



# Postmodern rendition of myth in Ashbery's 'Syringa'

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**ABSTRACT.** Postmodern poetry revisits the traditions and subjects myth and history to drastic experimentations. The present paper reacts to Ashbery's postmodern rendition of the myth of Orpheus in his poem 'Syringa' (Ashbery, 1985). He dismantles and opposes the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and disrupts its totalitarian voice. The main concerns of the paper are to investigate what linguistic potentials Ashbery deploys in his experimentation, how these potentials help him appropriate and then subvert the mythical subtext, and what the consequences of this subversion could be. He disturbs the myth of Orpheus by drawing on the potentials of constructed oppositions. These potentials help Ashbery deconstruct the mythical narrative and adapt it to his postmodern tastes. The theoretical framework comprises Leslie Jeffries's notion of constructed opposition. The methodology is analytic and interpretive; it conducts a close reading of the poem which situates the poem at the intersecting nodes of myth, poetry, and language. The poem is argued to have relied heavily on the oppositions that Ashbery sets up between his text and its mythical subtext. The paper concludes negation and shifts of verb-tenses are the main structural triggers of opposition along with semantic triggers.

**Keywords:** Ashbery; opposition; myth; Orpheus; 'Syringa'; postmodern.

## Interpretação pós-moderna do mito na 'Syringa' de Ashbery

**RESUMO.** A poesia pós-moderna revisita as tradições e sujeita o mito e a história a experimentações drásticas. O presente artigo reage à versão pós-moderna de Ashbery do mito de Orfeu em seu poema 'Syringa' (Ashbery, 1985). Ele desmonta e se opõe ao mito de Orfeu e Eurídice e perturba sua voz totalitária. As principais preocupações do artigo são investigar quais potenciais linguísticos Ashbery utiliza em sua experimentação, como esses potenciais o ajudam a se apropriar e subverter o subtexto mítico e quais poderiam ser as consequências dessa subversão. Ele perturba o mito de Orfeu recorrendo aos potenciais das oposições construídas. Esses potenciais ajudam Ashbery a desconstruir a narrativa mítica e adaptá-la aos seus gostos pós-modernos. O quadro teórico compreende a noção de Leslie Jeffries de oposição construída. A metodologia é analítica e interpretativa; ela realiza uma leitura atenta do poema, que o situa nos nós de intersecção do mito, da poesia e da linguagem. Argumenta-se que o poema se baseou fortemente nas oposições que Ashbery estabelece entre seu texto e seu subtexto mítico. O artigo conclui que a negação e as mudanças de tempos verbais são os principais gatilhos estruturais de oposição, juntamente com os gatilhos semânticos.

**Palavras-chave:** Ashbery; oposição; mito; Orfeu; 'Syringa'; pós-moderno.

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## Introduction

Postmodernism marks a revisitation of the traditional and of the past. Many postmodern writers and poets display their creativity in the new perspectives they open onto the already said, or the familiar. History and myth are the two rich fields that have not remained immune to postmodernists' experimental approaches. While some try to dismantle the stability and naturalness of history, some others shift to myths, employ a multiplicity of techniques to distort and present them in different, unusual ways and to adapt them to their own tastes or make myths suitable for their own times. John Ashbery is one of those poets who tackles with myths, disrupts their totalitarian voice, and rips them apart. One of the myths he pays particular attention to is the one of Orpheus and Eurydice, which in Lyndon Davies's words, "[...] has always been a staple of Western European culture, a thematic and symbolic resource for writers, craftsmen, and artists in every age and genre" (Davies, 2013, p. 211).

The present study does not merely concern itself with the significant role the myth of Orpheus plays in Ashbery's poetry. Rather, it investigates how this myth is manipulated by the poet and what linguistic potentials the poet deploys to realize such manipulations. Ashbery's postmodern rendition of the myth of Orpheus is the main subject matter of this study which is carried out focusing on his poem, 'Syringa'. The close reading of this poem situates the paper at the intersecting nodes of myth, poetry, and language. A glance at the selected poem evinces that it relies heavily on oppositions the poet constructs between his text and its mythical subtext. This renders the theoretical framework of the study a mixed one of Leslie Jeffries's notion of constructed oppositions and Maurice Blanchot's literary interpretation of the myth of Orpheus. What makes Ashbery's poetic rendition of this myth relevant to Blanchot's view is that like the literary critic, Ashbery finds in this myth the quest for reparation. Orpheus's search for reparation, in Davis's words, "[...] echoes the human drama in a civilisation whose validating rituals have been drained of power" (Davies, 2013, p. 212). This quest makes the myth suitable for a postmodern age which is featured by self-reflexivity.

## Literature review

### 'Syringa'

The American poet, John Ashbery, is mostly regarded as a postmodern experimentalist who tackles with the norms of language, myth, history, and poetic narrative. His poetry has received numerous critical responses from different disciplines. Harold Bloom discusses the different ways in which Ashbery plays with the myth of Orpheus in 'Syringa' (2004). Bloom deals with Ashbery's "[...] innovative experimentation with form and distinctive tendency to focus on the present as the source of poetic inspiration" (Bloom, 2004, p. 110-111). He thereby refers to the etymological root of the title of the poem, 'syringe', which is the accusative case of *Syrinx*. On the relation and significance of the title of the poem with the poem itself, Bloom asserts that Ashbery attempts to decry and inexorably participate in the process of transformation of the nymph, *Syrinx*, to plant, from plant to inanimate instrument, from instrument to myth, and from myth to an underlying concept in a poem (Bloom, 2004). Since the poet cannot preserve the past or control the future, he can "[...] do little but focus on the present [...]", Bloom concludes (Bloom, 2004, p. 112).

Richard Jackson approaches 'Syringa' as the embodiment of the deconstructionist theories of Derrida and Foucault (Jackson, 2004). He regards writing as "[...] the vanishing point, the scene of transgression [...]" (Jackson, 2004, p. 114) from which the poet must cut himself off and become part of the "[...] library [...]" or the "[...] archive [...]", to be subject to later archeologies (Jackson, 2004, p. 116). Lawrence Kramer attends to the polyvocality of 'Syringa' and detects two main voices. The first is a meditative voice that "[...] engages in a tranquil, resigned consideration of the problem of loss as presented by Orpheus [...]" ; the second voice is an elegiac one which "[...] full of lament and desire [...]" uses the Orpheus myth to utter 'hidden syllables' of personal sorrow" (Jackson, 2004, p. 118). Kramer refrains from calling the poem ambivalent because the poem discloses no conflict, "Its two voices compose only one utterance" (Kramer, 2004, p. 119). He contends the two voices presented by the mezzo and the bass "[...] are not 'opposed' to each other at all, but 'posed against' each other" (Kramer, 2004, p. 119-120, author's emphasis). Kramer's distinction between being opposite to one another and being posed against each other implies the notion of constructed opposition. But it remains unelaborated with reference to the poem itself, since Kramer's main focus is on Elliot Carter's musical adaptation of 'Syringa'.

In his Raritan essay, David Bromwich reads 'Syringa' as the embodiment of the Ashberyan paradox whereby epiphanies afforded by arts always occur too late to adapt them to life (Bromwich, 2004). For Bromwich, this poem evinces lack of relationship between the perfection of an artwork and the perfection of the life. Bromwich reads 'Syringa' as a revision of Auden's belief, expressed in '*Musée des beaux arts*' (Auden, 1939), that art can yield wisdom for the sake of life. For Ashbery, however, the observations of art enter one's life as knowledge when it is already too late (Bromwich, 2004). John Shoptaw interprets Ashbery's poem as an attempt to elegize the past without getting stuck there (Shoptaw, 2004). He traces back the etymological significance of the title of the poem to the myth of *Syrinx* (Shoptaw, 2004) and contends the main argument of the poem is change, [as in] Ovid's 'metamorphosis' (Shoptaw, 2004). Although Shoptaw speaks of change in 'Syringa', he does not show in details how metamorphosis as a main theme is realized in the poem. Linguistic and mythical realization of metamorphosis is in charge of the poem's dynamism to which none of the above critics has attended. Based on these readings, the present study borrows the notion of metamorphosis from Shoptaw and opposition from Kramer to show how constructing oppositions through language and manipulating mythical subtext renders 'Syringa' a dynamic enterprise in Ashbery's oeuvre.

### Constructed oppositions

The study of Ashbery's postmodern rendition of the myth of Orpheus entails a focus on the way language is handled by the poet. Lying at the core of Ashbery's linguistic experimentation are constructing oppositions that render the poem cognitively dynamic. This study draws on the notion of constructed oppositions propounded by Lesley Jeffries (2010). She contends the distinguishing feature of constructed oppositions is that their oppositional relationship "[...] arises 'specifically' from their textual surroundings" (Jeffries, 2010, p. 1, author's emphasis). She puts this kind of opposition in contrast to context-free notion of the capacity of words to have oppositional relationship which she calls "[...] conventional oppositions" (Jeffries, 2010, p. 2).

In psychology, there is a tendency to accept the concepts of antonyms and oppositions as givens (Davern & Cummings, 2006), or as incidental and given concepts in investigation of other cognitive attributes (Scott, Kline, Faguy-Cote, & Peterson, 1980; Estes & Ward, 2002). Murphy and Andrew (1993) take opposition as conceptual rather than linguistic. Brewer and Stone (1975) investigate the acquisition of certain antonymic pairs relating to spatial dimensions. Jones and Murphy's (2005) finding that children appreciate oppositions from very young ages implies the pre-linguistic grasp of antonyms and thus gives it a cognitive base.

Sapir (1944), Lyons (1977), and Cruse (1986, 2004) have contributed to the study of linguistic oppositions. Lyons highlights the embodiment of the acquisition and use of oppositions, arguing "[...] opposition in general, is based upon some kind of analogical extension of distinctions which we first learn to apply with respect to our own orientation and the location or locomotion of other objects in the external world" (Lyons, 1977, p. 281-82). Jeffries bases her view of oppositions on her argument that "[...] many oppositions are neither absolute nor 'given', but are reflections of one particular way of viewing the world and the human experience" (Jeffries, 2010, p. 15, author's emphasis).

Jeffries enumerates four categories of oppositions: mutual exclusivity, mutual dependence, gradability, and reversibility. The mutually exclusive type of opposite is usually complementary and characterized as binaries; it is a stereotypical opposition that permits no intervening values between its extremes (Jeffries, 2010). The opposites in mutual dependence provide a double perspective on a single set of facts or events. Also known as 'converses', Cruse puts these opposites in the category of directional and relational opposites (Cruse, 1986). The gradable antonyms are the most common of the conventional opposites in English which can be treated either as mutually exclusive or as mutually dependent oppositions in different contexts. Conventional opposites such as 'close' and 'disclose' and directional antonyms such as 'up' and 'down' are reversive oppositions in which one of the terms of oppositions reverses the process or direction of the other (Jeffries, 2010, p. 23).

In contrast to Mettinger (1994), Jones (2002), and Davies (2008) who treat syntactic and semantic triggers as manifestations of the same phenomenon, Jeffries (2010) distinguishes between them. She borrows the term 'trigger' in pragmatics from Davies's comment,

If oppositions are as omnipresent as Lyons, Cruse, and Jones and so on believe, then it seems reasonable to assume that the common frames in which they appear will also structure the way we process non-canonical variations. These might work in the same way as what, in the field of pragmatics, Levinson (1983) calls 'presupposition-triggers' (Davies, 2008, p. 102-103, author's emphasis).

Jeffries (2010), thereby, categorizes opposition triggers into two main groups of structural (grammatical) and semantic triggers. She refers to negation and replacive triggers, parallel structures, coordination, and comparatives as the main structural triggers of opposition. Negation triggers occur in 'X not Y' frame, while in replacive opposites 'X instead/place of Y' is the base. Parallel opposites occur in a repeated framework, one positive and one negative which indicate an opposition (Jeffries, 2010). Short states that in literary works, parallel structures have the "[...] power not just to foreground parts of a text for us, but also to make us look for parallel or contrastive meaning links between those parallel parts" (Short, 1996, p. 15). What makes readers search for contrast or similarity in parallelism is the semantic content of such structures themselves (Jeffries, 2010).

For Jones (2002), coordination provides a pervasive context for conventional antonyms, and Jeffries (2010) regards all coordinating conjunctions as indicators of opposition in certain contexts. Mettinger (1994) and Jones (2002) recognize comparative structures as one of the standard contexts where conventional antonyms occur.

For lexical triggers of opposition, Jeffries refers to two strategies such as explicit mention of oppositional relation and the influence of oppositional opposites in context. Jeffries refers to such words as "[...] change [...]", "[...] turn [...]", "[...] compare [...]", "[...] transform [...]", and the like as the words whose semantics set up some kind of contrast (Jeffries, 2010, p. 47). Semantic and structural triggers of opposition can contribute a lot in investigating how Ashbery manipulates the Orphic myth in 'Syringa'.

### Myth and mythical subtext

The paper's concern with the use of myth in 'Syringa' is based on Lyndon Davies's interpretations of myth in literature (Davies, 2013). As the critics' notes on Ashbery's poem evince, there are two myths at work in 'Syringa': one is the Orpheus myth to which the poet explicitly refers in the first two lines; the other is the myth of Syrinx which the title bears by way of etymology. Ashbery's reliance on myths in this poem opens up a room to discuss the significant role myths play in postmodern poetry. As Davies interprets, the Orpheus myth encompasses many aspects of human life such as loss, joy, love, fear, mourning, and disintegration; but more important than these, he regards this myth "[...] apposite to the artist's situation [...] congruent with the inner shape of the creative process [...] it's a story about death, and about the search for reparation for that potentially catastrophic event" (Davies, 2013, p. 211-212).

What is quite special about Davies's view of myth is his idea that myth is "[...] a melding of tale, countertales, strands, variants, interpretations; it's a swarm into which we read the lineaments of whom we need to be and what we need the world to be at that moment" (Davies, 2013, p. 212). Envisaged as such, a poet's use of a myth can be taken as a "[...] diagram, delineating a pattern [...]" which s/he may have intuited in the world (Davies, 2013, p. 212). The paper approaches Ashbery's use of myth as an interpretive, identity-disclosing approach. The second point that is beneficial in approaching Ashbery's Orpheus is the ambivalence Davies detects in the figure of Orpheus. Taking Orpheus as 'emblem of a ritualistic perfection of expression', Davies writes, Orpheus "[...] reveals himself here as his own antagonist, plunging headlong through the surface of an intolerable familiarity to a labyrinth of uncertainty and estrangement hidden in the weave of it" (Davies, 2013, p. 214). Such self-antagonism lies in line with the oppositions 'Syringa' constructs all through its text.

Maurice Blanchot refers to the same ambivalence in the Orpheus myth when he takes Orpheus as an artist whose mission into the underworld is to create a work, "[...] to bring it [the ultimate point] back to the light of day and give it form, shape, and reality" (Blanchot, 1982, p. 171). But the poet's impatience to gaze back is already a gaze into the destruction of the work he is so carefully leading towards the light (Davies, 2013). For Blanchot, Orpheus is the impatient artist who risks his work and thereby attains freedom, "[...] the extreme moment of freedom, the moment in which he (Orpheus) frees himself of himself and [...] frees the work of his concern, frees the sacred contained in the work" (Blanchot, 1982, p. 175). The freedom brings to the work infinite openness of the possible, the possibilities of the openness released by the negated work.

### Methodology

Ashbery's 'Syringa' (1985) comprises two long stanzas separated from one another with a single line space. The present article analyzes each stanza individually in terms of the oppositions in constructs. Then in a concluding part, it brings the findings of each analysis together, compares and contrasts them and tries to see how the poet's perspective develops from the first to the second stanza. For detecting the constructed oppositions in the poem, the study goes according to Jeffries's distinction between structural and lexical triggers. The focus on the structural triggers entails scrutinizing the grammatical structures of the poem which provoke oppositions. Such triggers as negation, replacive triggers, parallel constructions, coordination, and comparatives are looked for in each stanza. Semantic triggers necessitate a close look at the words that construct oppositions. These words will be listed for each stanza.

In a second move, the analysis deals with the mythical subtexts of the poem and investigates how the deployed myths are treated in the poem. This concern gives enough room to address the relationship between the body of the poem and its myth-laden title. Figuring out the interrelationships between the mythical deployment and the constructed oppositions brings the findings of the analysis to a conclusion.

## Analysis

'Syringa' (Ashbery, 1985) comprises 781 words, two thirds of which occur in the first stanza; the second stanza contains one third of these words. Structurally, cases of negation in the first stanza are twice those in the second stanza. Almost no parallel construction appears in either stanza. Since the first stanza is double in terms of size, its coordinating conjunctions occur more frequently than the second stanza. The most frequent conjunctions which appear in two stanzas are 'but' and 'then'. There appear no replacive triggers in the whole poem. The comparative trigger, 'more', occurs four times in the first stanza, but it is totally missing in the second stanza. In addition to the triggers pinpointed by Jeffries, 'Syringa' weaves its argument out of interplays between present and past tenses of its verbs. Such interplays become a means of constructing oppositions all through the poem. Grammatically speaking, therefore, this study focuses on the most frequently drawn structural triggers – negation, coordination, and verb tenses – by way of which oppositions are triggered.

### The first stanza

Among the 520 words contained in the first stanza, the words 'no' and 'not' occur twelve times. These negating words trigger oppositions which are briefly listed here.

The oppositions constructed by negation and negating words reveal an important feature of the first stanza and that is its being centered on transformation and metamorphosis. A glance at the constructed oppositions in Table 1 shows in all cases an item/entity is always resisting (almost in vain) a change-bearing force: 'gullies' and 'hummocks' resist Orpheus's changes; present performances and seasons have changed and are no longer like the past ones; the new Orpheus is opposite to the mythical figure; standing, singing, music, and protection cannot resist the fleeting time; and even the 'maverick' is not impervious to changes. Lying at the core of all these constructed oppositions is the ever-changing force of time which opposes the old and the new, the past and the present, the traditional and the modern.

**Table 1.** Cases of negation in the first stanza of 'Syringa'.

Negation/Negating words and phrases	Line and line number	Constructed Opposition
Can't	"Gullies, hummocks/Can't withstand it" (lines, 4-5)	Gullies and hummocks versus Orpheus's forceful changes
Not	"Not vivid performances of the past" (line, 10)	Present/new versus past/old performances
why not	"But why not?" (line, 10)	Orpheus's changes versus Apollo's reasoning
no longer	"The seasons are no longer what they once were" (line, 12)	Present seasons versus past seasons
hadn't	"[...] even if he hadn't turned around" (line, 17)	A counterfactual presupposition: The new version of Orpheus myth versus its traditional one
No	"No use standing there like a gray stone toga as the whole wheel/Of recorded history flashes past" (lines, 18-19)	Standing versus flashing past
isn't	"But it isn't enough/To just go on singing" (lines, 28-29)	Singing versus acting
didn't	"Orpheus realized this/And didn't mind so much about his reward being in heaven" (lines, 29-30)	Orpheus's realization versus his end
cannot	"[...] and how you cannot isolate a note of it" (line, 36)	The act of isolating versus the wholeness of the song/music
Cannot	"[...] one cannot guard, treasure/That stalled moment" (lines, 41-42)	Protection/preservation versus passing time
No	"[...] but to participate in the action/No more than this" (line, 49)	Action versus limitation
Nothing	"Nothing of this is happening to me" (line, 53)	Changes versus resistance to changes

Source: Developed based on *Opposition in discourse*, by. L. Jeffries (2010).

The notion of time as ever changing is best manifested in the verb tenses of the stanza. A scrutiny into the verb tenses of the first stanza shows that out of 44 verbs, 31 verbs are in present tense and only 13 verbs are

cast in past tense (Note: the verbs in direct quotations are not included here). There is a stark contrast between the past and the present tense. Radden and Dirven (2007) argue past tense is characterized by three main features: focus on the past time, detachment from the present, and definiteness. In addition, past tense has finality; it refers to something that is finished in course of time. But present tense is left open to the coming future; it is not finished and cannot speak with determinacy of a complete action the way past tense does. It speaks of an action in the present time but it does not guarantee the continuation of the action further in the present and into the future. Therefore, while past tense shows the least flexibility to changes, present tense is most changeable. The fact that present-tense verbs outnumber the past ones in this stanza confirms the findings of the oppositions, the negation and negating words and phrases about the irresistible force of the ever-changing time.

No wonder is the stanza replete with semantic triggers that signify transformation, change, and metamorphosis, all of which occur under the force of time. The word 'change' appears in the third line, "Then one day, everything changed" (Ashbery, 1985, p.245). The coordinating conjunction 'then' opposes the state of affairs as it was before the change and as it is after the change. From here onward, verb tenses shift to the present time until Apollo's interference. Such verbs as "rends", "Can't withstand", "shudders", and "[is] ready to give up wholeness" all refer to events which are aftermaths of "change". Against Apollo's admonishment, Orpheus highlights the necessity of change, "But why not?/All other things must change too" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 245). What Ashbery refers to as Orpheus's mistake is his attempt to change what is already gone, that is, Eurydice's death, "No use standing there [in Hades] like a gray stone toga as the whole wheel/Of recorded history flashes past, struck dumb, unable to utter an intelligent/ Comment on the most thought-provoking element in its train" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 245). Orpheus's getting locked up in past time is opposed to time that 'flashes past' in the form of history in 'its train'.

Final alliteration of 'brain' with 'train' strikes similarity in sound but triggers opposition in meaning, "Only love stays on the brain" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 245). In contrast to the recorded history that 'flashes past' in its train, love "[...] stays on the brain" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 245). The opposition is made between love which lasts and time which flashes. Yet even this love is far from being static since it finds its expression in a song whose "[...] notes mount straight up out of the well of /Dim noon and rival the tiny, sparkling yellow flowers [...]" and it "[...] encapsulates/The different weights of the things" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 245). The metaphor 'the well of /Dim noon' constructs an unconventional similarity between noon and well, daylight and darkness. The verb 'rival' triggers an opposition between the notes of the song coming out of the well and the 'tiny, sparkling yellow flowers'. The adjectives 'sparkling' and 'yellow' best fit 'noon' but they are used for flowers. Attributing inappropriate adjectives and using unconventional metaphors help Ashbery bring about Orphic change in his linguistic and poetic expressions. All these run in contrast to 'Singing accurately' because such a song is anything but accurate. Besides, how can a song be accurate and at the same time encapsulate 'The different weights of the things'?

The speaker's claim that "[...] it isn't enough /To just go on singing [...]" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 245) opposes the way Orpheus's music is reported to have driven the Bacchantes out of their minds and "[...] torn him apart [...]" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 245), "But probably the music had more to do with it" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 246). This is the last sentence in the stanza that bears past tense. From here onwards, all verbs are either progressive or present tense. This shift in verb tenses opposes Ashbery's version of Orpheus with the mythical one: the music Ashbery's Orpheus plays is fleeting like time itself; it is the music that "[...] passes, emblematic/Of life and how you cannot isolate a note of it /And say it is good or bad" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 245-246). When the speaker advises "You must/Wait till it's over [...]" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 246), the reader already knows Orpheus's music never reaches an end.

The fact the end is never reached marks Ashbery's Orphic music with indeterminacy. This indeterminacy is conveyed both through structural (present and progressive tenses) and semantic triggers. The speaker's views that the 'tableau/Is wrong', 'one cannot guard, treasure /That stalled moment', 'It too is flowing, fleeting', 'And to ask more than this /Is to become the tossing reeds of that slow,/Powerful stream', all signify the ever-changing and protean nature of the Orphic song. Even when each horse claims "I'm a maverick. Nothing of this is happening to me [...]" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 246), he already knows he is exposed to changes, "The itinerary of the lights caught in the storm is fully/apparent to me [...]" much/As trees move more easily in the wind after a summer storm/And is happening in lacy shadows of shore-trees, now, day after day" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 246).

The coordinating conjunctions that trigger oppositions in the first stanza are 'then' (four times), 'but' (five times), 'al/though' (four times), 'only' (once), 'except' (once), and 'even if' (once).

### The second stanza

The second stanza is inclusive of half of the words of the first stanza. Negating words and expressions in this stanza are seven cases which are listed in Table 2.

**Table2.** Negation and negating words and phrases in the second stanza of 'Syringa'.

Negation/Negating words and phrases	Line and line number	Constructed opposition
are .... not	"[...] these are of course not regrets at all" (line, 64)	Thoughts versus regrets
no matter	"And no matter how all this disappeared" (line, 67)	What is important versus what is unimportant
no longer	"[...] it is no longer/Material for a poem" (lines, 68-69)	Past material versus present material
not enough	"Its subject/Matters too much, and not enough, standing there helplessly" (lines, 70)	'too much' versus 'not enough'
can never	"[...] the meaning, good or bad, can never/Become known" (lines, 73-74)	Meaning as being knowable versus meaning as being unknowable
cannot	"The song is engulfed ... in blackness/Which in turn must flood the whole continent/With blackness, for it cannot see" (lines, 77-79)	Blackness and its blindness versus blackness and its blinding force
Not	"The singer/Must then pass out of sight, not even relieved/Of the evil burthen of the words" (lines, 79-81)	Relief versus burden

Source: Developed based on *Opposition in discourse*, by L. Jeffries (2010).

As Table 2 shows, negation and negating words and phrases in this stanza are almost half of those in the first stanza which is quite appropriate with respect to the size of the stanza in terms of words. As the list of constructed oppositions displays, the oppositions in this stanza are more abstract than those in the first one. The first one opposes thoughts with regrets. While thoughts are timeless, regrets are anchored in the past. The Orpheus who appears only once here is no longer a singing figure; he has changed to "[...] a bluish cloud with white contours" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 246). The metamorphosis of Orpheus to a cloud signifies his instability, abstractness, indeterminacy, and protean shape. He is not a regretting lover; rather, he becomes a careful thought that scholarly sets down "[...] unquestioned facts, a record of pebbles along the way" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 246). Interest in the loss of Eurydice fades away just as the present subject matters differ from those of the past. Meaning becomes unfathomable and words have 'evil' burthen. It is not the subject matter that vanishes; rather, it is the singer that fades away into blind blackness. The abstractness of opposed entities here runs in contrast to the relatively more concrete and authentic oppositions in the first stanza. The abstractness assigns the oppositions more indeterminacy which is also backed up by the over-dominant use of present tense verbs. Apart from two cases, 'regretting', and 'screaming', no progressive verb appears in this stanza; this relative absence of progressive forms of verbs locates the second stanza in the after-metamorphosis phase.

While in the first stanza semantic triggers of opposition mostly center on change and transformation, the triggers here focus on invisibility and disappearance. The verb 'regret' indicates a past that is no more, and the phrase 'scholarly setting down of/Unquestioned facts' implies reaching an end or settling into a position. In line, "[...] no matter how all this disappeared/ Or got where it was going [...]" directly refers to disappearance and invisibility of everything. When the poem is [...] turned inward [...]" its meaning fades away and "[...] can never/Become known" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 247). When the singer constructs his poem and in the last moment turns away in an Orphic gesture, "The song is engulfed in an instant in blackness/ Which must in turn flood the whole continent/With blackness, for it cannot see" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 247). The song gets engulfed and devoured by blackness which itself is invisible and makes things invisible. The singer must also perish away. In this condition, "Stellification" which makes one visible and concrete is only "[...] for the few [...]" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 247); all records of people disappear "[...] into libraries, onto microfilm" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 247). These records remain "[...] out of touch [...]" and the tale of "[...] an arbitrary chorus [...]" that may approach them has "[...] hidden syllables [...]" of the incidents that have once occurred "In some small town, one indifferent summer" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 247). The phrase 'some small town' signifies time setting of the incidents is

already blurred and obscured by 'some', just as 'one' uproots 'indifferent summer' from its temporal context. Thus, the poem ends up with indeterminacies of place and time which remain hidden. Such a highly indeterminate ending opposes the definite beginning of the poem which takes the roots of the poem into ancient myths and in the figure of Orpheus, Eurydice, and their love affair.

## Discussion

The analysis of structural triggers of oppositions in the two stanzas of 'Syringa' shows that negation and verb-tense shifts are the two main structural triggers which are backed up by semantic triggers. The analysis evinces gradual fading away of the past tense into the present tense which is marked with indeterminacy. Also, the comparison of the two stanzas has proved that while the first stanza deals with transformation and change, the second one is focused on disappearance and invisibility. The gradual thematic move from metamorphosis to invisibility may be regarded as the line of the poem's development. However, the mythical subtexts and how they relate to this line of argument needs further elaboration.

As noted, 'Syringa' draws on two myths: Syrinx and Orpheus. The title of the poem alludes to an Arcadian nymph who pursued by Pan changed into a reed and finally turned into a Syrinx, or panpipe, by her frustrated lover. The poem bears no mention of Pan, and Syrinx is only briefly referred to in "[...] the tossing reeds of that slow, /Powerful stream" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 246). In Orpheus myth, Eurydice dies of a snake bite and Orpheus tries to bring her back to life through the powers of his music. Violating the gods' injunction not to turn back to Eurydice before they step into daylight, he gazes back and Eurydice vanishes into the Hades. Therefore, like the titular myth, the Orpheus myth is a narrative of loss and disappearance. The common points between the two myths is both have frustrated lovers whose beloveds disappear, one into the Hades, the other into the river. Both lovers express their love through their arts in vain attempts to capture their lost loves. 'Syringa' shares common grounds with these mythical subtexts: it deals with transformation and disappearance. But far from mere singing of, speaking about, or describing, these processes, the poem enacts them by transforming and then making invisible the mythical subtexts. Therefore, the myths are treated quite differently by Ashbery. The Syrinx myth sits only at the title and receives a very brief reference in the word "reeds". While in the first stanza, the loss of Eurydice is the main theme of Orpheus's lament and the cause of his destructive force, in the second stanza, this loss is 'no longer/Material for a poem'.

Ashbery transforms not just the beloveds but also the lovers. Pan is never mentioned in the poem, so he is already invisible. The lamenting Orpheus in the first stanza turns into a thought, in the second, which is as shifty and impossible as 'a bluish cloud'. He does not regret his loss any more, nor does he bother what has happened to his beloved. Just like a cloud, he fades away in the poem so that by the end of the poem Orpheus is no longer heard of. The invisibility of Pan and the gradual disappearance of Orpheus in 'Syringa' well justify the weak relationship between the body and the title of the poem. When the nymph turns into a reed, Pan captures Syrinx in an attempt to get hold on her. Although he expresses his love through his Syrinx, that music bears the least resemblance to the nymph herself. In the process of transforming from a nymph to a reed and then to a Syrinx, the nymph disappears totally. She is no more seen or heard of.

The fact that Ashbery puts the Syrinx myth in the title of a poem like this which in turn raises another myth (Orpheus) is an indication of the disappearance of the subject matter in the process of expression. While in both myths, fate is the force that imposes separation between lovers and their loves, in Ashbery's poem, it is time that has such a distorting influence upon others. Conceding a central motif in his work, Ashbery states, "[...] it seems to me that time is what I have been writing about all these years during which I thought I wasn't writing about anything" (Bloom, 2004, p. 132). Time makes records of people's lives disappear into libraries and onto microfilm. They remain there till 'an arbitrary chorus/Speaks of a totally different incident with a similar name' and sings of them. But even in this, those records remain out of touch and locked up in 'hidden syllables of what happened so long before' to some people somewhere and sometime.

What makes Ashbery's treatment of myth postmodernist is the way he manipulates it. His manipulation of myth itself triggers an opposition between traditional myth and his postmodern rendition of it. In addition to the changes he does to Orpheus as a lover, Ashbery tackles with the traditional Orpheus as a poet. And it is this concern with the poetic and artistic identity of Orpheus that categorizes his approach as postmodernist. Like Virgil and the modernist poet Rilke, Ashbery recognizes in the Orpheus myth the tragic dimension of art, "[...] never able to close the gap between image and object, eternal form and changing substance" (Segal, 1989, p. 28-29). This tragic vision finds its poetic expression in Rilke's 'Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes' (1979).



Ashbery's poem subjects not only a poet's subject matter to transformation but also the poet himself. This justifies the changes his Orpheus undergoes in 'Syringa' (Ashbery, 1985). In traditional myth, Orpheus's song, even his laments, are appreciated so that he can move all nature by his magic power of art. Ashbery's Orpheus also moves the whole nature, but in a violent and aggressive form. His art is told to rend rocks into fissures and disrupt the balance of the sky which shudders and is about to lose its wholeness. Criticizing such a destructive force, Apollo reminds Orpheus of his loneliness in mourning and of the lost power of his magic art, "Leave it all on earth / [...] Why pick at a dull pavan few care to/Follow, except a few birds of dusty feather,/Not vivid performances of the past" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 245). The negated phrase, 'Not vivid performances of the past' along with 'dull pavan' followed only by a few 'birds of dusty feather' oppose the powers of modern and traditional art. This Orpheus is a distorted version of the traditional and even of the modernist mythical figure. From the very beginning, he is presented as a crippled artist whose music is not appreciated by many.

When in the second stanza Orpheus transforms into a 'bluish cloud' and then fades away, Ashbery replaces him with a singer. Ashbery's singer "[...] builds up his chant in progressive stages/ Like a skyscraper, but at the last minute turns away" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 247). In contrast to the mythical Orpheus who goes down to the underworld to win back his beloved, Ashbery's singer moves upward by building a skyscraper that stretches toward the sky. While the traditional Orpheus ventures down into the world of hidden mysteries, Ashbery's postmodern Orpheus ventures up into the realm of ambitions. The word 'skyscraper' is a late-capitalist phenomenon in the world of market and neoliberal imperialism.

The singer's act of turning away engulfs his song in blind blackness. What happens to the singer is that he is also doomed, "The singer/Must then pass out of sight" (Ashbery, 1985, p. 247). Unable to close the gap between image and object, the singer also perishes away. From here till the end of the poem, there is no mention of any poet or singer; only an 'arbitrary chorus' is hoped to rise and sing of 'a totally different incident with a similar name'. Ashbery thus banishes the impotent poet from his poetic world and this is how he manipulates and thereby distorts the much-praised poet-lover Orpheus.

Such an end to Orpheus and his art is postmodernist since it stems from Ashbery's doubt about, even disbelief in, the power of art. The rise of an 'arbitrary chorus' in the face of a talented poet-singer marks the indeterminacies Ashbery finds in his means of expression and its relation to the world around. The least relevance the chorus's chant might have with its subject matter signifies the widening gap between image and object and the impotence of art or language to 'represent' in a mimetic manner the object. Envisaged as such, 'Syringa' can be regarded as one of the chants of an arbitrary chorus, a chant which merely bears the name of Syrinx and speaks of a totally different incident/myth, the myth of Orpheus as a failed artist.

## Conclusion

The analysis of constructed oppositions in Ashbery's 'Syringa' (1985) has addressed both the language and the theme of the poem. It shows that a poet might deploy different aspects of structural and semantic triggers in order to construct his/her oppositions. Applying Jeffries's theory of opposition to a postmodern poem like Ashbery's reveals the merits and limitations of the theory. The detection of constructed oppositions helps the reader a better appreciation of the poet's stance toward his/her material, especially if the text grows out of a traditional, historical, or mythical subtext. In 'Syringa', negation has been most widely used among the structural triggers Jeffries has enumerated. The paper also shows shifts in tenses of verbs which, although not discussed by Jeffries, can contribute to constructing oppositions. This point may lead us to the conclusion that opposition triggers may vary from text to text, depending on the way structural and semantic potentials of language are used by the writer/poet.

Thematically also, 'Syringa' (Ashbery, 1985) owes its dynamism to the many distortions Ashbery does to its mythic subtexts. His manipulations oppose the Ashberyeian version of Orpheus to the traditional myth. Referring to the contrasts between the two versions, the study reaches the impossibility of representation which is the main concern of postmodernists. The unbridgeable gap between expression and the real entity renders poetic and linguistic expression indeterminate, arbitrary, exposed to openness, and irrelevant. What Ashbery is lamenting at the end of the poem is not just the transformation of things in the fleeting course of time, but their "hidden syllables" that remain locked up forever and thus render the entities unreachable and invisible.

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