

Chapter 37

The New York School

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Donald Allen's anthology *The New American Poetry: 1945–1960* (1960) first introduced a national audience to a "generation" of "younger poets," "long awaited but only slowly recognized," that he claimed represents the "true continuers of the modern movement in American poetry."¹ He labeled one subset of this new literary phenomenon "the New York Poets." The name was rough and ready; it simply designated where most of the relevant writers lived at the time the anthology saw print. Allen explained that John Ashbery (b. 1927), Kenneth Koch (1925–2002), and Frank O'Hara (1926–1966) "first met at Harvard where they were associated with the Poets' Theatre," but this core group "migrated to New York in the early fifties" and was gradually joined by other figures, most importantly Barbara Guest (1920–2006) and James Schuyler (1923–1991).²

Later critics have not shared Allen's understated approach to the topic. A year after the appearance of *The New American Poetry*, John Myers – whose Tibor de Nagy Gallery had already published books by Ashbery, Guest, Koch, O'Hara, and Schuyler – rechristened the circle the "New York School of Poets." He wanted to elevate a cluster of friends into a full-scale literary movement. As Ashbery recalls, "Myers . . . thought that the prestige of New York School Painting" – by which he meant abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, and Franz Kline – "might rub off on 'his' poets; he coined the term in an article in the California magazine *Nomad* in 1961, and it has stuck."³ Indeed, it has become one of the principal *points de repère* in the landscape of post–World War II American literary history. If critics declare that a particular poet is affiliated with or has been influenced by the New York School, their auditors are sure to nod knowingly. Moreover, one will frequently find mentions of multiple generations of the New York School, as if it were possible to draw a genealogical chart tracing the descendants of Ashbery and company down unto the third and fourth begats. Significantly, these New York School scions need not live in the five boroughs, nor even be

American by birth or residence. They are implicitly credited with inheriting a bundle of traits identified closely with one or more precursors.

These ways of talking are liable to mystify the uninitiated, not least because the term "New York School" itself can be confusing. The word "school" falsely suggests a well-defined shared agenda. No such slate of uniform goals existed. While some of the poets did write pieces that could conceivably be called manifestos, they tend, like O'Hara's "Personism" (1959) and Ashbery's "The Invisible Avant-Garde" (1968), to be idiosyncratic exercises that combine wicked satire and coy shenanigans with illuminating advice. The poets' careers also diverge too greatly to imagine them working consistently in concert. O'Hara died in a freak beach vehicle accident on Fire Island in 1966, whereas Schuyler's first major collection, *Freely Espousing*, dates to 1969. Guest arguably came into her own only in the 1980s, and Ashbery continues to write stellar work well into the twenty-first century.⁴ The attribution "New York" can also be as misleading as "school." The poets only lived together in the city for a relatively brief time in the 1950s. Ashbery, for example, had left for Paris even before Allen's anthology came out, and Guest was ultimately to become more influential as a Californian than as a Manhattanite.

What can one, then, say about these poets as a group? Even if they lack the into-the-breach élan of the Italian Futurists, the Russian Constructivists, and other early twentieth-century avant-gardes, the members of Allen's and Myers's original short lists of writers were nonetheless good friends whose early work was shaped by the same milieu. As already stated, Koch, O'Hara, and Ashbery knew one another as undergraduates; they later met Guest via *Semi-Colon* (1953–1956), a poetry newsletter put out by the Tibor de Nagy Gallery. Schuyler was O'Hara's roommate for several stretches during the 1950s; Ashbery and Schuyler collaborated on a novel, *Nest of Ninnies* (1969); and Koch, Ashbery, and Schuyler each edited one or two issues of the little magazine *Locus Solus* (1961–1962). They all shared a proclivity for a distinctive but eccentric and cosmopolitan blend of literary models: Francophone poets such as Rimbaud, Apollinaire, and Pierre Reverdy; European Dadaists and Surrealists such as André Breton and Tristan Tzara; British modernist masters of dialogue such as Ivy Compton-Burnett, Ronald Firbank, and Henry Green; and three Anglophone authors whose poetics one might have thought wholly immiscible, W. H. Auden, William Carlos Williams, and Gertrude Stein. The New York School poets were all involved, too, in experimental theater, and they wrote a number of plays, among them O'Hara's *Try! Try!* (1951), Ashbery's *The Heroes* (1952), Koch's *George Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1962), and Guest's *The Office* (1963). And all five poets were passionate about

the fine arts. In addition to acquiring a connoisseur's knowledge of classical music, opera, jazz, ballet, modern dance, and avant-garde cinema, they had contact with composers such as John Cage and Morton Feldman; filmmakers such as Rudy Burckhardt and Jack Smith; and dance-world luminaries such as George Balanchine, Edwin Denby, Lincoln Kirstein, and James Waring.

Then there is the connection to the visual arts. In addition to rubbing elbows with the marquee abstract expressionists in the Cedar Tavern, the Club, and elsewhere, the poets cultivated close relationships with, and even collaborated with, a younger cohort of New York painters that included Norman Bluhm, Jane Freilicher, Michael Goldberg, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, Fairfield Porter, and Larry Rivers. They continued to be *au courant*, too, in the years 1955 to 1965, as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol wreaked havoc in the art world; each of the poets tested literary analogs to neo-Dada assemblage and pop appropriation in their own verse. Four of them – Ashbery, Guest, O'Hara, and Schuyler – contributed essays to *Art News*. Ashbery also wrote art reviews for the *New York Herald-Tribune*; Guest published in *Arts Magazine* and *Art in America*; O'Hara worked his way up to curating major shows for New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA); and Schuyler, too, spent six years as a curator at the MoMA. To learn more about the New York School's involvement with the art world, one should consult the collections of all four poets' prose about art, above all O'Hara's *Art Chronicles*.⁵

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There is no such thing as a representative New York School poem. The New York School poets are too different, and they change too much over the course of their careers, for any one lyric to bear such a burden. This diversity, however, does not preclude family resemblances. Few good New York School poems would ever be confused with lyrics from the same years written in rival styles, such as Black Mountain projectivism, Beat oral athleticism, Black Arts populism, and confessional pyrotechnics.

The poets share a delight in the messy complexity of urban life, a desire to challenge norms governing sexuality and gender, a suspicion of grand schemes and totalizing systems, a faith in self-reinvention, and a belief that bliss can be found in the here and now. Unsurprisingly, given their biographies, they are also drawn to ekphrasis, the re-creation of a visual artwork by verbal means. They test every available means of achieving it, too, from learned commentary (Ashbery's verse essay "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" [1975] even includes block quotations) to manipulations of a poem's layout (the two

rectangular arrangements of text in O'Hara's "Joseph Cornell" [1955] echo Cornell's signature use of wooden boxes in his sculptures).

Their most frequently pursued ekphrastic strategy is probably *homology*, the attempt to coax language to approximate what visual artists can achieve in their own media of choice. Guest's "Poetess" (1973), for instance, strives to evoke a small Surrealist gouache of the same name by Joan Miró that is full of bold primary colors and biomorphic curved shapes: "A dollop is dolloping / her a scoop is pursuing / flee vain ignots."⁶ The words "dollop" and "scoop" suggest how Miró applied paint, whereas "pursuing" and "flee" convey the dynamism of the composition. The phrase "dollop is dolloping" is more than a tautology; it captures one word morphing into another. Guest hints that Miró's painting did not copy something in the external world but rather was generated by riffing imaginatively on a few basic shapes and gestures. Finally, the neologism "ignots" is like one of Miró's parti-colored amoebas or flattened blobs. Although the term might call to mind more familiar things (for example, the words "ingots" and "ignorance" and the name "Ignaz"), it nonetheless remains stubbornly, uncannily an independent entity.

Ekphrastic verse of this variety might push at the accepted boundaries of reason and logic, but that, significantly, is also its attraction. One learns what happens when divergent means of communication are forced to find common ground. Collectively, the New York School is fascinated with the countless ways that language functions, and from poem to poem and even from line to line they will switch approaches, now tediously exploring documentary realism, now spouting glossolalia, now launching into passionate arias. Like the artists that they admire, these authors dramatize their inquiry into the very tools, conditions, concepts, limits, and processes that make self-expression possible. In doing so, they frequently concentrate on the local texture of verse, churning out only tenuously connected quotable quotes or proposing quaint, profound, bizarre, or incomprehensible juxtapositions. As far as they are concerned, a poem can begin anywhere, go anywhere at any time, and end anywhere. They do not hold that a poet has a responsibility to pursue an idea, a description, or a narrative in a sustained, rewarding manner, nor must he or she make sure that all details prove pertinent to the artwork's unfolding. Readers, in short, must set aside New Critical dicta concerning architectural structure and forget the Romantic ideal of an organic coherence in which parts and wholes align pleasingly and harmoniously. They must steel themselves for sudden, unpredictable vertiginous shifts. Even veteran poetry critics can suffer whiplash.

Why peruse such demanding verse when there are surely less head-spinning alternatives? One reason: It is surprisingly pleasurable. Readers can usually discern and appreciate patterns or trajectories operative if not throughout then within or across smaller segments (repetition and variation is especially common). More importantly, the New York School believes that a poet can be serious about exploring the outer boundaries of artistic possibility without necessarily producing dour, gloomy work. A hallmark of their poetry is its whimsical free association, outlandish puns, and other sorts of brash wordplay that one more readily associates with stand-up comedy than highfalutin' poesy. Kenneth Koch's "A Poem of the Forty-Eight States" (1969), for example, opens with a stanza ostensibly about Kentucky, but he appears to know nothing about the place beyond its nickname, "the Bluegrass State":

O Kentucky! my parents were driving
Near blue grass when you became
For me the real contents of a glass
Of water also the first nozzle of a horse
The bakery truck floating down the street
The young baboon woman walking without a brace
Over a fiord⁷

Here "grass" suggests "glass" via rhyme, and "blue" plus "glass" leads Koch to think about water. He then forges gaily on, "water" becoming first spray from a "nozzle" and then flooding waters rushing "down the street" and finally a "fiord." He ornaments this chain of word association with other tropes ("nozzle" leads to "horse" via the double entendre "hose"); further rhymes ("glass" suggests the suppressed term "ass," which Koch replaces, *ahem*, by "baboon woman"); and plain old slapstick lunacy (a "bakery truck" floating away).

Such writing can seem pointless, the literary equivalent of doodling. When faced with a New York School poem, though, one should never prejudge what constitutes *making a point*. True, Koch might not be describing a real location, and he teaches no immediately obvious moral, ethical, or political message. He is, however, relying on his readers to have a rudimentary knowledge of American poetic history. He mocks the vatic swagger of would-be American bards from Walt Whitman to Allen Ginsberg who write as if they are speaking on behalf of a country that is, in fact, exceedingly large and diverse, well beyond the capacity of any one poet to comprehend as a whole. Such bards, Koch cheekily informs us, have to improvise and playact like mad if they are to live up to their implicit impossible claim to be all-knowing about all of America. At the same time – a twist that raises the work above a cheap shot – Koch is also poking fun at his own provincialism, his utter lack of experience

with the goings-on outside Manhattan. What is Kentucky to him, or he to Kentucky? His comedy, in short, is fairly sophisticated. It depends on a reader's awareness of precursors and intertexts, and its tone is slippery, combining satire of others with self-deflationary gestures.

New York School humor can be hilarious, infuriating, vaudevillian, adolescent, ambivalent, un-PC, and groan-a-minute bad, but it generally serves ends beyond laughter, often ones that self-reflexively concern the nature and function of poetry. Readers have to be prepared to think not simply about a lyric's contents, that is, what it says denotatively and connotatively, but also about the exemplarity of a particular statement. That is, what kind of writing would one normally expect to encounter under these circumstances, and how does this particular gesture of refusal or dissidence or amateurism challenge business as usual? Why does this passage or line register as indecorous or purposeless? What do these prerational judgments reveal about a person's underlying values and assumptions?

Closely allied with the New York School's delight in whimsy is its fascination with games and game play. If Romantic poets stereotypically wait for nature, God, or other agents to inspire them to write, a New York School poet is more likely to begin composing by flipping coins, seizing on strange found texts, running through musical scales, or posing crossword-puzzle-like verbal challenges. For instance, Ashbery wrote "Into the Dusk-Charged Air" (1966) based on the rule that every line must name a river: "The Liffey is full of sewage, / Like the Seine, but unlike / The brownish-yellow Dordogne. / Mountains hem in the Colorado."⁸ He manages to keep the poem going for 150 lines, a testament to his ingenuity. Moreover, he adds details (a movement through the seasons climaxing with winter, for example) that transform a brainstorming exercise into an engrossing read.

On occasion, New York School writers push to drastic extremes the sorts of wordplay to be found in "Poem of the Forty-Eight States" and "Into the Dusk-Charged Air." Partly, they do so to explore what happens, what principles still function, if a poet suspends referentiality, and sometimes grammar too, almost completely. What is left: Song? Flashes or fragments of imagery? The play of a sensuous imagination? In such cases, their writing approaches pure abstraction. Koch's *When the Sun Tries to Go On* (1969) is a virtuosic example, extending to more than sixty pages:

Hats! hacks! heads! Is buzz. An
Cow-oyster, dollars! alimony of disease-art-lemons, O
Poo, the knack of name's plate's poodle, "Ends" is
Sang, "House! mate of jim-jam controlling puce

Teak!" Out! Badder, yell-place and nick and socker-
 Glow, each is and, joyous handlike knickers
 Cuckoo. "How could you have gone, bitter
 Roistering hint glove task phone 'ache' factory hoop device?"⁹

Although such gleeful babble cannot be paraphrased, one can trace different threads of sound or association that keep it from degenerating into total chaos. This passage begins with *h*'s and exclamations ("Hats! hacks! heads!"). The exclamations, though, do eventually give way to a rhetorical question, even as *h*'s recede and first plosive *p*'s ("Poo ... plate's poodle ... puce ... place") and then hard *c*'s and *k*'s move to the fore ("Teak ... nick and socker ... handlike knickers / Cuckoo"). The last line in this passage tries out a march of heavy monosyllables ("hint glove task phone 'ache'"), a series of emphatic spondees that designedly contrast with a prior equally heavily accented string of trochees ("joyous handlike knickers / Cuckoo"). Koch aspires to give his readers an absorbing spectacle: the flashy, rapid, inventive deployment of verse's nonsemantic resources.

Ashbery's second book, *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), is especially well known for its turn toward an antirealist agrammatical lyricism. Some poems of this type, such as "Rain," are highly evocative. Their verbal pointillism suggests story lines, landscapes, characters, and events that never quite hove fully into view:

At night
 Curious – I'd seen this tall girl
 I urge the deep prune of the mirror
 That stick she carries
 The book – a trap
 The facts have hinged on my reply
 Calm
 Hat against the sky
 Eyes of forest¹⁰

One wants such moments to lead somewhere, to culminate in a love story, a mystery, or some other tried-and-true genre. Instead, as with *When the Sun Tries to Go On*, the words tend to slip away, leaving trails of sound instead of sense (*c*'s and *k*'s again – "Curious ... stick ... carries ... book ... facts ... Calm ... sky"). There is another kind of disappearing act, too, an Ashbery trademark: memorable but ultimately empty figures of speech ("the deep prune of the mirror"). Other, thornier poems in *The Tennis Court Oath* recall Stein at her most obdurate: "Neutral daylight sitting things / Like it. It woofed. It liked it.

// Ordeal a home and / My lake and sat down."¹¹ For Ashbery – and for the members of the New York School of the 1950s and 1960s more generally – this rigorously antimimetic mode of writing represents an asymptote. They would repeat but not exceed its challenges to conventional English usage. For half a century, *The Tennis Court Oath* has served as a litmus test. For some readers, it strays too far in the direction of nonsense and hence represents a wrong turn in an otherwise glorious career. Other readers, more at home with unanchored wordplay, consider the book to be Ashbery's true contribution to literary history, a leap into new expressive territory akin to Arnold Schönberg's break with tonality in *Das Buch der Hängenden Gärten*, op. 15 (1908–1909).

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After *The Tennis Court Oath*, Ashbery, like the other New York School poets, would continue to employ nonnormative syntax on occasion (especially dangling modifiers, ambiguous antecedents, run-on sentences, violations of the sequence of tenses, and anacoluthon). Although he did not cease to experiment with form, he did shift his focus. Like Guest, Koch, O'Hara, and Schuyler, he made tone central to his innovative poetics. "Tone" is notoriously difficult to define and describe, but it is shorthand for, among other things, the stance that writers adopt toward both their material and their audience. New York School poets will disregard decorum, alter perspective, provide contradictory evidence, mix stylistic levels, and otherwise write in such a way that it becomes difficult to say whether they are being sincere, arch, jokey, serious, frivolous, vacuous, wise, or all of the above at the same time. The consequent tonal instability – a reader's uncertainty regarding who is speaking and why – is one reason why the work of the New York School can still feel remarkably contemporary. Its self-awareness concerning the scene of writing translates into a theatrical poetry in which speech is never natural or unmediated. Poetic *voice*, they believe, is a construct that produces calculated effects; it is not a unique innate property would-be poets cultivate en route to becoming authentic writers.

The opening lines of Ashbery's "The Other Tradition" (1977) can illustrate his mature style and the role that tone plays in it:

They all came, some wore sentiments
 Emblazoned on T-shirts, proclaiming the lateness
 Of the hour, and indeed the sun slanted its rays
 Through branches of Norfolk Island pine as though
 Politely clearing its throat, and all ideas settled
 In a fuzz of dust under trees when it's drizzling.¹²

The poem begins dramatically in medias res, but who “came” and why? We learn only that “some” were wearing “T-shirts.” Yes, he does specify that the shirts have “sentiments / Emblazoned” on them, but we do not hear what those sentiments are, nor do we discover whether we are supposed to interpret “emblazoned” as referring to images, text, or some blend of the two. No matter; the shirts somehow inform us about “the lateness / Of the hour.” At this point, the story line begins to feel curiously unmoored, a bit like an updated version of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (1885), with its glittering heraldry; its effusive, vague declarations of heartfelt passion; and its pervasive mood of belatedness. The bookish transition “indeed” prolongs the intimations of an old-fashioned, high-mannered style, and then Ashbery elegantly alludes to Emily Dickinson’s “There’s a certain Slant of light” (1862). His sun’s “slanted” rays, however, do not cause “Despair” or deliver “Heavenly Hurt.”¹³ Weirdly, his afternoon light “[p]olitely [clears] its throat,” acting like a functionary interrupting a meeting. Equally jarring is the next image, of “ideas” washed out of the air by drizzle and left lying in “a fuzz of dust.” What ideas? Whose? The word “fuzz” is just slightly wrong as well, rendering a bit too concrete the cliché “bite the dust.” The tenses go haywire as well. The clause “when it’s drizzling” does not match up with “slanted its rays” and “all ideas settled.” Has the speaker become careless or forgetful? While the setting of this passage is conventionally Romantic – a forest at dusk – within this single meandering sentence the language careens between apt and dodgy, imprecise (“all,” “some”) and exact (“Norfolk Island pines”). Ultimately, one has to say that Ashbery leaves readers uncertain whether he endorses or mocks the nineteenth-century rhetoric that he echoes.

The modulations of tone in New York School poetry tend to raise vexing dilemmas instead of offering resolutions. Audiences are encouraged to speculate how and whether a poem might obliquely address the relevant issues, but in the end there might be no answer, or only a provisional one. A preferred New York School target for this unsettling treatment is the boundary between high and low culture. Their lyrics higgledy-piggledy refer to topics such as Hollywood movies, modernist symphonies, musical theater, French highbrow fiction, tawdry pornography, Renaissance epics, and animated cartoons. Common are poems such as Koch’s “En l’An Trentiesme de Mon Eage” (2000), which might have a professor-friendly allusive title (here quoting the first line of François Villon’s *Le Testament* [1489]), and which might genuflect, as this poem does, to canonical poets such as Swinburne, but which nonetheless also spotlight less filling fare, in this case comic strips such as *Terry and the Pirates* (1934–1973). Adopting the same impassioned tone toward both elite and

popular culture can leave a writer’s taste level in doubt, as well as lead to reservations concerning his or her fundamental aesthetic values. When O’Hara gushes about James Dean, when Ashbery pens a sestina about Popeye, when Schuyler elegizes Janis Joplin, and when Guest names a poem “Jaffa Juice” (1960) after a British soft drink, one has to wonder whether these wear-their-erudition-on-the-sleeve poets can truly be all that enthusiastic about their subject matter. Are they temporarily slumming? Laughing at uptight snobs – or at bourgeois Middle America? How would one ever know for sure?

The word “postmodern” is regularly used to describe New York School poetry. The term has many meanings, of course, but critics often have in mind its poets’ games with tone, in particular their disorienting traipsing back and forth across the high–low divide. Fredric Jameson, for example, singles out Ashbery as “one of the most significant postmodern artists” in part because his verse refuses to settle into a straightforwardly imitative or parodic mode.¹⁴ Instead he reprocesses a myriad of other discourses in ways that are eerily unmarked. One cannot decide whether he is engaging in pastiche on autopilot, subtle satire, or incisive critique. Does he intentionally stud his verse with advertising clichés, sugary sentimentality, and empty ideological formulae? Why do his sentences often sound freestanding, as if written by different people at different times? Jameson contrasts such equivocal later twentieth-century work with earlier masterpieces such as Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* (1893) that do not hesitate to take a definite, strong stand against the ills and horrors of modernization.¹⁵

Mutlu Konuk Blasing argues that New York School poetry restlessly declines to endorse any stance that implies direct or privileged access to “transcendent truth.” Those poses, though, she goes on to state, are not so much discarded as made newly available for rhetorical play.¹⁶ In other words, all speech acts are exposed as motivated artifice, and the poets permit themselves to scramble, invert, reinvent, and otherwise tinker with every available discourse without respecting any of them as sacred or outside the limits. New York School poets often exalt in this freedom by making artifice and artificiality a central theme in their work. The title of Schuyler’s “Fabergé” (1969), for example, calls to mind the jeweled and enameled eggs made by the House of Fabergé from 1885 to 1917, especially the exquisite Russian imperial Easter eggs. The poem goes on, appropriately enough, to talk about gemstones, but each new mineral becomes an opportunity for a new flight of fancy: “I keep my diamond necklace in a sparkling pond for invisibility. / My rubies in Algae Pond are like an alligator’s adenoids. / My opals – the evening cloud slipped in my pocket and I felt it and vice versa.”¹⁷ The first line here is a play on the idea of hiding

in plain sight, and then the second elaborates on the idea of jewels in water by identifying another kind of pond (one covered with algae) that could conceivably hide not translucent diamonds but "rubies" as red and large (and ideally as well-protected) as an alligator's tonsils. Changing tacks, Schuyler then compares "opals" to being felt up by a cloud, a unique but, it appears, heavenly brand of seduction. The tone of "Fabergé" combines the ebullience of a collector and the arrogance of the writer who presumes readers can keep up with a swiftly leaping intellect. Schuyler is singing the praises of (and, of course, simultaneously poking fun at) his ability to generate images, ideas, and scenarios as glittering, seductive, and treasured as rare crystals. Losing confidence in transcendent truths can be a prelude to discovering the intoxicating power of one's own creative capacities.

The New York School writers each have their own shorthand for the thrill of losing oneself in the delights of artifice. Guest refers to far-off countries, Mediterranean or Eastern European, that exist for her more as fantasy lands than as actual historical states: Morocco, Illyria, Egypt, Tsarist Russia, Turkey, and above all Byzantium, whose rich silks she writes movingly about in her essay "Mysteriously Defining Mystery: Byzantine Proposals for Poetry" (1986). For Ashbery, pageants, masques, tapestries, and sculpture will do, although architecture is perhaps his favorite, as in "Vetiver" (1987), in which he makes his habitual equation between buildings and poems unusually overt: "The pen was cool to the touch. / The staircase swept upward / Through fragmented garlands, keeping the melancholy / Already distilled in letters of the alphabet."¹⁸ O'Hara, a talented trained pianist, is drawn to music, both lushly Romantic (Rachmaninoff) and austere modern (Schönberg), but painting is truly his *idée fixe*. Whenever paint, painters, or paintings show up in his writing, these images announce an increased attentiveness to the decisions, processes, and stakes that inform every effort at making art.

The emphasis on affectation and mannered artifice in New York School poetry, one must add, coexists with what can appear to be a countervailing tendency, namely, immersion in everyday particulars. While it might be hard to miss the self-reflexive dimension to a piece titled "On Seeing Larry Rivers' *Washington Crossing the Delaware* at the Museum of Modern Art" (1956), O'Hara is in fact better known for his so-called "I do this, I do that" poems, which recount in simple, direct fashion where he goes, what he sees, and what he purchases, often during a lunch hour:

I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun
and have a hamburger and a malted and buy

an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets
in Ghana are doing these days.¹⁹

Schuyler, too, builds numerous lyrics out of what can seem like straightforward observations:

The dogs are barking. In
the studio music plays
and Bob and Darragh paint.
I sit scribbling in a little
notebook at a garden table,
too hot in a heavy shirt²⁰

Schuyler also names numerous poems after the date on which they were written – "3/23/66," "Dec. 28, 1974," "October 5, 1981" – and otherwise uses titles to indicate the setting where both watching and writing took place – "En Route to Southampton," "4404 Stanford," and "Noon Office." In such diary-like poetry, artistry can at first be notable chiefly in its absence.

This way of writing is not, however, offered as an escape from artifice – quite the opposite. It teaches that mundane sights and events can provoke aesthetic responses that, although different in kind and intensity from, say, reading Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1532) or viewing a painting by Ingres, are nonetheless quite real. "I do this, I do that" poems demonstrate that intensified inspection of each moment as it passes causes speakers to pause over and marvel at things that might otherwise escape their notice. And these feelings of wonder can translate into bursts of joyful rhetoric, as in Guest's "On the Way to Dumbarton Oaks" (1960):

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! (BGC, p. 12)

As always with a New York School poem, the tone at such moments is trickier than a quick read-through might suggest. The naïve pleasure here of watching clouds form and reform as they scud across the sky (all! those! exclamation! points!) is undermined by grace notes of sophisticated self-awareness. Dumbarton Oaks, after all, is a center in Washington, D.C., dedicated to the study of ancient and medieval Byzantium, and Guest's transposition of "colonial" from D.C.'s architecture to the heavens ("The colonial air!") prepares a reader to think about empires, ancient and modern. She then draws not on nature but on culture to provide metaphors to describe roiling clouds (Canada,

Alaska, sleighs, tunnels, roads). People constrain the world, she hints, by using political fictions and merely human creations as standards by which to measure, and to rein in, its boundlessness and its glories. Tracking how a New York School poet describes a scene or a series of actions, even when such scrutiny might appear to verge on overinterpretation, often deepens into a lesson about phenomenology, more specifically, about the kinds of prerational, prejudicial, and ideological factors that shape and filter one's perceptions of quotidian goings-on.

The desire to record the texture of ephemeral everyday life – and an accompanying puckish impulse to provoke readers to question the whole purpose of such an endeavor – reaches its deadpan extreme in lyrics such as Ashbery's "Grand Galop" (1976), which incorporates verbatim a school menu from a newspaper that the poet picked up during a tour of the Midwest: "Today's lunch is Spanish omelet, lettuce and tomato salad, / Jello, milk and cookies. Tomorrow's: sloppy joe on a bun, / Scalloped corn, stewed tomatoes, rice pudding, and milk."²¹ A reader stumbles over passages of this kind because of their ordinariness. Why put such neutral language into a poem? Can the imagination redeem or transfigure it? Or are readers supposed to stop and think for a moment about routine existence, the welter of undistinguished things and happenings that one normally overlooks? The dilemma recalls the challenge that Pop Art posed during the early 1960s. Is a can of tomato soup or a box of scouring pads really truly a worthy subject for a contemporary visual artist? By framing and presenting an audience with subject matter generally considered too banal for artistic treatment, the New York School poets again draw attention to the problem of artifice, this time by probing its zero degree, the boundary between art and nonart. Somewhat paradoxically, they manage to elevate this investigation into a compelling species of lyricism.

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How does one read a New York School poem? The process can be compared to looking at a still life by Paul Cézanne (1839–1906). Seeing an apple on the canvas is only a starting point. One must then ask how, specifically, that apple looks, as well as how the artist has played within and against conventions and expectations when rendering it in oil. A viewer should reflect carefully, too, on the experience of interacting with the artwork, noting the course, character, and outcome of that experience. Such an interpretive practice is not, it must be emphasized, dryly formalist. How, why, when, and what we see (and read) are among the most pressing political, moral, historical, and cultural questions anyone could pose.

When applied to New York School poems, labels such as "postmodern," "avant-garde," and "experimental" are, more often than not, ways of conveying the shock of encountering writing that treats mimesis – the imitation of reality – as only one tool, and certainly not a privileged one, within a poet's utility kit. The sophistication of this position, and its many dizzying literary, philosophical, and political ramifications, helps explain why a small circle of friends, first brought to national attention by a countercultural anthology, has over the last half century proved to be such a spectacular success among tweedy academics and other establishment gatekeepers. Ashbery and Koch have won Bollingen Prizes; Ashbery and Schuyler have won Pulitzers; Ashbery and O'Hara have won National Book Awards; and Ashbery and Schuyler have been Fellows of the American Academy of Poets. Rafts of scholarly books and articles have appeared since 1975, and the rate of their arrival seems to be increasing, not tapering off.²² Over the last decade there has been a sustained effort, too, to make as much of the poets' writings as widely and easily available as possible.²³ Since the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, humanists have been reevaluating the Cold War era, and, at least among poetry critics and readers of poetry, the New York School has retrospectively taken on unexpected prominence.

One could argue that the group's reputation has also benefited to an unusual degree from the succession of trends in literary criticism over the last half century. During the 1950s and 1960s, the New York School's radical rethinking and loosening of poetic form appealed to readers constitutionally averse to the dumbed-down New Criticism prevalent at the time in schools and universities. The popularization of poststructuralism and deconstruction in the 1970s and 1980s similarly prepared a new generation to appreciate a highly performative poetics that takes nothing for granted about language or representation. The popularization of queer theory in the early 1990s again seems to have served the same ends. One can read Ashbery, O'Hara, and Schuyler as pursuing a deconstructive approach to sexuality in which assertions of gay identity are present but countered and complicated by wild, discursive mash-ups and other disconcerting rhetorical means of troubling received sociocultural categories.

Turning from the overall picture to individual cases, however, such a narrative of lucky convergence between New York School poetics and academic criticism is hard to sustain across the board. The poets' reception histories and their relative statuses over time vary greatly, and they include dramatic ups and downs. In comparison to his friends, for example, O'Hara had an almost immediate impact. Intimately friendly with a remarkable number of talented

people, he inspired, provoked, and cajoled them into producing inventive, high-quality work. At the center of the New York art and poetry scenes, he was able to leave his mark through wit, banter, and scorn on an entire generation. After his premature death in 1966, he quickly became a legend, even a bit of a saint, in the circles in which he had traveled. Within a decade, his admirers had assembled and published most of his uncollected writings. The sheer amount of them was a revelation. O'Hara had always been laid-back about publication, and during his lifetime only three slim collections had appeared in print – *Meditations in an Emergency* (1957), *Lunch Poems* (1964), and *Love Poems (Tentative Title)* (1965) – plus a few limited-edition chapbooks and collaborative projects. Suddenly, it became possible to gauge the true extent of his accomplishments. One consequence, the presentation of the National Book Award for his *Collected Poems* (1971), gave him something he had never sought – credibility among university-based scholars – and the first monograph surveying the whole of his career, Marjorie Perloff's *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*, appeared in 1977.²⁴ A cult figure had become canonical.

O'Hara's best-known verse remains his "I do this, I do that" poems, such as "A Step Away from Them" (1956), "Personal Poem" (1959), and "Adieu to Norman, Bonjour to Joan and Jean-Paul" (1959). Nearly as celebrated are lyrics such as the Billie Holiday elegy "The Day Lady Died" (1959) and "Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!)" (1962) that similarly depict the everyday pressing chaos of life in a modern metropolis. Opening lines such as "It is 12:20 in New York a Friday / three days after Bastille Day" (*FOC*, p. 325) and "It is 12:10 in New York and I am wondering / if I will finish this in time to meet Norman for lunch" (*FOC*, p. 328) have been imitated by so many ephebes that they have since become a cliché.

The winsome, gregarious speaker of the "I do this, I do that" poems is prepossessing, and his casualness and lightheartedness can be a welcome relief after reading such pomposity-prone contemporaries as Bly, Duncan, Olson, and Lowell. These particular poems, too, provide welcome historical insight into the urbane and cosmopolitan intellectual culture in New York during the early years of the Cold War. A lyric such as "Poem (Khrushchev is coming on the right day!)" (1959) illustrates how cheerful a person could be despite (or perhaps because of) the constant threat of atomic oblivion. In search of details about the thriving 1950s and 1960s pre-Stonewall queer subculture in Manhattan, one will find no more vivid and evocative sources than "At the Old Place" (1955) or "Poem (I live above a dyke bar and I'm happy)" (1957), and few homoerotic love poems in English surpass "Les Luths" (1959), "Poem (Light

clarity avocado salad in the morning)" (1959), and "Having a Coke with You" (1960), all written for the dancer Vincent Warren.

The "I do this, I do that" poems, however, represent only one small part of O'Hara's oeuvre, and, if readers are not careful, they will fail to perceive their artfulness, that is, the precision with which he employs characteristically estranging New York School devices such as non sequitur, intense local sound patterning, repetition and variation, bizarre juxtapositions, obstructive enjambment, and, everywhere, rhetorical dodges. ("Why I Am Not a Painter" [1956], for instance, entirely fails to answer the question posed by the title in a straightforward manner.) To acquire an accurate sense of O'Hara's poetics, one should read widely in his nearly six-hundred-page *Collected Poems*. Particularly rewarding is the series of odes that he wrote in the later fifties, which includes "Ode to Joy" (1957), "Ode on Causality" (1958), and "Ode to Michael Goldberg's Birth and Other Births" (1958). Veering between sublimity, sappiness, and bathos, these lyrics ambivalently extend and subvert the high style of the Romantic ode:

Buildings will go up into the dizzy air as love itself goes in
and up the reeling life that it has chosen for once and all
while in the sky a feeling of intemperate fondness will excite the birds
to swoop and veer like flies crawling across absorbed limbs

(*FOC*, p. 281)

Other poems illustrate his love of French Surrealism: "The razzle dazzle mag-gots are summary / tattooing my simplicity on the pitiable / The perforated mountains of my saliva leave cities awash" (*FOC*, p. 96). The goal, though, is not to give access to either his or a collective unconscious. Like Richard Crashaw, Luis de Góngora y Argote, Jan Andrzej Morsztyn, and other baroque poets, he seeks to impress with a deluge of mad ornamentation: "Now! / in cuneiform, of umbrella satrap square-carts with hotdogs / and onions of red syrup blended, of sand bejeweling the prepuce / in tank suits" (*FOC*, p. 146). One should never confuse O'Hara's investment in what he calls the "personal" with the forthrightly autobiographical or the confessional. "I" in his poetry is an occasion to launch a performance, to try out new ways of combining words. Like Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg taking up ordinary objects and declaring them art – bottle racks, shovels, clothes hangers, flashlights, rubber tires – O'Hara often sorts through the jumble of daily experience and assembles a poem. He reserves the right, however, to draw on other materials and resources, and his poetry accordingly possesses

an impressively wide range, from knee-slapping one-liners to grotesques, to touching aubades, and to majestic meditations on death's inevitability.

Ashbery's career trajectory bears little resemblance to O'Hara's. Although it started out brightly – Auden awarded his first full collection, *Some Trees* (1956), the Yale Younger Poets Prize – he failed to capitalize on that early success. Even before winning the prize, he had fled New York and its manic get-ahead whirl. In 1955 he traveled to France on a Fulbright Fellowship, where he taught American literature at the University of Rennes. Afterward he stayed on in Paris, earning his keep as an art reviewer and as a translator of detective fiction. His sophomore outing, *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), especially its long poem "Europe," responded thoughtfully to living in a nation still grimly struggling under the long shadow of World War II. The book's frequent recourse to collage and its extreme syntactical breakdown have parallels in such contemporary French artworks as Jacques Villeglé's and Raymond Hains's torn, lacerated posters and Arman's accumulations of refuse. As he would soon discover, though, his writing was no longer in step with developments in America, where the sunny soullessness and deceptive legibility of Pop Art better captured the superpower's love affair with consumerism. (Warhol, significantly, had his first one-man show the same year *The Tennis Court Oath* came out.)

After returning to the United States in 1965, Ashbery's next two volumes, *Rivers and Mountains* (1966) and *Double Dream of Spring* (1970), put him on a different path. Grammatically better behaved and generally written in either meandering free verse or strict form, his verse now began to sound more like Auden's, sometimes even like Bishop's, and the pas de deux that he struck up with the ghost of Romanticism brought him nearer to another precursor, Wallace Stevens. He revealed a new versatility as a poet, too. Highlights include the oddball sestina "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape," the introspective discursive lyrics "Clepsydra" and "Soonest Mended," and the eerily indeterminate "These Lacustrine Cities." Finally, these two collections established a pattern followed by most of his volumes over the next four decades: a clutch of short- to medium-length lyrics supplemented by a daringly original long poem. After two more abortive stabs at complete self-reinvention – *Three Poems* (1973), which consists of three very long, sinuous prose poems, and *The Vermont Notebook* (1975), a diaristic experiment – he returned to the meditative-lyrics-plus-a-long-poem format in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975). It promptly won the Pulitzer, the National Book Award, and the National Critics Book Circle Award. Virtually overnight, he went from being a difficult pleasure to a critics' darling. Famously, Harold Bloom used his "considerable power as a cultural commentator" to tout him as the central postwar poet.²⁵

For a while, it seemed Ashbery could do no wrong. One well-received book followed another, a series that includes *Houseboat Days* (1977), *As We Know* (1979), *A Wave* (1984), *April Galleons* (1987), and, finally, a free verse quasi-autobiographical epic, *Flow Chart* (1991). Throughout the 1980s, Ashbery's reputation was at its height. He managed to write beautifully, to touch on the sublime, to let demotic English run riot, and to reinvigorate literary tradition – all while, as if an enrolled member of the Yale School of Deconstruction, decentering the self, denaturalizing discourses, and unmasking claims of access to transcendent truth. (Here academic fashion did verifiably seem to play a role in New York School reception.) His influence seemed inescapable: young poets aped his shifting pronouns, his mix of the concrete and vague, his hollow metaphors, and his oscillation between grandeur and camp.

During the 1990s and 2000s, he continued publishing, in fact at an increased rate. Some critics began complaining that he was publishing too much. More accurately, one could say that scholars and readers have simply proved incapable of keeping up. His first twelve or so books, from *Some Trees* to *Flow Chart*, are far from thoroughly digested. How can anyone claim mastery, too, of the next ten plus? Collections such as *Hotel Lautréamont* (1992), *And the Stars Were Shining* (1994), and *Can You Hear, Bird?* (1995) are clearly as ambitious as the better-studied but similar successes of the 1980s, whereas more recent volumes such as *As Umbrellas Follow Rain* (2001), *A Worldly Country* (2007), and *Planisphere* (2009) shift toward a sparer, more epigrammatic style that is also bawdier than heretofore. There are other surprises, too, such as the book-length poem *Girls on the Run* (1999), which is ostensibly based on the work of the outsider artist Henry Darger but which reads like Victorian children's literature put through a food processor. Ashbery might be one of a small number of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American poets to enjoy an international reputation, but, as anyone who has read all of his books quickly discovers via an MLA bibliography search, appreciation of the diversity and depth of his achievements is still preliminary. Whole continents have yet to be explored.

Of course, one should keep such declarations in perspective. When turning from Ashbery to the remaining major New York School poets – Guest, Koch, and Schuyler – "preliminary" has another meaning altogether. They, too, might have won numerous awards, but they have yet to receive anything resembling the celebrity treatment accorded to O'Hara and Ashbery. The secondary literature on their work remains quite limited in size and scope, and instead of being treated as authors who develop and deepen over time, they are still usually approached via discrete close readings that provide scattered,

isolated snapshots of their poetics. Alternatively, they receive praise for work in other genres entirely. Schuyler, for example, is noted as a diarist, Guest as a novelist, and Koch as a pedagogue. (Teachers still regularly consult his *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry* [1970].)²⁶

At the present time, though, one of these three "other" New York School poets seems poised to start receiving star billing in her own right: Barbara Guest. A generation ago, such a claim would have sounded ludicrous. For many years she was the most neglected New York School poet. She was regularly omitted from anthologies, articles, and monographs devoted to the phenomenon, and if her name did come up, the impression left was that her verse was derivative, less skilled, or somehow just not worthy of being set alongside that of her male counterparts. This insinuation was wholly unwarranted. She followed up her early volumes *The Location of Things* (1960) and *The Open Skies* (1962), which admittedly do overlap in forms and themes with *Some Trees* (1956) and *Lunch Poems* (1964), by two much stronger books, *The Blue Stairs* (1968) and *Moscow Mansions* (1973), which should have firmly established her independence as a writer. "A Handbook of Surfing" (1968), for example, is a long poem that draws on a found text to expose connections between the idyllic golden-boy masculinity at the heart of the 1960s surfing craze and the bellicose posturing in the pro-Vietnam War rhetoric of the same period. Such a description can make the poem sound like propaganda. It is not. Guest is tempted by the myths and trappings of conventional maleness, and she writes with a mix of sympathy and repulsion that puts strain on the poem's language and renders its speculations and criticisms anything but cardboard thin. Other long poems of the time, such as "Knight of the Swan" (1973), go on to ponder whether a female artist might in fact selectively appropriate and redeem masculine heroic ideals. Guest's work of the late 1960s and early 1970s is only just beginning to receive the attention that it has long deserved.

Her later work has fared better. During the 1980s, her profile began to increase. Instrumental was the appearance of *Herself Defined: The Poet H.D. and Her World* (1984), a pathbreaking study of the modernist author that alerted academics to Guest's name.²⁷ Around the same time, a younger generation of experimental women poets rediscovered her, and the feminist newsletter *How(ever)* (1983–1992) both honored her and gave her a welcome new outlet for publication. Venues associated with the West Coast branch of Language poetry began adopting her as a respected elder. Los Angeles's Sun & Moon Press, for instance, published *Fair Realism* (1989), *Defensive Rapture* (1993), and her *Selected Poems* (1995); the Post-Apollo Press of Sausalito, California, put out *Quill, Solitary APPARITION* (1996); and *Poetics Journal*, edited by Lyn Hejinian

and Barrett Watten, printed her essay "Shifting Personae" (1991). By century's end, she had attained a national reputation. In 1999 she won the Robert Frost Medal for Distinguished Lifetime Work, and soon thereafter she received another institutional imprimatur, when Wesleyan University Press became her chief publisher.

Guest's verse from the early 1980s onward is marked by a turn toward the ethereal and the fantastic. Her lineation and word placement becomes pronouncedly visual, and she starts to use white space in an almost sculptural manner. She seems to be intent on injecting silence into her statements, or perhaps she wishes readers to focus on each line individually and in isolation. At times, her poems sound like scrambled scraps lifted from medieval romances or pilfered from post-Tolkien heroic fantasy novels:

tell us where light comes from
white curtains in its beak;
closer closer to the splintered mountains
O king endlessly
scattering (BGC, p. 300)

Her references are highly literate, ranging from Ovid to Mallarmé to Theodor Adorno, and the settings often seem medieval or classical, albeit at a peculiar remove, as if filtered through an intermediary pair of eyes, perhaps a rococo master such as Antoine Watteau:

Beyond the roof tiles,
lap of a hill, *fleur d'or*
gold ass on the threshold
Apuleius's other . . .
Of many colors porcelain
with faerie glove (BGC, p. 439)

While obviously revisiting the New York School fascination with artifice, Guest at times seems to commit to it almost wholly, allowing imaginary landscapes and scenarios to displace any direct treatment of the world around her. Naturally, one has to ask what she gains and loses thereby, and whether she, in roundabout ways, is challenging readers to think about how and whether poetry can any longer fulfill – whether it has ever fulfilled – expectations that it serve documentary or instrumental ends. Are imaginary voyages enough, if they are seductive, variegated, and well constructed, and if they run the gamut of emotions from grief to rapture?

Since the publication of Guest's *Collected Poems* in 2008, scholars at long last have an opportunity to view the whole arc of her career and to map its landmarks, ruptures, and high points. Ill served in the past by the few anthologies that included her verse – "Parachutes, My Love, Could Carry Us Higher" (1960) and "Red Lilies" (1973), for example, simply are not representative of her poetry at its best – her canon remains in flux. As scholars become more familiar with her work, its excellences should become more evident. Young poets are helping. The British poets Andrea Brady and John Wilkinson, for instance, have written invaluable about her poetics.²⁸ One can no longer talk about the mid-twentieth-century New York School as if it were a boys' club. We still do not know, however, what the circle's achievements and legacy will look like once we fully appreciate that Guest was in the tree house all along.

★

Critics still might not have a complete picture about the original core group of New York School poets, but that has not prevented them from talking confidently about second, third, and even fourth generations of the New York School. The second generation, for example, is usually taken to include such figures as Ted Berrigan, Joe Brainard, Joe Ceravolo, Clark Coolidge, Bernadette Mayer, Alice Notley, Ron Padgett, and Anne Waldman, all of whom were active in New York in the later 1960s or the early 1970s. After O'Hara's untimely death in 1966, he was especially revered, and much of Berrigan's work, as well as Notley's and Waldman's earliest verse, reads like pastiche of O'Hara's writings, especially his "I do this, I do that" poems:

Time of, dress warmly, 3 A.M. walk
Coat over sweater, shawl over
Hair, boots over slippers, snow
On & over all, I forgot
To mention I'm drunk (martini
& piece of toast)²⁹

Other writers pushed further the radical linguistic experiments that characterize such works as Koch's *When the Sun Tries to Go On* and Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath*. Coolidge's *The Maintains* (1974) is a good example of this tendency: "at in as on ones / one soon at some as / book on coition lies / abrase snails."³⁰ Perhaps the most inventive figure in second-generation circles was Mayer, who was more deeply involved than the others in the New York art world of the period. (She co-edited the journal *o to 9* with the conceptual and body artist

Vito Acconci, for example.) Her work sometimes incorporates photography, and she is as liable to exhibit the results in a gallery as to publish them. Her project *Studying Hunger*, which still has yet to be published in full, is a prolonged inquiry into the most fundamental aspects of her existence, namely, how and what she thinks, feels, and perceives. The resulting prose poetry is self-interrupting, slow moving, and, as it accretes over page after page, extraordinary in its wholly focused unceasing act of introspection:

A start. A stop. I am woman of beginning. You are all at the shore. You are a center, you design a week, the meek, a mile, the shore, endless beginnings of entropy, endless universe of design. New words. What can I speak of, what can I call? Can I call you, all of you, all, call you to me, can I embrace, can embrace all, all parade, all center & all (a picture) never, & ever the bird that speaks, that bird cannot speak, this call to all, eternal rhyme & time, she only knows the simplest words, the smallest prose closed of design. She opens, she is cool, she is call of all that wild, she is unerring, she is fall.³¹

In such writing, Mayer reprises the New York School fascination with everyday experience and pushes it in a dramatically new direction.

While a second generation of New York School writers is relatively easy to identify – one can discern a number of young poets who moved to New York and self-consciously styled themselves as the heirs of O'Hara and his friends – it becomes increasingly more difficult and tendentious to track further generations. A critic has to decide which institutions, which poets, and what kind of aesthetics should deserve priority. One could, for example, single out St. Mark's Poetry Project as the core of an ongoing New York School tradition, because many of the second-generation figures either helped found it or have served as its director. Putting too much emphasis on any one milieu, however, risks arbitrarily excluding contemporary writers such as, say, John Ash, Anne Lauterbach, Marjorie Welish, and John Yau whose poetry is manifestly in dialogue with Ashbery's yet who are not usually associated with St. Mark's. Alternatively, one could limit the label "third generation" to a circle of poets, including Eileen Myles and Tim Dlugos, who came into their own in the 1980s and whose verse, while drenched in O'Hara and Schuyler, is more in-your-face queer in both its themes and politics:

Leonard wears a shark's tooth
on a chain around his neck
and long blond hair.
These days he's the manager
of Boots and Saddles ("Bras

and Girdles," my beloved
Bobby used to say) and
costumer for the Gay Cable
Network's *Dating Game*.³²

Why, however, consider such poetry more worthy of the New York School label than its 1980s rival, the New York branch of Language writing? Both Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews, co-editors of the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (1977–1982), which gave the movement its name, could be read as poet-heirs of a lineage including *The Tennis Court Oath*, Coolidge, and Mayer, as these lines from Andrews's *Edge* (1973) illustrate: "stallpart / retro-bulb / spun-a-off / amethyst trunk."³³ This kind of asyntactical word string confronts readers with the bare, brute materiality of language. They are encouraged to contemplate sound play, indentation, and whatever else is left when referentiality is suspended. One does not have to grasp the complex theoretical and socioeconomic motives informing such verse to appreciate that it carries on, in rarefied form, the New York School proclivity to think of a poem as an abstract composition in which conveying information can be secondary to arranging letters and words on the page in a striking manner. In short, there are many contemporary candidates for the New York School label. After 1975 or so, it is perhaps best to stop tracing poetic Jesse Trees and to speak more specifically about which of the many aspects of the New York School legacy continue to be inspiring – and to whom.

One of the most oft-cited studies of the New York School, David Lehman's *The Last Avant-Garde* (1998), looks back nostalgically at the 1950s and 1960s, as if Ashbery, Koch, O'Hara, and Schuyler (he omits Guest) stood at the end of a fabulous but doomed enterprise.³⁴ If a person surveys subsequent American writing, however, that is not a defensible moral to the story. It makes even less sense if one looks at the school's international impact. In Britain, for example, a prominent line of poets, from Lee Harwood and Tom Raworth in the 1960s to Drew Milne and Mark Ford in the 2000s, have drawn on the New York School for inspiration. Moreover, the group's influence has not been limited to English-speaking countries. In postcommunist Poland, poets such as Marcin Świetlicki, Jacek Podsiadło, and Miłosz Biedrzycki have promoted "O'Harism" as a means of grappling with a swiftly changing society and culture. Around the world, numerous authors have carried on in sundry, provocative, and occasionally contradictory ways the pioneering, estranging, heady, giddy poetics of the New York School.

Notes

1. Donald Allen (ed.), *The New American Poetry: 1945–1960* (New York: Grove, 1960), p. xi.
2. Allen (ed.), *The New American Poetry*, p. xiii.
3. John Ashbery, *Selected Prose* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 249.
4. John Ashbery, *Notes from the Air: Selected Later Poems* (New York: Ecco, 2007).
5. John Ashbery, *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles 1957–1987* (New York: Knopf, 1989); Barbara Guest, *Dürer in the Window, Reflexions on Art* (New York: Roof, 2003); Frank O'Hara, *Art Chronicles, 1954–1966* (New York: Braziller, 1975); Frank O'Hara, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Braziller, 1959); Frank O'Hara, *Nakian* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966); Frank O'Hara, *Robert Motherwell* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1965); James Schuyler, *Selected Art Writings* (Santa Rosa, Calif.: Black Sparrow Press, 1998).
6. Barbara Guest, *Collected Poems* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p. 121. This collection will be cited in the text as *BGC*.
7. Kenneth Koch, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 2005), p. 183.
8. John Ashbery, *Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1985), p. 54.
9. Kenneth Koch, *On the Edge: The Collected Long Poems* (New York: Knopf, 2009), p. 10.
10. John Ashbery, *The Tennis Court Oath* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1962), p. 31.
11. Ashbery, *The Tennis Court Oath*, p. 23.
12. Ashbery, *Selected Poems*, p. 208.
13. Emily Dickinson, *Selected Poems* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1992), p. 27.
14. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 26.
15. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 11–15.
16. Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry: O'Hara, Bishop, Ashbery, and Merrill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 10.
17. James Schuyler, *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993), p. 12.
18. John Ashbery, *April Galleons* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987), p. 1.
19. Frank O'Hara, *Collected Poems* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 325. This collection will be cited in the text as *FOC*.
20. Schuyler, *Collected Poems*, p. 231.
21. Ashbery, *Selected Poems*, p. 14.
22. Recent high-profile studies include Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press,