



FRAGMENTATION AND CONTINUITY IN JOHN ASHBERY'S POEM 'DAFFY DUCK IN HOLLYWOOD'

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Abstract

John Ashbery is the most distinguished member of the New York School of Poets. His avant-garde and highly innovative poetry make him one of the most unique poetic voices of America. John Ashbery incorporated many surrealist and abstract expressionist techniques to his poems which produce a fragmented effect to them. The poem *Daffy Duck in Hollywood* from the volume *Houseboat Days* is concurrently linear and nonlinear, fragmented and continuous. The poem abounds in a multitude of references ranging from the characters of the cartoon world to exotic literary texts. The juxtaposing of the references taken from literary works and classical operas and familiar comic book characters creates a uniquely evocative effect. All the fragments and the fragmented voices taken from various literary sources are interwoven into the structure of the poem. Daffy Ducks entire existence depends on whether something is remindful of him or not. As he embarks on a labyrinthine journey in search of an identity, he places himself somewhere between the trivial and the highly serious. Toward the end of the poem all the fragmented voices finally merge into the voice of the protagonist. All the digressions and fragments are reconciled at the end of the poem, thus bestowing on it a sense of continuity. The disjunction characteristic of surrealism can be perceived throughout the poem. Keywords: Avant-garde, fragments, continuity, digressions, labyrinthine.

Daffy Duck in Hollywood is one of the most important poems of the volume *Houseboat Days* which was published in the year 1977. This poem is one of Ashbery most stylistically innovative poems. A multitude of images and voices are incorporated into the texture of the poem in a surrealistic manner. There could be found in this poem the alignment of the most incongruous of images and experiences. The entire poem revolves around analogies, resemblances, resonances and allusions. In this poem Ashbery doesn't differentiate between the

traditional high art and the mediocre aesthetic of popular culture, throughout the poem popular colloquial diction alternates with literary diction, exotic locales, references from an eclectic mélange of sources and rapidly shifting perspectives are presented as normal happenings in this extraordinary poem. Daffy Duck was one of the first new eccentric animated characters that was created in 1937 by Tex Avery. It replaced everyman characters such as Mickey mouse and Popeye. In this poem Daffy Duck is characterized as an assertive

protagonist who embarks on a labyrinthine journey. The poem opens with the protagonist announcing that he is being haunted by some unknown feeling, in the following run on lines which abound in allusions Daffy Duck expresses that something unfamiliar is coming toward him and that La Celestina has to warble the first lines of a very popular song or something elevated from Handel's opera *Amadigi di Gaula* to acquire things ranging from a popular brand of baking powder can to a celluloid earring to the fiction from the highly imaginative desk of Helen Topping Miller to a bundle of suggestive pictures, in these enjambling lines there is a juxtaposing of the most unlikely of images.

Something strange is creeping across me.

La Celestina has only to warble the first few bars Of '1 Thought about You" or something mellow from *Amadigi di Gaula* for everything - a mint- condition can of Rumford's Baking Powder, a celluloid earring. Speedy Gonzales, the latest from Helen Topping Miller's fertile *Escritoire*, a sheaf of suggestive pix on greige, deckle-edged Stock- to come clattering through the rainbow trellis where Pistachio Avenue rams the 2300 block of Highland Fling Terrace. (1 - 9)

La Celestina is a Spanish comedy entirely in dialogue, it's attributed to Fernando de Rojas. It was written in 1499. La Celestina is the name of the procuress who facilitates the meeting of the lovers Calisto and Melbea. *Amadigi di Gaula* is an opera by Handel, Speedy Gonzales is a cartoon character in the Warner Brothers Looney tunes and Merrie Melodies series of cartoons, Helen Topping Miller is a popular writer of pulp- fiction while Pistachio Avenue and Fling Terrace are street names in Hollywood. In the following lines Daffy Duck expresses that the cartoonist who has promised to get him out of his creations has gone back on his words and he finds his rather tepid reproduction of his picture done on covers etc, all the same it could be deemed funny when hung in the congested waiting room of a quack but it could scarcely be called friendly. In the succeeding lines Daffy feels claustrophobic and finds everything choked to the point of silence. He says that a magnetic storm hung

above the Fudds' garage which has given it the look of the diminutive blue cabin found on the commemorative cover of a Gadsden Flag. The Fudds are also cartoon characters while the Gadsden Flag is a historical American flag associated with libertarianism. In the next lines, Daffy makes the sudden announcement that he finds everything detestable on the island of Hollywood and that although he meets many people on the emerald traffic island, none of them results in actual interaction, he comes across strange armies decorated with feathers who point towards a white cardboard castle. In the following lines a phrase from a popular song is quoted. Daffy asks rhetorically how it is all going to conclude. In the following lines he expresses that Anaheim the city where Disney Land is located has turned a riotous red with the glow of a volcano sized firecracker that went off in the last minute into the map of Carte tundra where Amadis in the right hand side of the map is trying to deceive Princess de Cleves into an unrestrained midnight drinking spree on the river Tamigi with their fellow cartoon characters the Wallets in a lame covered boat borrowed from an old movie set. *La Princess de Cleves* is a French novel which was published anonymously in March 1678. It is regarded by many as the forerunner of the modern psychological novel, it is about the unspoken unrequited love of Marie. The Map de tundra referred to in these lines was a French map of an imaginary land called Tundra.

It's an allegorical map based entirely around the theme of love. Suddenly Daffy declares that he has an announcement to make. He compares his journey to wandering by the side of the mythical river of oblivion Lethe and Tophet. Tophet is actually place mentioned in the Bible where child sacrifices to Moloch and Baal were offered In the following lines he expresses that the entire moment is. He bids farewell to the tanneries, hedges and to the meadows. He expresses that the allegory has become calm and sober very quickly, and the satire is likened to a shower of cashew harpoons between the tornadoes. In these lines he says that his exists only when someone thinks of him now and then, in a discontinuous manner which is likened to thinking in an alien language. Here the poet suggests that

existence remains meaningless and incomprehensible for Daffy. In the next lines Daffy expresses that for him everything depends whether someone is remindful of him or not, the sense of déjà-vu evoked by him in others is of paramount importance, in the following complex sentence Daffy elucidates that the present is like a fantastic tale while the past is like the hushed silences of the soul sparkling like diamonds on black velvet. And that the 'prodigies of timing' might be able to affirm that they live in one dimension. In this line the pronominal 'I' is replaced by the relational 'we'. The speaker suggests everything is synthesized according to his liking.

I have only my intermittent life in your thoughts to live which is like thinking in another language. Everything depends on whether somebody reminds you of me.

That this is a fabulation, and that those "other times" are in fact the silences of the soul, picked out in diamonds on stygian velvet, matters less than it should. (37 - 42)

In the succeeding lines which echo Satan's awe inspiring speeches from Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* Daffy Duck says that he has been through all the dark coasts trying to free them all, and he tries to think in a language whose grammar despite being deliberately tortuous offers resting places, while colored ambulances pick up the injured and rush them to the hospital immediately. Here the poet suggests that the animated characters can be brought back to life as their creator wishes.

Prodigies of timing may be arranged to convince them we live in one dimension, they in ours. While I abroad through all the coasts of dark destruction seek deliverance for us all, think in that language: its grammar, though tortured, offers pavilions at each new parting of the ways. Pastel ambulances scoop up quick and hie them to hospitals. (42 - 49)

In the lines that follow there is a shift in thought as Aglavaine and Selysette, the main characters from Maurice Maeterlinck's symbolist drama with the same name are introduced. It's a drama in five acts where Maeterlinck propounds the

theory of existential philosophy. In this part of the poem, along with Daffy Duck other characters make their appearances. Aglavaine rues the fact that she has to stay affixed in one place while others have a jolly time. She remembers the time when they used to lay under the tough green leaves arranged to convince them.

And it was supposed that they were least concerned about colorless regions. In the following lines they she says that they that they were not different to others, and during the day their behaviour can be deemed proper when judged by the New Brutalism standards, all then turned silent as if by a previous agreement. Aglavaine regrets that they were all forcibly sent away to some secret destination under the cover of the dark. In the next lines she says that it is not about their half hearted appeals but more about the ghost like quality of the finished product which decides their existence.

It's not the incomplete importunes, but the spookiness of the finished product. (64 - 66)

In the succeeding lines she says that if their creator is the outcome of himself then they can be deemed far better being his creations. But they pay little importance to the notion. She surmises if the satin came from the case which once held a pair of duelling pistols. She ends her monologue by regretting that the latest sequel made on them has been applauded in London and St.Petersburg. The phrase New Brutalism is a modern architectural style with emphasis on the extensive use of concrete and steel.

The second strophe begins with the protagonist of the poem expressing that the storm has just begun and that Aglavaine was asking all who came there if they had ever heard of Amadis or of stern Aureng-Zebe and his first love and none seemed to know. Amadis is the heroine of the magic opera *Amadigi de Gaula* by Handel. It is based on a lyric tragedy by Andre Cardinal Destouches and Antoine Houdan de le Matte. In the following lines the poet says that for some it didn't matter at all and further they would reason that when everything is complete in itself then what's wrong in accepting it as it is till it reveals itself wholly. It's similar to the way low skyscrapers reveal piece by piece the

architectural details, but the main element that might have conveyed the meaning of the entire design always remains hidden in the pages of the text.

In the following lines the poet says that everything depends on how they see something and not the way what they see. And everything's the same, still they greet enthusiastically the person who announces the change as they would herald the change itself.

Not what we see but how we see it matters;
all's alike, the same, and we greet him who
announces the change as we would greet the
change itself. (86 – 89)

In the next lines the poet states that existence can't be deemed as imaginary, at the same time the insignificant book that falls away ones hand can't be deemed as the missing part of this 'invisible picnic' or life whose prominence remains veiled. In the succeeding lines the protagonist of the poem says that they are all encamped in a temporary camp without being hindered by moral predicaments. In these lines the diction undergoes a drastic transition, the poet uses the shorthand code common to colloquialisms.

Grab sex things, swing up
Over the horizon like a boy
On a fishing expedition, No one really knows
Or cares whether this is the whole of which
parts were vouchsafed-once-but to be
ambling on's the tradition more than the
safekeeping of it. (91 – 97)

In the succeeding lines the protagonist says that none know or want to know if this is a whole whose parts are guaranteed as in the past, but all seem more interested in staying within the tradition than in preserving it. In these lines the protagonist expresses that the grander stuff can think of grandiose concepts like my maps and model cities but for people like him life is somewhere midway, placed precariously between wholeness and fragmentation. Toward the conclusion of the poem Daffy Duck says that they don't care any longer if the sky is a parrot green as long as they have with them

the earnest to carry them forward however deceptive and beguiling it might be.

Life, our life anyway is between. We don't
mind or notice any more that the sky is green,
a parrot one, but have our earnest where it
chances on us, disingenuous, intrigued,
inviting, more always invoking the echo, a
summer's day. (98 – 107)

Toward the conclusion of the poem Daffy Duck speaks for all those artists exiled to the margins of society and whose existence depends on the tastes and choices of others. The entire poem moves around analogies, resemblances and resonances. Daffy Duck despite being a creation of the mainstream popular culture finds himself on the fragment of a society that has neither disowned nor integrated him, inclusion in the real sense never takes place as he goes on searching for a relatable context. This poem can be read as a self portrait as well as an internal dialectic on coherence and meaninglessness. The alternation of images and phrases blurs the distinction between 'high' and 'popular' cultures as the poem simultaneously complements and subverts 'high' and 'popular' cultures.

And as Keith Cohen has put it in David Lehman's important collections of essays on John Ashbery's poetry *Beyond Amazement*. (1980)

The poem seems to be a celebration of the way Hollywood manages to incorporate everything- from classical opera to pop music, foreign culture to American Gothic- and spew back transformed within its narrow vision of things. (130)

In this densely associative poem, the transitions in style and context are very rapid and very often take place within the sentence. Throughout the poem the grand and the extraordinary images are subordinated and aligned with the trivial. In this highly allusive poem Ashbery suggests at newer insights at every shift and divergence taken by the lines. Toward the conclusion of the poem the protagonist adopts the tone of a visionary who speaks for all those who feel excluded from the cultural mainstream which is defined by its sense of tradition, he accepts that

deception is an undeniable aspect of the human condition. He speaks for those artists who defy the mainstream cultural ethos. Daffy Duck seeks wholeness and continuity from a discourse that's far from reassuring, for him life is placed somewhere between maybe before the beginning of the movie or at its intermission.

Toward the conclusion all the fragmented voices, parallel stances and non-sequiturs are reconciled and subordinated to a closure of resignation and acceptance. The poet suggests that the structural continuity of the poetic rhetoric can be perceived in all art forms be it in the unreal Hollywood cartoon flicks or in canonical literary texts. This poem also embodies the quest for a unified response to the varied facets of the human experience. And the poet seems to suggest the predicament concerning a unified consciousness in the face of impeding fragmentation of both the self and that of others. Daffy Duck remains an assertive protagonist till the end of the poem. He maintains his confidence in the face of fragmentation and dejection. John Ashbery was particularly influenced by surrealism and in this influence could be perceived in many of his poems. The influence of surrealism, in this poem can be perceived in the collocation of fragment from diverse literatures and also in the employment of non-sequiturs or statements that don't follow the premise of the previous statements.

Although the poem moves toward rhetorical collapse the structure of the poem prevents it from disintegration. The complex sentences as well as the run-on lines of the poem bestow on it a continuity of thought.

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