

## Vernon Shetley: On "Daffy Duck in Hollywood"

?This style of chaotic juxtaposition produces an effect of agitation and urgency, which in turn is continually undercut by the humor generated in the collision of elevated language with the mundane. Daffy Duck?s voice seems consistent in its cycle of inflation by allusion to chivalric romance, followed by farcical deflation, while at the same time these contrasts seem far too great to subsume under any notion of a coherent speaker. The title, "Daffy Duck in Hollywood," in its specification of speaker and situation, promises a dramatic monologue, but what the poem delivers cannot be brought together within [Cleanth] Brooks and [Robert Penn] Warren?s notions of "fundamental character and situation" [as outlined in *Understanding Poetry*, the fundamental textbook of New Critical reading].

The poem?s contrasts reflect those of its source, which is not so much Tex Avery?s 1938 cartoon "Daffy Duck in Hollywood" as Chuck Jones?s celebrated "Duck Amuck" of 1953. In "Duck Amuck," Daffy swashbuckles onto the screen wielding a rapier, as if to reprise his 1950 role, "The Scarlet Pumpernickel." The setting, without Daffy?s noticing it first, shifts to a barnyard, where, after an ineffectual attempt to apprise the cartoonist of the problem, Daffy chooses to switch rather than fight, changes to overalls, and throws a hoe over his shoulder. Throughout, the scene keeps shifting in this fashion, with Daffy always a step behind. ? Ashbery?s character is at the mercy of disconcertingly rapid changes of scene which leave the speaker disoriented and strange to himself, unable to face his own "reflection." Yet, at about its middle, the frenetic motion of the poem gives way to a moment of syntactical calm:

I have

Only my intermittent life in your thoughts to live

Which is like thinking in another language.

If the poem, to this point, has embodied the predicament of the mind assaulted by the chaos of discourses that compete for priority in our culture, here it stands back to reflect on that

predicament. ? While ? marginalization seems potentially liberating, a way to "step free" of the concerns of the self, ? it is shaded with some of the pathos generated by the most extremely marginalized character in English poetry, Milton?s Satan, as Daffy continues:

While I

Abroad through all the coasts of dark destruction seek

Deliverance for us all, think in that language ?

On first thought Daffy seems to get the worst of the comparison these lines propose. But if the distance between the earlier and the contemporary culture here allows us to measure the diminishment of our own civilization in comparison to Milton?s, it also invests with a certain grandeur the duck?s struggle to prevail against the shocks and indignities inflicted by an unseen tormentor, a tormentor who is in fact his creator as well. It?s by no means certain whether the joke here is on him or on us.

? [Shetley cites from the last six lines of the poem.] This closing section sports a number of inversions (e. g., "bivouac we") reminiscent of the verbal habits of the Daffy Duck voice, yet this ending seems very different in tone from the broadly ironic opening. How has this voice entered the poem? I propose that the often highly conventional-seeming endings of Ashbery?s poems are enabled by the fracturing and displacement of voice ? of which "Daffy Duck in Hollywood" is a particularly baroque example; Ashbery is able to employ highly traditional forms of lyric closure because the play of voices in the poems prevents these passages from being read directly as expressive utterances by the poet ? saves them, that is, from sentimentality.

Again and again, even the most discontinuously organized of Ashbery?s poems arrive at some traditional form of elegiac terminus: a phrase or image that seems to sum up the poem as a whole, a natural image, an epigrammatic reflection, or a gesture that suggests a return to beginnings: [Shetley cites here, among other passages, the concluding 4 lines to "Hop o? My Thumb."]

From Vernon Shetley, "John Ashbery?s Difficulty" in *After the Death of Poetry: Poet and Audience in Contemporary America* (Durham: Duke U P, 1993), 124-125, 127.

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