“Between the Flash and Fall of Turning”: “New York” School Poets, American Pragmatism, and the Construction of Subjectivity

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Abstract

With my dissertation entitled *"Between the Flash and Fall of Turning": "New York" School Poets, American Pragmatism and the Construction of Identity*, I seek to account for the depiction of the anti-foundational self which emerges time and again in the poetry of John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Barbara Guest, James Schuyler and Kenneth Koch. While theorizing the self as a contingent, provisional, and shifting construct is hardly new to a theoretically oriented academy transiting into the present century, scholars and critics have tended to ground such interpretations in "structural linguistics" and so-called "French philosophy." One of the goals of this project, therefore, is to propose that the philosophical skepticism toward the self as a site of stable and enduring meaning has always been felt and articulated by American Pragmatism, specifically in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James and John Dewey.

While a handful of critics have looked to Pragmatism to account for the protean self in the work of "New York" School Poets, these commentators have tended to focus their attention largely on O'Hara's and Ashbery's poetry. This project seeks, on the one hand, to round out this work with close readings of all the major "New York" School Poets, and extend it, on the other, by looking beyond poetry to visual art and classroom pedagogy to examine evidence of a Pragmatist orientation *across* the disciplines, despite the apparent interpretive consensus that American Pragmatism "goes silent" at mid-century.

My opening chapter focuses on John Ashbery's first collection of poems entitled *Some Trees*. For a poet regarded generally as working in an experimentalist vein, *Some Trees* contains an unusual number of traditional and even antiquated poetic forms. The upshot of these encounters with "containment," however, seems to be that formal and generic limits can be perversely generative, for as William James suggests, there is always "something" that eludes attempts to delimit. This insight is not lost on Frank O'Hara, the subject of my second chapter, for O'Hara's fondness for the excesses of language, cinema, and visual culture cannot be squared by the rigidly-defined and conformist drift of Cold War ideological discourses, those pernicious forms of containment which aim to produce, circumscribe and enforce human identity.

In my third chapter, the focus on poems from Barbara Guest's inaugural *The Location of Things* dramatizes the tension inherent in such attempts at ideological enforcement. As they move between "locations" and "things," Guest's poetic personae never demonstrate the unity and stable referentiality upon which such enforcement depends, reflecting instead an Emersonian awareness that it is in the movement *between* ideas, moods and discourses that we catch glimpses of something like a self, though never for very long. James Schuyler, whose ostensible realist aesthetic I take up in my fourth chapter, appears at odds with Guestian abstraction. Nonetheless, Schuyler is likewise fascinated with what happens once again *between* iterations of self, and my analysis here focuses on

just this tension, finding in the art work of second-generation Abstract Expressionist Fairfield Porter a like-minded desire to seek out the interstices *between* realism and abstraction.

My concluding chapter explores Kenneth Koch's attempts to unsettle the grasp which the New Criticism exerted on pedagogy at mid-century and beyond, looking instead to Pragmatist-minded educators like John Dewey and William Carlos Williams to find a pedagogy consistent with an implicit holistic, organic, and experiential theory of education, so I would argue, within the "New York" School aesthetic more generally. In sum, by examining the Pragmatist undercurrents of "New York" School Poetry, post-war visual art, and "progressive" pedagogy, my dissertation proposes to construct an alternative narrative of literary and critical ideas for the second half of the twentieth century, and potentially beyond.

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Introduction

But then you remember something William James / wrote in some book of his you never read – it was fine, it had the fineness / the powder of life dusted over it, by chance of course, yet still looking / for evidence of fingerprints. Someone had handled it / even before he formulated it, though the thought was his and his alone.

--John Ashbery ("My Philosophy of Life" 174)

As is usually the case with generalizations, the label "New York School Poets" ascribed to John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler, Kenneth Koch, and, somewhat belatedly, Barbara Guest, is both useful and seriously misleading.[1] It is useful insofar as it helps readers begin to orient themselves to the prolific poetry landscape of Cold War America, to trace the reverberations of modernism in the personal, political, and aesthetic choices that characterize more generally Black Mountain, San Francisco Renaissance, Beat, and "New York" School Poets. It should be noted, however, that these groupings are not as well-defined as they appear to be in Donald Allen's seminal *The New American Poetry*, where Allen admits readily that he "adopted the unusual device of dividing the poets into…larger groups, though these divisions are somewhat arbitrary and cannot be taken as rigid categories" (xii). If there is any unifying

[1] Guest receives little to no attention in Geoffrey Ward's *Statutes of Liberty,* William Watkins' *In the Process of Poetry* and David Lehman's *The Last Avant Garde*, titles regarded generally as critically-informed introductions to the "New York" School Poets.

strand, it is in the poets "total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse" (xi).

Of the five seminal members of the "New York" School of Poetry foregrounded in this study, only Ashbery can claim to hail from New York – not the big city, but the rather more modest Sodus, a hamlet on the outskirts of Rochester where the Ashberys owned a farm.[2] Schuyler and Koch were born in the midwest, Chicago and Cincinnati respectively, though Schuyler did spend his boyhood in West Aurora, a suburb of Buffalo.[3] O'Hara grew up in Grafton, Massachusetts. A young man anxious to make a career in music, he summed up his attitude toward suburban life in bleak New England in a poem dedicated to his sister Maureen which ends with a rather urgent entreaty: "Oh piano! hire a moving van! / Put down Mendelssohn and run! ("The Spoils of Grafton," 26). Guest was born in Wilmington, North Carolina but was shipped off at a young age to the west coast, where it was felt she would receive a superior education.

What makes this collection of friends and collaborators "New York" School poets has nothing to do with origin; in fact, it makes more sense to suggest that each poet made his or her way to New York to experience a kind of rebirth, an opportunity to live and work and love in a place that Ashbery famously referred to

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[2] As Ashbery notes in an interview with Mark Ford, things might have turned out differently had Ashbery's grandfather accepted an offer to invest in a new technology that allowed for the introduction of colour into still and moving photography. Eastman Kodak, better known as Kodak, owned a substantial percentage of the market in analog film throughout most of the twentieth century (20).

[3] Schuyler's 1981 *The Morning of a Poem*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, was written during an interval in which the recently-hospitalized and recovering Schuyler moved back into his boyhood home, where his mother still lived.

as a kind of “anti-place,” a “logarithm of other cities” (qtd. in Gray 57). And it is nothing if not consistent with its members’ ongoing efforts to re-imagine and reconstruct identity that the moniker “New York” School was plucked out of the air by an opportunistic art showroom director and friend to the young poets seeking to attract attention to the Tibor de Nagy showroom. The Tibor published the poets and hosted readings, but since the gallery’s primary mandate was to sell art, the slippage in the mind of art world denizens between the fledgling “New York” School Poets and transformative New York School Artists like Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline could only help its prospects. Conceived as a lark of sorts, the label has come, within anthologies and classrooms, to signify a unity that the poetry itself tends to undermine.

Because each of the poets under study responds primarily to highly individual constellations of influences, events, impressions, memories, dreams, and moods – and because these aforementioned are always changing, prompting a corresponding need to adapt personally as well as poetically to new circumstances – trying to characterize, in general, the overarching poetics of the “New York” School Poets is a difficult business indeed. Schuyler’s best-known poems focus on the objective world as such, and they are rife with descriptions of overheard speech, weather patterns, and other localized ephemera. O’Hara’s poems tend to riff on the musicians, actors, artists, and poets whose work turned him on, juxtaposing so called “high” culture references (to Italian opera, for example) with the “low,” mixing in references to consumer products and jingles to

form a kind of Baedeker of 1950s popular culture. Koch's display a child's delight in dickering with received conventions and the language they are cloaked in, while Guest's often reflect on the landscapes, seascapes, and cityscapes that stoke her imagination. Ashbery, in turn, mines all of this territory, often in the space of a single poem.[4] If there is any sensibility or attitude underwriting such a range of interests, it is perhaps summed up by a line of Ashbery's from "Soonest Mended": "But the fantasy makes it ours, a kind of fence-sitting / raised to the level of an esthetic ideal" (*The Mooring of Starting Out* 233).

In modern parlance, "to sit on the fence" is to express uncertainty between two alternatives and to defer decision. To many, sitting on the fence denotes inaction, even paralysis: *choose one way or the other*, we are told. But in America in the 1950s, the range of choices were fairly narrow, and the choice between, say, communist or patriot, "deviant" or well-adjusted adult, beatnik or grey flannel suit carried serious social, professional and even legal implications. [5] It is precisely this either-or orientation towards the world, and the philosophical tradition on which it depends, which "New York" School Poets eschew in their

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[4] "Popular Songs," for example, which "was written in an attempt to conjure the kind of impression you would get from riding in a car, changing the radio stations and at the same time aware of the passing landscape," moves kaleidoscopically between elegiac, comic, and quasi-philosophical registers (qtd. in Shoptaw 31).

[5] In 1950, it was revealed that of 91 public employees dismissed for "moral turpitude," most were homosexuals (D'Emilio 41). Such revelations caused both a kind of abstract paranoia amongst the public as well as a series of concrete punitive actions taken by politicians, policy makers, and law enforcement agents, raising the stakes for choosing amongst social, sexual, and political identifications. For more on the homophobic history of 1950s America, see John D'Emilio's *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, George Chauncey's *Gay New York* and David Johnson's *The Lavender Scare.*

work, preferring instead to honour the contingent nature of the universe and its upshot: radical uncertainty. Because each day brings with it a set of experiences which modify our present beliefs, forcing us to re-examine how we look at the world, uncertainty becomes a bulwark against ideology, against ideas that have become impervious to the datum of experience. It is my contention that the poets under study recognized the danger which can come of believing that one's ideas are objectively right and another's wrong. One need not be a historian to recognize in absolute certitude the preconditions for violence.

This kind of philosophical skepticism, this allergy to absolute certainty and its deleterious effect on our worldview, characterizes another informal group, a loose association of lawyers and philosophers, writers and mathematicians, scientists and clergymen that met to talk through the philosophical, political, and social issues facing late-nineteenth century Americans. Despite personal and philosophical differences, the core members of the group – which included Oliver Wendell Holmes, William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, and John Dewey – cleaved to "the belief that ideas should never become ideologies – either justifying the status quo, or dictating some transcendent imperative for renouncing it" (Menand xii). Ideas, they believed, were simply provisional, human-made, contingent responses to circumstances, and they should never be confused with Divinely-Authored Truth. James, who was instrumental in wresting the study of the mind away from traditional philosophy to a new discipline called psychology, which sought empirical rather than speculative evidence for human

behaviour, would have been loath to suggest that a dogmatically empirical perspective got things right. As Louis Menand puts it, “James’s thought…belongs to the tradition initiated by *On the Origin of Species*; but he refused to regard evolution as a ‘law’…and he devoted much of his life to attacking” those who interpreted Darwin along such absolutist lines (141). Dewey attacked the dichotomies that often help to sustain and perpetuate a metaphysical approach toward philosophy. Distinctions, of course, can help us to organize and even understand experience; parts put us into better relation with the whole. But Dewey never failed to remind his interlocutors that the parts cease to matter in any real sense once they are abstracted from the whole, that the distinctions we make between “knowing” and “doing” or “stimulus” and “response” are not “real things” but rather “terms of inquiry” into a circular process known as experience (Menand 329-330). Consequently, there is no reason to elevate one term over another since, properly speaking, these are continuous, relational, co-dependent entities. By calling the purported ontology of foundational thinking into question, Dewey opened the door to further investigation of some of the more invidious dichotomies upon which western philosophy is built.

Classical Pragmatism, as it is sometimes referred to, devolves from many different sources. James dedicated *Pragmatism: A New Name For Some Old Ways of Thinking*, a set of lectures which introduced Pragmatism to the wider world, to the memory of John Stuart Mill, “from whom I first learned the pragmatic openness of mind and whom my fancy likes to picture as our leader were he alive

to-day" (n.p). Dewey named one of his daughters after Jane Addams, a Chicago-based sociologist whose conviction that "antagonism…was always unreal" "converted" Dewey, laying the foundations for his life-long commitment to exposing specious philosophical hierarchies (qtd. in Menand 313). But for the purposes of this project, it is Ralph Waldo Emerson who looms largest.

We know that though he was something of a local celebrity in nineteenth-century Cambridge, friend to the likes of Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. and Henry James Sr., and occasional participant in the goings-on at The Metaphysical Club, Emerson preferred to remain aloof, saving his energy, perhaps, for the close study of the self that constituted the primary focus of his intellectual life. Often regarded as the prophet of self-cultivation in the service of self-reliance, and as the forefather of the rugged Yankee farmer, Emerson's conception of the self was altogether less sturdy, less robust than is sometimes imagined. According to Richard Poirier,

> Emerson is actually opposed to individualism in the customary or social sense in which the term is most used. That is, he is opposed to the notion of the self as something put together by a person who is then required to express it and to ask others to confirm it as an identity. (29)

Conformity to such a construct tends to "solidify and hem in the life," for experience modifies constantly that which came before it, "making us correct our

present formulas" as James would later put it (qtd. in Poirier 23; James 106). [6] To fall back on a familiar, reassuring, monolithic sense of self is precisely what Emerson counsels we *not* do. It follows then that self-reliance, for Emerson, "gives way recurrently to its opposite, to self-dissolution, to the abandonment of any already defined Self" (Poirier 20). As I see it, Emerson's bequest to James and Dewey, and down to the "New York" School Poets, is just this notion that the self never *is* for very long, not if it wishes to swim with the stream of experience. Consequently, it is the perpetual movement *between* the ideas, moods, and discourses that constitute and re-constitute the self, rather than any one idea, mood, or discourse itself, that matters in the long run.

According to the standard historical narrative, Pragmatism enjoyed great popularity in intellectual circles between 1880 and 1920, after which it began to cede philosophical ground to Logical Empiricism, and the steady stream of European émigrés who arrived on American campuses eager to disseminate it. Logical Empiricists were by nature scientists, mathematicians, and logicians, and their work focused almost exclusively on the semantic and semiotic implications of language, anticipating the "linguistic turn" philosophy would make in the late 70s.[7] As a result, Logical Empiricism was said to be an improvement upon

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[6] Ashbery's observation in "Two Scenes – "From every corner comes a distinct offering / The train comes bearing joy" – seems to me to reflect just such an unfinished, expectant notion of subjectivity (*Mooring* 3).

[7] In general terms, "the turn" was made by twentieth-century philosophers like Wittgenstein, and later, J.L Austin, who rejected, along with structuralists, the idea that language referred to or corresponded with concepts that were external to or separate from reality, and believed that most philosophical problems arose from misunderstandings of the way language works.

Pragmatism, which was thought to be "muddleheaded" and "fuzzy" by comparison (West 183; Bernstein 11; Haddock Seigfried 18). According to this narrative, it is not until the late 1970s and Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* that Pragmatism catches up. The renewed interest in Pragmatist thought in turn fosters a steady expansion of Pragmatism's purview into disciplines as varied as law, race and gender studies, and literature. [8]

An alternative narrative, the one I will present in these pages, regards the Pragmatist attitude as alive and well throughout the 1950s, furthered in and through the literary, artistic, and philosophical descendants of the classical Pragmatists and functioning as a kind of antidote to "a dominant culture bent on enforcing unity by marginalizing and repressing deviant, nonconforming, political, racial, sexual, and artistic identities (Epstein 16-17). It is perhaps worth mentioning that there is no substantial evidence that the "New York" School poets were actively *reading* Emerson, James, or Dewey. In an interview with Mark Ford, Ashbery said that he had read "philosophy that [was] close to poetry," mentioning William James (60). All of the poets, of course, read Stevens, who studied under one of James's students, George Santayana, while at Harvard, yet Stevens denied being influenced by anyone whatsoever during his undergraduate years (Rae 112). Koch read William Carlos Williams' work closely, and, though he resisted the association, there is evidence to suggest that

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[8] On Pragmatism's "awakening" in the 1980s and 90s, see Cornel West's *The American Evasion of Philosophy,* Charlene Haddock Seigfried's *Pragmatism and Feminism*, Richard Poirier's indispensible *Poetry & Pragmatism*, and Richard Posner's *Law, Pragmatism, and Democracy.*

Williams was influenced by Dewey, particularly Dewey's landmark works in education.[9] Schuyler's greatest influences proved to be his closest acquaintances, particularly "second generation" Abstract Expressionists like Fairfield Porter and Jane Frielicher.[10] Yet, as I will endeavor to show, both Porter's and Freilicher's work are in sympathy with Pragmatist sensibilities. On the other hand, Guest eschewed explicitly any connection between her work and classical Pragmatism in a 1995 interview with Charles Bernstein. I take up her disavowal in Chapter Three.

As is evidenced by comments like Williams', the whole issue of direct influence is a somewhat touchy one for poets, perhaps belying an anxiety of influence. In any event, this need not prevent us from examining the purported affinities between the "New York" School poets and classical Pragmatism. "None of [the "New York" School] poets," according to Anne-Marie Mikkelsen,

> was a philosopher, and their direct engagements with James and Dewey, where they can be identified, were usually brief. Like most of their contemporaries, they experience pragmatism in large part as a philosophy that suffused contemporary reassessments of the ideal self and community. (16)

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[9] "Resistant" is putting it mildly: "[I]f I could convince myself or have anyone else convince me that I were merely following the steps of Dewey, I'd vomit and quit – at any time. But for the moment I don't believe it" (qtd. in Beck 57)

[10] "Second generation" Abstract Expressionists differ from their ancestors chiefly in and through their re-introduction of the figure to the canvas as well as a general reluctance to dramatize overtly the *agonistic* struggle of the artist that seems to characterize much first-generation work. For examples of "second generation" works, see Figures Five and Six. For examples of "first generation" Abstract Expressionist works, see Figures One and Two.

Historical record to the contrary, Pragmatism, I contend, is very much "in the air" in the post-war period, a refuge from the imperatives of absolute certitude, an Emersonian reminder that "nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit…People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them" (*The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* 289).

In Chapter One, I take up John Ashbery's *Some Trees*, his first collection of poems published in 1956. Despite Ashbery's use of a number of traditional and even antiquated poetic forms, *Some Trees* is, in "some" ways, a product of its time.[11] Written in the wake of the increased efforts on the part of law enforcement agencies to police so-called natural social and sexual boundaries, many of the poems appear to dramatize the limited agency of Ashbery's poetic personae as they negotiate a continuously shifting series of forms and discourses. But it would be a mistake to suggest that Ashbery is merely responding to historical circumstances as he finds them in *Some Trees*, for the upshot of these encounters with "containment," in all its various manifestations, seems to be that limits can be perversely generative. *Some Trees* seems then to offer a way of thinking about limitations, and about the limits of limitations, which can never completely organize, regulate, or delimit experience. "There is no complete generalisation, no total point of view, no all-pervasive unity," William James tells us in "A Pluralistic Mystic[,]" "but everywhere some residual resistance to verbalisation, formulation, and discursification, some genius of reality that

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[11] In addition to sonnets and sestinas, *Some Trees* contains a pantoum, a canzone, and an eclogue.

escapes from the pressure of the logical finger, that says 'hands off,' and claims its privacy, and means to be left to its own life" (1313). This protean "something" that can never be pinned down, in turn, begins to gesture toward the decidedly indeterminate conception of subjectivity located in the work of the "New York" School Poets.

The notion that there is something more to subjectivity than can be squared by various institutional discourses becomes particularly vexing in the context of the Cold War, for "something" undermines the systematic attempt, on the part of various representatives from the medical, political, and legal establishments, to enact and police essentialist theories of sex and gender. For Frank O'Hara, an unabashedly "out" poet taken up in Chapter Two, strictures enforcing sexual and gender normativity threatened to reduce the variousness of experience he refers to in "In Memory of My Feelings" to a crude algorithm. O'Hara took every opportunity to address this potential dimunition in his poems, celebrating the sexual and semiotic excesses of cinema and visual culture, those recognizable idols and icons of popular culture whose identities were not easily contained by binary logic. Like many of his "New York" School cohorts, O'Hara was keen to "unstiffen" the grip Cartesian dualism has had on the manner in which we experience experience, choosing with Kenneth Koch to keep his "subject up in the air for as long as possible," so as not to arrest the possibilities it holds out (*Pragmatism* 43; *Complete Poems* 4).

To quote William Carlos Williams, “so much depends” on the reading of Barbara Guest’s *The Location of Things* that I offer in Chapter Three, for Guest is the only “New York” School poet to reject explicitly affinities between her work and American Pragmatism. As I point out in the Chapter, there are a number of potential reasons for Guest’s disavowal of Pragmatism, but her full-throated refusal prompts the question: what does Guest take Pragmatism to be? If it is taken as synonymous with a rigidly empirical philosophy that denies the abstract its place in the order of things, then Guest will have no truck with it. But Pragmatism, and Jamesian Pragmatism in particular, does not necessarily privilege empiricism. In fact, James did not believe that *any* set of ideas had a monopoly on truth. His insistence, according to Louis Menand, is the very essence of James’s pluralism. Accordingly, it is in the restless movement between ideas and moods, and, of course, between “locations” and “things,” as in the title of Guest’s inaugural collection *The Location of Things*, that the Guestian persona reveals its Pragmatist inheritance.

Though James Schuyler’s commitment to representing “things as they are” appears to put him at odds with Guestian abstraction, as revealed in Chapter Four, the two poets share an abiding conception of subjectivity as perpetually unfinished, a continual process of becoming-other. Consequently both poets are fascinated with what occurs between iterations of self, though the shape this fascination takes is varied. Schuyler’s poetry, from *Freely Espousing* to *A Hymn to Life*, tends to reflect his beatific gratitude for the environment he finds himself

in, particularly those rural and coastal sites where he can allow his attention to linger on the weather and its almost-imperceptible changes – a graphic analogue, for Schuyler, of the fluid, protean aspects of the self. But Schuyler was dazzled, in equal measure, by the work of visual artists like Fairfield Porter and Jane Freilicher, so called second-generation New York artists working in the wake of Abstract Expressionism. Like Schuyler's, Porter's and Freilicher's work exhibit a keen interest in the "atmosphere" of a particular scene – the quality of light present on an overcast afternoon, a chance reflection from a neighbouring building, the tension generated by a couple who, though seated together, appear to be inhabiting different worlds. This attention to detail suggests a kind of realist aesthetic, and yet, in ways that overlap with Schuyler, many of Porter's works play with the distinctions between abstract and representational art, seeking out, again, those pictorial coordinates which unsettle generic boundaries.

Chapter Five rounds out my study of the "New York" School Poets and their Pragmatist orientations by turning to Kenneth Koch and his much-lauded pedagogical writings, *Wishes, Lies and Dreams*, and *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?*. Written in the wake of two teaching stints in New York City's public school system, in 1968 and 1969, these texts find Koch espousing a playful, improvisational, and experiential approach to teaching poetry to children, one that is decidedly at odds with the then- (and to some extent still) reigning authority of poetry study, the New Criticism. Turning the hallmarks of New Criticism – close reading, formal analysis, critical distance, and, underlying these, a conception of

poetry as a rigorous discipline reserved for the initiated – on their head, Koch instead encourages his students to use the poems they read together as vehicles for their own self-discovery and attendant self-expression. This insistence on the importance of the reader's experience of the poem anticipates the reader-response criticism taken up and developed by "neo-pragmatists" like Stanley Fish and Jane Tompkins. But it also looks back to William Carlos Williams, and, through Williams, to John Dewey, both of whom sought a pedagogy less concerned with the transmission of universal truths than the discovery of quite local, personal, and provisional ones. Concluding with Koch, and more specifically with his pedagogical writings, also serves to reinforce the notion of Pragmatism as "in the air" at mid-century and beyond, the presence of Pragmatist attitudes in visual art and pedagogy, in addition to poetry, as testament to its elasticity, and its vitality.

Finally, an anonymous reader has suggested that, strictly speaking, one might just as well adopt any one of a number of nineteenth- or twentieth- century philosophies as an antidote to the Enlightenment Self. The suggestion reflects what Pragmatists like Richard Poirier and Cornel West see as an academic obsession with European philosophy, whether it be Marxism, structuralism, or poststructuralism, and a corresponding lack of appreciation for the "anti-foundationalism of Charles Peirce or William James or John Dewey…Stein, Stevens or Frost" (Poirier 173; West 4). My attempt to "salvage Pragmatism" is an attempt to reconstruct the narrative of academic or intellectual development in

the twentieth century, a narrative which views Pragmatism as a necessary stepping stone to more “respectable,” “tough-minded,” “serious” philosophies purported to contribute to the linguistic turn (Bernstein 12). In the process, it forms part of an ongoing effort to rediscover in the American grain glimpses of the postmodernist theorizing that pervades literature departments today, and more fully to historicize its many tributaries. Trolling these ostensibly unhandsome intellectual backwaters of Concord, Massachusetts, or Burlington, Vermont, or Sodus, New York, one finds ample evidence of an anti-foundational theory of self in the making.

Learning to Live Within the System: American Pragmatism and John Ashbery's *Some Trees*

This chapter forms part of a broader challenge to the widely-held belief that American Pragmatism goes silent – vanishes from the intellectual and philosophical scene – in the decades following World War Two, not to resurface again until the 1980s and 1990s. Despite scholarly consensus, I will contend that Pragmatism is still very much "in the air" during the 1950s, though not in philosophy departments or popular journals.[12] My case in point in this chapter is John Ashbery's first collection of poems, *Some Trees* (1956).[13]

My examination of *Some Trees* begins from a series of fairly basic questions about the text: Why does Ashbery include two sestinas, two sonnets, a pantoum, a canzone, and an eclogue in a collection that most readers of poetry would agree belongs firmly in the experimental mode? Why mix conventional, technically demanding forms in a collection of poems clearly aiming to evade the kind of verse that poetry readers might have identified as traditional or popular? Is there something about the restrictions that these forms impose that serves perversely as a precondition for or prelude to creativity? Might there have been a

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[12] For discussion of Pragmatism's decline at mid-century, see: Cornel West's *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (1989); Richard Poirier's *Poetry & Pragmatism* (1992); and Charlene Haddock Seigfried's *Pragmatism and Feminism* (1996).

[13] The American poetry community greeted *Some Trees* with a mixture of awe and bewilderment. W.H. Auden awarded the collection the Yale Younger Poet's Prize, and fellow "New York" School poet and friend Frank O'Hara pronounced *Some Trees* "the most beautiful first book to appear in America since Wallace Stevens' *Harmonium*" (qtd in Dubois 1). Writing in dissent for the Hudson Review, William Arrowsmith declared that he had "no idea most of the time what Mr. Ashbery [was] talking about…beyond communication of an intolerable vagueness that looks as though it were meant for precision" (qtd. in *JA in Conversation with Mark Ford* 13).

reason for a poet to concern him or herself with the relationship between constraint and creativity in a decade, the 1950s, in which civil liberties and freedom of thought were increasingly subject to various forms of social, political, and ideological control? I hope to demonstrate that the decision to include these forms is no accident; rather, I see Ashbery's engagement with and negotiation of constraint as an artistic response to the social, political, and ideological limitations facing U.S. citizens in the post-war years. The poems I want to focus on negotiate various constraints – poetic, psychological, social – via concepts associated with Pragmatism: faith in the individual and his or her creative or imaginative faculties, critical distance, and democratic inclusivity.

In order to foreground the radical implications of a collection of poems that both affirms and develops classic Pragmatist principles, I want to begin by reviewing some of the discourses that militate against Pragmatist conceptions of individuality, creativity, and democratic inclusivity in the 1950s. Through the first several decades of the twentieth century, Pragmatists were considered to be among the vanguard of socially progressive thinkers in the U.S., charting a course for critical intelligence and creative democracy in an increasingly fragmented public sphere. By the time of John Dewey's death in 1952, however, an influx of European philosophers, scientists, and mathematicians fleeing fascist Europe for the U.S. had begun to alter the type of philosophy taught on college campuses and published in specialized journals. The ideas of logical positivists like Otto Neurath, Hans Reichenbach, Rudolf Carnap, and Philipp Frank played a

crucial role in shaping the development of twentieth century philosophy, particularly in the U.S. of the 1940s and 50s, where, according to Kucklick, "no professionally respected thinker claimed the public mantle of Dewey, who…still embodied philosophy for the most ruminative of the college-educated elite, and spoke to its urge for guidance in a corporate world" (227). In contrast to Dewey, the logical positivists "embodied an extreme empiricism," "a set of doctrines [that] emphasized the exclusive claim of science to knowledge, and downgraded any philosophical pursuits that did not acknowledge such exclusivity" (232).

The ostensible birth of logical positivism, the so-called "turning-point" in philosophy, was announced by Moritz Schlick in a paper of the same name delivered in 1930. Schlick wanted to locate philosophy more firmly in the province of empirical science. He advanced a theory of meaning that attempted to eliminate unanswerable metaphysical questions by applying scientific criteria to language: any proposition that could not be empirically tested, any proposition whose tangible effects could not be objectively measured, was considered to be meaningless. According to Schlick, philosophy, "the queen of the sciences," would come to "furnish the foundations" for empirically-derived truth (5); its modus operandi would be to confer meaning on propositions, meaning which would derive from "factual indications, in demonstrations…and thus in real acts" (5-6). The outcomes of these real acts would finally and conclusively exhaust a proposition's meaning – "these alone neither can nor need be given any further

explanation; the final giving of meaning therefore always takes place by means of actions, and it is these that constitute the philosophic activity" (5-6).[14]

In their wish to fashion a concrete, empirically verifiable language, many of the logical positivists that took up prominent positions at U.S. universities during and after the war turned their attention to physics, mathematics, and symbolic logic. At a time when philosophers were in danger of becoming increasingly tangential to serious conversations about the problems facing modern society, logical positivism "seized the imagination of the most talented young philosophers in the [U.S.]" (West 183). To aspiring students of philosophy, Pragmatism, with its mid-century emphasis on historical consciousness and social reflection, "appeared… to be vague and muddleheaded" (183). The Pragmatists' "vagueness and lack of clarity simply did not meet the high standards of 'rigour' required for serious philosophical inquiry" (Bernstein 11).

Logical positivism reached the height of its popularity on the eve of the Second World War. Once the Cold War had begun, however, "there was increasingly little room in professional philosophy or science for...any program that was not essentially technical and apolitical" (Reish 68). According to George Reish, the campus loyalty oath requirements of the 1950s played a major role in determining the turn toward the technical and formal problems that came to dominate philosophy of science in 1950 and later years. Reish's comments

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[14] In his effort to bring about "a final change in philosophy," Schlick skips over some fairly reasonable questions: Will the meaning of a proposition be determined by an individual or by a group? In light of new evidence, will it be subject to revision? Who will decide what constitutes a "real act"?

suggest that Pragmatism's waning influence during this period may have had more to do with the political orientations of individuals like John Dewey, Sidney Hook, and C.Wright Mills than with their philosophical methods. By the 1950s a professor's standing at a college or university was evaluated primarily by reference to the position he or she took on domestic politics (Schrecker). An appetite for "tough-minded" continental philosophy may have supplanted Pragmatism briefly, but by the mid 1950s, both Pragmatism and logical positivism seem to have been supplanted by a technical, formal, and apolitical disciplinary ideology.

As for John Dewey, his concerns about "the growth of the corporate mentality in America" and its effect on individual agency and creativity would prove more than justifiable (Bernstein 80). In the years following World War Two, a number of landmark studies were published detailing the increasing power that corporations, working in association with government, were coming to exert over the working and middle classes. C. Wright Mills's *The New Men of Power* (1948) warned of "the encroaching power of a leviathan, corporate, military state" and worried over "the conservative bureaucratic tide" which seemed to characterize U.S. political economy in the post war years (xxii; xxvi). Leading this wave was a political class Mills called the sophisticated conservatives, a group of corporate elites and politicians wary of the growing power of the labour movement and reluctant to make concessions to it.

By the time Mills published *White Collar: The American Middle Class* (1953), he was able more definitively to articulate the stakes involved in the long transition from a burgeoning industrialized economy to an increasingly corporate world for the average American: “The decline of the free entrepreneur and the rise of dependent employee on the American scene has paralleled the decline of the individual and the rise of the little man in the American mind” (xii).

Mills’ study, a diachronic account of the changing social and economic landscapes of the first half of the twentieth-century, focuses on shifts in occupation between 1860 and 1950. These shifts are primarily the result of greater efficiencies at the level of the production of goods. According to Mills, one of the chief consequences of mechanization and mass-production techniques was that “as a proportion of the labour force, fewer individuals manipulate things, more handle people and symbols” (64). The “little man” which Mills refers to is the historically unique product of a period in U.S. history that witnesses an explosion in the speed and scale at which goods can be produced, one that reverberates across and has implications for all sectors of the workforce. The mechanization of industry and the expansion of the white-collar workforce prefigures the emergence of a new socio-economic type, one that is distinctly less independent-and entrepreneurial-minded than his American predecessors. According to David Savran,

> the “organization man” was expected to subordinate his personal ambitions for the good of the corporation and develop those interpersonal skills that

> were becoming an increasingly important part of the business world….Men were discouraged from competing aggressively with one another and were expected to submit to corporate structures in exchange for obtaining a secure place in the organizational hierarchy. Unlike the self-reliant entrepreneur of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the "organization man" was expected to cultivate respect for authority, loyalty to one's superiors, and an ability to get along with others. (47)

Within the community of social scientists, the rapid consolidation of the corporate sphere and the new socio-economic imperative gave way to the belief that the most effective method for organizing society was to model it on the structure of the corporation. W.H Whyte labeled this phenomenon the "social ethic," "that contemporary body of thought which makes morally legitimate the pressures of society against the individual" (7). Like Mills, W.H. Whyte expressed serious concern over a societal structure that was being reshaped as a gigantic corporate group. His response to this crisis is *The Organization Man* (1956), a seminal text in the field of sociology, which seeks to establish a unifying account of the subterranean forces shaping U.S. society in the 40s and 50s. One of these forces is scientism, a pillar of the organizational ethic representing "the promise that with the same techniques that have worked in the physical sciences we can eventually create an exact science of man" (23). Scientism represented a utopian idea – the perfectibility of human society – that chimed with some of the views put forward by the logical positivists, particularly Otto Neurath and his Unity of

Science Movement.[15] Culled from the proceedings of several conferences, Whyte presents what he calls "a fair composite of the message" (24):

> The conditions which determine human happiness are discoverable scientific methods and are to a major extent capable of realization…More than ever, the world's greatest need is a science of human relationships and an art of human engineering based upon the laws of such science….Although human relationship problems are extremely complicated, science is gradually reducing them to simple fundamentals through which these complexities are reduced to factors that respond to direct and simple treatment. (qtd in Whyte 24)[16]

The social science community that Whyte spent years observing believed the "art of human engineering" was the most expedient method for bringing man back into association with man. What was needed, of course, was "an elite of

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[15] For more information about the Unity of Science Movement, see Reish, "From 'The Life of the Present' to the 'Icy Slopes of Logic': Logical Empiricism, the Unity of Science Movement, and the Cold War." *Cambridge Companion to Logical Empiricism*. Ed. Alan Richardson and Thomas Uebel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 58-87.

[16] It may be worth noting that John Dewey was also optimistic about the role modern science and the scientific method might play in social reform, though contrary to his critics' charges, Dewey does not "make a fetish of scientific method" (West 97). More so than the scientific method, Dewey takes seriously the scientific attitude, a critical, questioning, and scrupulous intelligence that "takes delight in the problematic, and cherishes it until a way out is found that approves itself upon examination" (qtd. in West 97).
In contrast to the community of scientists Whyte observed, Dewey is in no way suggesting that we might achieve something like objectivity through application of the scientific method to human affairs; and he would likely have been disturbed by the belief that a commitment to scientific method might rid us of bias. As Dewey points out, this conception of science "is ludicrous because these scientific conceptions, like other instruments, are hand-made by man in pursuit of realization of a certain interest" (qtd. in West 98).

skilled leaders who will guide men back, benevolently, to group belongingness" – a managerial class trained to bring dissatisfied individuals in line with group objectives (Whyte 33). Schooled on the application of scientific principles to human affairs, these leaders

> won't push him [i.e. the worker] around; they won't even argue with him – unfettered as they will be of "prejudice and emotion," they won't have any philosophy, other than co-operation to argue about. They will adjust him.…these neutralist technicians will guide him into satisfying solidarity with the group so skillfully and unobtrusively that he will scarcely realize how the benefaction has been accomplished. (36)

If the organizational ethos held at the level of the organization, its potential efficacy at the level of society might hold even greater promise. In time, stability could be achieved via social engineers, those tasked with the duty of determining what was in a society's best interest through the application of a set of value-free, objective criteria for social harmony. Based on a specious faith in the infallibility of scientific method and a narrowly conceived definition of "the Real," the organizational ethos asserted itself as the governing principle of social organization in the post-war years.

In retrospect, it is perhaps Mills who most accurately analyzed the psychological effects of the shift toward a corporate world, one in which middle-class individuals depended for their livelihoods on employment within vast, hierarchical organizations. As employees became responsible for servicing

accounts rather than people, and for marketing brands rather than the products themselves, the social harmony that scientism envisioned gave way to something less than sanguine. Faced with socio-economic circumstances that all but eviscerated the exercise of individual agency, Mills foresaw the rise of what he called the tragic view:

> The material hardship of nineteenth-century workers finds its parallel on the psychological level among twentieth-century white-collar employees. The new Little Man seems to have no firm roots, no sure loyalties to sustain his life and give it a center. He is not aware of having any history, his past being as brief as it is unheroic…perhaps because he does not know what frightens him, he is paralyzed with fear. This is especially a feature of his political life, where the paralysis results in the most profound sense of apathy in modern times. (xiv)

For Mills, who believed strongly in the notion of a critically informed, historically conscious citizenry, the tragic view was a betrayal of the best of both Pragmatism and Marxism, two "-isms" that Mills felt shared an underlying conviction:

> One idea ran through both ideologies: the optimistic faith in man's rationality. In pragmatism, this rationality is formally located in the individual; in Marxism in a class of men, but in both it was a motif so dominant as to set the general mood. (146)

Pragmatism, once so genial to the national temperament as to "set the general mood," is replaced by a more sombre world view: "Since the war years,

the optimistic rational faith has obviously been losing out in competition with more tragic views of political and personal life" (149). According to Cornel West, the tragic view was symptomatic of a generalized "pessimism regarding the human lot," a residue of the war and its most visible symbols – the concentration camp and the mushroom cloud (113). Consequently, promoting optimism, individualism, creativity, critical intelligence, and inclusivity within a limited social and discursive space becomes *the* central problem for mid-century intellectuals and artists in the Pragmatist grain, whose writing comes increasingly to reflect the prevailing mood: "Pervasive in their writings are a sense of the tragic, a need for irony, a recognition of limits and constraints, and a stress on paradox, ambiguity and difficulty" (114).

West's characterization of mid-century philosophy and literature describes very well John Ashbery's first collection of poems. Concerned with the paradoxical relationship between constraint and creativity, many of the poems in *Some Trees* highlight the limited agency of individuals caught up in various networks and discourses. These poems negotiate the constraints – formal, artistic, heteronormative, social – that are constitutive of these networks via a Pragmatist faith in the individual and his or her creative faculties to imagine forms of democratic life that were previously unimaginable.

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There is perhaps no better illustration of the stultifying corporate culture which I have been describing than Ashbery's "The Instruction Manual," a poem written from the point of view of a writer, perched in a building high above the midday traffic of downtown Manhattan, tasked with producing a highly technical document:

> As I sit looking out of a window of the builidng
> I wish I did not have to write the instruction manual on the uses of a new metal.
> I look down into the street and see people, each walking with an inner peace,
> And envy them – they are so far away from me!
> Not one of them has to worry about getting out this manual on schedule.
> And, as my way is, I begin to dream, resting my elbows on the desk and leaning out the window a little,
> Of dim Guadalajara! City of rose-coloured flowers!
> City I wanted most to see, and most did not see, in Mexico!
> But I fancy I see, under the press of having to write the instruction manual (*Mooring* 8).

The tone is lighter than Mills' more solemn assessment of life within the corporate sphere, the window, a Pragmatist trope, as we shall see in ensuing chapters, functioning both to let a little air into stuffy proceedings and offer the writer an egress from the somewhat oppressive task set before him. Despite such tedium,

or perhaps because of it, the writer proceeds to reel off a mock travelogue of a city he's never visited, complete with a holiday parade lead by the mayor, – "a dapper fellow" with a "mustache, which has been trimmed for the occasion" – an intimate encounter with an old woman, – "My son is in Mexico City…his job is with a bank there. Look, here is a photograph of him" – and a rooftop view of the city at dusk – "Soon we have reached the top, and the whole network of the city extends before us" (8; 9; 10). At each turn, events are punctuated by pastel colours – "Around the stand the flower girls, handing out rose- and lemon-coloured flowers, each attractive in her rose-and-blue striped dress (Oh! such shades of rose and blue)" – and sentimental observations – "Here come the boys! They are skipping and throwing little things on the sidewalk…Yet soon all this will cease, with the deepening of their years, And love bring each to the parade for another reason" – that testify less to the fidelity of the account as to the pleasure of its making (8; 9). Ultimately, our instruction manual writer endeavours to sustain, even cultivate, his imagination, and the pleasure attendant on such an undertaking, despite the ennui concomitant with white-collar work, a task which the Ashbery personae within *Some Trees* will try to replicate.

In "Two Scenes," Ashbery engages with questions of creativity and constraint that emerge in "The Instruction Manual" more overtly. "Two Scenes" seems to betray a certain concern with formal constraint, consisting as it does of two numbered stanzae, each containing nine lines. There is, for example,

something conventionally formal in the aphorism of line one – "We see us as we truly behave" – and yet beneath its verbal surface there exists an unsettled and complicated vagueness (3). Who constitutes "we" and "us"? How does this group acquire the internal coherence to see itself as it "truly behaves"? Do we imagine Emerson, who was fond of using aphorisms in his essays, applauding the poet's sly effort to unsettle the conventional wisdom that the aphorism vaguely gestures toward ("treat thy neighbour as you do thyself")?

If there is something vaguely reminiscent of Emerson in the opening line of "Two Scenes," the tenor of the lines following locate us more firmly on Emersonian ground, embracing as they do classical Pragmatist values like optimism, industrial dynamism, creativity, and mythic individualism.

> From every corner comes a distinct offering.
>
> The train comes bearing joy;
>
> The sparks it strikes illuminate the table.
>
> Destiny guides the water-pilot, and it is destiny. (*Mooring* 3)

Emerson deeply wanted to believe that the "basic nature of things, the fundamental way the world is, is congenial to and supportive of the moral aims and progress of the chosen or exceptional people, i.e. Americans" (West 15). The "central philosopher of American individualism," as Sacvan Bercovitch refers to him, believed strongly that progress would not be made in the social experiments conducted at Brook Farm and elsewhere. Progress, Emerson claimed, could only be made "by a reverse of the methods [the collectivists]

use…The Union is only perfect when all the Uniters are absolutely isolated" (qtd. in Bercovitch 310-11). Emerson believed that the American continent could serve the needs of a modern industrial nation unlike any the world had seen. He believed that the objectives of the American democratic experiment could be realized through the will of purposeful individuals working separately, though with a common vision. In fact, the experiment could not fail, for the self-reliant man, the American scholar *was* America – new in nature, pregnant with possibility, and forged by the contingencies of politics and history. This wonderful rhetorical conflation meant that every man or woman, every American who cultivated an authentic self, contributed toward actualizing America.

This conception of the individual is worth considering, if only because of how antagonistic it is to America's social structure in the 1950s. As we have seen, this is an era that witnessed the birth of the "white collar" worker (Mills), the "organization man" (Whyte), and "the man in the grey flannel suit" (Wilson) – a masculine type that emerged to staff government agencies, entertain clients, coordinate faculty meetings, and manage companies. As Mills, Whyte, and Wilson make clear, one of the most pervasive trends of the 50s was the "decline of the free entrepreneur and the rise of the dependent employee" – he whose best chance at prosperity and happiness was thought to be through affiliation with institutions that drew financial, political, and social capital from relationships with state government officials and multinational corporate clients (Mills xii). Most paths to the good life ran through bureaucracies, boards, and guilds, groups of

individuals organized around what W.H Whyte called "the social ethic," an ethos reflecting the belief that "the individual is a non-logical animal incapable of rationally solving his own problems, or, in fact, of recognizing what the problem is" (36).

If we take the first stanza of "Some Trees" as building slowly toward an Emersonian pitch, then "we" seems to take on new meaning as an unassociated group of isolates who place faith squarely in the hands of the individual and his or her ability to make her own fate, fashion her own identity, or forge her own outcomes. [17] The train which powers these lines might then be read as a further symbol of Emerson's faith in individual creativity, for it signifies ingenuity on a grand scale, the sparks it throws off penetrating every hive of human activity and industry. But if the aforementioned lines can be read as celebrating Emerson's radical conception of individuality and inclusivity, the lines which conclude the first scene seem to identify potential threats:

> For long we hadn't heard so much news, such noise.
>
> The day was warm and pleasant.
>
> "We see you in your hair,
>
> Air resting around the tips of mountains." (*Mooring* 3)

[17] John Shoptaw reads the '"we" representing this in-group somewhat differently. For him,

> the "we" of "Two Scenes" may represent not only all of us but a secret society whose members behave openly among themselves: only "We see us as we truly behave." Often the communications system in *Some Trees* encodes a gay network of friends circulating among enemies and possible informants. (20)

The question which the first stanza seems to ask is whether "something" can be heard above the chatter of modern life – those commonplace descriptions of the weather, the snatches of overheard conversations or dialogue. Perhaps this "something" does not signify according to or cannot be assimilated by the rules governing our language game? Perhaps it is not, in Richard Rorty's terms, a truth candidate – "We see you in your hair // Air resting around the tips of mountains." Can we read the slant rhyme as an offer of "something" we can perhaps intuit but not quite imagine into existence, evidence of a residuum of thought that eludes classification, categorization, or logical inquiry?

If there is "something" buried beneath these lines, perhaps we can imagine it as compatible with Robert Frost's use of the term in his work, as exhumed by Richard Poirier, an attitude that Poirier, in turn, traces back to William James.[18] James would have been content to make "ever not quite" the watchword of his pluralistic philosophy (1312). The conclusion of "The Pluralistic Mystic," James's final contribution to American philosophy, finds James once again railing against the absolutist assumptions of transcendental idealism and rigid empiricism, both of which espoused an Idea (God in the first case; reason in the second) "that professed to enclose everything" (qtd. in Simon 286).

> There is no complete generalization, no total point of view, no all-pervasive unity, but everywhere some residual resistance to verbalization, formulation, discursification, some genius of reality that escapes from the pressure of

[18] I am thinking of Frost poems such as "Mowing, "Mending Wall," "For Once, Then, Something," and "The Gift Outright."

> the logical finger, that says "hands off," and claims its privacy, and means to be left to its own life. (1313).

For James, there is "something" irreducibly mysterious at the heart of existence, an excess that, as Poirier suggests, we might celebrate not as a gift of meaning but only as an inconclusive promise of it (145). Despite the threat that television, advertising, and consumerism pose for the individual trying to communicate with an audience, I read the end of the first scene as offering a promise of something hopeful, if not quite fully realizable in the present moment.[19]

The first and most obvious detail to note in scene two is the simplistic rhyme scheme of the first five lines. Is the scaffolding of these lines meant to mimic a certain ease or uniformity that might characterize the age?[20] What do we make of the "canal machinery" as compared with the train and the boat from the first scene? What are the implications of a poem set against an industrial landscape? Is this an occasion for celebration or lament? If the first scene begins to foreground the difficulty of sustaining an Emersonian conception of individuality in an era of mass communication, scene two takes this scenario to its logical conclusion – a static social landscape in which individual authority is increasingly being replaced by collective decision-making:

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[19] For additional uses of the term in *Some Trees*, see: "A Boy ("Isn't there something I asked you once?"), "Some Trees" ("That their merely being there / Means something;"), and "He" ("He will demand something on the menu").

[20] Commenting on Ashbery's attention to form in *Some Trees,* Andrew Dubois reads the opening of the second scene as evidence of a poet who "would never be so gauche as to use [formal conventions] without mock-seriousness":

> Machinery, honesty, history, authority, and poverty stand in a regimental line, through rudimentary rhyme defending formal decorum – a vertical defense but a horizontal poem, and the lines make their final words absurd. (9)

A fine rain anoints the canal machinery

This is a day perhaps of general honesty

Without example in the world's history

Though the fumes are not of a singular authority

And indeed are dry as poverty. (*Mooring* 3)

Unlike the "sparks" that spur creativity and innovation in scene one, the "fumes" of this collective effort serve only to produce bland uniformity. Poverty, a term often used by Wallace Stevens to denote writer's block or creative fatigue, is the by-product of an ideology in which the creative energies of the individual are constrained by a dull, monochrome vision of social organization. Here and elsewhere in *Some Trees*, Ashbery calls attention to the idiosyncratic, eccentric artisan – the individual who, despite his unique gift (or perhaps because of it), exists at the "margins of our technological society," unrecognized within a monoculture of military-industrial men who congratulate themselves for having reduced everything to a system (232):[21]

Terrific units are on an old man

In the blue shadows of some paint cans

As laughing cadets say, "In the evening

Everything has a schedule, if you can find out what it is." (3)

Ultimately, "Two Scenes" seems to adumbrate the difficulty in store for the eccentric individual living in an increasingly homogenized and systematized

[21] See for example: "The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers"; "The Mythological Poet"; and "Pied Piper."

society, one that either drowns out or else dismisses dissonant voices and perspectives.

"Sonnet" continues to explore the relationship between individual creativity and constraint in *Some Trees*. Divided into sestet and octave, "Sonnet" locates itself within the Petrarchan tradition, though it reverses the conventional octave-sestet order of appearance and abandons Petrarch's rhyme scheme entirely. The first section offers a description of the poet's central problem, the reason or occasion for writing. Indeed, the occasion is marked by the poet's frustration, even exhaustion over the absence of creative powers, a familiar subject in the tradition of the sonnet, according to Michael Spiller.[22]

Each servant stamps the reader with a look.
After many years he has been brought nothing.
The servant's frown is the reader's patience.
The servant goes to bed.
The patience rambles on
Musing on the library's lofty holes. (25)

In addition to the Elizabethan sonneteers, there are a number of American writers who have used their lack of inspiration as subject matter. According to Richard Poirier, Emerson's lectures demonstrate an acute anxiety about his creative muse – the "superfluity of spirit" that is crucial to his vocation as a writer

[22] In his extensive study, Spiller notes that among Elizabethan sonneteers, difficulty of expression in the movement toward passionate utterance was so prevalent as to be considered a poetic trope. In other words, writer's block could function as a precondition or premise for writing.

– and the waning and waxing thereof (50). “Ah that our Genius were a little more of a genius!” Emerson says in “Experience,” as if trying to rouse his muse out of torpor, a residue of the death of his infant son, Waldo. I take the uninspired tenor of the first six lines of “Sonnet,” three of which are structured virtually identically, and only one of which contains enough momentum to spill over into the next line, as symptomatic of the condition Emerson alludes to above – an inability to sustain the creative energy needed to generate movement, to break out of statuary, to draw a new Emersonian circle. Here the “nothing” of which the poet laments is a figuration of creative poverty, more commonly known as writer’s block. After all, the servant has taken to bed, unable to produce anything new for the patient reader, who must instead content herself with plumbing old books, other mysteries.

If nothingness denotes psychic enervation, it follows that because all psychic states are transient, this too shall pass. The servant finds inspiration through identification with an other that supplies the desired momentum, and now, as “it pushes through the top stain of the wall,” “the rush,” as Ashbery refers to it elsewhere, “is on” (*Mooring* 25; “My Philosophy of Life”):

> His pain is the servant’s alive
> It pushes through the top stain of the wall
> Its tree-top’s head of excitement:
> Baskets, birds, beetles, spools. (*Mooring* 25)

The burst of creative energy in line ten, a playful, alliterative list – metonyms for fecundity and the creative process, calibrated so as to accentuate sonic juxtapositions – is the fleeting, hard-won product of a struggle to exercise the imaginative powers of the individual. "Sonnet" thus comes to serve as a metaphor for the creative process itself; it chronicles the history of its own making, though of course it does not disclose how the transition from *nothing* to *something* is made, nor why this creative outburst spends itself so quickly.

According to John Shoptaw, Ashbery has said he intended "Popular Songs" to simulate the experience of tuning a car radio somewhat haphazardly while passing various landscapes, and indeed the first nine lines of "Popular Songs" seem to channel a number of literary genres, including gothic, tragedy, and bildungsroman (31):

> He continued to consult her for her beauty
> (The host gone to a longing grave.)
> The story then resumed in day coaches
> Both bravely eyed the finer dust on the blue.
> That summer ("The worst ever") she stayed in the car with the cur.
> That was something between her legs.
> Alton had been getting letters from his mother
> About the payments – half the flood
> Over and what about the net rest of the year?
> Who cares? Anyway (you know how thirsty they were)

The extra worry began it – on the

Blue blue mountain – she never set foot

And then and there.

Meanwhile the host

Mourned her quiet tenure. They all stayed chatting.

No one did much about eating.

The tears came and stopped, came and stopped, until

Becoming the guano-lightened summer night landscape

All one glow, one mild laugh lasting ages.

Some precision, he fumed into his soup. (4)

Several stories are joined *in medias res* in “Popular Songs.” Someone or something has died in one, while in another a pair of passengers set out on a journey; a painful yet somewhat cliché story about sexual awakening precedes an elliptical account of a mother-son relationship complicated by what seem like irreconcilable interests; song lyrics (the words “Blue blue Mountain,” a reference likely to the Blue Ridge Mountains in Tennessee that appears in the lyrics of songs performed by John Denver, Earl Scruggs, and The Grateful Dead among others) are followed by an encouraging but aborted characterization, perhaps of Alton’s mother, until what John Shoptaw calls a “narrative collage” (30) pauses to describe a funeral. The stanza resolves itself on a comically self-reflexive note – “Some precision, he fumed into his soup” (4).

It is interesting to consider this "he" demanding precision. Does "he" represent the critical authority, along with its ideological or gendered assumptions, that structures or regulates definitions of what poetry should and should not be? Does this authority, this critical community, venerate formal or generic homogeneity above all? And why are these critical imperatives considered the standard for literature, deviation from which could only imply a lack of seriousness or merit or depth?

If we want to think of the champions of the New Criticism as imposing doctrinaire criteria for what constituted poetry in the 40s and 50s, an issue I shall return to at greater length in Chapter Five, perhaps we can think of the vagueness that characterizes "Popular Songs," its refusal to operate within one genre or discourse, as a radically anti-authoritarian gesture, an attempt to imagine a less insistently dogmatic vision of a society. The competing values, practices and narratives expressed therein would exist in an imprecise, "muddleheaded," or ambiguous farrago only to the degree that we continued to venerate absolutes. Charges of imprecision might then be reframed as celebrations of plurality, as attempts to include as many disparate voices and stories as possible.

Ashbery's sympathy for the eccentric, idiosyncratic, marginal, and maligned in *Some Trees* supports this claim. One thinks of figures like the beggar in "Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers," the pervert in "The Mythological Poet" and "the further sores which eyesight shall reveal // And they live" in "Pied

Piper" (18; 23; 51). I am suggesting that their inclusion is a radically democratic gesture – an attempt to envision and accommodate alternate formulations of subjectivity and personhood written during a period of U.S. history in which authorities sought and enacted legislation intended specifically to counter such notions. [23]

I wish to conclude my consideration of *Some Trees* with "The Painter" because it rounds out my discussion of creativity and constraint and foregrounds a number of aesthetic questions that I take up in more detail in Chapters Three and Four. Written in 1948, "The Painter" is a meditation on constraint, creativity, and the artistic traditions to which an American poet coming of age in the 1950s might look. Indeed, "The Painter" draws from a number of theories of the artist, beginning with the artist as passive medium through which the outside world expresses itself:

> Sitting between the sea and the buildings
> He enjoyed painting the sea's portrait.
> But just as children imagine a prayer
> Is merely silence, he expected his subject
> To rush up the sand, and, seizing a brush,
> Plaster its own portrait on the canvas.

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[23] For Richard Rorty, "expanding the range of our present 'we'…is one of the two projects which an ironist liberal takes to be ends in themselves, the other being self invention." By "ends in themselves," Rorty means that these are two undertakings that he finds to be intrinsically valuable, though he admits he "cannot imagine defending [this claim] on the basis of noncircular argument" (64).

So there was never any paint on his canvas

Until the people who lived in the buildings

Put him to work: “Try using the brush

As a means to an end. Select, for a portrait,

Something less angry and large, and more subject

To a painter’s moods, or, perhaps, to a prayer.”

(*The Mooring of Starting Out* 40)

The short-term consequences of this passivity on the part of the artist are cause for concern; waiting to channel the sea’s mysterious essence, the painter fails to produce anything. Anxious for (or about) him, the building’s denizens urge the painter to adopt a more functional approach to painting, including the adoption of a limit to his subject matter. And while the constraint offered by the residents is vague and even counter-productive – in effect, they suggest that the painter substitute an object of study with an abstraction, the sea with his moods or dreams – it is important to note that “The Painter” is a sestina, one of the more intricately regulated poetic forms, consisting of “six six-line stanzas in which the end-words in the lines of the first stanza are repeated, in a set order of variation, as the end-words of the stanzas that follow,” as well as a three line envoy which incorporates all six of the end-words (Abrams 306).

The formal properties of a sestina help us to recognize a set of curious, ironic, and generative tensions: desiring freedom from any limitations of his subject matter, the painter in the poem produces nothing, while the imposition of

a complex yet seemingly malleable poetic constraint allows the poet behind the painter to produce *something* – in this case, a hyperbolic yet familiar portrait of an artist struggling to find an appropriate critical distance within which to create. The irony – the generative potentialities emerging out of limitation – is multiplied by the fact that while the oppressive cultural politics of the 1950s represented a remarkably creative period for someone like Frank O'Hara, it did not for Ashbery, who produced one collection of approximately forty poems between 1948 and 1956, an average of five poems a year. In effect then, the poet utilizes a formal constraint to depict a painter whose refusal to do likewise results in creative paralysis, a scenario (the paralysis, that is) that Ashbery would confront in 1951-52, while working on poems for *Some Trees* (Shoptaw 5).

Meanwhile, we find the quixotic painter chafing under the suggestion to limit the scope or scale of his work. He wants simply to imagine himself as a conduit through which his environment speaks, to bring his audience into contact with a direct and unmediated experience of the sea – "How could he explain to them his prayer / That nature, not art, might usurp the canvas?" (*Mooring* 40). Unfortunately for the painter, this conception of the creative process takes no account of the very local contingencies that subtly and unconsciously affect the transaction between external object, artist, and work of art. Emerson, another Romantic who at times gave voice to quixotic ideas, was quick to point out the illusory quality of the quest to represent the world mimetically: "We have learned," he says, in his lecture "Experience"

> that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these coloured and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their error. (*Essential Writings* 322)

Neither the artist, nor anyone else for that matter, experiences the natural world directly, for our perceptions are always shaped by the learned associations between sound and image, or between object and concept, that give rise to those perceptions. The problem with the desire to bring one's audience into direct contact with experience is that painting – indeed most forms of art – is an intrinsically mediated process, depending for its effect on brushwork, the play of light and dark, and the interpretive schema of the artist. The mediating elements that exist between the artist and his work, as between subject and object, redirect any attempts at transparency, objectivity, and mimesis, a fact that pragmatists from Emerson to Rorty have tried repeatedly to point out. [24]

The painter, perhaps succumbing to popular taste, next attempts a vaguely abstract or impressionistic portrait of his wife, though this too is problematized by another sort of artistic dilemma – the scope or scale of modern industrial life: "He chose his wife for a new subject, // Making her vast, like ruined buildings" *(Mooring* 40). Indeed, this feature of modern industrial life seems to

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[24] Rorty flatly rejects the notion that a language user might operate as a mere conduit , the piece of filament that catalyzes while remaining wholly unaffected by poetic composition in Eliot's metaphor. This would amount to the suggestion that we might at last discover a final vocabulary which "gets something right…corresponds to the way things actually are" if only we could remove the subject from the picture (*Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* 8). To suggest we might some day arrive at a vocabulary that expressed the intrinsic nature of the self or reality is to suggest that language has an ultimate purpose. Rorty asks us to see language "as we now see evolution, as new forms of life constantly killing off old forms – not to accomplish a higher purpose, but blindly" (19).

signal a terminus for the kind of project our painter envisions, and yet, he perversely chooses to return to his original project, refusing to acknowledge the real danger that it poses:

The news spread like wildfire through the buildings:
He had gone back to the sea for his subject.
Imagine a painter crucified by his subject!
Too exhausted even to lift his brush,
He provoked some artists leaning from the buildings
To malicious mirth: “We haven’t a prayer
Now, of putting ourselves on canvas,
Or getting the sea to sit for a portrait!”
Others declared it a self-portrait.
Finally all indications of a subject
Began to fade, leaving the canvas
Perfectly white. He put down the brush.
At once a howl, that was also a prayer,
Arose from the overcrowded buildings. (40)

If “The Painter” caricatures the Romantic artist, it also submits popular notions of the postmodern artist to scrutiny. The contemporary artist appears in the above section as both the non-mimetic artist who ends up overwhelmed by his project, and the minimalist whose art offers no viable solution to the postmodern crisis of representation. Anxious to record the vastness of the

unconscious as it unfolds against the speed and scale of modern industrial life – to record, in a word, everything – these artists fail to find an adequate critical distance within which to create, one which does not put their art or their lives at risk.

The age seems to demand a new conception of the artist and a novel response to the postmodern dilemma. If representational art is an impossibility, "The Painter" characterizes the extremes toward which non-representational painting moves as risking either the obliteration of the artist or the reduction of the work itself to vacuous abstraction. Failing to find an adequate critical distance within which to create, the painter's fate is sealed in a manner not completely dissimilar to Jackson Pollock's, Mark Rothko's, or James Dean's. Like these figures, our painter has situated himself at the extremes of the artistic tradition, neither of which are sustainable, instead of operating somewhere in between:

> They tossed him, the portrait, from the tallest of the buildings;
> And the sea devoured the canvas and the brush
> As though his subject decided to remain a prayer. (41)

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I want to pause and take stock of where we've been. What I have been trying to highlight here is a set of ideas that quietly structure *Some Trees* and to resist those ideas structuring mid-century U.S. society and culture. By no means codified, Ashbery's poems nonetheless seem to embrace a philosophy distilled from Pragmatist formulations of individuality, critical intelligence, creativity, and critical distance. And though there seems to be nothing wrong, nothing even

particularly “un-American” about these concepts, they were adversarial to prescriptions of the good life in 1950s U.S. society, which emphasized group think, mindless consumerism, and a fanatical conception of “with us or against us” patriotism.

Many of the voices and figures inhabiting *Some Trees* are marginal to 1950s mainstream America, though Ashbery seems to want to bring them into the fold. Indeed, the poet can be thought of as one these marginal figures, searching for a critical distance within which to exercise his powers of imagination. For Ashbery, however, living on the margins is perhaps a kind of “consolation prize,” (“He”; 44) for it is only outside of the existing order of things, outside, that is, of the recognizable and legitimate modes of personhood as produced and circulated by the dominant structures, systems, and institutions, that he can go about the work of creating a new language, so as to generate new truths, realities, or possibilities for living within the system. Like Whitman before him, Ashbery in *Some Trees* is “both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it” (“Song of Myself” 38).

Before concluding my treatment of *Some Trees*, I want to say something on the topic of Ashbery’s sexuality. It is difficult to assess the pertinence of Ashbery’s sexuality to interpretations of his work. Critics like John Shoptaw, Catherine Imbriglio, and John Vincent argue that *Some Trees* is a veiled, elliptical response to the cultural politics of homosexuality in the 1950s. The generalized premise for their arguments is that for artists and intellectuals, cloaking one’s

sexual identity was the only way to avoid ending up on a watch list, losing one's job, or being tried in front of the House UnAmerican Activities Committee. Yet the contingencies that make up the self and identity seem to require more work to decode than appealing to very immediate and direct historical contingencies like the oppression of gay men and lesbians in mid-century America. Another way of saying this is that whatever Ashbery is getting at has less to do with his own particular sexual orientation than with "something" more universal. The ensuing chapters are devoted to poets equally skeptical about sexually or ideologically motivated claims to identity, preferring instead to focus their attention on those flickers of "something" that occur between iterations of self.

"Chipper, But Not So Well Arranged": Protean Subjectivities in Frank O'Hara

People of the paleolithic have very probably some concepts which change our vision of the world. They are the concepts of fluidity and permeability. Fluidity means that the categories we have – man, woman, horse, tree, etc – can shift. A tree may speak. A man may get transformed into an animal, and the other way around given certain circumstances. The concept of permeability is that there are no barriers, so to speak, between the world where we are and the world of the spirits.

--Jean Clottes, Former Head of Scientific Research, Chauvet Caves

(qtd. in *The Cave of Forgotten Dreams*)

When I painted Frank O'Hara, Frank was standing there. First I painted the whole structure of his face; then I wiped out the face, and when the face was gone, it was more Frank than when the face was there.

--Elaine de Kooning (qtd. in *The Last Avant Garde*)

World War Two witnessed the birth of the WAAC and the WAVES, female divisions of the Army and Navy called upon to participate in every aspect of military life except combat for the first time. For Oveta Culp Hobby, Director of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, enlistment exemplified the American woman's willingness to sacrifice for the greater good: these women were "carrying on the glorious tradition of American womanhood. They are making history! This is a war which recognizes no distinctions between men and women" (qtd. in May 61).

Deemed fit for participation in the effort to win the war, women's introduction to military service must indeed have been historic, particularly for those who felt that a woman's primary contribution should be limited to the domestic sphere. It is less clear, however, whether the Director of WAAC truly believed that women's service augured the end of sexual inequality in the United States, as her comments seem to suggest. Despite acknowledgement of their contribution by policy makers and pundits, women's *greatest* service, according to most, continued to be the preservation of the family. Widespread efforts to recruit women to the workforce, for example, were almost always couched in conditional language; "even feminist organizations stressed women's need to work over their right to employment – a strategy that underscored women's responsibilities to their families" (Tyler May58). Women entering the realms of "pink collar" employment were made to understand that this was to be a temporary situation; they would support their families with their earnings and return to their domestic duties once the war was over. Having briefly experienced the freedom borne of economic independence and social mobility, the messaging attendant on winning the war shifted, and women, asked now to support their husbands in their transition back to civilian society, headed back to the home. Despite Director Hobby's claim, and in spite of radical structural changes precipitated by World War Two, the cultural politics of the late 40s and early 50s served in the main to reinforce and perpetuate traditional gender roles.

Historians like Elizabeth Tyler May, John D'Emilio, and Barbara Ehrenreich have attempted to account for the cultural conservatism that greeted men and women at the end of the war – the return, after a period of sustained alteration, to traditional gender roles, the attempt to shore up essential differences between men and women, and the suppression of practices which deviated from the norm. From their work, it is apparent that the retrenching of conservative "moral" values was in large part a reaction to wartime contingencies which threatened the institution of marriage. The nature of military life itself – boot camp, overseas deployment, trench warfare – lent itself to various kinds of promiscuous, that is non-connubial, sexual activity, for both men and women. The effects of women's entrance into the "pink collar" workforce are also worth considering. As Tyler May points out, the receipt of a steady wage allowed women, for the first time in history, to entertain the possibility of self-sufficiency and thus of postponing entrance into marriage.

Pundits and policy makers had no trouble framing the explosion of extra-marital, gay, and lesbian relationships as depraved, as constituting a grave cultural and ethical threat. They had more trouble justifying the threat which women's emergence from the homefront posed for men. This difficulty was partly because role reversals, promoted by necessity during the war, seemed to call attention to but also render ambiguous social and cultural markers that were supposed to distinguish women from men. Women, it turned out, could do most of the things men could do, and do them well.

Michael Davidson describes the category crisis which ensues in the post-war period as the effect of "a displacement of tensions in culture at large onto the normative logic of gender differentiation" (102). Indeed, "tensions in the culture at large" barely registers the turmoil of a sharply polarized, ideologically intransigent era. Between 1945 and 1960, Americans were labelled as "patriots" or "pinkos" according to their positions on national security, foreign policy and the distribution of wealth. Deviations from the party line were treated with severity. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, F.O. Matthiesen, and Don Hollanbeck were among the more public victims of an anticommunist campaign which infiltrated government agencies, the military, university campuses, and corporations. This relentless drive to categorize manifested itself within the medical establishment as well. Psychiatrists, for example, declared their "deep faith" in the naturalness of gender roles *(*Ehrenreich 15). Therese Benedek's pseudo-biological argument for why men were providers by nature was not exceptional. Lacking human evidence for her thesis, Benedek turned to the "exemplary behavior of male birds and certain species of fish, who, unlike most male mammals, show a nurturant interest in their young" to conclude that "providing food and security is not a culturally imposed burden on the male of the species but "nature's order" (qtd. in Ehrenreich 15). Often, sketchy conclusions like the aforementioned were filled out in popular culture, where many films of the post-war era aimed to naturalize traditional gender roles. As David Jarraway notes, in "classic battle-of-the-sexes style," films like George Stevens's *Woman of the Year* (1942) and George

Cukor's *Adam's Rib* (1949) "pitted the sacrosanct force of the law identified with the male on one side, and the mitigating feeling for hearth and home identified with the female, on the other" ("Cukor and Collaboration" 38).

Out of this deeply held belief in the discreteness of gender roles emerges what David Savran calls the ideology of familialism:

> [This] theory of 'sex roles' conceived the distinction between men and women as a binary opposition that set the aggressive, "go-getting' businessman and father against the 'warm, giving,' and 'expressive' housewife and mother whose responsibility it was to embrace domesticity and contain her sexuality" (*Going the Distance* 112).

Why the insistence on such well-defined social boundaries? The answer depends in part on who is asked. Some historians tend to single out the imminent threat of nuclear warfare as playing a significant role in the rush toward marriage and parenthood that characterizes the post-war period in America. Others emphasize the creeping fear of communist infiltration, said to pose a direct threat to the family, and necessitating the vigilant enforcing of conventional family structures. Elaine Tyler May suggests wartime fears and anxieties tended to coalesce around the proliferation "of all forms of nonmarital sexuality that had been dormant since the Progressive era," and the moral-theological imperative to defend the sacred institution of marriage (61), while David Jarraway points to the "irrational, unpalatable, and unbearable social and historical realities" that mark women's emancipation from the home and/or entry into the public sphere, and

the threat autonomous women posed to traditional notions of masculinity ("Cukor and Collaboration" 56). For John D'Emilio, the push toward clarification emerges out of a more basic premise: "The labelling of sexual deviants helped to define the norm for other men and women" (68).[25]

D'Emilio's pronouncement asks us to consider the philosophical implications of such labelling, for it brings home the dualistic thinking that seems to structure notions of gender, sexuality, and identity in the post-war period. It is not simply existential or moral panic that animates Cold War ideology. It is a fear, rather, of the dissolution of those dichotomies which produce the illusion of order and stability in the first place, "a fear of the unconscious, of sexuality, of the loss of identity and stable ego boundaries in an era of profound sexual crisis as well as social conflict" (qtd in Livingston 25). It is a fear, perhaps, of "becoming like women" (Haddock Seigfried 134).

What follows is an attempt to begin to assemble a different picture of gender, one which problematizes mid-century constructs of masculinity and femininity as these circulated in and through popular culture. As critics like Michael Davidson have pointed out, this more protean conception of gender is present in selected poems Frank O'Hara completed in the 1950s, but the Pragmatist undercurrents of such a conception seem to require further examination. Neither O'Hara, nor any of the "New York" School Poets, was a card-carrying Pragmatist, and yet, as I hope to make clear, the conceptual

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[25] I am assuming that D'Emilio would not object to my use of the word "deviant" as including anyone who failed to conform to the prescriptive dictates of mid-century gender norms.

underpinnings of O'Hara's notions of gender can be traced to William James's radical empiricism, a holistic theory of experience which I will sketch hereafter.

As the first epigraph to this Chapter attempts to make clear, fear of the dissolution of the social and psychological boundaries separating men from women becomes an animating concern only once we have agreed to perceive the world in binary-oppositional terms, a need which is relatively contemporary. Patricia Rae is not the first to suggest that its origin derives from the momentous decision made by Descartes "to divide the world into two, discrete substances of mind and matter" (114). Dividing the world along Cartesian coordinates has considerable implications; according to Nietzsche, it signals nothing less than the birth of a new phenomenon – the modern self: the "remarkable opposition of an inside to which no outside and an outside to which no inside corresponds [is both] an opposition unknown to ancient peoples [and] the most distinctive property of this modern man" (24). According to historian James Livingston, the modern self which emerges within the context of Cartesian dualism is conceived primarily as "*a set of radical discontinuities* (e.g., mind vs. body) which are in turn projected, as deferred desires – as work and language – into an "external world of inanimate objects denominated as the elements of nature and/or pieces of property" (my italics; 17-18). This *weltanschauung* is commonly referred to as the "traditional subject-object picture" of modern philosophy, and efforts to "bridg[e] the gulf between subject and object by means of epistemological mechanisms"

have been said to constitute the most fundamental project of modern philosophy (Rorty 10; West 88). [26]

Rather than attempt to "bridge the gulf," Pragmatist-minded philosophers have endeavored to distance themselves from this project, questioning its ability to account satisfactorily for lived experience and historicizing its foundational formulations. It was Charles Peirce, Pragmatism's first exponent, who noted that "our beliefs are really rules for action," that there is no "cognition without purpose" (qtd. in *Pragmatism* 28-29; Livingston 7). For Peirce, there is no justification for treating ideas as occurring prior to and separate from their trial: theory and practice are "not the terms of an either/or choice because each is ingredient in, and *interchangeable with*, the other" (8). For his part, William James had difficulty accepting "the old dualism of matter and thought, this heterogeneity of the two stuffs posited as an absolute" ("La Notion de la Conscience" 263). The difficulty was particularly acute when it came to theorizing consciousness, for neither of the two philosophical camps, which James referred to as "rationalists" and "empiricists" respectively, could give a satisfactory account of what consciousness as Pragmatically conceived amounted to. Neither, that is, was willing to abandon the notion of consciousness as dualistic – consciousness of

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[26] It is important to note with Livingston that the subject of this epistemological project has always been "the decidedly male proprietor, the man of reason" or "paradigm of self-determination in the modern epoch" (17-18). There are a number of feminist and Pragmatist works that problematize the phallocentric tradition in Western philosophy, including Charlene Haddock Seigfried's *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996; and Phyllis Rooney's "Feminist-Pragmatist Revisionings of Reason, Knowledge, and Philosophy." *Hypatia.* (8.2), Spring, 1993, pp 15-37.

some external object plus “an immediate consciousness of consciousness itself” (“Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” 5). James’s challenge to this view, presented in “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” is worth revisiting at length:

> This supposes that the consciousness is one element, moment, factor – call it what you like – of an experience of essentially dualistic inner constitution, from which, if you abstract the content, the consciousness will remain revealed to its own eye. Experience, at this rate, would be much like a paint of which the world pictures were made. Paint has a dual constitution, involving, as it does, a menstruum (oil, size or what not) and a mass of content in the form of pigment suspended therein. We can get the pure menstruum by letting the pigment settle, and the pure pigment by pouring off the size or oil. We operate here by physical subtraction; and the usual view is, that by mental subtraction we can separate the two factors of experience in an analogous way – not isolating them entirely, but distinguishing them enough to know that they are two.
>
> Now my contention is exactly the reverse of this. *Experience, I believe, has no such inner duplicity; and the separation of it into consciousness and content comes, not by way of subtraction, but by way of addition*. (6-7)

James’s ideas amount to a theory of continuous presence, of experience as a “conjunctive relation of continuous transition” in which distinctions like inside and outside are known as such only in retrospect (MacDermott xxix). Pure experience, the “instant field of the present,” is

> Only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. For the time being, it is plain unqualified actuality or existence, a simple *that*. In the *naif* immediacy it is of course *valid*; it is *there,* we *act* upon it; and the doubling of it in retrospection into a state of mind and a reality intended thereby, is just one of the acts. The "state of mind," first treated explicitly as such in retrospection, will stand corrected and confirmed, and the retrospective experience in its turn will get a similar treatment; but the immediate experience in its passing is always "truth," practical truth, *something to act on*, at its own movement. (13)

For James, "the bifurcation of experience into subject and object is a counterintuitive, even unnatural act" (Rae 114). James calls instead for a radical empiricism, a theory which does not take as given the separation of experience and the subject who experiences. Dividing experience in this manner follows from what Cornel West – paraphrasing John Dewey – calls the "fictive spectator theory of knowledge," in which "experience centers in, or gathers about, or proceeds from a center or subject which is outside the course of natural existence, and set over against it" (92). Ultimately, James's view of experience contains both the empiricist and rationalist views; it is at once grounded in materialist philosophy and, strangely, freed from it: "that which is outside of us and that which is inside, that which has extension and that which does not, blend into one another in an indissoluble marriage" (qtd. in Rae 114).[27]

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[27]Ann Marie Mikkelsen describes Dewey's vision of experience as similarly "postdualist." For Dewey, experience "recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and

James's radical empiricism helps us to demystify projects that originate in philosophical dualisms. Theory is shot through with practice, facts are erected upon values, and reason is infected by desire. This STANCE is another way of saying, with Richard Rorty, that there are no neutral vantage points from which we can conduct investigations into foundations, or with Livingston, that:

> any *ontological* distinction between thoughts and things, or subjects and objects, or mind and matter, merely obscures the dynamic relations between fluid and porous moments in time. "Matter is effete mind," as Peirce declared, "inveterate habits become physical laws" (8).

Although we can only speculate about the matter of Jamesian influence with respect to Frank O'Hara, or to any of the "New York" School Poets, connections have been made in recent years to establish a lineage. Andrew Epstein, for example, follows Brad Gooch and Michael Magee in picking up on O'Hara's enthusiasm for Paul Goodman's essay writing during the early fifties, and with Goodman's own championing of William James, and views that connection as a more direct way of linking O'Hara to Pragmatism as a stay against Cold War consensus and homophobia.

Whatever his philosophical disposition, it is clear, from early on, that O'Hara had little patience for the exacting demands that constitute what he would eventually refer to dismissively as "dealable-with systems," that is modes of being-in-the-world rooted in or following from what James himself referred to as

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material, subject and object, but contains them both in an unanalyzed totality" (qtd. in Mikkelsen 32).

"bad *a priori* reasons, fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins" ("Notes on Second Avenue" 495; *Pragmatism* 31).[28] By the time he was at Harvard, O'Hara was attempting to locate literary forerunners whose temperament was not derivable from or reducible to essentialist distinctions which appeared to foreshorten the complexity of experience, as in this early journal entry: "Is it true that Kassner's remark about Rilke that 'the conflict between judgement and feeling which is so masculine, so peculiar to men, did not exist for him,' applies to me also?" (qtd. in Gooch 29). Friend and fellow poet Bill Berkson said of O'Hara that he regarded "ideas as inseparable from the people who had them. Theory and experience had to jell, and the varieties of experience around made dogma appear pointless" (qtd. in Perloff 16). While "no ideas but in things" may have been the watchword of modernist poets, O'Hara and his "New York" School cohort were committed to rethinking statements cloaked in the language of dualistic philosophy, a point Ashbery brought home in his Norton Lectures when he invoked Dr. Williams's infamous credo, adding "for me, ideas are also things" (2).

Dated 1949, "Melmoth the Wanderer" is one of O'Hara's earliest poems on record, and thus a useful place to begin exploring his radically empirical understanding of masculinity, femininity, and identity. The novel to which it refers was written in 1820 by Charles Robert Maturin, an Irish Protestant clergyman

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[28] See Andrew Epstein's "Crisis, Possibility, and Pragmatism: F.O.H's Early Journal and William James" or his *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* for accounts of O'Hara's Jamesian orientation and of Pragmatism's relevance to, and omission from, critical conversations on the topic of postwar avant-garde American poetry.

who drew inspiration for his protagonist from a passage in one of his sermons. The story begins at the death bed of John Melmoth, a descendant, we soon learn, of the titular character. Parsimonious to his final breath, Melmoth's primary concern is to secure his worldly possessions against a houseful of female servants and caregivers. "These hags," the narrator tells us

> surrounded the bed; and to witness their loud, wild, and desperate grief, their cries of "Oh! he's going, his honor's going, his honor's going," one would have imagined their lives were bound up in his, like those of the wives in the story of Sinbad the Sailor, who were to be interred alive with their deceased husbands. (13)

Despite its archly comic tone, Maturin's death-bed satire calls attention both to the hierarchical structure of the Victorian private sphere and to the stereotype of frail femininity upon which it was grounded, reflecting the commonly-held, nineteenth-century belief that women were inherently irrational creatures whose emotional excesses rendered them unfit for participation in the public realm. In its patronizing representation of female dependence, Maturin's death-bed scene provides a glimpse into relations between the sexes in the Victorian private sphere.

Written close to one hundred years later, images of female dependence and subservience are nonetheless present in O'Hara's "Melmoth." And whether we invoke the historical present or a Victorian past, these women appear contained

firmly in the domestic sphere, their realm of activity restricted to caring for the wounded and singing dirges for the deceased:

> These women are given the
> bleeding meat of bulls fresh
> killed in fields their work
> of charity at night to sing
> to tombstones and ships
> this is the only food they
> need wives of shadows (*CP* 10)

The palpable burden of these material obligations sit in stark contrast to those of the "shadows" these women are married to, sailors, we surmise, and thus unmoored, both from the land and the "bleeding meat" of earthly bodies left to women's care. In contrast to these wraiths, it is the physicality of the wives that asserts itself:

> their
> cheeks suck inwards the waves
> are white and thin you can
> smell their breath as they
> wash over the hill blue
> eyes shine dimly and the
> moon spins in its socket of
> comparative stone unable to

decide if this is the night. (10-11)

The references to water and its inherent fluidity hold out promise of some break in the daily routine, a rupturing, perhaps, in the edifice of patriarchal prerogative. Freed from containment, the poetic line spills over from one stanza to the next. Yet fluid excess is stoppered just at the point where it seems to have broken free of all earthly impediments. Traditionally regarded as a symbol of feminine lability, the moon is fixed firmly in place in the cosmos. Stone-faced, it offers no orifices of ingress. Like the earth-bound wives she is associated with, the moon's trajectory constitutes merely the re-tracing of well-worn tracks. She serves primarily as a prelude to the appearance of Melmoth himself, a mark "of biological, linguistic, and/or cultural difference" that establishes the conditions for the "bearer of a body-transcendent universal personhood" (Butler 13).

True to this Beauvoirian notion of gender subjectivity, "HE" strides into our frame of view in stanza four, both an apparition and a colossus:

HE will again appear the
real lighthouse beyond the
sleeping city and the sailors
their voices rise it is a
long time lover since youth. (*CP* 11)

Radiating white light, Melmoth is clearly the inheritor of attributes which Western philosophy genders masculine and installs as ideal: authority, transcendence, knowledge. Amongst his circle of devotees, women are nowhere to be found.

One assumes they are home, tethered to the messiness of experience. Deftly, O'Hara's "Melmoth" works to establish a series of oppositions around which Western philosophy revolves: corporeality and disembodiment; darkness and light; stasis and mobility; women and men.

To return to our point of departure, we might suggest that one of the key differences between Maturin's novel and O'Hara's poem inheres in their respective depictions of women. Rendered grotesque in the novel, the women in O'Hara's poem are portrayed as genuine in their care and concern for their husbands. If we do choose to empathize with the women, we find that the poem calls attention to the distinction between a woman's tendency to alleviate the pain and discomfort of others – what Charlene Haddock Seigfried and others refer to as women's "ethics of care" – and a man's inclination to search after truth, knowledge, power – a proclivity which often comes at the expense of a subjugated group.[29] From this perspective, "Melmoth the Wanderer" records the struggle to reconcile a strong identification with women with the prescriptive dictates of mid-century masculinity. In other words, the poem articulates a latent anxiety about masculinity – a sympathetic identification with virtue gendered feminine that exists in tension with stereotypically masculine attributes of power and authority.

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[29] For a related discussion of the relationship between masculinity and metaphysics, femininity and Pragmatism, see Charlene Haddock Seigfried's *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric*, Chapter 2.

"Women" picks up on conflicts which begin to emerge in "Melmoth." Published in the spring of 1951, the poem presents two types of women, or two alternative notions of femininity: the homemaker and the eccentric. In the first case, the poem evokes a sympathy bordering on pity for these homemakers, as well as recognition of the melodrama which they are staging:

> They sit on the stairs and cry.
> They hear accidents a week away
> Screaming "Pierrot Lunaire! why
> am I sitting at home while you are
> there?" (*CP* 47)

Given the date of publication, one cannot help wondering whether these lachrymose figures are weeping for husbands in combat, or, perhaps more covertly, for their "peters," a common anglophone translation of Pierrot. It is clear, however, that their emoting takes place in a contained space and thus does not pose any direct threat to events happening outside the home. As noted previously, despite increased calls for women to join the labour ranks during the World War Two, policy makers vociferously championed the importance of the role of the homemaker. Yet there were "some" who denied the ordered logic of the private sphere, the eccentric few presented as a foil to the prevailing image of mid-century femininity. These women, the poet notes, "deny order. Wear no pattern but the hazardous / polka dot or stripe. Eat their emeralds" (*CP* 47).

The patterned/patternless dichotomy presented between these two types of women is interesting to consider, for it goes to the heart of the existential crisis O'Hara found himself in during autumn 1948 and winter 1949, a crisis that appears to have to do with choosing what kind of artist, and what kind of man, he wanted to be. As Brad Gooch has observed:

> In [O'Hara's] final journal entry of January 28, 1949, he wrestled with a comment of Mary McCarthy's that "the most harrowing experience of a man" was "the failure to feel steadily, to be able to compose a continuous pattern." The notion of steadying one's feelings was particularly irritating to O'Hara, whose father, like Proust's, had accused him of an inability to assert any willpower over his sentimentality, the supposed weakness later alluded to in "Meditations…": "I will my will, though I may become famous for a mysterious vacancy in that department, that greenhouse." O'Hara opposed amorphous "being" to McCarthy's imposed "pattern." "I feel steadily, but there is no pattern, there can be no pattern, there is only being," he argued. "The artist *is* and always loves and always creates and cannot help but love and create; I do not mean that only the artist achieves being; I am not metaphysical, quite vulgarly I mean realization of personality. (131)

For O'Hara, acting like a mid-century American "man" means suppressing feeling, containing emotional excess, imposing his will over a sentimentality gendered feminine. It means choosing the barn of his New England upbringing

rather than the parlour where O'Hara gathered with his aunts to read books and listen to music. It also means conforming to a pattern or system which belied the tangle of beliefs, feelings, and emotions that shaped the poet's experience of the world. Like the eccentric women in the poem, O'Hara denies the possibility of a patterned – that is to say systematized or formulaic – existence; for him, this is not a genuine option because it denies in advance those aspects of experience which do not fit the pattern, which "*boil over*, making us correct our present formulas" (James 106). What is momentous about this journal entry is O'Hara's precocious conception of experience as something that one cannot, as he says elsewhere, "reduce to a dealable-with system" ("Notes on Second Avenue" 495). To do so is to privilege theory over practice, a decision whose "reward…is illness both from the inside and outside" (495).

Yet there is a third, ambiguous, figure in "Women." Pierrot Lunaire is a stock character in the Italian *commedia dell arte* generally characterized by his foolishness and naivete in matters of love. Pierrot is often depicted as a sad clown or a stand in for the artist, forming part of a love triangle in which his is the love unrequited, but the character has proven to be quite malleable. Along with his many instantiations in poetry, literature, and theatre, the protean Pierrot has also migrated into other media. For our purposes here, it is useful to note that "Pierrot Lunaire" is also the name of a musical composition written by the Austrian composer Arnold Schonberg – a favorite of O'Hara's – a melodramatic piece about a lovesick male protagonist. Interestingly, the role was written for and

played by a popular female vocalist in the early twentieth century. Schonberg's decision to write the role for a woman may have had something to do with his dislike of absolutist, categorical thinking. And while Pierrot Lunaire's inclusion in O'Hara's work is not, on its own, sufficient basis for suggesting that he views distinctions between men and women as occurring "*by way of addition,"* it is interesting to consider "Women" alongside "Three-Penny Opera," a poem written during roughly the same period.[30]

A German lampoon based loosely on John Gay's *The Beggars' Opera* (1798), *The Three-Penny Opera* was written by Bertold Brecht, with music by Kurt Weill, in 1928, and adapted for the screen by G.W. Pabst in 1931.[31] Pabst's filmic version is considerably more political than Brecht and Weill's original. A marxist critique, it calls attention to the corruption that exists among the governing elite, and the veil of sanctimony behind which capitalist culture exploits its working class. Did O'Hara see Pabst's film version?[32] He seems at least to suggest as much in the third stanza, where the poet addresses Polly directly:

> But Polly, are you a
> shadow? Is Mackie projected
> to me by light through film?
> If I'd been in Berlin in

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[30] According to Donald Allen, "Women" was probably written in 1950 or 1951. He traces the writing of "Three-Penny" to 1950 (*CP* 521-22).

[31] For a fascinating account of the proprietorial quagmire which accompanied *Three-Penny's* screen adaptation, see Tony Rayns's : "The Three-Penny Opera: Doubles and Duplicities."

[32] It is unlikely that he saw it on stage. *Three-Penny* played in New York in 1933 for a total of twelve runs, not returning until 1956, six years after the publication of the poem. O'Hara would have been seven years of age in 1933.

1930, would I have seen you

ambling the streets like

Krazy Kat? (32)

In Pabst's hands, Polly is a fitting counterpoint to Mackie – an avaricious woman with shrewd business sense and a no-nonsense managerial style. When none of Mackie's criminal cohort offers to entertain Mackie and Polly at their wedding reception, it is Polly who offers a song, poking cynical fun at sentimental conceptions of love. Once the police finally arrest Mackie, it is Polly who steps into the breach, converting the gang's illegal activities into a legitimate business – a bank of all things – which she runs with the confidence of an entrepreneur (Rayns ¶18).[33] In other words, Polly is not bound by the strictures of womanhood as conventionally represented. This fact is worth considering alongside James Livingston's comments on the genesis of the "postmodern subject":

> If we can then say that the confinement of females to the household – for example, through the valorization of "republican motherhood" – becomes the enabling condition of modern subjectivity, we can also say that the extrusion of females from the household signals a crisis of the modern subject. Any devaluation of motherhood or "maternal authority" resulting from a profusion of extra-familial roles for women would threaten this subject, simply because it would announce the desublimation of female

[33] According to Rayns,

> Pabst's celebration of the strength and intelligence of Polly, who runs the gang with an iron fist in Mackie's absence and shifts it socially from the basement to the penthouse, could be his vindication of Elisabeth Hauptmann, who did most of the work [on Brecht's original] and was rewarded with 12.5 percent of the grosses. (¶18)

> sexuality, and so would force upon male citizens the realization that feminine desire is not synonymous with maternal affection. (19)

Though it does not bode well for socialism, Polly's trajectory in *Three-Penny*, from *ingenue* to capitalist fat cat, does seem to augur well for those women whose attitudes toward love and money would have been considered unconventional if not scandalous.

And what of the curious comparison between Polly and Krazy Kat, the central character in George Harriman's enormously successful American comic strip of the same name?[34] Krazy, it should be noted, is indeterminately gendered, referred to variously as "he" and "she" from strip to strip. When asked about the Kat's sex, Herriman replied thus:

> I don't know. I fooled around with it once; began to think the Kat is a girl – even drew up some strips with her being pregnant. It wasn't the Kat any longer; too concerned with her own problems – like a soap opera. Know what I mean? Then I realized Krazy was something like a sprite, an elf. They have no sex. So that Kat can't be a he or a she. The Kat's a spirit – free to butt into anything. Don't you think so? (qtd. in McDonnell, O'Connell, and Riley De Havenon 54).

Is Polly a "New Woman," one who rejects emphatically the Victorian model of womanhood? Or is she something more radical, a free spirit along the lines of Krazy Kat, a character whose gender identity is, to quote Michael Davidson in

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[34] The premise of *Krazy Kat* is as follows: Krazy is madly in love with a mouse named Ignatz, who rebuffs all of Krazy's romantic advances with a brick to the cat's head. Krazy, in turn, is the object of Officer Pup's affection, though Officer Pup does not make his feelings plain.

comments he made elsewhere, “free floating,” “multiple,” “constant[ly] shifting,” and “multifarious” and who experiences “existence as a series of costumes, attitudes and positions” (qtd. in “Cukor and Collaboration” 36-37)? And what of the poet’s direct address to Polly, and the sympathetic identification which is pushed further in stanza four?

> You’d have seen all of us
> Masquerading. Chipper; but
> not so well arranged. Air-
> ing old poodles and pre-war
> furs in narrow shoes
> with rhinestone bows.
> Silent, heavily perfumed.
> Black around the eyes. You
> wouldnt have known who
> was who, though. Those
> were intricate days. (*CP* 33)

This loose collection of individuals would seem to problematize further efforts to find a pattern which can “express the truth of the self” (Hartman 45). Just as in the previous stanza, where the poet questions whether or not he has perceived anything other than the interplay of light and shadow, here the reader is left to wonder whether there is anything beneath the profusion of surface accoutrements – pre-war furs, rhinestone bows, cosmetic flourishes – that

outwardly characterizes this disordered assembly. To refer even to a group composed of members suggests an organizing principle that appears to be missing, for these revelers are "not so well arranged," and surely part of the pleasure they take comes from the fact that they are unassimilable, "chipper" though they may be. The question which O'Hara's "Three-Penny Opera" seems to leave us with is not "who goes there?" but "what is to be done?" (James, "The Will to Believe," 84).

One answer is to view this merry band not as an expression borne out of defensiveness, an attempt to circumvent the repressive apparati of government policy by speaking in code, but as something more radically empirical – reflecting a notion of subjectivity that aims "to dismantle the rigid demarcations of human identity … in order to make it more porous like language (on the border between images and sounds)" (qtd. in "Cukor…" 36). Pierrot Lunaire, Polly, the revelers – these figures and their characterization seem to take part in this dismantling, for they problematize essentialist understandings of gender, troubling categories of identity that were produced, naturalized, and enforced in the 1950s.

Indeed, as Anne Hartman points out, O'Hara disliked artistic projects that aimed to strip away "superficial" trappings with a view toward revealing inner truth. According to Hartman, "O'Hara wrote dismissively of this quality in Lowell's "Skunk Hour":

> I don't think that anyone has to get themselves to go and watch lovers in a parking lot necking in order to write a poem and I don't see why it's

admirable if they feel guilty about it. They should feel guilty. Why are they snooping? What's so wonderful about a peeping Tom? (qtd. in Hartman 40)

Embedded in this facetious critique of Lowell's poem is a more serious challenge to confessional poetry, *the* preeminent and critically sanctioned discourse for writing about the self in the U.S. at midcentury, according to Hartman (42; 41). Given what we know of O'Hara's fondness for playfully dashing off poems about friends, works of art, and totems of popular culture, it is not hard to imagine his indifference to a poetic mode that placed a premium on solemn, solisipstic self-scrutiny in the service of "express[ing] the truth of the self" (45). In this context, a poem like "Homosexuality," based in part on James Ensor's "Self-Portrait With Masks," seems to parody the confessional mode, particularly its tendency to privilege depth over surface:

So we are taking off our masks, are we, and keeping
our mouths shut? As if we'd been pierced by a glance!
The song of an old cow is not more full of judgement
than the vapours which escape one's soul when one is sick;
so I pull the shadows around me like a puff
and crinkle my eyes as if at the most exquisite moment
of a very long opera, and then we are off!
without reproach and without hope that our delicate feet
will touch the earth again, let alone "very soon."
It is the law of my own voice I shall investigate.

I start like ice, my finger to my ear, my ear
to my heart, that proud cur at the garbage can
in the rain. It's wonderful to admire oneself
with complete candor, tallying up the merits of each
of the latrines. 14th street is drunken and credulous,
53rd tries to tremble but is too at rest. The good
love a park and the inept a railway station,
and there are the divine ones who drag themselves up
and down the lengthening shadow of an Abyssinian head
in the dust, trailing their long elegant heels of hot air
crying to confuse the brave "It's a summer day,
and I want to be wanted more than anything else in the world."
(*CP 81*-82)

Now, to be "pierced by a glance" is to be revealed, laid bare by the force of the gaze, or perhaps to be opened up to the observation of the professional eye in its obsession to identify and catalogue, to "go under the knife" for the sake of discovery. The poet is incredulous at this misdirected quest for knowledge; indeed, he thinks it a symptom of sickness. After all, he is less interested in revealing the face behind the mask than in investigating the law of his own voice.

Not surprisingly, James Ensor's "Self-Portrait With Masks" problematizes the very idea of self-knowledge through this sort of invasive scrutiny (Figure Three). Floating amongst a sea of carnivalesque masks, the artist's mimetically

rendered, centred, and slightly elevated face appears to have been laid bare in the fashion we described, as if the artist has given in to the demand to reveal his authentic self. Acquiescence, however, is not without its costs, for by opening up to the scrutiny of the critical gaze, the artist, in effect, subjects himself to the violence picked up by the verb "pierced" and augmented by the crudely cut apertures that pass for eyes and mouths on the masks. In Ensor's hands, the pursuit of self-knowledge as traditionally conceived slides uncomfortably into a dissection or horror show, not unlike the anatomy lessons of the seventeenth century, a spectacle that was both a demonstration of new science and ritualist dismemberment. Neither will the poet have any truck with Romantic notions of the poetic process. Instead of rooting around in the trash, like that inward-looking "proud cur at the garbage can," the poet directs his reader to those city spaces which, perhaps through addition, might reveal his unmasked or naked self. But this psycho-geography doesn't get us very far. As Marjorie Perloff points out, "the poet's images…are not symbolic properties; there is nothing behind these surfaces" (23).

Of course, the sheen of the superficial was nowhere more prominent than in popular film, and O'Hara's fondness for the movies is well documented. Music too assumed importance in O'Hara's work, and the poet could not have been unaware of the reference to Cole Porter's "Night and Day," an iconic love song first adapted for the stage in 1933, when O'Hara wrote "Day and Night in 1952." From Gooch's biography, we know that O'Hara was at least familiar with the

song, which conjured memories of boyhood for the poet now stationed at Key West:

> The other night I was over at the patio and they played "Night and Day" and "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes." It made me think of you both [his parents]... I wonder if you know, either of you, what an impression you made on me – you made being grown up so attractive and glamorous…so sophisticated and movie-ish to me. (qtd. in Gooch 23)

Given O'Hara's lifelong infatuation with things "attractive and glamorous…sophisticated and movie-ish," the question is whether I risk opening myself up to accusations of heedless frivolity by exploring "The Gay Divorcee," a 1934 RKO production starring Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, in which Porter's "Night and Day" is prominently featured. If there is a warrant for this kind of "detour," perhaps it can be found by noting with Eve Sedgewick that "'the movies are salubrious, a site for self-discovery and self repair, for conferring 'plenitude' on an 'inchoate self'" (qtd. in Yaeger 898). As we have seen in our examination of *The Threepenny Opera*, the movies seem to have played a considerable role in helping O'Hara to rethink the philosophical dualisms upon which identity is traditionally constructed.

"The Gay Divorcee" is a screwball comedy revolving around the complicated courtship of Guy Holden (Astaire) and Mimi Glossop (Rogers). Unhappily married to a man who refuses to grant her a divorce, Mimi travels to London to seek out the advice of her thrice-married Aunt Hortense, whereupon

the two women pay a visit to Egbert Fitzgerald, a bumbling lawyer and former love interest of Hortense's, who explains that the only way to ensure Mimi's husband will grant her a divorce is to concoct a scenario in which her husband catches Mimi "in flagrante delicto." Egbert and Hortense set to work arranging the details, and soon a plan takes shape – Mimi will travel to an English seaside resort to meet with a buffoonish hired man; once they are together in Mimi's hotel room, Egbert will arrange for the police, and Mimi's husband, soon after, to find them.

At Egbert's request, Guy Holden (Astaire), a well-known American dancer, agrees to accompany his friend for some rest and relaxation by the sea – the tonic, Egbert insists, for Guy's bout of lovesickness. Unbeknownst to Egbert, the woman Guy is pining for is Egbert's client Mimi, whom Guy by chance meets upon Mimi's arrival at the London port. Much to his chagrin, Mimi, who is in town on business, rebuffs Guy's initial advances, both at the port and in several subsequent chance meetings. But Guy is determined; in fact, he is convinced that he and Mimi are destined to be together. "Chance," Guy says to Egbert, now fully rejuvenated after a day or two by the sea, "is the fool's name for fate." The line is so pithy that Egbert snatches it, promptly informing his client, Mimi, that the hired man will deliver the very same line in order to reveal himself to her. The trouble is, Guy, who is floored to find Mimi at the seaside resort he has repaired to, likes the line so much *he too* continues to use it, trotting it out to an

incredulous Mimi soon after the two share their first dance, to Porter's "Night and Day."

The subsequent scenes involve a working-out of this case of mistaken identity, and the film ends as comedies often do, with the restoration of the social order: Guy and Mimi will marry, as will Egbert and Hortense. Like most of the Astaire-Rogers vehicles, there is no real depth to either Guy or Mimi. Our "Guy" is a virtuoso artist whose prowess on the dance floor is equalled only by his male prerogative to woo women and scorn men.[35] Not that this was necessarily a problem for contemporary audiences. As Margaret McFadden notes, audiences of "The Gay Divorcee," indeed of most Astaire-Rogers films, "did not expect psychological complexity in their characters or 'classical' Hollywood narrative logic in their plots" (679). They did expect, however, the "wonderful dancing, splendid music artfully sung," as well as "the sparkling appeal of Rogers and Astaire as personalities…and the elaborate, elegant Art Deco sets" (679).

Surely one of the things we can say of "The Gay Divorcee" is that its Art deco sets bear the hallmarks of a camp sensibility. One need only observe Astaire and Rogers dancing to Porter's "Night and Day" in front of a trompe l'oeil backdrop of the sea, the moon, and the stars to discern the film's governing aesthetic. And camp, it turns out, is very much on O'Hara's mind in "Day and Night in 1952":

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[35] If the scrupulously observed division of gender roles which Guy and Mimi adhere to in the plot are troubled, this troubling might be said to occur *in dance* where Guy/Astaire and Mimi/Rogers really do appear to "flow between the dualisms, somewhere on the border between language and sound" (qtd. in Jarraway 45).

> We do not know the exquisite manliness of all brutal acts because we are sissies and if we're not sissies we're unhappy and too busy. Be not discouraged by your own inept affection. I don't want any of you to be really unhappy, just camp it up a bit and whine, whineola, baby .(*CP* 93)

According to Sontag, whose "Notes on Camp" (1964) marks the introduction of the term into the academic mainstream:

> Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is *one* way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization. (277)

Because Camp places such a heavy emphasis on *style*, Camp taste, as Sontag explains, tends to run toward those art forms in which outward appearances are primary: "Camp art is often decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content" (278). Camp also eschews metaphysics. As a sensibility or purely subjective preference, "it has no system and no proofs…[it] refuses both the harmonies of traditional seriousness, and the risks of fully identifying with extreme states of feeling" (276). Precisely because they can be viewed as little more than campy vehicles for song and dance, films like "The Gay Divorcee" serve as foils to the character-driven films that begin to make their appearance in the 50s, for they embrace style over content, surface over depth, and frivolity over seriousness. As we see in the portrait of the revellers from "The Threepenny Opera," camp seems to be one way of challenging the dualism which undergirds heteronormativity, for a camp aesthetic

calls attention to the ease with which one can "pass" between categories of gender identity, and to the bad faith behind arguments which posit fundamentally protean aspects of lived experience as unchanging and static.

By way of conclusion, perhaps we might return to the introductory epigram. Elaine De Kooning's comments strike me as apt precisely because this act of de-facing so neatly encapsulates what I take Frank O'Hara to be working toward in some of the work examined previously. Like the work of his "New York" counterparts, O'Hara's poetry seems doggedly resistant to what the critical literature terms the depth model of subjectivity, a concept that assumes there is such a thing as the self, and that it is the artist's job to get in touch with and express its fundamental truth. As we have seen, O'Hara is less interested in cataloguing the details of the face than in effacing its borders. And it is just this notion of effacing borders that brings us back to James's radical empiricism, and more generally to a Pragmatist refusal to confer ontology onto the foundational divisions upon which modern philosophy rests. Whatever we take O'Hara to be doing, it is clear that he is working out of a different, more "chipper" tradition, one which draws heavily on Pragmatism's anti-foundational spirit and camp's playful *joie de vivre* in order to reimagine the human subject as a shape-shifting entity.

Between "Location" and "Things": Wandering the Corridors of Barbara Guest's Imagination [36]

Life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected; often, indeed, it seems to be there more emphatically, as if our spurts and sallies forward were the real firing-line of battle, were like the thin line of flame advancing across the dry autumnal field which the farmer proceeds to burn.

--William James ("A World of Pure Experience")

Barbara Guest's belated recognition as an "important" American poet has spawned various attempts to trace her pedigree. In addition to her well-documented association with "New York" School of Poetry, Guest has been claimed as a feminist (Linda Kinnahan), surrealist (Rachel Blau Duplessis), modernist (Robert Kaufman), urban pastoralist (Timothy Gray), and language poet (Charles Bernstein). According to Robert Benett, much has been made of Guest's "relationship to both the "New York" School of abstract expressionist painters and the other "New York" poets who shared her interest in 'the aesthetics, the people, the politics, the social life, and the concerns of the New York art world'" (Bennett 43). Bennett's focus, in contrast, is Guest's "wide-ranging, creative and enigmatic exploration of unconventional spatial images," and he cites Anthony Manousos and Barbara Hillman as critics who "have long noted that spatial images and themes play a central role in Guest's writing" (44). Indeed, it is striking to note, along with Bennett, the frequency with which "doors,

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[36] In a somewhat altered form, this chapter is slated to appear in a forthcoming issue of the *Canadian Review of American Studies*.

windows, stairs, roofs, walls, rooms, houses, buildings, streets, art studios, museum galleries, and other kinds of spaces" serve to open up points of egress for Guest's poetic personae, as they negotiate the distance between "locations" and "things," the ostensible foci of Guest's first collection entitled *The Location of Things* (45).

For her part, Guest, along with her "New York" School poet-friends has endeavored to steer clear of aligning herself with this or that set of aesthetic, philosophical, or political ideas, "customarily "shun[ning] the communal ramifications of such a project, and insist[ing] instead on separateness" (Nelson 38). Such an insistence on "separateness" is, curiously, both affirmed and undercut during the course of Guest's 1995 appearance on LINEbreak, a radio program hosted by Charles Bernstein. The interview begins with Bernstein asking Guest to read two early poems and then a more recent poem in order to set up a question about the years intervening, touching off a playful exchange that, to my mind, is crucially important to my attempt to situate Guest within Pragmatism's purview:

> **Bernstein:** Where do you feel the discontinuities and the continuities are between these poems at the two ends of your work chronologically?
>
> **Guest:** I see that I'm still interested in weather.
>
> **Bernstein:** Which is what changes.
>
> **Guest:** Yes.
>
> **Bernstein:** Always changes.

…

Bernstein: How about imagination, is that something that goes through your work?

Guest: Well, you know that I preach it.

Bernstein: I couldn't let it go by. This is the time for a poet to preach, on the radio, right? This is our only chance. [*Both laugh.*]

Guest: I want to get there before somebody else does. I believe in imagination, and I think it's disappearing. It has become a harder quality. It is not as fluid as it used to be. It's more something you chip off the old block. It's not used so much because practicality seems to be a vision of the future. Within imagination, there aren't too many corridors for the practical.

Bernstein: Practicality is in contrast to imagination for you?

Guest: Yes.

Bernstein: And yet, you're kind of an old-time Pragmatic person, just leading a life.

Guest: Yes, but I don't believe in Pragmatism. I'm not an Emersonian.

Bernstein: No?

Guest: No. [*Both laugh.*] I don't believe in it at all.

Bernstein: Because you're not an Emersonian and you're not a Pragmatist, I won't ask you what you are, because you don't have to be anything in that case.

> **Guest:** I'm not John Dewey. [*Laughs.*] I'm an old-fashioned – I suppose you could say – imagist. How's that? (Bernstein, 1995)

The excerpt from the radio program is worth unpacking for several reasons, beginning with Bernstein's association of practicality and Pragmatism, a conflation that likely owes to a misinterpretation of William James's theory of truth, in which, from the perspective of its critics, what counts as true is simply "what works," or what is useful, or practical, to believe. Guest also declares emphatically that she is no Pragmatist. If she is to categorize herself as anything, it is as an "old-fashioned imagist," presumably in the likeness of HD, a significant line of force in Guest's work. Clearly then, claims of Guest's "separateness" must be qualified, for there are some poetic traditions which she will consent to be associated with. To her disavowal of Pragmatism, one might simply say fair enough; after all, Pragmatism has no shortage of critics, but Guest's explicit rejection incites further questions about what she takes Pragmatism to be: an enemy of the imagination? A mode of rational inquiry which venerates practicality above all? A party or program – that is, something to believe in? How should we read her disavowal?

If we take the poet at her word, we notice that Guest, like Bernstein, is content to conflate the important differences between our contemporary understanding of what it means to be practical and the intellectual tradition known as Pragmatism, and neither she nor Bernstein is the first to do so. William James likely inaugurated Pragmatism's association with practicality in his 1907 lectures,

where he introduced the world to the Pragmatic method, a method which could settle cases where metaphysical disputes lead to theoretical dead-ends by "tracing [the] respective practical consequences" of each claim (28). The method, James admitted, was derived from the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, whose 1878 article entitled "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" declared that "perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object" could be attained by considering

> what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve – what sensations we are to expect from it and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole conception of the object, so far as the conception has positive significance at all. (29)

Peirce's positivistic criterion of meaning is likely a good deal more complicated than I am making it out to be; nonetheless, it does set out a theory for assessing a proposition in terms of its actual or tangible impact, that is, in terms of its measurable effect. Peirce's strict empiricism, or William Carlos Williams's annoyingly materialist "no ideas but in things," would not have sat well with Guest, who had far too much faith in the intuitive logic of the imagination to construe reality in such exacting terms. Of course, the emphasis she gives to fluidity, with all of its gendered significations, may well be a further reproof of a materialist philosophy. As we will come to see, "things" in Guest's work are

secondary to "location," those intermediate spaces of exchange that occur between "things."[37]

William James thought that a Pragmatist methodology might have applications beyond the domain of linguistics and semiotics, where Peirce focused his attention, particularly in the realm of belief. Pragmatism's great popularizer, James felt that Pragmatism could reduce the undesirability of having to choose between competing, totalizing conceptions of the world. In James's time, this was the choice between believing in Darwin's evolutionary biology and his father's creationist Christianity. James, who strove for much of his life to shed his father's worldview, came to recognize that its opposite, a bleakly deterministic view of a world without human agency was equally unsustainable. Moreover, he came to recognize that cleaving too closely to either view offered no great consolation, and he understood that carving the world up in this way was intellectually indefensible, noting that

> most of us have a hankering for the good on both sides of the line, your ordinary philosophical laymen never being a radical, never straightening out his system, but living vaguely in one plausible compartment of it or another to suit the temptations of the successive hours. (14)

[37] Likewise, it is possible that political Pragmatism's veneration for "what works," and its corresponding emphasis on the achievable rather than the ideal, may have gone against the grain for Guest. Looking back on the twentieth century, it may be that, for Guest, so-called Pragmatic political leaders were too willing to compromise on core princples, too quick to embrace the rational over the romantic, particularly for someone who speaks of the imagination in quasi-religious terms.

James believed that a Pragmatist sensibility might allow one to live more comfortably within and among occasionally contradictory values and sentiments. His use of the term “compartment,” a spatial image, seems felicitous, for the Pragmatist sensibility he advocates is designed to allow egress from the often limited and limiting vantage points of rigidly-defined, fixed positions. An eminently plastic attitude,

> Pragmatism stands for no particular results. It has no dogmas and no doctrine save for its method. As the young Italian Papini has well said it lies in the midst of our theories, like a corridor in a hotel. Innumerable chambers open out of it. In one you may find a man writing an aetheistic volume; in the next someone on his knees praying for faith and strength. In a third a chemist is investigating a body’s properties. In a fourth a system of idealistic metaphysics is being excogitated; in a fifth the impossibility of metaphysics is being shown. But they all own the corridor, and all must pass through it if they want a practicable way of getting into and out of their rooms. (32)

What does James offer us in this extended metaphor? He suggests that a Pragmatist methodology is less interested in ends than in means, that is, less interested in the result – whether it be atheism, metaphysical idealism, or functionalism – than in how the result was arrived at. But the image outstrips the message, so to speak, and we are left wondering about how to interpret this curious set of eccentric hotel lodgers. Drawing out the implications of this figuration, we cannot fail to recognize that the Pragmatism James personifies

seems less concerned with what is happening within our various “rooms” than with whatever happens between rooms, between, that is, competing beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives. James trains our attention not on the closed room that walls us off from experience, but rather on the passageway – an emphatically open, threshold space – for this is where the action is, where the self, shrugging off previous intellectual and ideological entrapments, engages in a process of becoming other, a process which might be said to characterize our postmodern understanding of subjectivity. Acknowledging its provisionality, its status as perpetually unfinished, the Pragmatist self steps back into experience, back into that welter of stimuli that tends to modify that which came before, forcing such a self to begin the process of self-authorship again.

This conception of a serial self, a self perpetually divesting itself, perpetually becoming, is one which Emerson begins to describe in “Circles,” an essay published in 1841, when he observes: “The way of life is wonderful; it is by abandonment (290),” and it courses through the work of Emersonian Pragmatists like Robert Frost, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens. As Andrew Epstein notes, artists and writers who take up this post-Enlightenment notion of subjectivity as free-floating rather than fixed have found a means to dramatize it in language:

> In terms of its influence on poetry, Pragmatism can be thought of as an American idiom – a certain accent, temperament, and way of approaching the world. This idiom is overflowing with tropes of motion, transition,

> change, action, and flux set against images that highlight the hazards of immobility. (55)

Guest's poems abound with images of fluidity, both in the literal evocation of water and the conception of self that Emerson confronts time and again in his essays. According to Timothy Gray, few critics have taken the time to examine "Guest's descriptions of water," giving "only brief mention to the aqueous images flooding Guest's volumes," this despite the number of poems in which seascapes provide the reader with a sense of "The Location of Things," the title poem in her debut collection published in 1960 (73). Fluidity is also an apt characterization of many of the poet's personae as they exchange one location for the next, moving between seascape, landscape, and cityscape, seeking out that which lies between extremes.

In "The Location of Things," we encounter this persona in what will become a familiar setting, sitting in front of a window, pondering what Maggie Nelson calls "big, unanswerable questions" (35). In this first of three "locations," the speaker's perception of things moves quickly from realist to surrealist to synaesthetic, the window functioning as a trope for both location and dislocation, for egress from the "narrower" perceptive passageways that might inhibit the project she is outlining. A window frames the speaker's view in the next stanza, and she begins by surveying the scene within it, her perception of "someone / with dark hair balanc[ing] a carton on his shoulders" giving way to a kind of recognition: "it reminds me," she says, "of pictures in restaurants, the exchange of hunger / for

thirst, art for decoration, and in a hospital / love for pain suffered beside the glistening rhododendron / under the crucifix" (3). The pace quickly becomes giddy, the reader left wondering what is transpiring within this vague, unsettled scene in which

> The street, the street bears light
> and shade on its shoulders, walks without crying,
> turns itself into another and continues, even
> cantilevers this barroom atmosphere into a forest
> and sheds its leaves on my table
> carelessly as if it wanted to travel somewhere else
> and would like to get rid of its luggage
> which has become in this exquisite pointed rain
> a bunch of umbrellas. An exchange! (*CP* 3)

An exchange, but of what? Perhaps the crucifix is our clue; here, at the cross, crossing, crossroads, the poet's persona moves beyond the larger questions she began with, embracing an uncertain, shifting relationship with "locations" and "things." The street beyond the window helps to extend this incipient sense of fluidity as it "cantilevers this bar-room atmosphere into a forest" of leaves, which it very promptly leaves behind, anxious to keep moving, to avoid the stasis of fixed positionality. Finally, the rain functions to dissolve the scene entirely, the "water's lace creat[ing] funerals / mak[ing] us see someone we love in an acre of grass" (4). "Grass," with some Emersonian troping, might also scan as glass, the

window again offering an out, this time from the ordinary romance the speaker seems so exhausted by – "how many times has one seen it. Afternoons of smoke and wet nostrils" soon to run dry. She, on the other hand, seems willing to exchange this drama of presence for the mystery of someone or something flickering at the edge of her consciousness, hovering at the threshold which seems to materialize out of the combination of rain on glass.

The final scene in the poem announces a departure, the window now punctuating the distance between the safety of home and the uncertainty of the open road. "Standing at the head of Guest's career," Maggie Nelson suggests "the [final] stanza functions as an odd self-portrait and invitation" (36). Indeed, after the drama of settled domesticity depicted in this stanza, the tired routines both speaker and listener have acted out too many times, the speaker appears ready, at this juncture, to abandon the comforts of the Cold War hearth and its gendered significations for the indeterminacy of corridors and staircases, means of exchange between locations, conveyances into the Unknown or the Other:

> through this floodlit window
> or from a pontoon on this theatrical lake,
> you demand your old clown's paint and I hand you
> from my prompter's arms this shako,
> wandering as I am into clouds and air
> rushing into darkness as corridors
> who do not feel the melancholy of the stair. (*CP* 4)

According to Nelson, “the syntax is tricky, but the implication seems to be that the corridors don’t fear “the melancholy of the stair,” but that the speaker may” (36). But just at this point, I’d like to see the speaker as again poised at the threshold which the very trope of the window makes possible, in between locations, en route, and so free of the hazards of immobility, if only temporarily.

In “History,” dedicated to fellow poet and friend Frank O’Hara, we are presented with a pair of urbanites anxious to get beyond the “pale” of consumer culture, to situate themselves at some remove from the city, in a pastoral setting, a locale which offers a brief respite from the twin idols of religion and commerce:

Old Thing

We have escaped

from that pale refrigerator

you wrote about

Here

amid the wild woodbine landscapes

wearing a paper hat

I recollect

the idols

in those frozen tubs

secluded by buttresses

when the church of

Our Lady cried Enough

and we were banished

Sighing

strangers

we are

the last even breath

poets.

Yet the funicular

was tied by a rope

It could only cry

looking down

that midnight hill.

My lights are

bright

the walk is

irregular

your initials

are carved on the sill.

Mon Ami!

the funicular

has a knife

in its side

Ah allow these nightingales to nurse us (*CP* 23-4).

Invoking sensations of balance and counterbalance, the funicular is worth pursing further.[38] A funicular railway or cable car, which works by pulling in both directions concurrently, is a fitting image for the imagist Guest, for it encapsulates Guest's method of building tension into a poem as she herself states:

> A pull in both directions between the physical reality of place and the metaphysics of space. This pull will build up a tension within the poem giving a view of the poem from both the interior and the exterior. ("A Reason for Poetics" 20)

This balancing act, upon which "so much depends," puts one in mind of the technique of certain of the abstract expressionists within the poet's milieu, particularly German artist and teacher Hans Hoffman's technique of "push and pull." Hoffman was a significant presence within the New York art world of the fifties and sixties, and many of his students, including Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell, Mike Goldberg, and Fairfield Porter, experimented with the "push and pull" technique of moving paint across the canvas. In a Mitchell painting like *George Went Swimming at Barnes Hole But it Got Too Cold* (1957), the subject of the painting (ostensibly Mitchell's dog George) is decidedly subordinate to the interplay between dense brushstrokes in the foreground and tendril-like wisps reaching beyond the canvas, and between the archipelagos of colour that bob up only to be pulled back down into the cold white undertow (Figure Four). Calling

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[38] According to The Oxford *Concise English Dictionary*, funicular is an adjective used to describe a railway on a steep slope operated by cable with ascending and descending cars counterbalanced (574).

attention to the interstices between ascending and descending, between push and pull, the funicular gestures toward an indeterminate or threshold space operating somewhere between the physical and the metaphysical. It is precisely this tension, between the physical and the metaphysical in the case of Guest, and between mimesis and abstraction in the case of second-wave abstract expressionists like Joan Mitchell, that I see as aligned with a Pragmatist construction of subjectivity which regards the "in-between" as the site of subject formation, dissolution, and transition – the space where the "fluid" self concomitant with Guest's imagination takes shape.

Situated somewhere between departure and arrival, "On The Way to Dumbarton Oaks" is another Guest poem in which "things" themselves are secondary to the oscillations that occur between them. This makes for a capricious poetic climate, in which purportedly stable, static structures like brick walls fail to offer much in the way of protection from extreme weather:

> The air! The colonial air! The walls, the brick
> this November thunder! The clouds Atlanticking,
> Canadianing, Alaska snowclouds,
> tunnel and sleigh, urban and mountain routes! (*CP* 12).

Embracing this chaotic meteorological event, Guest's persona is at home in this environment, even taking the time while en route to her ostensible destination to stop and smell the flowers:

> Chinese tree

your black branches and your three yellow leaves

with you I traffick. My three

yellow notes, my three yellow stanzas,

my three precisenesses

of head and body and tail joined

carrying my scroll, my tree drawing. (12)

As Maggie Nelson points out, the goal here is not to "represent the tree's yellow leaves, but to "traffick with them," that is to engage in the kind of exchange with which the Guestian persona in "The Location of Things" engages, that might in turn serve to re-establish the notion of fluidity I have tried to foreground (31). Nelson likewise identifies this exchange as one which calls attention to the incessant movement between that characterizes many of Guest's early works. And yet, how to square the "three precisenesses" with the purported challenge to representation, to exact likeness, which Guest and her abstractionist associates mount? Perhaps we might consider this question within the broader context of what Joan Retallack, in her introduction to *Gertrude Stein: Selections*, calls "the contested divide in both the visual and the literary arts of the time…between the artifice of mimetic or descriptive naturalism and the artifice of foregrounding the material medium itself" (42). Though Stein is before Guest's time, this divide between mimetic representation and nonrepresentational art continued to reverberate throughout the twentieth century. Moreover, like Stein's "If I told Him, A Completed Portrait of Picasso," there is something in the repetition of the

Guest stanza – “my three yellow notes, my three yellow stanzas, my three preciseneses of head and body and tail” – which, in “foregrounding the material medium itself,” seems to trouble naturalistic or mimetic exactitude. Nelson gets at something similar when she notes: “the effect of this trafficking is odd, for Guest’s continual naming of colors eventually creates a universe that often feels colorless, or at least one in which color hovers between sensation and idea, never quite landing in either place” (32-33).

In Guest’s most well-known poem, “Parachutes, My Love, Could Carry us Higher,” we find the Guestian persona immersed in a watery environment. As Tim Gray points out, “the air and water filling these seascapes are necessary for survival, yet one may suffer from their surfeit as well as from their deprivation” (82). Surfeit is an apt characterization of the speaker, who finds her lover’s excessively patronizing regard somewhat stomach-turning, especially because its arrival coincides with the speaker’s expression of real uncertainty: “I just said I didn’t know / and now you are holding me / in your arms, how kind. / Parachutes, my love, could carry us higher.” (*CP* 14) Her lover’s response may be motivated by affection, but it is also troubling and even suffocating. Such a response refuses to acknowledge a condition – genuine uncertainty – that is as intransigent as gravity, and so, like a parachute designed for ascending, it reads as a denial of reality.

As the image of the net – a trope for arrested motion – in the next stanza suggests, this relationship is clearly problematic for the speaker, whose ability to

hover between the “pink” and “pale blue” demarcations of traditional gender roles is under threat, perhaps because of the masculinist posturing taking place around her. Having “exercised [their] arms in swimming,” the pair are in mid-air, suspended between sea and sky, treading water. Yet even here, at these indeterminate and so potentially emancipatory coordinates, there exists for the speaker radical doubt: “The suspension you say / is exquisite. I do not know” (14). After establishing how keen Guest’s personae are to be between extremes, we now find that it is precisely this suspension between the sea and the sky, and the conjugal uncertainty which is coterminous with it, that so troubles the speaker. Perhaps this allows us to say something here about the nature of the Guestian persona, for in many of the poems we encounter a speaker whose continual uncertainty about the distance between “locations” and “things,” as between self and world, is what endures. As Tim Gray puts it, “Guest’s personae remain suspended in these elements as they seek proper personal attachments,” a practical – or Pragmatist – strategy for negotiating what Louis Menand calls tensions that arise in the process of adjustment between organism and world (330).

To return to the stairs, a recurrent figure in Guest’s poetry which conjures sensations of ascending or descending, there is no reason to fear them, no reason, that is, to understand them as coterminous with a vertical or transcendental logic:

There is no fear
in taking the first step
or the second
or the third
                having a position
                between several Popes
In fact the top
can be reached
without disaster
                precocious
The code
Consists in noticing
The particular shade
of the staircase
                occasionally giving way
                to the emotions. (*CP* 61)

Occupying an intermediate location on the patriarchal ladder, Guest's persona calls attention to the interplay between the particular and the nebulous, and again we are reminded that, for Guest, it is not just the particular – not just "things" – that require our attention. As we proceed, we notice that there is, to borrow Guest's term, an "invisible architecture" taking shape here, one which resists the

relentlessly vertical movement which the staircase demands ("Invisible Architecture" 18).

It has been chosen
discriminately
To graduate
the dimensions
ease them into sight
republic of space
Radiant deepness
A thumb passed over it
disarming
as one who executes robbers
waving the gnats
and the small giants
aside
balancing (61).

Gradually – "graduate" comes from the Latin gradus, meaning "degree, step" – and according to an "eccentric spatial logic," the poetic persona performs her balancing act, suspended between the physical and the metaphysical, between surface and depth (Bennett 46). After all, poetry is a matter of feet, of putting one foot in front of the next. "The Blue Stairs" continues to thematize intermediacy as it negotiates the relationship between spatial images and aesthetic issues. The

poem, we are told, is beautiful, but what makes it so? It is presented both as a "fantastic" vehicle designed to "elevate" one into regions of "the most delicate fixity," and as a "humble" instrument conceived for a "practical," "productive" purpose – "to push one foot ahead of the other" (*CP* 62-3). In lieu of Guest's emphasis on these liminal spaces, the language of transcendence seems parodic, the poet poking some fun at the notion of "using this counterfeit of height to substantiate a method of progress" (63). Like windows and corridors, Guest uses stairs as a means of movement, but it is the lateral rather than the vertical that's important:

> Reading stairs as interpolation
> in the problem of gradualness
>
> with a heavy and pure logic
>
> The master builder
> acknowledges this
> As do the artists
> in their dormer rooms
>
> eternal banishment
>
> Who are usually grateful
> to anyone who prevents them
> from taking a false step
> And having reached the summit
> would like to stay there

even if the stairs are withdrawn. (63)

Again, despite, or perhaps because of, its vertical formulation, we should view this portrait of the poet ascending the stairs to the altar of high art with some skepticism, for it sits awkwardly alongside the indeterminate spatial coordinates where many of Guest's personae seem to find themselves, suspended as they are between "things" like rooms, homes, cities, landmasses, en route as in Guest's "Dumbarton" poem, or, to return to James, "*in* the *midst*… like a *corridor* in a hotel" (my emphasis).

As Robert Bennett points out, "many readers find [Guest's] ambiguous spatial images especially unsettling partly because they are traditionally accustomed to think of spaces as a privileged ground of stable meaning" (49). Indeed, perhaps part of what is of value in Guest is her relentless emphasis on dislocation, displacement, and incessant "travel" within an intermediate and imaginative zone, a space Guest comes to regard as a fairer – both truer and lovelier – reflection of reality, a *Fair Realism*, to quote the title of Guest's 1989 collection. Returning to the interview that served as a jumping off point for my discussion, we find that Bernstein deftly picks up on Guest's fondness for and use of the word "fair," going so far as to attempt to link it to the portrait of a Pragmatic Guest, this despite the scorn that Guest has, only moments earlier, heaped on Pragmatism. "Fair is lovely. It also has a somewhat Pragmatic quality in that it's decent realism, or well-distributed realism, as opposed to absolute

realism. It's a modifier, which is interesting." Characteristically, however, Guest refuses to be pinned down, responding tersely, "it's a modifier. Exactly."

By way of conclusion, we might revisit Guest's expressed wish to distance herself from the label "Pragmatic" and from two of Pragmatism's central exponents. If we take Pragmatism as synonymous with practical, as espousing a rationalist, masculinist credo like "no ideas but in things," it is not difficult to understand Guest's refusal. But adopting a Pragmatist orientation, as I have endeavored to point out, does not necessitate adopting such a viewpoint. Like windows and corridors, a Pragmatist orientation opens up onto the space between "locations," between the fixed antagonisms that structure how we see the world: inner and outer, absent and present, light and dark, organism and environment. It is Pragmatism in this sense that I see at work in Guest's early work, a fluid, lateral orientation at home within the corridors of imagination, the transitional sites within which the subject is constituted and reconstituted *ad infinitum*.

James Schuyler: Between Abstraction and Representation

When I sat down to piece together almost a year's worth of readings, notes, and ideas on "New York" School poet James Schuyler, I vaguely recalled a portion of a conversation Schuyler had had with an interviewer. When asked about how he might describe himself, Schuyler had, according to my recollection, said something like "lake effect snow." I felt that this fragment, quite possibly misremembered or mangled, nonetheless spoke to a question my advisor had posed to me months before, in my earliest attempts to say something about the way Schuyler experienced his subjectivity, and possibly about the nature of subjectivity more generally. "Why THIS particular preoccupation in Schuyler? Because of his homosexuality, his bi-polar schizophrenia, his 'homelessness,' his post-War displacement, etc? I think you might want to say a bit more biographically about WHY this particular aspect of the poetry is so compelling for the poet."

Schuyler is often treated as a poet whose interests and preoccupations inhere in the observation and description of "things" from both the natural and human-made world. According to Daniel Katz, critical reception of Schuyler's poetry "has emphasized his 'descriptive exactness,' 'precision of detail' and embrace of what is everyday and ordinary: elements seen as elaborating a new relationship to 'things as they are' and to objects generally" (1). Katz's observation has some merit to it. Along with David Lehman, Mark Ford also subscribes to this interpretative schema, suggesting, for example, that Schuyler's

close study of English diarists provided the poet with a template for how to "avoid dealing with what John Ashbery calls in 'Daffy Duck in Hollywood' 'the big/Vaguer stuff'" – metaphysics and symbolism and issues of self-figuration – ostensibly allowing Schuyler to concentrate instead on describing everyday objects for their own sakes (173). Schuyler's musings on weather, while discussed and even foregrounded in some Schuyler criticism, receive less attention than his relationship to things, yet they offer, I think, the beginnings of a sketch of Schuyler, and an answer to the question of why Schuyler might be particularly concerned with the nature of subjectivity.

Weather is of course a powerful metaphor for mental illness. I was struck, for example, by the vocabulary which William Potter, a one-time product developer for pharmacological giant Eli Lilly and former scientist at the National Institute of Mental Health, used to explain the interaction between brain biochemistry on the one hand and pharmacological intervention on the other: "It's not simple; it's like a weather system. You do something somewhere that changes wind speeds or humidity, and you get a completely different kind of weather, but how which change will affect what, even the best meteorologists can't be sure" (qtd. in Solomon 113). Though difficult, like weather, to predict, mental illness in its various guises is cyclical, and the cycles vary from person to person. For some, the shape their illness takes is as inevitable as the changing of the seasons. "You see SAD people beginning to go in the autumn," says Norman Rosenthal, credited with discovering seasonal affective disorder. "It's like

watching the leaves fall off the trees" (qtd. in Solomon in 140). Reversing the tendency of poets to anthropomorphize their environment, Rosenthal's statement reminds us that the processes which characterize complex organic phenomena like mental illness are perhaps best understood through a kind of biomorphic lens.

Schuyler was no stranger to mental illness. The 1970s, his most prolific years from the perspective of producing poems, were also his darkest. During this time, Schuyler spent more time in psychiatric units and nursing homes than anywhere else. He was hospitalized on six separate occasions in the 1970s, and his brakedowns could be severe (Ford 166). During one episode, Schuyler, believing he was Jesus Christ, decided to wash his paper money in the bathtub, pegging them to a clothes line to dry. During another, he nearly died in a fire he himself caused while smoking in bed (Ford 166; Conte 4). The speaker in "Trip," the Schuyler poem Ford flags in his article, puts it mildly when he says: "When I think / of that, that at/ only fifty-one, I / Jim the Jerk, am / still alive and breathing / deeply, that I think / is a miracle" (qtd. in Ford 164).

Clearly, for "Jim the Jerk," observing, transcribing, and speculating on the mysterious, cyclical nature of environmental weather patterns served some need. Perhaps it was simply a beautiful and welcome distraction from illness. Or perhaps it served a poetic impulse "to tell the truth but tell it slant" that originates in another reclusive, melancholic American poet, Emily Dickinson (212). Perhaps it allowed Schuyler to speculate on the nature of self without succumbing to the

confessional mode which was so much in vogue in the 50s and 60s, the mode which fellow “New York” School poet Frank O’Hara likened tellingly to a skunk rooting around in the garbage.

To my mind, Schuyler’s preoccupation with the weather, his lovely, transient, occasionally mysterious accounts of the world beyond his wondow, can be viewed in conjunction with his mental illness, for both are complex, mutable phenomena of which we know relatively little. What does the “weather” denote? Something fragmented or whole, molecular or metaphysical? Where does one “weather system” leave off and another begin? One might ask the same of mental illness. What are its origins? How does it change over the course of an hour, a day, or a lifetime? I am not suggesting that every time Schuyler writes about weather, he is really describing his mood. What I am saying is that the weather serves in Schuyler as a set of tropes for discussing his mental illness, but also, and more importantly from my point of view, his subjectivity, that is, his experience as a fluid, changeable subject variously constituted and reconstituted in and through biology, environment, language. For some, mental illness can become the defining characteristic of self-identity, functioning as a foundational narrative upon which to build a life, but this was not a project Schuyler was interested in pursuing.

Incidentally, it turns out I had slightly misremembered the Schuyler snippet. It wasn’t uttered in interview but recorded in his diary, and the question

about how the poet might describe himself was never posed. Nonetheless, it does gather up many of the strands of Schuyler's work that I have laid out.

Monday, December 5, 1988

> There is always a theme in the news, and lately it has been child abuse: but in the more tranquil world of weather, where I prefer to dwell, it is "lake effect snow" (243).

In what follows, I will lay the groundwork for a reading of Schuyler as a poet interested in the "big/Vaguer stuff" that critics tend to ascribe to the work of John Ashbery and Barbara Guest. To do so, I will shift from the rural surroundings in which Schuyler preferred to dwell to the the New York art world of the 40s and 50s and the work of Fairfield Porter, a singularly important figure in Schuyler's life and work. As we will come to see, however, neither Porter nor Schuyler dwell exclusively within one domain, interested as they are in interrogating the borders between the natural and the human-made, between nature and art.

Like many of his "New York" School counterparts, James Schuyler's poetry is informed by his exposure to and immersion in the New York art world of the 50s and 60s. Like O'Hara, Schuyler worked at the Museum of Modern Art; like Ashbery and Guest, he supplemented his income, such as it was, writing art reviews for *Art News* (Conte 3; Thompson 109). Alongside his connections within the artistic establishment, Schuyler also kept close company with the musicians, poets, and artists inhabiting downtown Manhattan during the heady post-war years, particularly those able to offer the poet unfettered access to the rural

charms of their country homes and seaside hideaways. The pleasure Schuyler took in the close observation and description of such surroundings radiates from diary entries which tend to revolve around daily occurrences – listening as Bruno, the Porter's dog, barks impatiently at the door, waiting for a letter, recording the reflection of "golden pink patches on the shadowy white snow" (103). Nathan Kiernan, editor of Schuyler's posthumously published diary, informs us that Schuyler's poetry was as "concerned with looking at things and trying to transcribe them as painting is," adding, by way of further characterization, that "Schuyler's work has often been linked with that of figurative painters to whom he was personally close: Jane Freilicher, Alex Katz, Darragh Park, Robert Dash, and especially Fairfield Porter" (qtd. in Kiernan 14; 14).

On its face, this alignment seems unextraordinary. Ever since Marjorie Perloff's 1979 monograph on Frank O'Hara, critics have explored the connections between poets of the "New York" School and their contemporaries in the visual arts. And yet, by proposing something like a closely-aligned artistic sensibility to artists like Freilicher and Porter, Kiernan, in effect, places Schuyler in direct opposition to Pollock and Motherwell, Rothko and Newman, artists whose committment to producing abstract, gestural, non-representational, and non-narrative art is at odds with Porter's portraits of his children or Freilicher's cityscapes. Along with Larry Rivers, Grace Hartigan, Alex Katz, and a few others, Porter and Freilicher are said to have constituted a "second wave" of Abstract Expressionism, differing from their "first wave" predecessors most strikingly in

their reintroduction of the figure, a "representational impulse" that resisted the grand narrative of Abstract Expressionism (Ward 96). This turn to "the simple pleasures of observation and the sensuous use of paint" was, in many quarters, anathema to the development of a thorougly American avant-garde art that had emerged from the embers of the second World War, for it belied the subversiveness of pure abstraction (96). For vanguard artists like Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, the rationale for art that subordinated subject matter in order to emphasize the technical aspects of painting was inextricably bound to the radical sense of uncertainty and upheaval which the war produced. "In times of violence," Gottlieb declared, "personal predilections for niceties of colour and form seem irrelevant. All primitive expression reveals…the immediate presence of terror and fear" (128-9).

Throughout much of the fifties, a steady current of commentary and criticism seems to have borne out Rothko's and Gottlieb's point of view. Artist and theoretician John Graham said simply: "Art has nothing to do with representation, impersonation, decoration, compromise, character, caricature or psychological problems" (142, 44). Koontz and Rosenberg's 1949 essay titled "The Intrasubjectives" was likewise animated by a vociferously anti-representational, almost primordial impulse:

> The modern painter is not inspired by anything visible, but only by something he hasn't yet seen. No super-lively kind of object *in* the world for him. Everything of that sort has to be put there. (155-56)

With the war's culmination, many art critics ran full tilt into the theoretical breach, anxious to articulate how exactly American abstract artists had "extinguish[ed] the object" from their work (Rosenberg 191). According to Harold Rosenberg, the crucial difference between an abstract tradition that had its roots in early European modernism and the American avant-garde inhered in the way the latter conceptualized the canvas: "Rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze, or 'express' an object, actual or imagined," the canvas had become, for these artists, "an arena in which to act" (190). Anxious to herald the artistic merit of these "American Action Painters," and to augment his role in its coming to fruition, Rosenberg described this "act" in nothing less than messianic terms:

> The American vanguard painter took to the white expanse of the canvas as Melville's Ishmael took to sea. On the one hand, a desperate recognition of moral and intellectual exhaustion; on the other, the exhilaration of an adventure over the depths in which he might find reflected the true image of his identity. (193)

The desire to elevate this first wave of Abstract Expressionism and its primary exponents is underwritten by a complex web of personal and political interests, but there is little doubt that part of the critical and populist embrace of this new strain of American abstraction owes to its defiant assertion of personal freedom, that is, to its reification of the mythology of the heroic American individual. While critics like Rosenberg intuit a kinship among Abstract

Expressionist artists and Melville's Ishmael, each braving the bottomless seas in search of that elusive, mysterious prize – the essential self – second wave artists like Jane Freilicher and Fairfield Porter bear a closer resemblance to Emerson's figure of the skater. As is clear in "Experience," an essay in which Emerson attempts to come to terms with his inability to feel deeply the loss of his son Waldo from scarlet fever, Emerson is much less sanguine about the possibility of discovering "the white whale" somewhere in the depths of consciousness. The fact that he cannot get the loss of his son "nearer" to him, to "touch" or "come into contact" with the incalculable, ineffable reverberations issuing from the boy's passing, calls into question the idea that a subject can ever make contact with its object. For Emerson, this endeavour is another kind of hoary phantom – another "big fish" – that belies the experience of contemporary life, leaving him to conclude with a classically cryptic Emersonian aphorism: "We live amidst surfaces, and the true art of life is learning to skate well on them" (349, 350).

Written a century previous, Emerson's figuration of the skater who moves adroitly among and between the slick surfaces of modern life might be a more fitting motif for the group of "second wave" artists working in the post war era, particularly Fairfield Porter. Porter worked in relative obscurity for much of his life; he did not give his first one-man show until 1952, at the age of forty-five. And though artists tended to credit Porter's painterly vision as estimable, many mid-century critics felt his depictions of domesticity, of his children, his wife, his home, and his studio were far too bourgeois for the times (Spring 192; *Selected Art*

Writings 8). Nevertheless, by the mid 1950s, Porter's stubborn persistence to paint in a manner more reminiscent of sensuous, colourful, Impressionist masters like Vuillard and Bonnard was beginning to gain traction. In an essay published in 1954 in *Art News*, Porter's friend and fellow artist Elaine de Kooning issued a decisive rejoinder to the gospel of abstraction gripping the New York art world. According to Porter's biographer, Justin Spring, de Kooning's "Subject: What, How, and Who?" presented "perhaps the most convincing case for the validity of this new form of European-inspired representation," for it "asserted that abstraction was no longer a revolutionary idea and that, given [its] acceptance…realism was just as valid a way of seeing" (211). In fact, de Kooning went further, chastising those art critics whose unqualified embrace of Abstract Expressionists had sapped the movement of its avant-garde vitality: "docile art students can take up the non-Objective art in as conventional a spirit as their predecessors turned to Realism…The 'taste bureaucracy'…all freely accept abstraction" (qtd. in Spring 211).

Like Schuyler's, Porter's aesthetic is often viewed as an artistic practice which treats things as they are. According to Spring, Porter was "committed to an art that was immediate and representational and personal" (203). He was "against the Platonic notion that what is real is an idea. That is *not* what is real. Plato is wrong…art is not ideal, it's material and specific and actual. It's not an idea" (qtd. in Spring 286). Reviewing Porter's paintings for *Art News* in May, 1967, James Schuyler felt that Porter's was "an art that values the everyday as

the ultimate, the most varied and desirable knowledge. What these paintings celebrate is never treated as an archetype: they are 'concentrated instances'" (16). Yet the epithet "realist painter," used by art critic Peter Schjeldahl to characterize Porter, is complicated, as Schjeldahl himself points out, by the artist's "serious aestheticism – valuing an image's execution over the image itself" (138). "Realism," which de Kooning alludes to in Porter's work, is only part of Porter's vocabulary. In Porter's 1965 "Morning Landscape" (Figure Five), for example, Spring notes how easily the portrait of Porter's daughter, Elizabeth – seated on the porch of the Porter home on Great Spruce Head, Maine, and framed, beyond wildflowers and spruce, by a view of the harbour – "moves between representation and abstraction" (276). Critic Grace Glueck, commenting on Porter's January 1969 show, highlights in like terms this tension in Porter's work, referring to his paintings as "neither abstract nor representational, but existing in a light struck zone *between*" (qtd. in Spring 296; my emphasis). Poet and friend John Ashbery calls attention to Porter's refusal to "introduc[e] a fatal divisiveness into what can only be whole" in an essay meant to coincide with the aptly named 1983 Porter retrospective *Fairfield Porter: Realist Painter in an Age of Abstraction* (9). "The painting" Ashbery informs us, "has the vehemence of abstraction, though it speaks another language" (9;13).

It is true that Porter grounded his work in everyday experience, in portraits of his wife, children and friends, still lifes of the kitchen table in the quiet moments after breakfast, landscapes and seascapes. Such subject matter is in keeping a

commitment to realism, but Porter's work just as often slides into abstraction as the aforementioned reviews attest. Perhaps this is why Schuyler, who had the uncanny ability to represent a scene while preserving its native mystery, found in Porter something of a kindred spirit. This excerpt, taken from an undated letter Schuyler sent to Porter sometime after the latter's first exhibition, speaks directly to the oppositional energy both sought to preserve in their work:

> There seems to me to be an excitement in your pictures created by your desire, as a painter, to have your own way with your subject matter, that is at odds with a desire not to lose what it was that drew you to it in the first place, by tampering with it. That, I think, is an excellent tension under which to work, in the interest of creating interest, and quite different from only seeing, in the subject one's own painting (as I think some painters do) or having the paint take over, once it's launched. (qtd. in Spring 206)

Beyond their complex relationship as friends, critical correspondents, and lovers, what links these two figures is their shared aversion to theoretical reductionism. Porter and Schuyler were less interested in flying the banner of either abstraction or representation than they were in transcribing the at once ordinary and sublime moments when one way of seeing the world melts almost imperceptibly into another. Neither worried overmuch about their place in one or the other camp.

Of course, there is Pragmatic resonance in an attitude or sensibility that never allows ideas to become ideologies, that avoids, in other words, reducing reality to a "dealable-with system," one that can help us to round out the

Emersonian affinities hinted at earlier and gain a purchase on Schuyler's poetry (Menand xi; O'Hara 495). Previously, I mentioned Emerson's skater as an apt figure for "second wave" Abstract Expressionist art. The skater, we should note, differs from the deep sea trawler, for though they share the same medium, the trawler seeks, in increasingly desperate fashion, to reduce the distance between self and other in order to discover "the true image of his identity." In other words, he seeks "a sort of self-protective mechanism that would stave off the alterity of experience by foundationalizing truth" (Jarraway 7). Because the truth of the skater's identity is safely concealed, preserved by the very distance the trawler wishes to condense, written on the other side of a mirrored surface, as it were, the skater is free to inscribe her inimitable impressions on the ice, to carve out successive images of the self which can never be coincident with that self's ultimate truth.

> This distance – "a constitutive space, at once dark, mysterious, unspeakable"… [is] inveterately and omnivorously and indefatigably about the cultural work of *distancing* texts as various as photographs, novels, even people themselves from essences, origins, ends, ultimate truths. (Jarraway 4)

Such distance, forever oscillating between subject and object, mind and world, ought to get us thinking about modern subjectivity as existing in "the light struck zone *between*" (qtd. in Spring 296; my emphasis). In so doing, we might, in Pragmatist fashion, be on the look out for those tropes in Schuyler's work that

call attention to the transitions *between* observations, memories, speculations, descriptions, those moments when the poet "abandons one form or an incipent form for the always beckoning promise of another" (Poirier 25). Here we shall not find the ontological certainty of an essential, enduring self – not Rosenberg's much sought-after true image of identity – but something else entirely. To borrow from Schuyler's description of Jane Freilicher's canvasses, we might catch at the "almost empty spaces" in which subjectivity is formed and re-formed (Selected Art Writings 31).

It is fitting that "Freely Espousing," the titular poem in Schuyler's collection dedicated to Anne and Fairfield Porter, is in effect a catalogue of observations, reflections, descriptions, and disjunctions. Schuyler's fondness for transcribing what he sees while resisting the urge to editorialize can on occasion produce poems that read like laundry lists, as the poet himself notes in "A Hymn to Life."[39] Yet, here at the outset of Schuyler's poetic career, I find rather a profusion of detail touched off by word choice, association begetting association in a manner which is as much horizontal as it is vertical.

a commingling sky

a semi-tropic night

that cast the blackest shadow

of the easily torn, untrembling banana leaf

or Quebec! what a horrible city

---

[39] "All these lists are so much dirty laundry. Sort it out fast and send to laundry or hurl into washing machine, add soap and let 'er spin" (*CP* 218).

so Steubenville is better?

the sinking sensation

when someone drowns thinking, “This can’t be happening to me!”

the profit of excavating the battlefield where Hannibal whomped the

Romans

the sinuous beauty of words like allergy

the tonic resonance of

pill when used as in

“she is a pill”

on the other hand I am not going to espouse any short stories in which

lawn mowers clack.

No, it is absolutely forbidden

for words to echo the act described; or try to. Except very directly

as in

bong. And tickle. Oh it is inescapable kiss.

Marriage of the atmosphere

are worth celebrating. (*CP* 3)

A “commingling” sky is mixed or blended, but *mingling* also suggests joining, socializing with, engaging. Much as he does here, Schuyler will continue to commingle with, even *espouse*, people, places, and things, but not “*till death do us part*,” for the poet’s commitment to transcribing the present moment necessitates a willingness to abandon past unions. As we will see, Schuyler is

quite fond of “commingling,” but he recognizes with Emerson the superficial nature of unions which can only go so deep, which do not and cannot make whole an always-already incomplete self.

A “sinking sensation” describes a situation in which recognition slowly takes place; a drowning man’s last lament, in this case, the choice of phrase is impishly ironic, the poet enjoying the free play of associative rather than linear thinking. Schuyler’s delight in the cadences and inflections of ordinary speech – “the sinuous beauty of words like allergy / the tonic resonance of / pill when used as in / ‘she is a pill’ – touches off a section of the poem in which Schuyler’s persona simultaneously eschews the notion of a unified sign and engages in the very onomatapoeic exercise he has just railed against, finding it impossible to adhere to his own, and by extension, to any artistic, literary, or linguistic fiat that limits the speaker from “freely espousing.” Comminglings of this sort are to be encouraged, or, as the poet puts it, “marriages of the atmosphere / are worth celebrating.” Yet the lineaments of the critique of “short stories in which / lawn mowers clack” also contain the seeds of a resistance to traditional, mainstream artistic practices which Schuyler seems to have shared with fellow “New York” School poet Frank O’Hara. O’Hara’s comments, in turn, on a certain modernist “poppa” begin to illustrate what is at stake for the “New York” School poets:

> I can learn little from him [Hemingway]. I’m tired of the current fad for short stories which clack along like a sewing machine, dispensing pertinent information in stitches and stopping only when the garment is finished… I

> want to move toward a complexity which makes life within the work and which does not resemble life as most people seem to think it is lived (qtd. in Perloff 33).

O'Hara tended to dislike the conventions of certain genres or forms which work to reduce the complexity of human affairs to a kind of mechanical algorithm. But what he, along with Schuyler, abhors, I would suggest, is the kind of realist work that "resembles life as most people think it is lived," sharing an aversion to mimesis that can be traced through twentieth century art movements like cubism, surrealism, and abstract expressionism. The goal is not to represent or reflect life within the confines of a set of conventions, but to make life – to *engender* it – and in doing so, to modify that which came before. As Matthew Mongrain points out, "Schuyler's poetry and Porter's painting share a fascination with the limits of representation, what representation looks like when it approaches the limit of abstraction" (18).

In "Freely Espousing," abstraction increasingly becomes the dominant register, the poet in effect pulling back from the scenes he has been scrutinizing, blurring the distinction between what seems and what is.

> the bales of pink cotton candy
> in the slanting light
>
> are ornamental cherry trees.
>
> The greens around them, and
>
> the browns, the grays, are the park.

Its. Hmm. No.

Their scallop shell of quiet

Is the S.S. United States

It is not so quiet and they

Are a medium-sized couple who

When they fold each other up

Well, thrill. That's their story. (*CP* 4)

An impressionistic, "slanted" view of the park preserves its mystery – "Its. Hmm. No." – including the mystery of the "medium-sized couple" which, in their preservation of a quiet, complex intimacy, recall Porter paintings like *Iced Coffee*, in which avuncular Schuyler reads quietly beside Porter's daughter Katie on the Porter's screened-in porch, a seemingly innocuous pastime complicated by Porter's decision to arrange for Katie's foot to overlay Schuyler's (Figure Six).

Schuyler, who lived in Manhattan for most of his adult life, wrote a number of poems in which city spaces like Central Park might be said to be the central character. "An East Window on Elizabeth Street," describes the view as seen from a downtown apartment Schuyler shared with Bob Dash, the window becoming, in effect, one of the many constructed surfaces which participate in the composition of the scene.

Among the silvery, the dulled sparkling mica lights of tar roofs

lie rhizomes of wet under an iris

from a bargain nursery sky: a feeble blue with skim milk

blotched

on the falls. Junky buildings, aligned by a child

("That's very good, dear") are dental:

carious, and the color of weak gums ("Rinse and spit"

and blood stained sputum and big gritty bits

are swirled away.) (*CP* 84)

If the window is a participant in the creation of the canvas, the light might be seen as the authorial hand. Coming into contact with the shiny scales of mica, the dark, thick tar, and the rhizomatic pools of rain water, the light generates a range of tonal and directional effects one might find in a water colour. Bathed in this luminous atmosphere of abstract description, the building is both recognizable in its decayed coloration but also surreal, an assemblage of rock, glass, teeth, "bits" of gristle, blood and human speech assembled at the hands of a child. A syncretic composition, the "junky" building neatly foregrounds the poem's penultimate image - a bird papering over her nest with whatever materials are at hand, in this case empty packages of cigarettes and gum.

Shifting his view from this slightly "down in the mouth" façade, the Schuyler persona refocuses on the scene below, where

Across an interstice

trundle and trot trucks, cabs, cars,

station-bound fat dressy women

("I never thought I'd make it")

all foundation garments and pinched toes. (84)

The plainly visible contours of “station bound fat dressy women,” along with their seeming proximity to the speaker (it is as if he can overhear their conversation), seems to resist his wish for a more expansive, less “pinched” view of his surroundings. Or perhaps it is the direction the women are moving which “pinches,” their hurry to get to the station predicated, perhaps, on certain centering, “stationary,” or foundational myths that cramp the poet’s wish to remain open to experience, to ponder the improbable marriage of urban and rural which the cityscape offers up.

I don’t know how
it can look so miraculous and alive
an organic skin for the stacked cubes of air
people need, things forcing up through thick unwilling air
obstinate and mindless as the glorious swamp flower
skunk cabbage and the tight uncurling punchboard slips
of fern fronds. Toned, like patched, wash-faded rags
noble and geometric, like Laurana’s project for a square.
Mutable, delicate, expendable, ugly, mysterious
(seven stories of just bathroom windows)
packed: a man asleep a woman slicing garlic thinly into oil
(what a stink, what a wonderful smell)
burgeoning with stacks, pipes, ventilators, tensile antennae –

that bristling gray bit is a part of a bridge
that mesh hangar on a roof is to play games under.
But why should a metal ladder climb, straight
and sky aspiring, five rungs above a stairway hood
up into nothing? Out there
a bird is building a nest out of torn up letters
and the red cellophane of cigarette and gum packs.
The furthest off people are tiny as fine seed
but not at all bug like. A pinprick of blue
plainly is a child running. (84-5)

Clearly there is something redeeming about these "things forcing up through thick unwilling air" which can alternately be "noble and geometric" and also "expendable and ugly." Perhaps it is the impression generated by the interplay between antagonisms that the poet wants to call attention to, a mutable, fluid cityscape which does not wall itself off from high or low, beautiful or ugly, worthy or wasteful. The light, of course, plays a role in all of this, softening the edges of constructed surfaces like buildings, blurring boundaries, inviting the outside in, thus allowing the viewer to attend more closely to the viewed. We should recall too that this meditation on the city is being conducted from behind a window, a proverbial Pragmatic trope for the liminal, threshold spaces between subject and object, thought and experience, mind and world used to similar effect in Barbara Guest's poetry, as I outline in Chapter Three. The last lines of the poem invite us

to consider the role which distance plays in Schuyler's poetry. Indeed, it is quite striking to compare, somewhere "further off," those people "tiny as fine seed" with the aforementioned "station bound fat dressy women." Schuyler reminds us that in poetry, as in painting, as in life, seeing is relative. Sometimes, as Matthew Mongrain puts it, "'a pinprick of blue' is enough" to evoke a human presence (33).

Like a number of Schuyler poems, the first three lines of "Light Blue Above" come from observations the poet recorded in his journal. The lines describe the view as seen from Fairfield Porter's home off the coast of Maine, with particular attention paid to the "commingling" of water, sky, light, and air:

> Light blue above, darker below, lightly roughened by the stirring air and with smooth tracks on it. There goes Reynald Hardie's lobster boat, taking a colorful load of pleasure-seeking shoppers to Camden. (*CP* 92)

Imbued with the "local colour" of coastal Maine, this flattened-out, two-tone depiction of the view from Porter's island retreat flirts with without collapsing into mimesis, suspended, like Hardie's boat, somewhere between the fixed coordinates of abstraction and realism. Air, the subject of the ethereal, philosophical apostrophe that follows these initial lines of prose, occupies similarly indeterminate semantic and spatial coordinates:

O Air

the clear, the soot-bearer, the unseen that rips

that kills and cures, that keeps

all that is empty filled, the bright invisible

into which we move like fingers into gloves

that coats our rolling home like the sweet softness

between grape and grapeskin

in silent laughter in a glass pushed down

into a basin at retreated puzzled water

constrained to rise elsewhere up

the sides of the basin, of the glass

up fingers and hands and wrist

clinging to arm hair in mercurial bubbles

that detach and rise and join itself

the quick to heal

that wriggles up from hot

heat-wave pavement like teased hair

or has a wintry bite, or in the dog days saps

or is found at the bottom

of a mailbox on an empty house

or in a nest between twigs, among eggs

and we go on

with it within us

upon a dust speck

in bubble air. (92-93)

Described in paradoxical terms, air is, in Schuyler's hands, a most curious element: fundamental to our survival, it courses through our most basic actions – laughing, washing the dishes, retrieving a letter from the mailbox – and yet, as this quietly elusive poem testifies, it remains mysterious, "mercurial." The poem's conspicuous references to fingers, gloves, hands, wrists, and arms speak to the difficulty of handling such a capricious subject, gesturing by analogy toward the difficulty of holding onto or pinning down our experience in language, a recognition which Emerson refers punningly to in "Experience" as "the *most unhandsome part of our condition*" (qtd. in Poirier 63; my emphasis). We cannot, Emerson seems to say, be more hands-on in our attempts to convey experience through language, no matter how much we attempt to manhandle it, to force language to submit to definition, a notion which Schuyler's treatment of air in "Light Blue Above" neatly encapsulates.

It is, in fact, remarkable to observe just how durable this sentiment, and its "handy" articulation, has proven among those associated with Emersonian Pragmatism. As noted in Chapter One, William James articulates this notion thus:

> There is always and everywhere some residual resistance to verbalisation, formulation, and discursification, some genius of reality that escapes from *the pressure of the logical finger, that says "hands off"* and claims its privacy, and means to be left to its own life. (1313; my emphasis).

As Richard Poirier deftly points out, Robert Frost's poetry is permeated by a "something" unnameable that dovetails nicely with James's formulation.

"Something there is," Frost reminds us in "Mending Wall," "that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down." I would submit that this unnameable, unrelatable "something" can also be found in what Matthew Mongrain calls the "positive emptiness" of a Schuyler poem like "Light Air Above." Porter, whose work interrogates the somewhat ill-defined spaces where abstraction and representation collide, assigned a positive value to emptiness, perhaps because, paradoxically, a desire to "depict things as they are" is bound up with a recognition that one cannot "relate the unrelateable" (Mongrain 29). What this leaves us with is an aesthetic or orientation which, by activating absence, inaugurates, perhaps, a new realism. Of Willem de Kooning, Porter said that "his meaning is not that the paintings have meaning…the vacuum they leave is a vacuum in accomplishment, in significance, and in genuineness (qtd. in Ashbery's "Fairfield Porter" 9). Summing up a Freilicher exhibition, Schuyler echoed these sentiments:

> These abstract paintings, whose "nature references" partook not at all of the blurry disguises of so-called Abstract-Impressionism, seemed almost empty. They left a visual after-taste of high thin colour, the palest yellow and a lot of white; and the sense of a big space vivified with the least and most effective means (*Collected Art Writings* 31).

Returning to the poem, we find in these "almost empty" coordinates, "at the bottom of a mailbox on an empty house / or in a nest between twigs, among eggs," something that is difficult to define, pin down, know. But rather than force it

to surrender to logocentricity, the Schuyler persona is ready to embrace a more democratic relationship to the unnameable, and with it, a rather un-Rosenbergian conception of self: “and we go on / with it within us / a dust speck / in bubble air.”

Schuyler’s “Buttered Greens” continues to develop the thematic of subjective intermediacy – and indeterminacy – which I have been sketching out. Using extremely short, enjambed lines and syntactical doubling, the Schuylerian persona problematizes the search for a stable referent.

> Sunshine
> makes shade
> acid blue
> leaf work
> of elms
> they fell first
> blown under
> a big plane
> tree lying
> on tuftedness
> the pattern
> of its later
> shedding. (*CP* 172)

This refusal to make firm syntactical distinctions between referents and their modifiers reminds me of Schuyler’s fondness for “commingling,” his wish to join or marry things taken as discrete entities: “Don’t ‘tsk tsk,’” the poet says, after describing the casual beauty of the natural scene, “men and habitations are nature too.” Levity, yes, but “Buttered Greens” muses on very human questions about the nature of subjectivity in a more direct manner than earlier poems. The

question for the poet is not whether or not we have free will, but what to do with it. Ironically, the most practical response to this metaphysical quandary seems to be to defer answering for the time being, to allow for, nay to believe in the "something" which constitutes agency:

> It
> is strange
> and easy,
> the will
> exercised
> within
> its wind-
> cleared and
> cleaned
> range, the
> "that" not
> understood
> too well
> the will
> will heal
> what hurt
> though that
> was what
> was meant:
> to do
> and undo
> what's
> done be-
> tween the

flash and
fall of
turning,
as the year
returns in
its ad-
vance to
take again
what it
last took
and what
it takes
brings back:
all done
not by
us or for
us but
with us
and within
the body
of a house
the frame
of wood or
bone it is
much the
same. (173)

The hyphen, the space that opens up in the linebreak separating “be-tween” in the foregoing citiation, bears witness to the inevitable split which the self experiences repeatedly as it transits from one iteration to the next. We do not

know what takes place in the interval "be-/tween the / flash and / fall of / turning," but it is continuous with the natural world. As the "year returns," so the Schuylerian persona participates in the repetition that, according to David Jarraway,

> drives us back even more relentlessly *into* the body – "back in[to] the mouth and around the sexual organs," says Foucault – that is to say, back into life-experience and back into concrete reality that all the while…will always be opaquely withheld from the rational cogitations and the logical impositions of the onmivorously colonizing mind. (13)

Schuyler's "Unlike Joubert" continues to affirm the empty, blank spaces of modern subjectivty, a series of indeterminate, intermediate ontological coordinates often marked in Pragmatist texts by tropes of transition. The poet's persona begins by describing with some precision his physical location, along with the time of day and the colours of his clothing, but he very quickly moves from external to internal description:

> Lying in bed in the afternoon
> But not "in a pink dressing gown"
> In red pajamas and a yellow bathrobe
> --flannel pajamas and a terry cloth bathrobe—
> and for a moment, a flicked off bit
> of a moment, succeeding where Joubert
> failed: to think nothing; but on

second thought, failing, as it was not
by intention, nor is it certain that
there was even the shaved off edge
of a flick between the thought and
the next thought, that there had been
no thought between them. (*CP* 156)

Here, the poet, who has an uncanny ability to bring to life familiar aspects of the everyday, is less certain about how to distinguish between and among the thoughts which drift across his conscious mind. He cannot even be sure that the happy accident in which he momentarily "thinks nothing" has taken place, since there is no certainty that anything – even nothing – intervenes "between the thought and / the next thought." "All that is clear," according to the poet, is that the thoughts evoke different tonal hues, much like a colour field painting, and that these fields are

As different as
day from night, and as alike,
just as their connective – the nothing which
may not have been – was also a gray,
creamier, lighter, and shifty-eyed
as the sky or a big flat button
cut out of a seashell, the polished
off husk of an oyster, perhaps:

subtle days in winter when

thought settles down in the presence of an absence. (156-57)

Beginning on a note of certainty with regard to place, Schuyler leaves us on much less stable ground by poem's end. What does it mean to be "in the presence of an absence?" Is this, then, the condition of modern subjectivity, a subject without origin or essence, untethered from foundational myths, "unmoored," as in Ashbery's "Soonest Mended," drifting between, as in Guest's "Parachutes, My Love, Could Carry Us Higher?" That both Schuyler and Porter can so often be seen interrogating the blank, empty spaces between abstraction and realism, poetry and prose, language and paint is, I think, a sure sign of their healthy skepticism about the notion that life is a Melvillian quest narrative in which one ultimately discovers "the true image of his identity." Both were too engaged in the process of attending to the everyday to bandy about with grand narratives.

By way of conclusion, I'd like to examine an excerpt from an interview Schuyler gave to Robert Thompson in 1990, in which he recalls his employ with a public radio broadcast called "Voice of America" sometime before going to work for *Art News* in the 1960s (110). Here I am interested chiefly in the way in which the responsibilities Schuyler outlines dovetail with a significant feature of his poetry on the one hand, his penchant for accurate observation and description, yet fail to satisfy his coterminous desire to engage with the "big, vaguer stuff" flagged in my introduction on the other.

Robert Thompson: Earlier, you had a stint working at the "Voice of America?"

James Schuyler: I was in effect working for the National Broadcasting Company. I had a job in what was called Traffic, which was just everything that goes in and out of the studios….

RT: What did you actually do?

JS: The big thing was the "log," this thing of pages and pages that had to be mimeographed every day, and it gave, in very exact little time breaks, what happened going in or out of the studio, each studio that we used, and then it had to be checked. It had to be absolutely right, because different people, the engineer would have it, all sorts of people would have copies of this, and they had [to fit] together.

RT: You weren't involved in broadcasting?

JS: No, not at all.

RT: Darn. Wouldn't radio have been an apt career for a poet?

JS: No. (110)

Keeping an "absolutely" accurate record of the studio's incoming and outgoing activity – right down to the "exact little time breaks" – strikes me as a felicitous gig for a poet who, as we have seen, takes great delight in transcribing various instances of daily "traffic" – atmospheric, environmental, physical, and pyschological. Why did Schuyler, if I am correct in my interpretation, disdain such work? Surely it would have aided, if not shaped, his evolving aesthetic? The answer, I think, returns us to the tension inherent in both Schuyler's, and Porter's,

work. Schuyler's lack of nostalgia for the job is not surprising, for the demand for accurate, literal, "absolutely right" transcription tends to produce a hollower, more impoverished vision of "what is" than the looser strictures of poetry and visual art, forms which more readily accept, even embrace, those blank, empty, "in-between" spaces which, by eluding the "logical pressure" of the transcribing finger, preserve something of the mystery and possibility of modern life and our experience of it. For Schuyler, it seems, there was always "something more" beyond the exacting logic of mimetic representation, or the discourses of identity that flit about his legacy, seeking in vain to hem in his life. Schuyler's continued fascination with and exploration of that "something" is the best warrant I can think of for continuing to approach him as a poet pre-eminently concerned with the nature of subjectivity.

“He Spoke Not As a Critic, But As a Man” :The Poetry, Pragmatism, and Pedagogy of Kenneth Koch

It is not a permanent necessity that poets should be interested in philosophy, or in any other subject. We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult.

--T.S. Eliot (“The Metaphysical Poets”)

People tend to see things on such a grand scale, it always amazes me. And they take their lives so seriously.

--Joe Brainard (“Interview ith Tim Dlugos”)

When it comes to modernist poetry, few individuals were taken as seriously as T.S. Eliot. By the middle of the twentieth century, his prescriptions for what poetry ought to be had coalesced in the New Criticism, a critical methodology which regarded literature, and poetry in particular, as a serious, scholarly pursuit reserved for the initiated, those who had received advanced training in rhetoric, poetics, and linguistics. According to John Beck, by the late forties and through the fifties, the New Criticism had become “the dominant paradigm” in “literary studies” (58). Vincent Leitch concurs, noting that by the middle of the twentieth century, New Critics had “influenced more colleagues and students, controlled more journals, had wider access to presses, and produced immensely more publications than contemporary critical schools” (qtd. in Hickman 13).

Historical narratives of the New Critics place them firmly within the ambit of T.S. Eliot, and indeed New Critics preserved many of the emphases that Eliot set out in his (1920) landmark work of criticism, *The Sacred Wood*. Like Eliot, the group of academics that included John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and Cleanth Brooks sought to distinguish the study of literature itself from the study of the historical and biographical circumstances in which it was conceived.[40] Like Eliot, "they turned energies to an effort to reform the discipline of English in the direction of greater rigor, prominence within the academy and cultural authority" (Hickman 7).[41] Such critical ambitions reflected the aims of an ambitious cadre of so-called serious poets, those who, having plumbed the depths of the western literary tradition, were most able to relate both the trauma and the ennui of post-World War One Europe. Filtered through the shattered prism of their modernist poetry, this poetry could be dense and obscure, hence the need for "expert guides to help [readers] to navigate the modernist labyrinth" (Hickman 14).

By the time Kenneth Koch graduated from Harvard in 1948 and began his graduate work at Columbia, a serious poem, one deserving of study and emulation, drew heavily on what Richard Poirier calls "Eliot's idiosyncratic mythologies of twentieth century crisis" and "a consequent obligation…to write a

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[40] One of the more contentious implications of Brooks' anti-historicism is the suggestion that poems can be endowed with a "universal" rather than historically-conditioned meaning.

[41] Gail McDonald's chapter entitled "Real Teachers in Imaginary Universities," in *Learning To Be Modern,* provides a useful literary-historical context for Eliot's campaign to transform literature and the study thereof into a "serious" academic pursuit.

'difficult' and 'allusive' poetry" (133). Koch, unlike Eliot, had seen active duty during war times, but he was not interested in subscribing to what Poirier calls Eliot's "wasteland" ethos; and if Koch shared Eliot's view of contemporary history as an "immense panorama of futility and anarchy," he certainly didn't let on (133). Yet, as Koch recounted in an interview with Jordan Davis, he found himself in "an Eliot-dominated ambience" where "even the slightest sensations of happiness or pleasure seemed rare and revolutionary poetic occasions" (2).

Koch, who has always sailed against the prevailing winds, seems to have associated poetry with pleasure from the get-go. His first encounters with what he calls in "The Great Atlantic Rainway" a "mysterious engine which floats bouquets" seem to have set the tone for a career devoted to extolling the virtues of this pleasure-producing machine.[42] Contrary to New Critical dictates, Koch learned early on to regard poetry as a popular form which anyone could take pleasure in or profit from. By his own account, Koch's family was relatively wealthy, his childhood relatively comfortable. Koch's father worked in the family business, a furniture store. His mother, who gave informal lectures on books – "they were sort of like dramatisations" – according to Koch, was fulsome in her support of her son's artistic leanings: "The first time I wrote a poem, my mother gave me a big kiss and said, 'I love you'" (qtd. in Herd 27; "Educating the Imagination" 157). Growing up an only child in an affluent suburb of Cincinnati, Ohio, Koch

[42] One of Koch's most enduring influences, William Carlos Williams described poetry in similarly mechanistic terms in his introduction to *The Wedge*: "A poem is a small (or large) machine made out of words…as in all machines, its movement is intrinsic, undulant, a physical more than a literary character" (256).

describes his childhood as happy, yet he also remembers yearning to get beyond the surveillance of his rabbi and his parents and his teachers, those paragons of the community who, in "making sense in the usual way," represented a kind of horizon Koch wished to traverse (159).

His sense of what life beyond suburban Cincinnati could be was kindled by an introduction to the works of Percy Bysshe Shelley arranged for him by his Uncle Leo, who also worked at the family furniture store and had dabbled in poetry as a younger man. As the story goes, Leo invites young Kenneth down to the store one day, whereupon he retrieves, from a "big safe that was upstairs," a copy of Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Complete Poems* along with a stack of Leo's love poems which, by his Uncle's account, are not very good. Koch leaves few hints as to what effect being let into the confidence of his Uncle had on him. Of Shelley's effect, however, Koch is unequivocal: "The *Bysshe*," he recalls, "was very important to me, as was the red cover of the book and also the wonderful picture of Shelley with wild hair and an open collar. That, for me suddenly was poetry" (154).

This image of the poet – audacious, sensual, slightly mad – returns in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," an early favorite of Koch's, in which the speaker sees in "the locks of the approaching storm" the likeness of an untamable creature, "some fierce Maenad" with "bright hair uplifted from the head" (295). It is this fecund image of wildness that Koch would return to repeatedly, as in "West Wind":

It's the ocean of western steel

Bugles that makes me want to listen

To the parting of the trees

Like intemperate smiles, in a

Storm coat evangelistically ground

Out of spun glass and silver threads

When stars are in my head, and we

Are apart and together, friend of my youth

Whom I've so recently met – a fragment of the universe

In our coats, a believable doubling

of the fresh currents of doubt and

Thought! a winter climate

Found in the Southern Hemisphere, and where

I am who offers you to wear,

And in this storm, along the tooth of the street

The intemperate climate of this double frame of the universe.

(*Collected Poems* 173)

"West Wind" does not so much refer to as invoke the storm scene from Shelley's "Ode," conjuring a verbal vortex of wind, water, trees, and stars, a suitable backdrop for two poet "evangelicals" so much moved by extreme weather. The young Koch would continue to cultivate attachments to poets like Shelley, poets whose verse might, every now and again, slip the bounds of the everyday in

order to meditate on "this double frame of the universe." Yet he resisted actively the notion that poetry was a rarified mode of literary expression reserved for those who possessed the proper tools, and he spent much of his career as a teacher and pedagogue debunking such approaches.

Koch is remembered as one of the seminal forces behind the "New York" School of Poetry, though not necessarily because of his poetic output, prodigious and varied as it is.[43] Rather, he is regarded as someone whose contribution inhered in his manic, mobilizing enthusiasm for his friends and students, particularly the elementary school students he taught in the late 60s and early 70s as part of the "poets-in-the-schools" program. Because of the challenge such a program posed to New Critical paradigms for teaching poetry, it is worth spending some time exploring this facet of Koch's legacy.

The "poetry-in-the-schools" initiative was itself a testament of the shift toward the more "student-centered," holistic learning galvanizing education in the 1960s. According to Timothy Gray, in its first year, 1966, poets-in-the-schools "placed poets in forty-seven of New York City's public high schools" (131). Riding in on the largesse of various cultural organizations supporting the poets-in-schools initiative, Koch spent several months in 1968 and 1969 at P.S. 61 in New York City teaching poetry to schoolchildren in grades three through six. His approach pivoted on exercises designed to go beyond the conventional poetry curriculum, for such a curriculum tended to feature poems that abandoned any

[43] See, for example, Daniel Chintz's rationale for Koch's "second-class" status amongst poets in "Arm the Paper Arm: Koch's Postmodern Comedy" in *The Scene of My Selves: New Work on New York School Poets*, pp. 312.

pretense of connecting with the experience of the learner. Though students were encouraged to examine their inner lives, Koch's exercises were not designed to elicit catalogues of pain and suffering in the mould of the "confessional" poetry espoused by New Critics; rather, they aimed to elicit momentary suspensions of self-consciousness. In attending closely to the process which a "poetry idea" – rules, essentially, that provided the students a scaffolding upon which they could experiment with poetry – initiates, students could temporarily get beyond their ego-driven understanding of the world in order to create strange realities. Strangely, and wonderfully, Koch's students created poems that are by turns intensely personal and public, concrete and abstract, recognizable and fantastic.[44]

While his pedagogy has received critical attention, the attitude which it, to borrow from Schuyler, "freely espouses," and which seems so bound up with the anti-academic ethos of the "New York" School of Poetry, seems to me to require more in the way of explanation. What made his "poetry ideas" so successful? How did Koch manage to do what for most teachers is a daunting task, particularly in an era of "results-based" teaching and assessment, namely, create an environment in which the curriculum challenges the student to take an active role in his or her education? One way to answer this question is to say that, for

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[44] A few excerpts will have to suffice: primary student Alex Morrison's "Noises I Hear": "What I hear on the street / I hear cars that go beep / beep. I hear people that / talk and talk" (*Wishes* 109); a snippet from third grader Mayra Morales's "Someday I Hope to See": "Someday I hope to see a face with roses / a hat of kisses / a stripe of hair / a kiss of babies / An eraser of kittens / A baby of mittens…" (149); and the opening to grade six student José Lopez's "I seem to Be But I Am a…": "I seem to be a man in the flying trapeze. But I am a man in the garbage can" (247).

Koch, pleasure and learning are not separate activities, that “pleasure,” contrary to the tenor of the New Criticism, was a serious business indeed. And while it is easy to extend the pleasure principle governing Koch’s poetry to his pedagogy, critics have not, by and large, looked to the work of experimental Pragmatists John Dewey and William Carlos Williams, whose writings advocated the idea that the classroom experience should inhere in the pleasures of self-discovery, to account for and historicize such a principle. To my mind, Koch’s whole approach to teaching is grounded in a Pragmatist epistemology which treats knowledge as a dynamic, horizontal, continual process rather than a static, vertical, one-time event.

In hindsight, we can see that along with preserving Eliotian dictates, the New Criticism of the forties and fifties also preserved something of the crisis mentality which spurred Eliot and Pound. According to I.A. Richards, a British critic associated with New Criticism, literary study of the kind the New Critics promoted “could guard against a slide into chaos” to which he perceived England was vulnerable during the postwar years (qtd. in Hickman 10.) Concerned primarily with the weakening of traditional and moral authorities that resulted from the mass upheavals of war, Richards worried over the prospect of a “mental chaos such as man has never experienced” (qtd. in Hickman 10). In the event of such chaos, Richards observed, “we shall be thrown back, as Matthew Arnold foresaw, upon poetry. It is capable of saving us; it is a perfectly possible means

of overcoming chaos" (qtd. in Hickman 10-11).[45] One of the preeminent New Critics, John Crowe Ransom understood his role in terms similar to the way in which Richards conceived poetry. For Ransom, the critic functions as a kind of ministerial intermediary between the poet and his apocalyptic struggle against his *agon* – the critic as Jacob's messenger, delivering news from the battle: "the critic should regard the poem as nothing short of a desperate ontological or metaphysical maneuver. The poet himself, in the agony of composition, has something like this sense of his labours" ("Criticism, Inc." 60).

This rhetoric of cultural chaos and spiritual tension which runs through Eliot and his New Critical descendants casts a wide net. "Fresh Air," Koch's most well-known and widely-anthologized poem, published as part of his *Thank You & Other Poems* from 1962, gave voice to the would-be poets suffering under the tyranny of "big fat men standing on the east coast as well as the west," those who, under the "baleful influence" of Eliot, were strangling every last breath out of poetry:

> At the Poem Society a black-haired man stands up to say
> You make me sick with all your talk about restraint and mature talent!
> Haven't you ever looked out the window at a painting by Matisse,
> Or did you always stay in hotels where there were too many spiders
> crawling on your visages?

[45] Richards must have neglected to read his Robert Frost. If he had, he might have been persuaded to view poetry not as a "perfectly possible means of overcoming chaos," but rather, and more modestly, as "a momentary stay against confusion" (qtd. in Parini 42).

Did you ever glance inside a bottle of sparkling pop,

Or see a citizen split in two by the lightning?

I am afraid you have never smiled at the hibernation

Of bear cubs except that you saw in it some deep relation

To human suffering and wishes, oh what a bunch of crackpots!

(*Collected Poems* 127;123;122)

Where Eliot and the New Critics saw evidence of a "restrained and mature talent," Koch and his "New York" School cohorts saw a school of thought that had become insular and effete, too fixated on human suffering to notice the dazzling vitality of the world beyond the printed page. Koch's resistance to New Critcism also owes something to the way it became orthodoxy, that is, to the wholesale adaption of New Criticism by American college professors, and to its subsequent imitation and inevitable dilution. He yearned for the arrival of a Whitmanesque figure, someone who could inject some "fresh air" into poetry readings and university lectures:

Is there no voice to cry out from the wind and say what it is like to be the wind,

To be roughed up by the trees and to bring music from the scattered houses,

And the stones, and to be in such intimate relationship with the sea

That you cannot understand it? Is there no one who feels like a pair of pants? (*Collected Poems* 124).

In effect, Eliot and his New Critical inheritors became figures Koch could both write and teach against, symbols of a culturally conservative literary-academic establishment whose "awful jereboams / To *irony, ambiguity, and tension* - / And other things I do not want to mention" nonetheless set the terms for discussions of poetry and poetics ("Seasons on Earth" 7). If Eliot's poetry depicted the twentieth century as "an immense panorama of futility and anarchy," Koch would "devote his days" to recording "the Pleasures of Peace" (*Collected Poems* 230). Moreover, If Eliot and his new critical brethren insisted on "difficulty," Koch, "citing Paul Valery's evaluation of Whitman," would suggest to his students that "greatness in poetry can come not from difficulties overcome but from – and this is better in French, *facilités trouvées* – easiness found" (qtd. in Poirier 133; qtd. in Gray 140).

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In addition to cultivating a second-generation of "New York" School poets which included Bill Berkson, Ron Padgett, and Ted Berrigan, Koch spent a number of years teaching in New York's public school system, recording his experiences and compiling his teaching materials in *Wishes, Lies and Dreams* (1971), *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* (1973), and *Making Your Own Days* (1998). According to Timothy Gray, New York City in 1968, the year of Koch's first stint at P.S. 61, was a propitious time for a progressive educator. By the late 60s, "top-down methods of instruction featuring an authoritative teacher and passive pupils were being replaced by spontaneous learning models in

which teachers “facilitated” intellectual discoveries children made on their own (129). Educators of Koch’s generation were no doubt pleased with the emergence of a more organic approach to teaching, yet Koch remained wary of some of the principles underpinning the progressive movement, particularly when they were adhered to too zealously. Despite his progressive streak, Koch was aware that “he could not rely solely on the instinctive ability of elementary school kids to produce great art” (123). His challenge, to quote the Pragmatist pedagogy of John Dewey, was to provide his students with a pedagogical framework that was “flexible enough to permit for the individuality of experience yet firm enough to give direction towards continuous development of power” (58).

As Koch quickly realized, he was not going to find this “middle ground” in the textbooks on offer in elementary schools, for the poetry curriculum appeared to lack a connection to experience, to the everyday “wishes, lies and dreams” of elementary school students. The poems on offer were “comparatively empty and safe,” disconnected from “any serious emotion or… complex way of looking at things”:

Asters, deep purple,

A grasshopper’s call,

it is summer,

Tomorrow is fall. (*Rose, Where Did You Get That Red*? 106)

“September” offered the children a “reassuring and simplified” poem with “a lot of rhyme…as though the children had to be entertained by its chiming at its every

moment" (106). The texts, Koch stressed, were condescending in their presentation of a "cloyingly sweet and trouble-free view of life" (106):

> Words are fun!...Some giggle like tickles, or pucker like
> pickles, or jingle like nickels, or tingle like prickles. And
> then…your poem is done!
> And so is my letter. But not before I wish you good luck
> Looking through your magic window. (106-7)

In terms of its relevance to the real-life experience of the student, this content is strikingly similar to the material Jane Tompkins reflects upon in her memoir, a thorough critique of the US education system, at midcentury and beyond, very much in keeping with Koch's concerns.[46] In the effort to reimagine the lived experience of American students at midcentury, these reflections are worth further consideration. Tompkins's memory of the first day of grade one is a case in point. She is nervous but also bubbling over with excitement, for "school," as she has imagined it, is nothing less than the port to adventure:

> School, I had thought, was to be a voyage of discovery, an expedition into the mountainous world of adults, full of tortuous paths, perilous peaks, sudden gorges, magnificent vistas. The journey would require everything I

[46] Tompkins' own personal connections to Pragmatist thought are worth noting, particularly her placement in the late 1980s among a coterie of Duke neo-pragmatists led by Frank Lentricchia and her marriage to Stanley Fish. Her scholarly work, particularly in the area of canon formation and reader-response criticism, has been transformative in its own right. See, for example, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (1985) *and West of Everything: The Inner Lives of Westerns* (1982).

> had but would be worth it, for in the end, I would get to see what adults saw: the great world itself. (19)

Sadly, learning to read in Ms. Toy's grade one class turns out to be a dull and disappointing exercise. Tompkins finds the reading material, a Dick and Jane primer, to be out of touch with reality, for fictional Jane's experience bears no resemblance to the real Jane: "The books are an insult. They are so unreal, they are incomprehensible…I can't believe this is all there is to reading. Where is the world? Where is discovery? (17).

Despite the infantilizing curriculum, Tompkins's experience did not dampen her enthusiasm for school. In fact, she went on to study literature at Bryn Mawr and Yale in the 1960s, where she and her classmates were introduced to the New Criticism, a method for reading and interpreting texts that discouraged strongly the imposition of any idea or feeling that was external to the text itself (81). A diligent student, Tompkins worked through her B.A. and Ph.D producing criticism devoid of historical, biographical, or psychological analysis, focusing solely on formalist elements of the text – "narrative structure, irony, or image patterns, diction, or tone" (82).[47] A few years after receiving her doctorate, Tompkins attended a cocktail party and found herself in an argument with "an early outspoken feminist" bent on challenging the newly-minted establishment academic:

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[47] These are precisely the New Critical categories laid out in Cleanth Brooks' and Robert Penn Warren's widely-acclaimed poetry textbook *Understanding Poetry*, a text which, according to Harold B. Sween, "revolutionized the teaching of literature in thousands of classrooms for twenty five years" (*Virginia Quarterly Review,* Web).

> Finally, more than a little drunk, but dead on target, she shouted at me in exasperation, “Don’t you believe in anything?” For one shocked moment, I saw that she was right. All I knew were little moves, attitudes I’d picked up. I had a veneer of tastes, a collection of preferences and dislikes that identified me as a bird of a certain feather, a person who didn’t make certain kinds of mistakes. But that was it. In the sense that she meant, I didn’t believe in anything. (84)

What strikes me about Tompkins’s experience in the school system is its failure to give women like her “some skills to handle the things that are coming up in their lives” (qtd. in Tompkins xiv). Young Jane is outraged at how “unreal” Dick and Jane are, how removed from her childhood experiences of dread and loneliness and hope. And it is hard to see how the curriculum can be said to have “progressed” during her tenure as a student. The New Critical imperative to discount any ideas or feelings save for those “immediately provoked by a work of art” makes it impossible for Jane to say anything real, anything suitable to the situation she finds herself in, anything not grounded in the formal components of a particular text (“The Perfect Critic” 13). Her schooling has literally rendered her unfit for the kinds of unfettered exchanges where the self-conscious ego, ever keen to demonstrate intellectual authority, is bracketed temporarily by the free-wheeling imagination, which is less interested in possessing authority than in “freely espousing” whatever ideas, influences, feelings, and values which a lively back-and-forth initiates.

Koch, who inherited a curriculum characterized by Dick and Jane-esque superficiality, had no intention of adopting an approach which such material entailed in his classrooms; rather, he was keen to bring the curriculum into the scope of his students' experience. To do so, he knew he would have to integrate the poems he wished to teach them into the students' writing in a way which made these poems less remote. Thus, reading Blake's "The Tyger" became an opportunity for the students to "ask questions of a mysterious and beautiful creature" (*Rose* 104). When the class read Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," Koch asked them to write a poem which "said the same things in many different ways" (104). Seeking exercises which would encourage the students to look at their own lives as worthy of poetic treatment, Koch turned to William Carlos Williams, adapting a number of his homespun themes into "poetry ideas." Williams's poetry contained much of what Koch wished to bring into the classroom: ordinary subject matter, plain language, and a recognition of "the importance of feelings and of one's secret imaginative life" (10). Because it was not "literary" in the traditional sense, it

> could point the children away from "highly poetical things," like palaces and snowcapped mountains, as the only proper ones to write poetry about. It could help them to look for what was beautiful to them in the things they really saw. (132)

Whether or not the students understood the Williams poems or their implications, they could all benefit from a "freer, more permissive" approach to writing poetry,

beginning with its lofty terminology (*Making* 39). Of course, "they would need to be free, too, from demands of rhyme and meter, which at their age are restrictions on the imagination" (16).

In Williams, Koch seemed to find what he was looking for. By adapting, for example, "The Locust Tree in Flower," a thirteen line poem, each line constituted by a single word, the children could enjoy "the haiku-like pleasure of short lines without the haiku like restrictions" (130). Modeled on the jagged lineation of "Locust," Andrew Vecchione's aptly-titled "Coke" juxtaposes images from the natural world with the colours and sensations associated with the iconic soft drink, arranging them like so many drips on a canvas, blurring the boundaries between art and life:

Among
water
lies
sun
purple
green
red
coke
splatters
in
water
like
petals
on
roses

floating
in
the
sun
set
of
the
world. (*Rose* 148)

Williams, of course, was no stranger to the pedagogical debates of his time. And, though he was loathe to admit it, John Beck has suggested that Williams's writings on democracy, art, and education are imbued with John Dewey, particularly *The Embodiment of Knowledge,* published in 1974.[48] Like Dewey, Williams was wary of the often arbitrary divisions which fixed disciplines like Science, Mathematics, and Language Arts imposed on life inside and outside the classroom, divisions, we should note, which the writer of "Coke" seems to throw off with ease. According to Beck,

> It is the need to demonstrate the importance of education as a way of life, inseparable from the "living current" of the world of everyday things and

[48] Williams's *The Embodiment of Knowledge* becomes Koch's "Instruction Manual," in Ashberian terms, for what he later plans to do himself in the classroom with the very texts of Williams by his side, for as David Jarraway, remarking on *Embodiment* by way of Theodore Adorno, notes, Williams is less interested in the "transmission or embodiment of truth" than in its "interpretation," an imaginative and expansive process "with a view toward altering or transforming the status quo" (qtd. in Jarraway 56; 52). This statement, and others like it, are reflected in Koch's wish to forgo exercises which aspire to analyze critically a Williams poem or a Blake poem or a Stevens poem; instead, Koch's "poetry ideas" encourage the students to play an active role in "altering or transforming" the poem, using its governing structure to explore and unearth quite personal feelings. As Koch puts it in *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?*, "what matters for the present is not that the children admire Blake and his achievement, but that each child be able to find a tyger of his own" (27).

> feelings, that forms the argument of Wliiliams's most sustained writing in education and (anti)epistemology, *The Embodiment of Knowledge*. (62)

If, in Williams, Koch found a holistic thinker whose "down to earth" poetry offered his students an alternative to the traditional poetry curriculum, in Dewey, Koch found an alternative to the conventional role of the teacher.

There is perhaps no single thinker whose work has made more of an impact on the education debate in America than John Dewey. He pioneered much of what is still deemed to be "progressive" pedagogy at The Laboratory School at the University of Chicago in the early 1900s and was seminal in bringing concepts like child-centered and open-field learning to the fore later in the century with his move to the Teachers College at Columbia University. Though they have gained currency over the past eighty years, Dewey's views on education, which center on the role experience plays in a student's learning process, were considered radical, and much of his pedagogical work was devoted to unpacking the implications of such an approach and fending off criticism of it. Dewey waded into the pitched battle being fought over how best to teach, but it is typical of Dewey that his quarrel was not with the traditional or the progressive approach per se, but with the absolutism which distorted and polarized the debate, with both sides "formulating beliefs in terms of either/ors, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities" (17). It is in the direction of "intermediate possibilities" that Dewey, like James before him,

committed himself to, an orientation which, as I have endeavored to point out, seems also to characterize the attitudes of the poets throughout this entire study.[49]

The notion that Koch might have also been working in the direction of "intermediate possibilities" is borne out in an early poem like "On The Great Atlantic Rainway," published as part of his (1962) *Thank You & Other Poems*. Indeed, it is tempting to read "The Great Atlantic Rainway" as developing, albeit indirectly, Koch's thoughts on the role of the educator, though "Kenneth," the fellow being discussed by the poem's two speakers, whom I wish to view as potential students, sounds more like the school bus-driver than the teacher. "Kenneth" in fact seems decidedly anti-intellectual, for instead of "fill[ing]" his passengers' "ears with resonance and stain," he speaks "not as a critic, but as a man," steering a course, in his musings, between the "white sky" and "the gravel on the groundway" (*CP* 73). Moreover, and in contrast to "the modern idea of fittingness" which students of the New Criticism would have likely encountered – "to, always in motion, *lose nothing*"[50] – Kenneth's vision of modernity deemphasizes the rigorous pursuit of knowledge, choosing "formulalessness"

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[49] William James sought to distinguish himself from the same kinds of ideological deadlocks that Dewey later tried to avoid. In James's time, this was the debate between rationalist and empiricist philosophy. To James, this was only an either/or proposition for those with a vested interest in the triumph of one side or another, that is, for professional philosophers. "Most of us," James said, "have a hankering for the good things on both sides of the line" (qtd. in Rae 218).

[50] This was Eliot's prescription for the poet as set out in "Tradition and the Individual Talent":

> [The poet] must be aware that the mind of Europe – the mind of his own country – a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his

and "vow[ing] delight" instead (73). Presumably, the fact that "formulalessness" is a nonce-word would not bother Kenneth, who tends with Stein to prefer the material musical elements of language more than its semantic content, particularly when novel combinations act to rinse words of their accreted meaning or symbolic value, rescuing, for example, "the rose" from its traditional literary connotations and fobbing off tradition in the process:

> "Yet always beneath the rainway unsyntactical
>
> Beauty might leap up!" "That we might sing
>
> From smiles' ravines, 'Rose, the reverse of everything,
>
> May be profaned or talked at like a hat'" (*CP* 73).

Koch's first "poetry idea," a collaborative exercise which was "easy to write, had rules like a game, and included the pleasure without the anxieties of competitiveness," seems oriented towards such "intermediate possibilities" – in this case, the possibility of getting the children excited about writing poetry while also offering them a flexible form in which to experiment:

> I suggested we make some rules about what should be in every line; this would help give the final poem unity, and it would help the children find

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> own private mind – is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route*, which does not superattenuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the magdalaneian draughtsmen. (51-2)

Of course, Emerson, who I wish to see as something like the fountainhead of the attitudes, sensibilities, and forms I am describing in these pages, had a slightly different prescription:

> The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory and to do something without knowing how or why; in short to draw a new circle. *The way of life is wonderful; it is by abandonment.* ("Circles," 290, emphases added)

> something to say…We ended up with the regulations that every line should contain a colour, a comic-strip character, and a city or country; also the line should begin with the words “I wish” (*Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* 5).

Having never tested this idea before, Koch discovered that the children had a much easier time expressing themselves through repetition, “which is natural to children’s speech” and which “left their poetry free for the kind of easy and spontaneous music so much appreciated by contemporary poets, which rhyme and meter would have made impossible” (“Teaching” 105; *Wishes* 16). The students in Mrs. Schapiro’s third grade class produced whimsical dissociations like “I wish I was Charlie Brown in blue Saudi Arabia” and “I wish I was Blondie in the colour sea green and the state of California” (57-58). Students in grades five and six demonstrated an ability both to use but also move beyond the formal framework, extending the scope of the activity in a vertiginous evocation of place and a profusion of familiar objects, characters and people:

> I wish that I were Charlie Brown eating a burnt, brown,
> greasy turkey with china on the table…
> I wish that Charley Chan would come to Washington to see
> The fields of olive green and meet my friend
> Cecil McDean. (61)

Equally important, Koch’s students had fun with the assignment. “Feelings at PS 61,” the name the students agreed on for their poem, “was not a great poem, but it made them feel like poets” (6).

"Poetry ideas" like the "I wish" poem impressed upon Koch the virtues of providing the students with themes they could relate to as well as a scaffolding within which to work. The form these poems took tended to revolve around repetition while the themes – from talking animals, imaginary creatures, and dreams, to colours, sounds, and smells – appealed to the students' sense of wonder, their inner lives, and their experiences of the world. The sheer volume of comic, off-kilter, musical, and poignant poems appended to Koch's *Wishes* is testament to his legacy as an educator.

In their own distinct way, Dewey and Koch are responding to one of the earliest and most indelible images of the school experience: The image of the teacher, standing at the front of the class and demanding the attention of his or her pupils, who wields authority and commands obedience. As Jane Tompkins suggests, this is the teacher from whom we learn, at an early age, to "give up our own judgment in favour of the judgment of those in authority" (xix). Dewey's vision of the teacher is somewhat different from the authoritarian model and more in keeping with his democratic ideals insofar as he imagines an exchange of authority between the individual and the group. In this scenario, the teacher functions not as an "external boss or dictator," but as "a director of processes of exchange in which all had a share" (59). There is reason to believe that Koch viewed himself in just this light, for, as he notes in *Wishes*, Koch found that by doing away with traditional classroom hierarchies, he could get more out of his students: "Treating them as poets enabled me to encourage and egg them on in

a non-teacherish way – as an admirer and fellow worker rather than as a boss" (26). In Koch's classroom, students were offered endless opportunities to exchange one thought, feeling, location, or time for another, a veritable feast of becomings-other: "I suggested they compare something big to something small, something in school to something out of school, something unreal to something real, something human to something non-human" (9). For his students, these opportunities could occasionally "lead to surprising truths" (19).

***

It is difficult to measure the impact Koch had on the elementary school students at P.S. 61 in concrete terms. While none of them went on to become poets, a few continued to experiment with verse, often as a way of coping with life challenges (Gray 149). In 1983, Jeff Morley, a former student of Koch's who went on to write for the *Washington Post*, began looking up his old classmates. As he did, he dug up "The Dawn of Me," a poem he wrote which appears in Koch's *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*. Like Koch's Uncle Leo, Morley didn't think much of the poem; according to Gray, Morley was "embarassed, thinking it was not of high literary quality" (149). Yet his encounter with the young boy who wrote "The Dawn of Me" was strangely pleasurable, like looking in on an old friend, and Morley seems to have unearthed an unexpected discovery in the process: "As I looked up my old classmates, I started liking 'The Dawn of Me' as much as I had the day we wrote it, maybe even more. Writing poetry was the dawn of all of us; I like to think we're still living in its light" (qtd. in Gray 149). While none of his P.S.

61 students went on to become poets, many of them seemed to have gained an appreciation for the emancipatory role language plays in the perception of self and world.

In terms of his impact on college students at the "New School" and Columbia University, Koch's legacy is palpable. Indeed, it is not disingenuous to suggest that for many of these students, including so-called second-generation "New York" School poets like Bill Berkson, Ron Padgett, and Ted Berrigan, Koch became something akin to the transformational figure he called for in "Fresh Air." Bill Berkson, who went on to write over twenty collections of poetry and produce a significant body of art criticism, recalls Koch's ebullient, improvisational approach to teaching poetry. He "invented as he went, uncertain in spots, but with surges of glee at the edges of his thought" (qtd. in Kane 257). Bob Holman, a well-known figure in the "slam" poetry community in New York City, remembers Koch as a "brilliant teacher" who did everything with "passion and love" (qtd. in Kane 258). Ted Berrigan credits Koch for helping him move beyond his influences, to continue to, as Daniel Kane puts it, "move toward something else," the latter "something," in signature "New York" School Poetry style, remaining vague, of course, as a Pragmatic promissory note with immeasurable "cash value" (258).

Beyond the intense pleasure Koch took in holding court on his favorite poets or following the train of his own inimitable word associations, he deserves substantial credit for discovering, or at least re-discovering, that formalized

repetition could provide the “firmness” and “flexibility” that Dewey prescribed. Just how elastic the repetition form can be is borne out in “second generation” New York School artist Joe Brainard’s memoir entitled *I Remember*, a one-hundred and fifty page prose poem in which each line begins with the phrase “I remember.” Writing on the occasion of the publication by The Library of America of Brainard’s *Collected Writings*, New Yorker reviewer Dan Chiasson called *I Remember* “the book that launched a thousand creative writing exercises” (*Web).* Paul Auster concurred, noting in the Introduction to The Library of America edition of Brainard that the *I Remember* exercise “is now used wherever writing courses are taught, whether for children, college students, or the very old, and the results never fail to summon up long-forgotten particulars of lived experience” (xviii).

What was it that proved so extraordinarily generative of this seemingly ingenuous type of incantation? Brainard’s response to a question put to him by Tim Dlugos provides a clue:

> Well, I have a terrible memory for one thing. I can’t remember anything. But then I began to realize that beyond that point there is another level of knowledge that could be triggered off. It wasn’t really useful knowledge unless it was triggered off; then I sort of used up that and there kept being more and different layers of things that were hidden. It isn’t really there spontaneously. So I got into that. I was unaware of it, for one thing, that all that was retained. (499)

The “knowledge” Brainard refers to here is not the kind one learns in school, certainly not in classrooms that subordinate the wonder of self discovery to the tedium of recitation. To get beyond this kind of knowledge, which Eliot was so desperate to retain and Emerson so willing to shrug off, one requires a process designed to neutralize ego-driven imperatives with prompts that activate the responder’s wishes, lies, and dreams. A lifelong educator, Koch shunned curricula that ignored these facets of an individual’s inner life. Reflecting in his (1987) *Seasons on Earth*, a response of sorts to his (1959) *Ko, Or A Season on Earth*, Koch voiced the concerns of a generation of pedagogues looking beyond academically-derived conceptions of knowledge acquisition:

> Did I have knowledge
> Instinctively I don’t have now? Is knowing,
> The kind one gets from every kind of college,
> The opposite of the ecstatic showing
> Of what life is in the amazing sandwich
> Of art? Is wisdom sun? Or is it snowing? (*On the Edge* 405).

Koch’s questioning of the whole metaphysical framework that structures thought and understanding, beginning with the sun as incandescent source of universal truth, provides yet more evidence of his commitment to re-thinking what it means to “embody knowledge.” For Koch, it seems that “knowing” is something that happens only when one moves beyond the tired binaries of enlightenment philosophy and out into the world. At present, there is good reason to believe that

the knowledge one comes to acquire through this process – a better, if imperfect understanding of self and its ever-changing relation to the world – cannot be acquired from college, not when the classroom is conceived in terms of an authoritarian model which, counter to the Pragmatist ethos, encourages conformity and obedience at the expense of self-discovery and personal growth.

Conclusion

As this project nears completion, I have had the opportunity to begin to think about its reception, particularly about areas that might benefit from further analysis. Had I more time and space, I might begin to address questions I have posed to myself along the way, questions like this one: "If I am correct, then part of the rationale behind 'rescuing pragmatism' is to argue for its relevance to many of the social and political transformations which emerged in the sixties and seventies as correctives to ideologically-motivated attempts to contain difference, namely a renewed feminist movement and a nascent queer movement. If this is true, I wonder why you decided not to add more female voices to your Pragmatist canon or to foreground more explicitly how Pragmatist theorizing speaks to women's experience or to notions of gender and sexual equality?"

My own focus was to argue that Post-Enlightenment notions of subjectivity often attributed to "structural linguistics" and so- called "French Philosophy" might also be found in the American grain, not just in the writings of the classical Pragmatists but in those poets, artists, and educators who succeeded them. It is true that most of this exegesis has focused on men; to this extent, it fails to grasp the opportunity to highlight women's contributions to and participation in an American Pragmatist tradition. Had I more time, I would be inclined in particular to examine the work of so-called "second-generation" abstract expressionist Jane Freilicher, for though her work is discussed often in the context of her association to members of the "New York" School Poets, her Pragmatist orientation, like

theirs, remains unacknowledged, this despite her at times quite explicit intention to work between genres, dissolving traditional dualisms like subject and object, presence and absence in the process. As Charlene Haddock Seigfried suggests, it is not that there are no women's voices to be found within the Pragmatist ambit, only that the connections remain undisclosed.

A case in point is Haddock Seigfried's accidental discovery of Louise Rosenblatt, an educator credited with pioneering Reader-Response theory in the 1930s. Only after Rosenblatt's husband, Sidney Ratner, "received the Herbert-Schneider Award in 1989 for his contributions to American philosophy" did Seigfried learn of Rosenblatt, a virtual unknown in Pragmatist and Feminist quarters at the time of Seigfried's (1996) *Pragmatism & Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* "despite the fact that her literary theory is based on Pragmatism, specifically on Dewey's theories of transaction, and despite the fact that reader-response theory is so central to one branch of feminist literary theory" (30). And while Rosenblatt has indeed received acknowledgement for her contributions to literary theory and pedagogy, "little attention has been given to exploring in detail the link between her transactional theory of reading and the concept of transaction found within Dewey's pragmatic epistemology" (Connell 398). Once we can verify the Deweyian undergirding of Reader-Response theory, it would seem appropriate to turn to Jane Tompkins, a central figure in the revival of Reader-Response in the 1980s whose redefinition of literature "obliterates the

traditional separation of reader and text" (xvii). As a reader of my chapter on Kenneth Koch and pedagogy put it,

> Tompkins won't mention a word about Pragmatism in the book [*A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned*]. But you will recognize instantly that her whole approach to English instruction inside (and more importantly, outside) the traditional classroom is pure unadulterated "Emerson (or John Dewey) 101!" (Personal Communication)

What begins to emerge is, on the one hand, a more gender diverse Pragmatist canon, and on the other, a more complete portrait of twentieth-century Pragmatist pedagogy as shaped by Dewey, Rosenblatt, Koch, and Tompkins, and in opposition to the New Criticism which dominated the literary landscape from the 1930s to the late 1960s. In their concerted effort to reclaim for literary criticism and for education the primacy of personal, social, and cultural experience in the formation of meaning, Pragmatists like Dewey, Rosenblatt, Koch, and Tompkins continue to offer professors and instructors the opportunity to re-examine their own pedagogical techniques and the values and beliefs that undergird them.

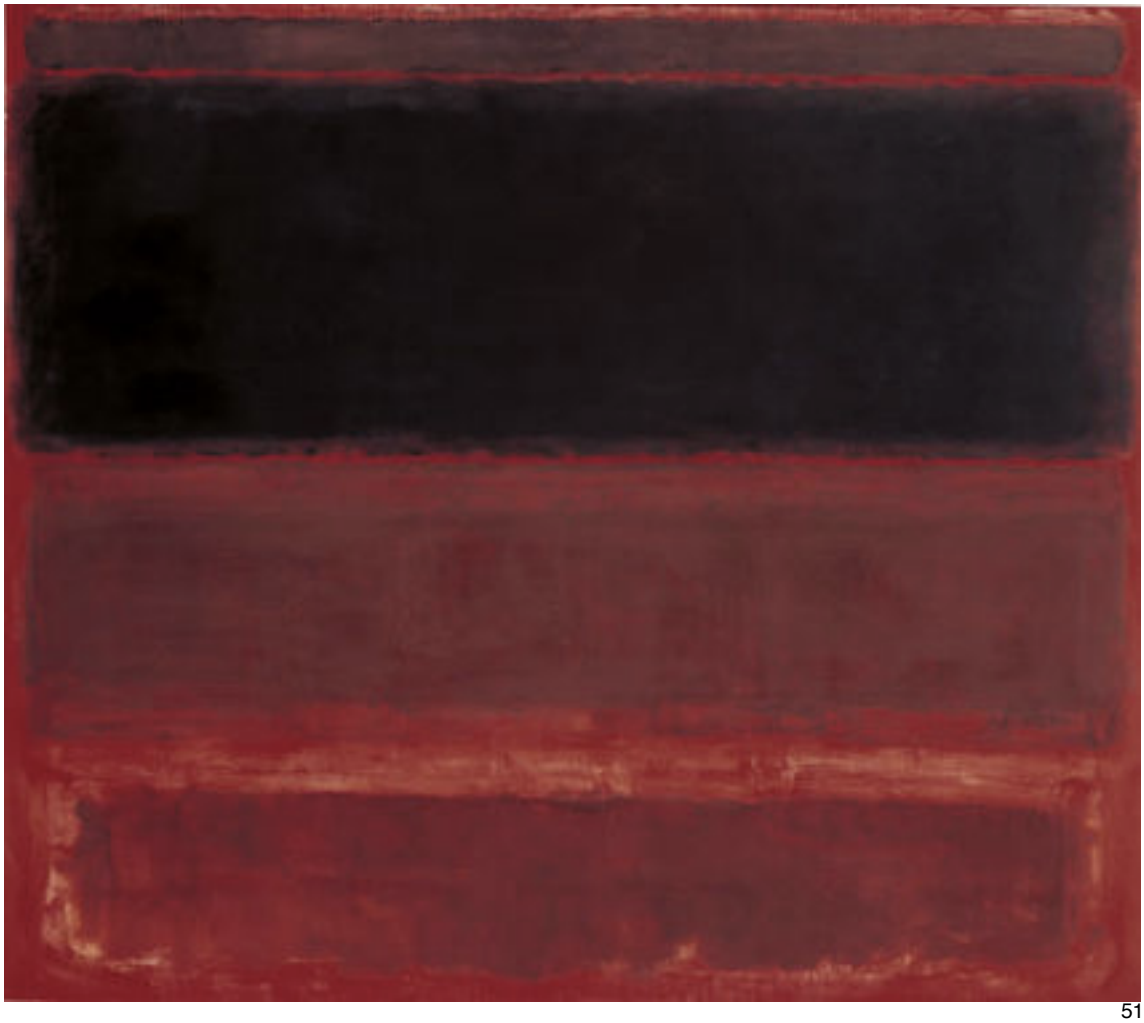
The next logical question, of course, is why these links between have remained murky for so long? For starters, we might, as Seigfreid suggests, consider the possibility that Pragmatism was relegated to the sidelines of philosophy curriculum in the 1950s and 60s

> for holding those very positions that feminists today would find to be its greatest strengths. These include early and persistent criticisms of positivist interpretations of scientific methodology; disclosure of the value dimension of factual claims; reclaiming aesthetics as informing everyday experience; linking of dominant discourses with domination; subordinating logical analysis to social, cultural, and political issues; realigning theory and praxis; and resisting the turn to epistemology and instead emphasizing concrete experience. (21)

If it's true that Pragmatism's marginalization owes something to its "feminine" bent, then it stands to reason that the effort to uncover a Pragmatist canon which highlights women's contributions to or participation in the evolution of Pragmatist thought has been doubly challenged – first by the professional biases militating against Pragmatism itself, and second by the long-standing cultural biases against women's work that still exist within the academy.

Finally, I can envision questions as to why, unlike critics like John Shoptaw, Catherine Imbriglio, and Maggie Nelson, I did not spend time focusing on the implications of Ashbery's or O'Hara's or Schuyler's sexual orientations, either as they apply to their respective works or to the re-imagining of gender and sexuality that took place in unison with the Gay and Lesbian movements of the 60s and 70s. The simple reason for not pursuing this line of thinking was because I did not want to suggest that their work was *merely* a response to historical circumstances. The contingencies that make up the self and identity

seemed to me to require more work to decode than appealing to very immediate and direct historical and socio-political circumstances. I suppose another way of saying this is that whatever Ashbery or O'Hara or Schuyler are getting at has less to do with their own particular sexual orientations, and less to do, perhaps, with the identity politics constitutive of movements, than with the dream-like nature of identity itself as it melts away and re-forms somewhere else. "The same returns not, save to bring the different," as nineteenth-century philosopher and mystic Benjamin Blood put it. "The slow round of the engraver's lathe gains but the breadth of a hair, but the difference is distributed back over the whole curve, never an instant true – ever not quite" (qtd. in James 1312). In their reticence toward associating themselves with any one particular movement or cause, one senses in the "New York" School Poets that classically Emersonian concern with the pernicious effects of "associationism," and a wish rather to transit freely between, or "traffick with" as Barbara Guest puts it, discursive and performative articulations of self that so often threaten to preempt further movement. And so my own movement onward to the next phase of this "New York" School project, and to the writers and artists I envision labouring more recently in its wake.



51

[51] Rothko, Mark. *Four Darks in Red.* 1958. Oil on canvas. Whitney Museum of Art. New York. *Rothko: The Late Series.* Ed. by Achim Borchardt-Hume. London. Tate Modern. p. 102. Print

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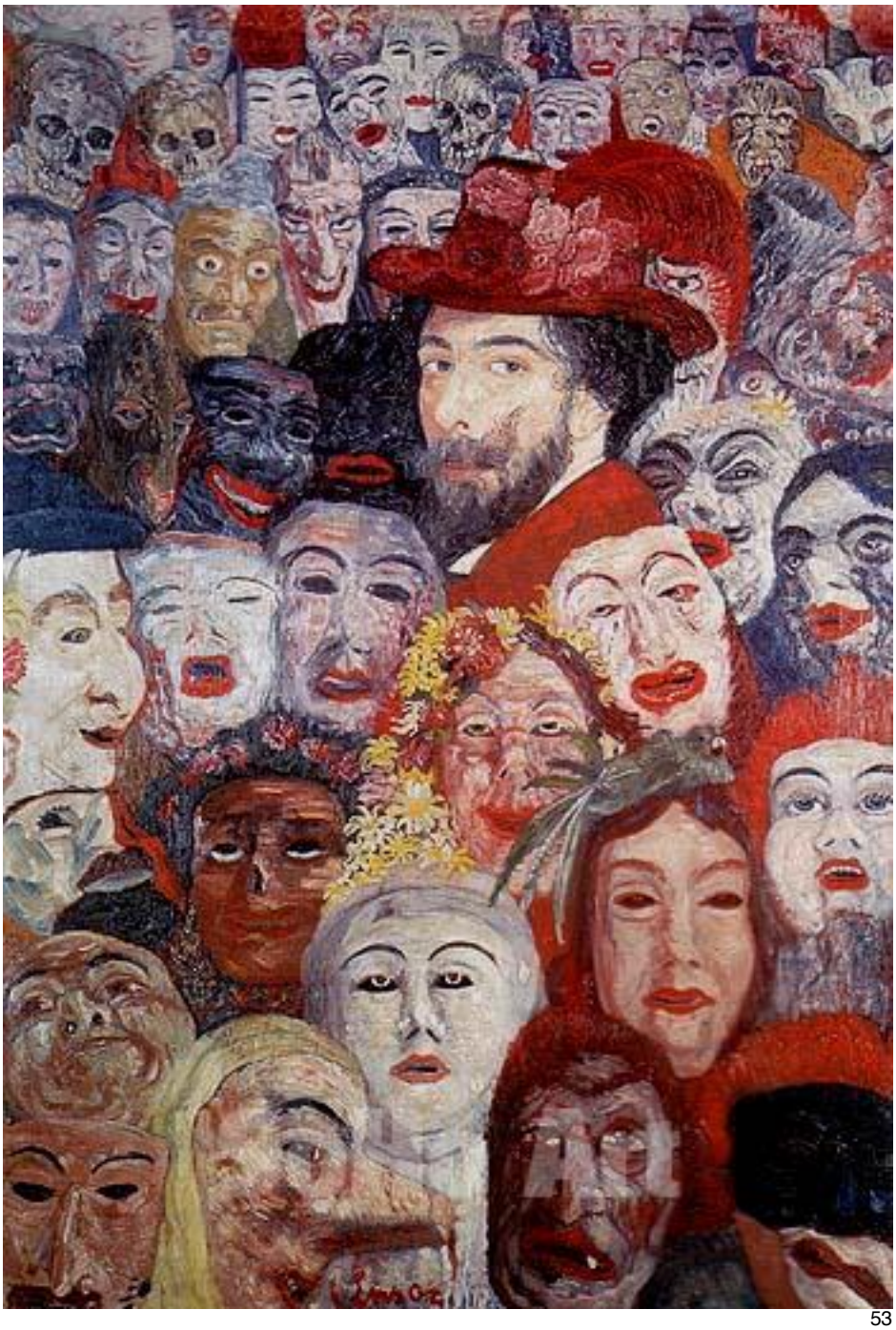
[52] Pollock, Jackson. *Number 5, 1948*. 1948. Oil, enamel, and aluminum paint on fiberboard. Collection of Galerie Beyeler, Basel. *Action Painting: Jackson Pollock*. Ed. Foundation Beyeler. Basel. Foundation Beyeler in association with Hatje Cantz, 2008. p. 83. plate 38. Print



53

[53] Ensor, James. *Self-Portrait with Masks*. 1899. Oil on canvas. Menard Art Museum. Komaki City. *James Ensor*. Ed. by Anna Swinbourne. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009. p. 183. plate 91. Print.

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[54] Mitchell, Joan. *George Went Swimming At Barnes Hole, But It Got Too Cold.* 1957. Oil on canvas. Albright Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY. *The Paintings of Joan Mitchell.* Ed. Jane Livingston. New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art in association with University of California Press, 2002. p. 102. plate 12. Print.

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[56] Porter, Fairfield. *Iced Coffee*. 1966. Oil on canvas. G.U.C. Collection, Chicago, IL. Spike, John. *Fairfield Porter: An American Classic*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997. p.197. Print.

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