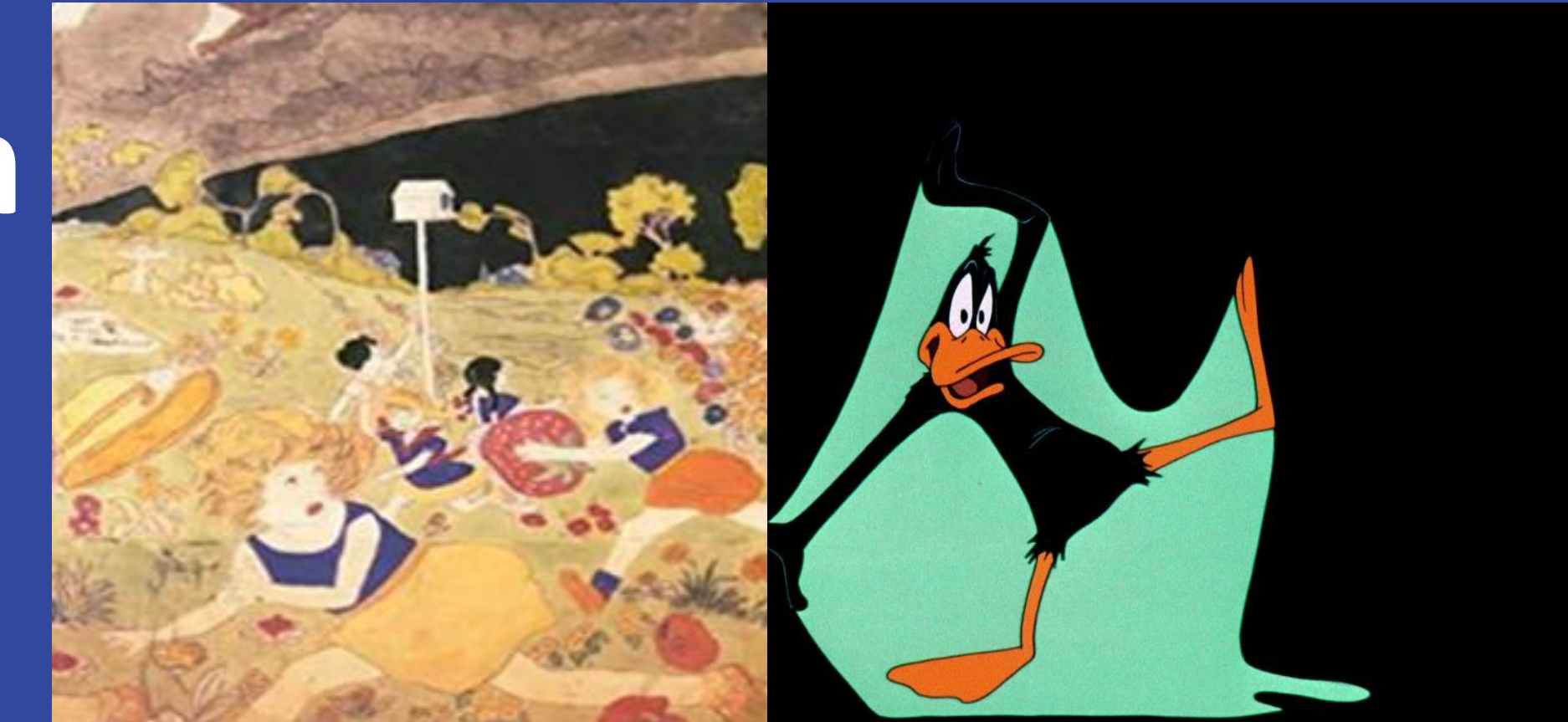


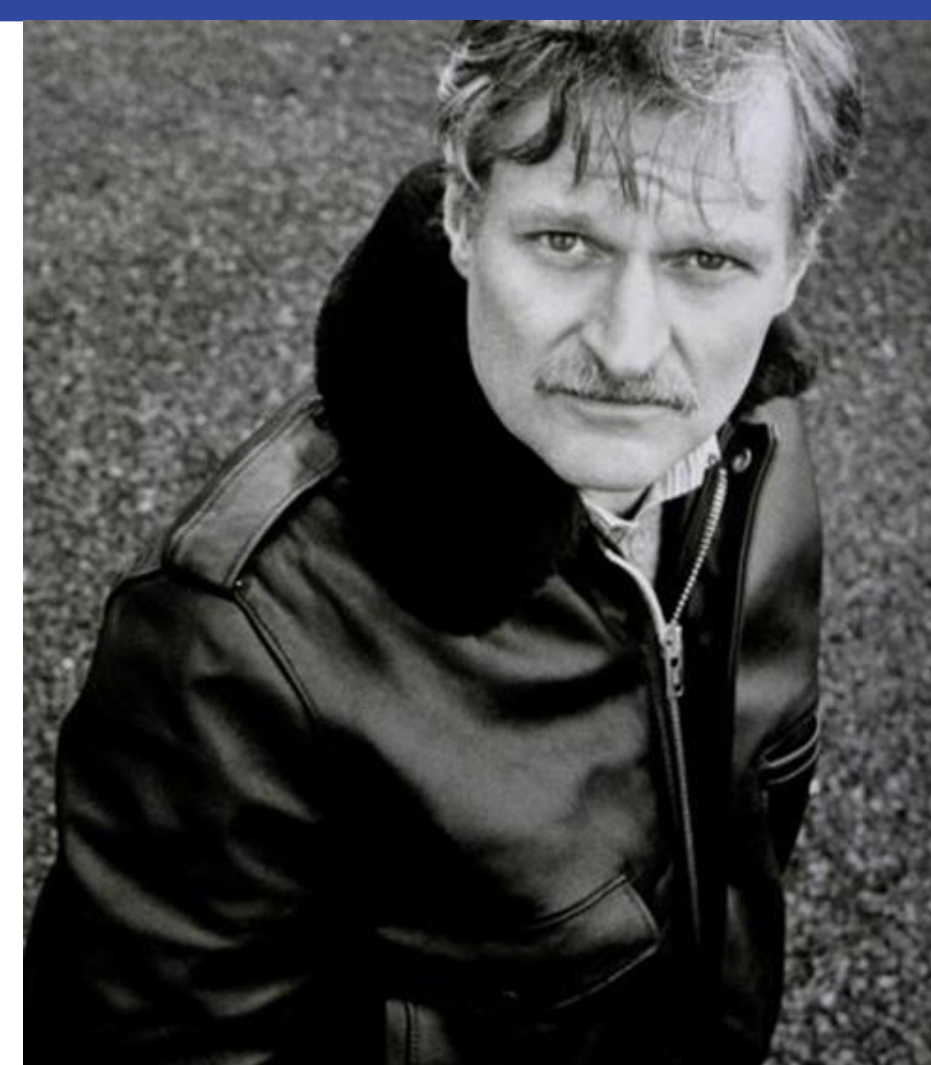


# Batman, Daffy, Wimpy, and *Girls on the Run*, Oh My! Postmodernism and the Cartoon World in John Ashbery's Poetry

By Alexandra Rowe



## Introduction



Above Image: American Poet John Ashbery (1927-2017)

In John Ashbery's poems, he playfully destroys the conventional expectations of poetry in order to stylistically challenge the relationship of conceptual order and dimension in poetry. For example, the usual poetic narration exists in a reasonable bubble where there is some degree of allusion and hints about the subject matter and order that the reader can expect. The poetry of John Ashbery is one of the exceptions to these long-held creative rules. Such examples of this style would be "Daffy Duck in Hollywood," "Breezeway," "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape," "The Price of Eggs" and *Girls on the Run*.

These poems explore the unconventional subject matter of cartoons as a literary gateway to deconstruct order, metafiction, language and surrealism in a philosophically postmodernist fashion. These poems are postmodernist because they stylistically deny any sense of certainty in the way that conventional poetry or even a lot of high modernist poetry does. All these poems play with their linguistic iconoclasm. I will argue that "Daffy Duck," "Farm Implements," "Breezeway," "The Price of Eggs," and *Girls on the Run* are all conceptually compatible because all of these poems employ cartoon characters in situations beyond their control, which is arguably a postmodernist commentary.

## Mr. Coffee Nerves

For this presentation, John Ashbery's poem, "The Price of Eggs" will be discussed. "The Price of Eggs" is about a cartoon has-been that once had a powerful sway over American advertising. The coffee substitute brand Postum had comic-strip-style ads in the 1930s featuring an evil ghost, Mr. Coffee Nerves, who tried to keep insomniacs on coffee.

For reasons unjustly lost to humanity, Mr. Coffee Nerves either dressed like a top hatted silent movie villain or a jetpacked science fiction astronaut with a helmet that resembled the ears of a cat in a state of moderate disappointment. Mr. Coffee Nerves magic powers were being in possession of a Salvador Dali moustache and making anyone who drank coffee to instantly become cantankerous. The only thing that stopped him was when someone drank Postum.

## Mr. Coffee Nerves and "The Price of Eggs"

Mr. Coffee Nerves was not just an all-pervading presence in his cartoon universe, but in real life American media. The Postum ads appeared in newspapers, magazines, subway stations, and billboards across the country. Despite his ubiquitous existence of being the cartoon advertising mascot of pseudo-coffee, Mr. Coffee Nerves was largely forgotten by the general public. Like Pepperidge Farms, John Ashbery did remember Mr. Coffee Nerves.

Ashbery wrote:

**No one remembers Mr. Coffee Nerves,  
his lap of beads, allegedly sitting there.**

**Families with pets, help me with this.**

**Something may disturb him:  
sun's parody, the price of eggs, raw orange.**

**Who was that plant from?**

**She, somewhat evaporated... Would I laugh?**

**You are not to be concerned about fish.**

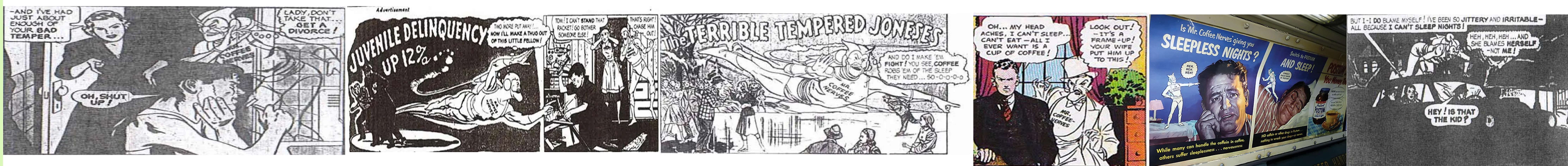
**Extreme ants polished our definition.**

## "The Price of Eggs" and Postmodernism

"The Price of Eggs" explores the existence of being in a space that is known but unable to expand beyond a cartoon universe. It has the theme of a yearning for a sense of connection, but the narrators are blocked to reach it through the absurdity of the situation. The later stanza mimics the language of the earlier one with the direct confrontation to the reader about the disappearance of a person. The ellipses preceding the question "Would I Laugh?" indicate the narrator is hesitant about whether the situation is either ridiculous or concerning. It is compatible with the postmodernist concept of derision as subversion. The amazing line "[e]xtreme ants polished our definition" shows that in the wider schemes of postmodernist theories, it ultimately doesn't matter because contradiction is unavoidable in contemporary existence.

Mr. Coffee Nerves is so forgotten that his actions are alleged and not truly known. "The Price of Eggs," conceptually aligns with the surrealism of being helpless to the instability of circumstances. Forgetting Mr. Coffee Nerves is a postmodernist act of decanonization. Decanonization is the postmodernist procedure of delegitimizing the master-codes and grandnarratives of modernism. According to philosopher Jean-François Lyotard and literary theorist Ihab Hassan, decanonization is the postmodernist procedure of delegitimizing the master-codes and grandnarratives of modernism.

In a cheeky pop culture way, Ashbery is decanonizing Mr. Coffee Nerves. Mr. Coffee Nerves is a manipulative god, an author and father of the destinies and fates of people. When Ashbery makes fun of Mr. Coffee Nerves being forgotten, he is decanonizing the power that Mr. Coffee Nerves once held in the collective imagination of the public.



Above Images: Vintage Postum Advertisements Featuring Mr. Coffee Nerves

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