Ashbery's "Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror," the poet quotes Sydney Freedberg, who comments on the painting from his *Parmigianino*. Ashbery's versification of the quote provides a profound comment on the conceptual power of art: "The surprise, the tension are in the concept / Rather than its realization."

The common belief that form and content are of equal importance is not meant to be disparaged here, an idea perhaps most memorably rendered by Robert Frost in "The Figure a Poem Makes" when he says, "like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting." The implication, one of surprise, also suggests that form and content must use each other up. Art that presents a striking concept, however, creates an immediacy around the whole, one different from an art whose immediacy might more slowly accrue through form, and through perception, a domain of the senses always strongly associated with poetry. Is the path to the intellect faster than that to the senses? —Sometimes, and perhaps more architecturally conclusive. Consider a masterful poem of both intellect and the senses like Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium," where the architectural notion is completed in the first line: "That is no country for old men. The young." The notion of spirit, which is youthful, providing both visible and invisible structures of eternity, is evidenced by the ancient city that will become Constantinople, one which used Christian symbolism, the circle and the dome for its architecture.

Or perhaps because the senses are directly related to the emotions, they often lose their permanence more easily. Consider this passage from Thoreau's "A Pond in Winter."

Perhaps the blue color of water and ice is due to the light and air they contain, and the most transparent is the bluest. Ice is an interesting subject for contemplation... Why is it that a bucket of water soon becomes putrid, but frozen remains sweet forever? It is often said that this is the difference between the affections and the intellect. (Thoreau 291)

Emily Dickinson's "I heard a fly buzz—when I died—" (the first line of poem # 465) provides one of the most striking conceptual ideas in English poetry, though I hesitate to cite it entirely here, since the poem's form, with its rich synesthesia, metonymy, synecdoche, and rhyme, seems tantamount to the opening line's ontological and theological paradox. Yet again, it is that opening paradox with its striking and somewhat sublime vulgarity that generates such immediacy through the intellect, one that seems complete if only the first line and last stanza were read as a whole:

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—

With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—
Between the light—and me—
And then the Windows failed—and then
I could not see to see—

(Dickinson 223)

Now remove the first line of the last stanza, with all its rich alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia, and still it is the poem's concept that prevails: What St. Augustine called the "Divine Intellect" might operate here at a higher level than that of the senses.

Following Parmigianino's lead in the visual arts, *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror*; other striking conceptual pieces might include Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1891) and Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1911). These two paintings of the late industrial revolution capture the angst of spirit suffocated by materialism in the former, and the bold declaration and embracing of a new beauty, that of machines in the latter. Duchamp's piece seems to gloriously pronounce—with its sleek, sensual amalgam of cut sheet metal—that there will be no turning back to the classic female nude, the same one Picasso dashed against a wall and reassembled helter-skelter as Cubism, or the one that DeKooning later monsterized in his female portraits in the 1950's.

Anselm Kiefer's *Lot's Frau* depicts train tracks entering into a bleak and abandoned Auschwitz. The painting, made of pigment, ash, dirt, and salt, is left purposely unglazed so that the carbon dioxide emitted from the breathing of museum-goers will gradually destroy the painting.

Concept can be brutally layered, as in the Kiefer painting, or blatantly arresting, paradoxical, or mysterious—as exemplified in many of Kafka's short stories and novels from "The Metamorphosis" and "A Country Doctor" to *The Trial* and *The Castle*.

Inspired by the Kalavala, John Ashbery's "At North Farm" provides a riveting and elusive metaphor for death. Here is the sestet (from his reversed variation on the sonnet) that opens the poem.

Somewhere someone is traveling furiously toward you,
At incredible speed, traveling day and night,
Through blizzards and desert heat, across torrents, through narrow
passes.
But will he know where to find you,
Recognize you when he sees you,
Give you the thing he has for you?

(Ashbery 301)

The poem's ontology is ours: death racing unsurely toward life. It is the race "of being" reversed, as the sonnet form is, and telescoped to haunt us. This

unsettling traveler never stops despite extremes of weather and landscape. The question of recognition is plaintive, “But will he know where to find you,” for the acceptance is up to *you*, the reader, just as death is either a slow or fast recognition by each of us.

Just reading the title of Jim Daniels’ poem “Watching My Old House Burn on the News” distills through an arresting concept how the ubiquitous and *all-at-once* nature of the media has changed all of our lives. Here are the last three stanzas of the poem:

On the sheets of a tired bed
In the upper flat of that house
I was conceived
on a wet night like this,

September, rain knocking
leaves from the trees,
two babies crying
in the other room.

My mother’s tears fall tonight
not like the rain at all
not like those falling leaves.
Like those flames. Like that fire.

(Daniels 27)

We don’t expect news to be personal, but objective, remote, hence dislocation occurs through surprise—conceptually—almost entirely with the title. The poem’s sober, mater-of-fact tone reinforces the paradox: unreal media upon media becomes real—mirrors we don’t intend to look into, where tears become fire.

Brenda Hillman’s startling and paradoxical “Styrofoam Cup,” a five line fragmented echo of Keats’ immortal five stanza “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” becomes both a new disposable and indispensable urn, one contemporized and carrying Keats’ ideas, just as Keats’ urn carried earlier cultural values and images.

Styrofoam Cup

thou still unravished thou
thou, thou bride

thou unstill,
thou unravished unbride

unthou unbride

(Hillman 21)

Originally, Keats transposed a sculpted, funereal form (a plastic art) to a literal one (poetry), then ultimately to a purely musical one through its intense lyricism. The urn, virginal in concept (“Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness”), prefigures and is also ruptured by the poem’s succeeding images: the lovers, spring boughs, sacrifice, and silent town.

Hillman’s spatial arrangement accents the prefix “un,” meaning not, lack of, the opposite, or reversal of original action, and thus heightens Keats’ notion of “negative capability”: “capable of being in uncertainties, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” More so, however, the poem allows us to conceptually experience that holy ghost of Keats’ poem, those “unheard melodies” and how the “silent form” and silence in form “dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!” It is as though the Styrofoam cup, completely unadorned and not “overwrought” has found a mundane, cultural equivalent, while simultaneously echoing that cultural icon of eternity stilled. In fact Hillman’s third line “thou unstill” echoes and contradicts Keats’ notion of “still” as *not moving*, and also as *yet* in his third stanza: “For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d . . .”

In reality, Styrofoam is not actually the product used in the disposable cups, and is in fact a more durable foam, yet the vulgar name as adopted by the throw-away-container nature of our fast food culture gives Hillman’s poem a jarring resonance when one reconsiders the memorable lines from Keats’ fifth stanza:

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,
“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,”—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

(Keats 101)

In Hillman’s poem, as in our century, Keats’ latter formula becomes more true: truth is beauty. Must we not see a beauty in the Styrofoam cup, just as Duchamp saw beauty in the machine—his *Nude Descending a Staircase* also gathers and reconfigures the cultural notion of beauty and gender. Hillman’s poem seems to reach its crescendo in the word “unbride,” just as Duchamp’s nude painted with metal flanges might be argued a “cultural unbride.” The Styrofoam vessel, though cheapened and holding no ashes, becomes funereal for our culture’s loss of culture—a new culture, paradoxically echoing one old, one deteriorating as the cup surely will.

Works Cited

- Ashbery, John. *Selected Poems*. New York: Viking, 1985.
- Daniels, Jim. *Places/Everyone*. Madison, WI: University Wisconsin Press, 1985.
- Dickinson, Emily. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Thomas H. Johnson, ed. Boston: Little, Brown, 1960.
- Hillman, Brenda. *Casacadia*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001.
- Keats, John. *The Essential Keats*. Philip Levine, ed. New York: Ecco Press, 1987.
- Kiefer, Anselm. *Lot's Frau*, 1989. Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH. (Reprinted with permission of Gagosian Gallery, New York.)
- Thoreau, H.D. *Writings of Henry David Thoreau*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989. 291.