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### Daffy Duck and Allegorical Violets: Inane Voices Asking Philosophical Questions in the Poetry of Louise Glück and John Ashbery

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Daffy Duck and Allegorical Violets: Inane Voices Asking Philosophical  
Questions in the Poetry of Louise Glück and John Ashbery

Poetry has always been used to pose questions, ranging from the mundane to the extraordinary, from highly specific personal enquiries to broad existential uncertainties. Where did we come from? Why are we alive, what does being alive mean? Existential questions have attracted the curiosity of intellectuals for millennia. Furthermore, in a global culture inherently tied to religion, these questions have often been posed or dedicated to a divine figure. Although the appearance of these god figures has changed and developed over time and across cultures, their symbolism and importance have remained constant. Drawing from traditions started in early religious texts and classical works of prose and poetry, many writers have appealed to a higher power in their work. From Virgil and Sophocles to Whitman and Dickenson, from Homer and Dante to Plath and Collins, poets have used their lines, stanzas and syllables to grapple with existence and perhaps even reach out to God. American poets Louise Glück, and John Ashbery are no exception.

In two unique collections, Louise Glück and John Ashbery utilize much of the same thematic material. Glück's *The Wild Iris* and Ashbery's "Daffy Duck in Hollywood" from *Houseboat Days*, both facilitate a dialogue between God and the individual. Each poet uses a stylized character to speak to God, never using their own voices. What truly brings Glück and Ashbery together is the characters they use. The voices Glück and Ashbery assume are extremely unusual, and notably fictitious. Glück personifies flowers and uses their invented voices, as well as the voice and a gardener. Ashbery draws from popular culture and writes in the perspective of

the Looney Tunes character Daffy Duck. Glück and Ashbery attempt philosophical, Miltonic dialogue through these voices, to curious results. Why do Glück and Ashbery mix high philosophy with inane voices? Analyzing this technique and the varied motives behind it greatly illuminates Glück and Ashbery's work, as well as the state of American contemporary poetry.

It is not uncommon to examine Louise Glück and John Ashbery together. Born only fifteen years apart, the two poets are part of overlapping generations, if not the same one, and their careers have intersected countless times. Both Glück and Ashbery have won a Pulitzer prize. Ashbery, who was awarded a Pulitzer for *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* in 1976, was among the two finalists in 1993, the year Glück's *Wild Iris* won. ("Poetry").

Being the younger of the two writers, Louise Glück has mentioned several times the influence Ashbery has had on her writing. In fact, Glück was the first one to urge the writer John Emil Vincent to read John Ashbery. Vincent went on to write a book about Ashbery, and thanks Glück in the acknowledgements (Vincent xi). Glück clearly respects John Ashbery's work. This admiration will become particularly important when we examine the similarities and differences in the work discussed here, especially because *Houseboat Days* was published years before *The Wild Iris*.

Although they work in slightly different aesthetics, Louise Glück and John Ashbery are relentlessly mentioned together, and are often anthologized together. This is because both writers have both made large contributions to modern western poetry over the mid and late twentieth century, inspiring a younger generation of writers. Specifically, Glück and Ashbery have challenged accepted forms of poetry. In "Freedom or Form" the poet Ira Sadoff writes about his esteem for "John Ashbery, Louise Glück, among others, all make use of (if I can use the term) "music" in their poems. Sophisticated and often difficult music..." (Sadoff 15) Thus, though

their poetic styles differ, it is clear that Glück and Ashbery are preoccupied with the same goals-form and language. It is significant that the two poets have this in common, as it suggests a deeper intellectual connection between the two American poets. Furthermore, one must first understand that the work and careers of Glück and Ashbery are innately linked before delving into the individual poets' work.

Born in 1943, Louise Glück's writing has been criticized and dismissed for being relentlessly negative or overly pessimistic. In a talk entitled "Education of the poet", Glück accepts these labels, describing how these traits have been part of her personality since her difficult childhood. Speaking on her outlook as a burgeoning writer, she says: "I alternated between contempt for the world that judged me and lacerating self-hatred. To my mind, to be wrong in the smallest particular was to be wrong utterly" (Glück 10). It is not difficult to see traces of this earlier overscrupulousness in Glück's work.

Louise Glück sets *The Wild Iris* in a garden. Glück models the entire collection on the progression of spring into the end of summer, reflected in both the literal details of the poems and the thematic elements. Glück's poetic voice tends towards a tone of stark, exacting simplicity, often favoring the dark and negative. Indeed, it is deeply ironic that a book of poems set in a garden of talking flowers could have so dark a tone and be completely free of "flowery" language. The opening line of the opening and titular poem of *The Wild Iris* reads:

At the end of my suffering  
there was a door  
Hear me out: that which you call death  
I remember (1-4)

Thus, Glück opens *The Wild Iris* with an extremely dark, thought-provoking image. This somber tone should not let the collection should not be oversimplified, however, as *The Wild Iris* is full

of tantalizing language and graceful allusion, and the extreme clarity with which Glück writes brings the work to greater thematic heights. One can assume that no collection beginning with an iris saying: “At the end of my suffering/there was a door” (1-2) can be exclusively talking about flowers. Moreover, by using these voices, Glück is able to add depth and allegory to *The Wild Iris*.

There are three types of narrators who speak within Glück’s garden: flowers, a gardener, and an omniscient god figure (for the sake of simplicity, I could clarify this voice to that of “God”, but Glück does not indicate this clearly enough for the assumption to be made). Glück’s voice disappears as the flowers talk, appealing to the gardener and the god figure. In the poem “Violets”, flowers speak with biting tongues:

...dear  
 suffering master; you  
 are no more lost  
 than we are, under  
 the hawthorn tree, the hawthorn holding  
 balanced trays of pearls: what  
 has brought you among us  
 who would teach you, though  
 you kneel and weep,  
 clasping your great hands,  
 in all your greatness knowing  
 nothing of the soul’s nature,  
 which is never to die: poor sad god  
 either you never have one  
 or you never lose one. (6-20)

The violets scornfully speak to their “master”. There is an overwhelming vagueness as to whom the flowers are addressing, as it could be the gardener or the god. This ambiguity hints at a parallel in the relationship of the flowers and the gardener and the relationship of the gardener and the god. Regardless, the violets hold themselves as equals, or perhaps even superiors, to this “master”. With condemnation, the flowers say the master knows “nothing of the soul’s nature”, which the violets suggest is immortality. Despite the insult, there is deep sympathy and sadness. The flowers seem to wish the master knew what they know:

...poor sad god  
 either you never have one  
 or you never lose one. (18-20)

The enjambment in these lines adds a layer of uncertainty to the piece. Are the last three lines a direct appeal to god (God?)? Or, is the audience the gardener, and the flowers are mourning his/her lack of having a god at all? This ambiguity is intentional, as Glück has said that “when the aim of the work is spiritual insight, it seems absurd to expect fluency” (Glück, 15). Thus, Glück encourages the reader to explore the possibilities of *The Wild Iris*. The poet’s focus is on leading her audience to deeper thinking, instead of forcing meaning onto her readers.

Starting at the setting, *The Wild Iris* is wrought with biblical imagery. One can assume that the garden in which flowers and humans have a direct communication with a god is a reference to Eden. In a review, literary critic Constance Hunting defines *The Wild Iris* as “Biblical, mythical, even lightly Miltonic and Keatsean” (Hunting 164). Miltonic themes are seen in multiple poems that converse with one another, like “Snowdrops” and “End of Winter”. Glück subtly facilitates a dialogue between the authoritative god voice and the plants. In “Snowdrops”, the flower marvels at its existence:

Do you know what I was, how I lived? You know  
 what despair is; them  
 winter should have meaning for you.  
 I did not expect to survive,

earth suppressing me. I didn't expect  
 to waken again, to feel  
 in damp earth my body (1-7)

Two poems later in "End of Winter", the god replies indignantly.

You wanted to be born; I let you be born  
 When has my grief ever gotten  
 in the way of your pleasure? (3-5)

Relying heavily on her own inexactitudes, Glück suggests a conversation. Although one would hesitate before labeling the dialogue a direct reference to Milton or *Paradise Lost*, there certainly are similarities to discuss. Of course, the Edenic setting is an instant reference to Milton.

However, could one assume that Glück's garden is truly prelapsarian? Perhaps, as man seems to still be able to communicate with his god, albeit an angry god. Yet, in the third poem "Matins", the gardener suggests that the fall has already occurred.

Unreachable father, when we were first  
 exiled from heaven, you made  
 a replica... (1-3)

In another sense, the arc of *The Wild Iris*, from spring to the end of summer, also ends with the god retreating into a quasi-abyss. In "Lullaby", the god appears to be bidding humanity farewell: "Time to rest now/...silence and darkness" (1, 14). Moreover, while there is some evidence that Glück adopts a style of Miltonic dialogue, there is far more proof that she focuses on a Miltonic

form instead, tracking the fall of man and the loss of god through an allegorical garden. John Ashbery, on the other hand, although a savant of form, more directly references Milton in his use of dialogue.

John Ashbery was born in 1927. At best he has been called, “the Sphynx of the generation” (Carroll, 16) and at worst, “the Doris Day of Modernism” (O’Rourke, 1). Most often, Ashbery is labeled as “a very difficult and perhaps impossible poet” (Dickey, 16). Despite the challenges his complex work always brings, Ashbery has enjoyed a long and successful career. His collection *Houseboat Days* delves into experimental forms, experimental language, and the greatest experiment of them all- language *as* form. This is apparent in the loosely constructed sentences, ever changing pronouns, and cacophony of diction seen throughout the collection. In “The Couple in the Next Room”, Ashbery moves unceasing from pronoun to pronoun:

She liked the blue drapes. They made a star  
 At the angle. A boy in leather moved in.  
 Later they found names from the turn of the century  
 Coming home one evening. The whole of being  
 Unknown absorbed into the stalk. A free  
 Bride on the rails warning to notice other  
 Hers and the great grave that outwore them” (1-7)

Immediately one notes the volatile energy of the language, like emotive brushstrokes on a canvas. At times Ashbery’s specific syntax serves only aesthetic purposes. This is no coincidence, as Ashbery was connected to the famous New York School of artists, including many abstract expressionist painters. Ashbery has said that he tries “to use words abstractly, as an artist uses paint” (“Ashbery, John (1927-), An Introduction to”, 40). This philosophy guides



much of *Houseboat Days*. Although Ashbery's complex form can hinder the reader by abstracting meaning, this does not mean that his writing is ever void of it. Indeed, much of Ashbery's work is deeply philosophical, the content simply blurred by seemingly superfluous language and reference.

In the poem "Daffy Duck in Hollywood", Ashbery draws from a multitude of cultures in his references. Everything from Elmer Fudd to French art, to "stygian velvet" is referenced. The poems' namesake and narrator is Daffy Duck- the beloved Looney Tune. Ashbery presents Daffy as a modern reinterpretation of *Paradise Lost's* Satan (Glover, "John Ashbery Goes to the Movies"). This concept was inspired by a Looney Tune movie Ashbery once saw, *Duck Amuck*.

*Duck Amuck* is a children's movie that contains philosophical themes. The film is a surrealism inspired jest between Daffy Duck and the cartoonist who draws him. Despite Daffy's best efforts, the cartoonist continually meddles in his affairs, erasing him, changing his clothes and props. For a cartoon character, Daffy isn't afraid to take on the metaphysical. Beckoning in the cartoonist- his creator and destroyer- Daffy declares "Thanks for the sour persimmons, cousin. Now look, buster, let's have an understanding" (Thompson 42). Using his iconic "looney" vernacular, Daffy attempts to reconcile with his god. Indeed, *Duck Amuck* has been described as "Daffy's *Book of Job*" (Thompson 41). Ashbery drives this concept further in "Daffy Duck in Hollywood". In a piece that can only be described as immensely overwhelming, Ashbery takes the cartoon duck to Miltonic heights while maintaining his distinctive writing style:

Vegetal jacqueries, plumed, pointed to the little  
White cardboard castle over the mill run. "Up  
The lazy river, how happy we could be?"  
How will it end? That geranium flow

Over Anaheim's had the riot act read to it by the  
 Etna-size firecracker that exploded last minute into  
 A *carte du Tendre* in whose lower right hand corner ... (31-37)

Of the Movies' dread mistress of the robes. Wait!  
 I have an announcement!... (44-45)

Ashbery describes Daffy Duck as both a narrator and an interrupter. The presumably omniscient figure that is describing the scene is stopped by the voice of the duck. If one considers the comparison between "Daffy Duck in Hollywood" and *Paradise Lost*, this is reminiscent of Milton's all-knowing narrator and Satan's interjections. For example, in book four, lines 30-33, the narration ceases as Satan begins to speak, crying out with passion, much like a certain cantankerous black duck: "Sat high in his meridian tow'r:/ Then much revolving, thus in sighs began./ "O thou that with surpassing glory..." (Milton 4.30-33).

By maintaining the character's signature voice, Ashbery carefully ennobles Daffy Duck without losing credibility. Near the beginning of the poem, Daffy is frustrated by his situation and exclaims:

That mean old cartoonist, but look what he's  
 Done to me now! I scare dare approach me mug's  
 attenuated.... (11-13)

...But everything is getting choked to the  
 point of  
 Silence. Just now a magnetic storm hung in the swatch of sky  
 Over the Fudd's garage, reducing it—drastically—  
 To the aura of a plumbago-blue log cabin on... (18-22)

...Suddenly all is

Loathing. I don't want to go back inside any more. (23-24)

Daffy's tone and characteristic cynicism is easy to spot. Ashbery uses the duck's voice as a cultural motif, a symbol of American popular culture. Yet there is also a subtle element of the classical, of the elevation of the subject matter. "Suddenly all is/ Loathing"- though the sentiment fits Daffy Duck's dark perspective, the diction transforms a petty complaint against a cartoonist into a fully-fledged philosophical quandary. One can't help but be immediately reminded of Milton's language, violent imagery, and repeated playing of darkness against light in *Paradise Lost*:

...Or could we break our way  
By force, and at our heels all hell should rise  
with blackest insurrection, to confound  
Heav'n's purest light...(2.135-138)

Although Glück and Ashbery are often discussed together *The Wild Iris* and *Houseboat Days* are very different collections. *The Wild Iris*, adhering to Glück's tradition of pedantic perfectionism, does not dabble in flourishing language and cultural references. Indeed, Glück's writing can appear unambitious and bare next to Ashbery's bursting lines. However, though the two authors utilize form in drastically different ways, they both adopt it as an artistic statement. Glück uses the form of *The Wild Iris* to characterize and set the tone in "End of Winter" and "Snowdrops". By defining a strict setting, time frame, and range of voices, Glück creates a specific aesthetic that complements the interactions between a god, a gardener, and their flowers. Conversely, Ashbery's extreme lack of visible rules or discipline in *Houseboat Days* defines the collection's aesthetic. His enthusiastic and wry use of pop culture and overabundant language creates the abstract expressionistic piece of writing necessary for the success of "Daffy Duck in

Hollywood”. A dialogue between Satan as a Looney Tune duck and God as his cartoonist would not be successful in *The Wild Iris*. Nor would a stripped-down poem about Snowdrops work in *Houseboat Days*.

The dialogue between the creator and the created parallels yet another pair: the artist and his/her art. Glück and Ashbery both allude to their own creative processes in *The Wild Iris* and *Houseboat Days*. The cartoonist in “Daffy Duck in Hollywood” can be interpreted as a symbol of all artists, even Ashbery himself. The duck, a pop culture symbol of Warholian levels, frets about his role within the poem itself, and his role within popular society:

...The allegory comes unsnarled  
To soon;... (53-54)  
...I have  
Only my intermittent life in your thoughts to live  
Which is like thinking in another language. Everything  
Depends on whether something reminds you of me. (55-58)

Appealing to the reader, Daffy meditates on the fleeting nature of fame within popular culture. He points out the main conceit of “Daffy Duck in Hollywood”- allegory, and suggests its unraveling. Daffy knows art cannot survive without an audience, and senses uncertainty in the world around him. This echoes thoughts Ashbery has on the state of his own poetry, fears of his audience disappearing and becoming erased as Daffy is in *Duck Amuck*. However, due to Ashbery’s blatant disregard for agreeing pronouns and reliable narrators in “Daffy Duck in Hollywood”, it is exceedingly difficult to know when the poet is writing about himself—if he ever does at all. Moreover, this makes it problematic to definitively assert whether or not Ashbery is expressing his own views on art, the poet, and audience.

Despite the strict adherence to the form and setting, Glück intermittently slips references of her own life and career into the text, creating another layer of metaphor. From the beginning of *The Wild Iris*, the dedication to “John and Noah” first recalls an image of two Biblical figures. This works well with the Edenic garden imagery, until further reading informs that John and Noah are Glück’s husband and son, respectively. In the poem “Heaven on Earth”, Glück mentions both figures, and the subsequent poems incorporate more of the poet’s personal life into *The Wild Iris*.

Louise Glück also comments on art and writing in *The Wild Iris*. For example, in “End of Winter” the god figure disdainfully addresses all that it has created:

Never thinking  
 this would cost you anything,  
 never imagining the sound of my voice  
 as anything but part of you—  
 you won’t hear it (12-16)

Like Ashbery, Glück suggests that this sentiment could also be spoken by a writer to her audience. Glück goes more personal “Never thinking/this would cost you anything”, she mourns harm that she’s caused with her work. Self-deprecating as always, Glück speaks to her readers as if she has hurt them, and vows to become silent. Furthermore, Glück and Ashbery both incorporate ekphrasis in their work through suggesting that the artist is to the art as the creator is to his creation.

While Ashbery explicitly references and models Milton’s dialogue in *Paradise Lost*, Glück uses a more generalized approach, adopting the form of the poem. Yet both Ashbery and Glück utilize voices to approach their philosophical issues, why? To recaptivate a tired audience. Both Glück and Ashbery, while commenting on art within their poems, question whether their

audience is even there. This fear is essential to the forms Glück and Ashbery use in their work. In a time where one is constantly overwhelmed by information, many ideas can seem exhausted or clichéd. Ashbery and Glück's use of unusual narrators act to jar their respective audiences into paying attention. By juxtaposing the unexpected with an expected poetic conceit, both poets attempt to revitalize old motifs. Some may say that one cannot seriously discuss Milton in the same poem that Elmer Fudd is referenced in. Yet this is the very definition of contemporary poetry. As culture develops it builds on its predecessors, and these now include popular culture. Louise Glück and John Ashbery are forcefully blending the high with the low to produce pieces that define the incredible potential that contemporary American poetry has-encapsulated by John Milton's Satan reincarnated through Daffy S. Duck.

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