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The New York School in the 1950s

A key constituent in the first homegrown avant-garde of American letters, the New American Poetry, the New York School produced some of most distinctive, energising and inventive verse of the post-war era. Its influence continues to be felt in American, British and indeed European poetics, experimental and otherwise, and some of its key figures (John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Barbara Guest) have become recognised as among the language's most important twentieth-century poets. Charles Bernstein, perhaps the most celebrated New York poet since the 1950 and 60s, has described the so-called School as encompassing 'the most engaging, original, and socially cogent American poets of the past half-century'.¹ The loose grouping's continued prominence has been accompanied by what are now well-developed critical accounts of their literary significance and cultural context. In both cases, the New York School has so far been defined as a response to two cultural hegemonies of the 50s: the stultifying dominance of so-called 'academic verse', and the galvanizing power of Abstract Expressionism. Such narratives have, however, tended to place a sometimes mythologizing emphasis on how New York School poetry was a reaction to quite narrowly aesthetic phenomena. In what follows, I do not want to ignore the importance of these two cultural strands to the New York poets, but I do want to reintroduce the historical and political forces into a discussion their poetry, and explore how mapping such forces onto it might reframe or refresh our understanding of its familiar antagonists and influences. These political forces have sometimes been assumed, sometimes elided, but in both cases, are in danger of going unrecognised. Here, I will attempt to expand our view of the sources of New York School

responsiveness, and place some of its inventions and interventions in the wider social nexus of 1950s New York.

The flourishing of the New York School can be dated somewhere between 1951, when Frank O'Hara joined his Harvard friends John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch in New York, and 1966, when O'Hara died in a freak beach buggy accident on Fire Island. Throughout this time the New York School was uniquely allied to the visual arts: its first publications — O'Hara's 1952 *A City Winter*, Koch's *Poems* (1953), and Ashbery's *Turandot* (1954) — were published by a Manhattan art gallery, Tibor de Nagy, all with illustrations by painters. The gallery would come to publish many New York School collections in the years to come, as well as *Semi-Colon* (1953-6), a four-page broadsheet full of the poetry. Indeed, the gallery's director, John Bernhard Myers, would coin the 'New York School of Poets' label that has since stuck (itself adapted from Robert Motherwell's term for the city's Abstract Expressionist painters), being applied, alongside Ashbery, O'Hara and Koch, to poets as various as Barbara Guest, James Schuyler, Edwin Denby, and thereafter a 'Second Generation' including Ted Berrigan, Joseph Ceravolo, Bernadette Mayer, and Ron Padgett. By around 1953, the core of the first-generation New York School (Ashbery, O'Hara, Koch, Schuyler and Guest) had become friends and a coherent group in which, as Koch remembers, 'we were very critical of each other, we admired each other, we were almost entirely dependent on each other for support'. I will have more to say about what kind of 'School' the poets formed later, but the label at least gave the group an outward identity. By the end of the decade the grouping be given its own space in Donald Allen's groundbreaking anthology, *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*, placing them on a similar footing to the far more famous Beats. Further book publications,

collaborations (most notably the magazine *Locus Solus*), alongside Myers's own *The Poets of the New York School* (1969) and other exposures, meant that by the late 60s strangers were writing to the poets asking for the School's address in order to enrol in it.² The movement came to further, largely retrospective, prominence in the 70s with the success of Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), which won the 'triple crown' of American letters (the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award) and, along with O'Hara's *Collected Poems* (1971), established the New York School as an important feature of the nation's post-war artistic landscape.

The New York School is often, rightly, positioned within the emergent post-war cultural centrality of the United States, or 'how New York stole the idea of modern art', to use the title of Serge Guilbaut's provocative book on the subject.³ Before this, however, the US had become central economically and politically. Bretton Woods established the US dollar as the world's main reserve currency, while the creation of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, alongside more obviously political moves like the Marshall Plan and a newly interventionist military policy the world over, meant that, in most respects, the cultural hegemony of the US was inevitable. Partly, the country's move away from isolationism (NATO was the first military alliance the US had joined in peacetime since 1778) was welcomed.

Modernism itself was an internationalist project that, in the face of US insularity, had drawn most of its American practitioners to Europe, but now it was New York where prominent European members of the international avant-garde, especially Surrealists, made their home. The US avant-garde, with its emphasis on the internationalism and open form, would find itself much more at home in the globalised America of the 50s

than the country's isolationist pre-war period. In other respects, however, moves in this direction were not so salutary. US internationalism was not, however, as quickly became clear to many post-war writers, the brotherly embrace of universal democracy it often pretended to be. Indeed, the Cold War policy of 'patient but firm and vigilant containment'⁴ of communism, of whatever kind, seemed to represent exported repression rather than democratic expansiveness. The years after the war saw a drive for American hegemony increasingly dominated by the use of violence, in which threats of 'massive retaliation' took precedence over political cooperation and cultural exchange.⁵ The transformation of Roosevelt's UN under Truman from an ideal of patrician but egalitarian uplift to a tool of self-interested imperialism was widely recognised. Some poets of the New American Poetry felt themselves directly involved in these developments: Charles Olson, for example, the *primus inter pares* of his generation, had been a New Dealer, and his radical poetics was partly a reaction to these geopolitical disappointments.⁶ Poets as far from *realpolitik* as O'Hara, however, were impacted by them as well, however: 'Watching the botching of military governments, the crippling of the UN, the ineffectual expediency of our national policies, and the mishandling of the atomic bomb, has been a bitter experience.'⁷ In this sense, the natural marginality of avant-garde movements was identified with the need for a space outside the centralising impulse of US *realpolitik*. For New York School poets particularly, most of whom were gay, this marginality was aggravated by the fact that homosexuality was associated with communism, or at least seen as a parallel infiltration of American free-market masculinity (McCarthy often referred to 'communists and queers' together). Contemporary mainstream or 'Middle Generation' verse could, by contrast, be posed as complicit or at least impotent in the face of the anti-communist containment paranoia, since both can be defined by a common 'fear

of dispersal', as Michael Davidson has noted: '1950s personalism [is] related to a kind of domestic cultural containment in which crises of national security are acted out as dramas of private insecurity'.⁸ The repressive tensions of Cold War dread were thought to be not so much addressed as reinforced and repeated by Middle Generation introvert melodramas. The New American Poets sought ways out of both.

Such, then, are the broad outlines of post-war American poetry's historical condition. It is the importance of New York City itself that especially distinguishes the New York School from its peers. However, from Myers's description of 'a situation which was open, yeasty, limitlessly permissive' to Lehman's contention that 'something of New York's metropolitan energy and sass made its way into their writing', the detail of New York's significance has been lost in the hype and nostalgia for 1950s Manhattan.⁹ This historical idealism is part of a wider mistaken opposition between anti-communist conformism and liberal individualism, two ideological currents now increasingly seen by historians as allied or, in the claim of one, interdependent: 'Cold War was a necessary precondition for the success of post-war liberalism.'¹⁰ In this sense, avant-garde marginality should also be seen as a resistance to another kind of centralism, closely linked to the imperium: 'the vital centre' of American politics as a whole. Arthur Schlesinger's 1949 book of that title, in which liberals showed 'virility', leftists and reactionaries 'sterility', sums up the age's political tenor.¹¹ This centre and its guiding consensus is now known as something quite different: the age of conformity. New Deal liberals, whose counterparts in Europe were establishing welfare states immediately following the war, were now 'Cold War liberals', which is to say anti-communists too seldom indistinguishable from Republican witch-hunters. Hyperbole about the supposedly natural opposition of New York to such trends has

led to readings of New York School poetry that too often position it, sometimes unintentionally, as a naïve celebrant of the supposedly all-American ideals of freedom and rough individualism that the bland and paranoid 1950s was otherwise eclipsing. At the centre of these claims is O’Hara, the most metropolitan of the New York poets, and perhaps the great city poet of the language. However, we need to scrutinise whether, in celebrating metropolitan *movement*, O’Hara celebrates an American ideal of anarchic market freedom.

There can be no question that one of O’Hara’s primary attentions was to motion, and proposed movement through the city as an antidote to the petrification of US culture occurring elsewhere. ‘I am so tired of the limitations of immobility / all of America pretending to be a statue’, he writes, and the city, and O’Hara’s own extemporising attitude with it, is one answer to such immobility.¹² O’Hara’s now famous claim, ‘I can’t even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there’s a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally *regret* life’, clearly opposes the quick and the dead.¹³ Not all metropolitan speed is convivial for O’Hara, however. For one thing, the bustle of New York itself, despite its apparent marginality and innocence from the *realpolitik* of Washington, is often closely tied to the Cold War; Manhattan houses, after all, the United Nations whose fate we saw O’Hara lament earlier. In ‘Nocturne’ (1955), the landmark typifies the dynamic but ultimately unsympathetic surfaces of New York:

There’s nothing worse
than feeling bad and not
being able to tell you.

[...]

A tiny airliner drops its
specks over the U N Building.
My eyes, like millions of
glassy squares, merely reflect.
Everything sees through me,
in the daytime I'm too hot
and at night I freeze; I'm built
the wrong way for the
river and mild gale would
break every fiber in me.¹⁴

This poem certainly registers speed, but it does not simply celebrate it: all images of movement — river, wind, the ominous airplane over the UN — threaten to obliterate the individual struggling to hold himself together in face of another movement, the temporary loss of the loved other.

Generally in O'Hara, dynamism is a problematic rather than an straightforward aesthetic. One symbol of radical post-war speed, for example, was the atomic bomb, and one way of reading the New York School's varied poetics of the momentary is against a backdrop of the threat of the city's instant annihilation, as articulated by E. B. White in 1948: 'The subtlest change in New York is something people don't speak about much that is in everyone's mind. The city, for the first time in its long history, is destructible... [O]f all targets, New York has a certain clear priority.'¹⁵ O'Hara reflects but does not wallow in this mood, as in 'Five Poems' (1960):

Well now, hold on
maybe I won't go to sleep at all
and it'll be a beautiful white night
or else I'll collapse
completely from nerves and be calm
as a rug or a bottle of pills

[...]

an invitation to lunch
HOW DO YOU LIKE THAT?
when I only have 16 cents and 2
packages of yoghurt
there's a lesson in that, isn't there
like in Chinese poetry when a leaf falls?

[...]

to be in bed again and the knock
on my door for once signified 'hi there'
and on the deafening walk
through the ghettos where bombs have gone off lately¹⁶

There is a tension here between glee and anxiety. The uncertainty over whether one will sleep from nerves or calm, or at all, is itself exhausting; absurd revelling in a free lunch as an proverbial moral mixes with the empty-bellied nervousness of the poem;

the 'hi there' is salutary only in contrast to more ominous door-knockings. Informing these tensions are specific types of deleterious 'tough and quick' phenomena: the bombed ghettos here summon both New York's so-called urban renewal projects and Robert Moses's clearance of whole New York neighbourhoods to make way for freeways, in addition to the obvious Cold War threat of nuclear annihilation. All three represent a dubious mobility: the change of the city landscape through destruction, the uprooting of the poor, the gutting of urban centres on behalf of the suburbs, and an unpredictable geopolitical situation. Each development is connected to aspects of post-war America where conformity was most visible. In O'Hara's poem, *jouissance* co-exists with danger contingently, to be grabbed momentarily against a background of fast-moving violence, serendipity and collision, a fact summed up in the anxious one-line poem that ends the series: 'I seem to be defying fate, or am I avoiding it?' The 'hold on' of the poem's beginning, far from an instruction to stop in one's tracks and consider the world at a remove, is a warning to keep up with the fast world the poem sometimes frets over, sometimes enjoys.

The achievement of O'Hara's poetry is to move with movement, whatever its violences. The kernel of the poetics is reported by Paul Goodman, on whom more later: 'Frank O'Hara says that Whitman and Mayakovsky identify with the world and its faults and so are not ground under the wheel, they are at the hub of the wheel.'¹⁷ To be the 'inexorable product of [his] own time', it was important for O'Hara to stick with the definitive fact of that time, which was the collapsing and acceleration of time itself.¹⁸ There is a danger that such an inexorable product will 'merely reflect', but if the poet can *move with* the time, resisting the temptation to 'freeze' in the face of its heartless dynamism, he will be able to speak of, in and to it. It is wrong to identify

O'Hara's undoubted mobility with the mere celebration of fast, knockabout competitiveness. It is sometimes this, but the tropes of the metropolis — speed, transience, tumult — are just as frequently identified with loneliness, anxiety, loss and anger. What *is* true is that O'Hara refuses the fraudulent step back from this speed into a contemplative, if defeated, space of transcendent poetic order. He seeks, rather, a space for all the affects this more meditative space seems to disallow (intimacy, resistance, affirmation) *within* the speed, in the wheel so as not to be ground under by it: 'You just go on your nerve.'¹⁹

This aesthetic needs to be seen in the light of the larger world New York was the centre of: the so-called free market, whose conflation of consumption and citizenship, of course, made its own ideological contribution to the Cold War. O'Hara's poems are full of, and fascinated by, consumable objects, and the Manhattan through which O'Hara moves is unmistakably a marketplace. What his poems *say* about this world is complex. Though some readers have found in O'Hara a mere revelling in the so-called free world's cornucopia of goods, accounts such as Michael Clune's, which see O'Hara thematising of choice as 'perversely out of key' with the dominant economic liberalism of the time, with its attendant sense of sovereign, rational-choice individualism, seem much closer to the truth. O'Hara, Clune says, 'shifts the centre of choice away from the interior of the choosing subject, and towards his local and contingent situation... In O'Hara, there is no causal account linking choice to the interiority of the subject'.²⁰ We see such a context-bound and contingent choosing, in O'Hara's most famous poem, 'The Day Lady Died'. The 'I do this, I do that' chattiness does not revel in the chaotic force and detail of New York as O'Hara is usually supposed to. The poem begins with a nervous movement anxious about

disconnection: ‘I will get off the 4:19 in Easthampton / at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner / and I don’t know the people who will feed me.’ From here until the very end of the poem, O’Hara attends to the distancing effects of purchasing things, buying a hamburger, a malted, ‘an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING’, ‘a little Verlaine’, a bottle of Strega, ‘a carton of Gauloises and a carton / of Picayunes’ and a *New York Post* — a collection with global if not imperial suggestiveness. These demonstrations of choice, far from liberatory, are tiring and boring, as we see O’Hara halfway through the poem ‘practically going to sleep with quandariness’. Even the syntax of the poem, with its interminable *ands* dramatises a monotony of accumulation. Out of this malaise comes the poem’s moving final stanza:

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
while she whispered a song along the keyboard
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing

The memory of Holliday reasserts value in O’Hara’s present; a moment of aesthetic force intervenes in a day of meaningless, alienating flow. Holliday’s voice is, of course, a temporary transcendence of the impersonal world of commercial flow, but it is not an escape to a contemplative non-space. Value is still found in the world’s breathlessness, in the moment, but this is a moment with a different kind of value, another sort of relation than the exclusively self-interested, monetary transactions that have passed before. However, O’Hara’s great poem goes beyond the now fashionable lionising of exploded subjectivity so commonplace in writing on avant-garde poetics: there is, clearly, a choosing that is deeply interior — and yet, O’Hara is not defined as a subject by the disavowal of what is rejected. The crowding particulars of the world

market, after all, make up almost all of the poem. ‘The Day Lady Died’ uniquely represents a form of agency on the threshold of subjective and social, through a performance of selfhood that, on the one hand, refuses to transcend the sometimes cruel, sometimes exciting, nature of post-war American market forces into a comfortable marginality that asserts its freedom and agency from the sidelines, and on the other enacts a space from *within*, where resistance may take place.

We have so far honed in on one’s poet’s reaction to the broad historical forces of the 1950s, finding in it a poetics uniquely responsive to the era of US and market hegemony and an apolitical aesthetic of permissiveness. I want now to look at the more immediate context of the New York School as a whole — that of the avant-garde grouping, coterie to which the aesthetic label most directly refers. What this context means, and what word of the many possible synonyms of ‘School’ we might use to articulate it can be couched in two broad, connected questions that are definitive for gauging its distinctiveness: What was the state of the avant-garde in the 1950s? What kind of community was the New York School?

One distinctive difference between the so-called ‘historical avant-garde’ of the interwar years and the artistic vanguardism we find in the American 1950s is captured by the idea of *coterie*. Paul Goodman’s 1951 essay ‘Advance-Guard Writing, 1900-1950’ influentially promoted the notion of an avant-garde grouping as ‘a small community’ in which the alienation of American Cold War culture might be fought:

The essential present-day advance-guard is the physical re-establishment of community. This is to solve the crisis of alienation in the simple way: the persons are estranged from themselves, from one another, and from their artist; he takes the

initiative precisely by putting his arms around them and drawing them together. In literary terms this means: *to write for them about them personally*...²¹

In the early 50s, such literary avant-gardes were burgeoning in Berkeley, Black Mountain College, New York and elsewhere, fuelled by collaborative atmospheres and self-publishing activities. Goodman, however, saw such community as only a first step toward universal forms of liberation. The process toward a more ‘intimate’ society, he said, should only be seen as ‘*starting with the artist’s primary friends*’. One did not create a coterie merely to ensconce oneself from the hostile outside world, but as a grounding from which to overcome society’s atomisation. Black Mountain, under Olson, had precisely the projective ambitions recommended by Goodman, whereas the San Francisco Renaissance was more insular and protective of its existing group identity, making up what Michael Davidson, quoting Robert Duncan, has aptly called a ‘fraternity of despair’.²² There is a sense, however, in which coterie is the first step toward abandoning the avant-garde as a workable project. In the 1950s, in the US, the avant-garde had begun to be absorbed into institutions, commodity culture and indeed Cold War policy, and was acquiring a burgeoning respectability and corporate kudos. One worrying symptom of its co-optation can be seen in the definitive anthology of American poetic avant-gardism, *The New American Poetry*, whose preface spoke seemingly patriotically of ‘our avant-garde’ in a way Tristan Tzara never would have. Given the central project of the avant-garde, to assail bourgeois culture by attacking bourgeois institutions, these were not promising developments. Coterie was responsive to the problem in that it made no attempt to repeat the attack on institutions that the avant-garde had already won over and had in turn been taken over by. It was, rather, better suited to extend the other, less theatrical

half of the avant-garde project, the subsumption of art into life. In this, coterie place an emphasis on accepting the world as it was, instituting an organic art moulded around the world as it existed rather than constructing symbolic orders to constrain it. This strategy was most influentially seen in John Cage's insistence on a shift 'from making to accepting', an aesthetic that demanded a heightened attention to the everyday world.²³ By the late 1960s, such a diffuse and accepting projects came to seem inadequate as a response to the repressions of increasingly concrete and identifiable political enemies. A society that had absorbed avant-garde's historically subversive gestures but that nonetheless continued to pursue the imperialist goals in Vietnam and elsewhere could hardly be responded to with more formal shocks like urinals dressed up as fine artworks.

What coterie meant for the New York School is telling for the period because, through a version of it, there emerges an experimental and socially-engaged poetics outside of an avant-garde rubric insisting on the power of art to change the world through innovative and confrontational aesthetic form. O'Hara, who had enthusiastically read Goodman's essay, clearly wrote '*personally*' for his friends in explicitly addressing poems to them. The enforced coterie of most of the poets, as homosexuals, meanwhile, was decisive for them. There is a more universalising impulse at the heart of New York School poetry as well, however. I want to call this impulse a *practice of reading*. A list of the various writers associated with a 'New York School tradition' over the years would run to some pages: a result of the coming together of the simultaneously inspiring and repressive 'English Canon' most of the poets studied at Harvard, their commitment to European literary and non-literary avant-gardes, and a unique appetite for the undiscovered and marginal. There is a

concerted attempt in this ‘to put together a tradition to build on where none had existed’, as Ashbery puts it.²⁴ It is through an analysis of the poets reading, and their reading together, that questions of the New York School’s sense of literary history, its relationship with Modernism, and its so-called ‘democratic’ cultural politics can be illuminated as symptoms flowing from an original sense of artistic reception itself.

In the summer of 1950, shortly after arriving in New York, a 23-year-old John Ashbery wrote to his new painter-friend, Jane Freilicher:

I’m reading *The White Devil* by Webster, a rather charming novel by Mary Webb called “*Armor Wherein He Trusted*”... I’m also reading the poems of Prior, whom Kenneth would love, I’m sure — he writes in a *very* familiar style, rather like Auden in *Letters from Iceland*. And Edith Sitwell: I love her early stuff more and more, but certainly can’t take a long poem called *Gold Coast Customs*, which she considers her *Waste Land*; it is easily the most intolerable poem ever written... I still have to finish D. H. Lawrence (groan)... Here’s a comforting little poem from Nicholas Moore... It sounds as though he wrote it to Kenneth Koch about John Ashbery...²⁵

There are many things revealed in such letters, common between New York School figures whenever they were away from each other. There is the obvious voracity of Ashbery’s reading appetite, his proclivity for variety, the apparently arbitrary mixture of high- and lowbrow, tragic and comic, ancient and modern, with no attempt to organise connections. There is also the collaborative atmosphere that reading as an activity is evidently taking place in: Ashbery is not only sharing his reading with one friend, he is constantly framing it in relation to another. Such collaborative reading practices were central to the New York School aesthetic. Following O’Hara’s arrival

in the city, ‘to kind of cobble everything together and tell us what we and they were doing’,²⁶ as Ashbery recalls, there were various enthusiasms, conversations and arguments ongoing about reading and individual writers. O’Hara and Ashbery would argue about ‘which was better’, Vladimir Mayakovsky or Boris Pasternak.²⁷ Kenneth Koch, in addition to bringing all manner of European literature into the other poets’ purview, constantly enthused about his experiences of reading Renaissance epics. Barbara Guest was able to position her interest in Anna Akhmatova, H.D. and Anne Marie Albiach alongside the male poets’ admiration for Marianne Moore, Gertrude Stein and Laura Riding. The poets’ letters show how they were urging each other to read the latest big thing, and sharing the specific pleasures of certain writers and individual works. The poets were, in effect, forming each other’s reading habits. *Locus Solus* is perhaps the first impressive result: despite its individual editors for each issue, the material of the magazine (which included the Troubadours, Abraham Cowley, Beat writing, ninth-century Chinese and fifteenth-century Japanese poetry, Sir John Suckling and the Italian Futurists) is an expression of a collective mind reading.

Schuyler would later celebrate the liberatory implications of this practice, recalling the effect of meeting Ashbery and his Harvard friends, answering Ashbery’s questions about Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as Young Man*: ‘I / didn’t know you were *allowed* not to like James / Joyce. The book I suppose is a masterpiece: freedom of / choice is better. Thank you, “Little J. A. in a / Prospect of Flowers”’.²⁸ Ashbery’s ‘The Picture of Little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers’ (1950) is itself an exercise in performed reading, as Ashbery explores how self-definition is achieved through reading. Here is the beginning:

*He was spoilt from childhood by the
future, which he mastered rather early
and apparently without great difficulty.*

BORIS PASTERNAK

I

Darkness falls like a wet sponge
And Dick gives Genevieve a swift punch
In the pajamas. "Aroint thee, witch."
Her tongue from previous ecstasy
Releases thoughts like little hats.

"He clap'd me first during the eclipse.

Afterwards I noted his manner
Much altered. But he sending
At that time certain handsome jewels
I durst not seem to take offence."²⁹

The allusive method here is centrifugal rather than centripetal in the High Modernist style. Referencing Andrew Marvell's poem of a similar title at its outset, 'Little J. A.' loses track of its source, referring within half a dozen lines to figures as divergent from Marvell as Boris Pasternak, James Joyce, Thomas Nashe, Daniel Defoe, Shakespeare and Wordsworth. 'Little J. A.' works as much by a principle of displacement as accumulation. Just as the theme of the poem is 'lost words', or the slippage of signification in the passage of time, so the voices here enter and exit by a logic of distraction, dislodging each other rather than coming together to build an

argument. In presenting a mind thinking, distracted, working with his material as the poem proceeds, Ashbery proposed an *invitational* aesthetic; that is, the poet situates himself, reading, in a position analogous with the reader of his own poem. Ashbery notes elsewhere: ‘the ideal situation for the poet is to have the reader speak the poem, and how nice it would be for everybody if that could be the case’.³⁰ Throughout New York School poetry, there is a parallelism suggested between writing and reading, between the poet writing through reading and us as readers of the writing. What Ashbery later described as a ‘program that was the absence of a program’, and what I’m calling a reading practice, gave rise to a fundamentally social conception of the literary, that in turn resulted in a social, collaborative conception of the relationship between reader and poet in their own work. New York School poetry, releasing the past into the dynamics of the contemporary, invites the reader into the poem, as an equal.

In its immediate moment, the New York School was not quite so universally inclusive, though it was a good deal more so than all the other groupings associated with the New American Poetry. Mark Ford’s *The New York Poets: An Anthology*, constituted entirely by white men, is hardly representative of the group’s variety, but there is a sense in which those writers falling outside of this hegemonic core were somehow on the outside looking in. Barbara Guest, for example, was one of only four women included in Donald Allen’s anthology, and was represented in the New York School category, but her foothold in the movement was anything but secure. James Schuyler’s letter to Ashbery regarding *Locus Solus* is one of many indications of the exclusive aesthetic presiding: ‘Secretly, I don’t believe that K. believes anybody except you, he, Frank and me has anything to offer... While I am of this opinion to, of

course, it seems rather limiting for a magazine'.³¹ That Guest couldn't even be guaranteed a spot in the magazine of her own supposed movement suggests her precarious status within it. Something of this liminality is manifested in her most famous poem, 'Parachutes, My Love, Could Carry Us Higher' (1957):

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.

[...]

Parachutes, my love, could carry us higher
Than this mid-air in which we tremble,
Having exercised our arms in swimming,
Now the suspension, you say,
Is exquisite. I do not know.

[...]

This wide net, I am treading water
Near it, bubbles are rising and salt
Drying on my lashes, yet I am no nearer
Air than water. I am closer to you

Than land and I am in a stranger ocean

Than I wished.³²

One reading of this poem would posit the poet in the ‘arms’ of the New York School, whose embrace is anything but stable and reassuring.³³ The effect is obviously not entirely deleterious — the poem’s ‘suspension’ is predominantly an ecstatic moment of love, but even its ‘exquisite’ nature is approached with uncertainty (‘I don’t know’) and potentially unwished-for. Though one would be reluctant to say the poem is *about* a particular poetic community, its ‘treading water’ maps clearly onto an contingent, uncertain and fought-for recognition experienced by female poets within the constraints of predominantly male groupings. This divide was part of a wider social trend in the 1950s that saw a democratisation of universities — where, of course, O’Hara, Ashbery and Koch all met — but largely only *for men*. The so-called ‘Second Generation’ presents a far better record on this score, and indeed was largely driven by women, but at the New York School’s beginning, women at best occupied an ambiguous position.

Such positioning was also experienced by black writers, who were only ever on the margins of the group. LeRoi Jones, at one time one of O’Hara’s closest friends as well his collaborator and publisher, would ultimately find the trappings of a white bourgeois avant-gardism partly typified by the more frivolous and permissive aspects of O’Hara’s aesthetic.³⁴ The tension between the New York aesthetic of immanence and the more pressing demands for revolutionary change faced by a black working-class writer like Jones, would be best expressed in two echoes Jones makes of O’Hara’s writings, consciously pitting the latter’s personalism against a political

poetics more responsive to the demands of social injustice. The end of O'Hara's *Personism*, 'founded by me after lunch with LeRoi Jones', a mock-manifesto sending up the usual revolutionary imperatives of the form, makes its facetious, ironic ending by claiming that Personism, 'like Africa, is on the rise. The recent propagandists for technique on the one hand, and for content on the other, had better watch out'. The vatic serious that ends Jones's landmark text, *Cuba Libre*, seems to respond to the casual Blaxploitation of O'Hara: 'But the Cubans, and the other *new* peoples (in Asia, Africa, South America) don't need us, and we had better stay out of their way'.³⁵ The difference would be made more pointed in Jones's response to O'Hara's 'Personal Poem' (1959), excerpted here:

LeRoi comes in
and tells me Miles Davis was clubbed 12
times last night outside BIRDLAND by a cop
a lady asks us for a nickel for a terrible
disease but we don't give her one we
don't like terrible diseases, then

we go eat some fish and some ale it's
cool but crowded we don't like Lionel Trilling
we decide, we like Don Allen we don't like
Henry James so much we like Herman Melville...³⁶

And so the poem goes paratactically on. Jones is invoked here, as the Japanese Kanemitsu is more literally, in at best a tokenistic fashion. This 'personal' response to racial violence and class consciousness, skipped over like a fish-and-ale lunch or so

much mock-aesthete posturing, aligned with the uncomfortable amoralism of the terrible diseases joke, is what Jones (soon to be Amiri Baraka, to leave Greenwich Village and renounce white avant-gardism) seems to refer to at the beginning of his pointedly named 'Political Poem': 'Luxury, then, is a way of / being ignorant, comfortably / An approach to the open market / of least information.'³⁷ The poem goes on to lambast personalism's 'polite truth': 'Who are you? What are you / saying? Something to be dealt with, as easily.' That O'Hara was, for Jones, the *most* politically engaged of all the New York poets³⁸ gives an indication of the inhospitable nature of the New York School as a whole for the purposes of black writers in the late 50s and 60s. The Beats would be far more successful in reaching out to non-white New York aesthetics like the Black Arts and Nuyorican Poets Café.

Subsequently, however, the New York School has served as one of the most galvanising and liberating oeuvres for experimental poets of all stripes, and perhaps most singularly of all the New American Poetry movements, to current, twenty-first century poets interested in the intersections between the poetic and political. Nor, indeed, is their reach limited to these fields: Ashbery continues to influence English Faber poets of a 1950s mould like Glyn Maxwell and Oli Hazzard as well as riot-raising communists like Joshua Clover and queer theorists like Lauren Berlant. It was the 1950s that formed the New York School, but the poets and poets that came out of that moment continue to form, to energise and fascinate writers up to this day.

Endnotes

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- 1 Blurb to Geoff Ward, *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets*, Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1993.
- 2 This story is told in David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: the Making of the New York School of Poets* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 27.
- 3 See Serge Guilbault, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (London: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
- 4 The phrase is from George Kennan's now-famous 'long telegram' of 1946.
- 5 This was the phrase attached to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles policy on the Soviet Union in 1954, following a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations.
- 6 See Ben Hickman, *Crisis and the US Avant-Garde: Poetry and Real Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 66-90.
- 7 Qtd. in Lehman, *Last Avant-Garde*, 40.
- 8 Michael Davidson, 'From Margin to Mainstream: Postwar Poetry and the Politics of Containment,' *American Literary History* 10 (1998), 266-90: 270.
- 9 John Bernhard Myers, *Poets of the New York School* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1969), 23; Lehman, *Last Avant-Garde*, 20.
- 10 H. W. Brands *The Strange Death of American Liberalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. xii.
- 11 Arthur Schlesinger, *The Vital Centre: the Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 151.
- 12 Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen, New York: Knopf, 1971, 396.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 197.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 224-5.

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- 15 E. B. White, *Here is New York* (New York: Harper, 1949), 50.
- 16 O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 364-5.
- 17 Paul Goodman, *Five Years: Thoughts During a Useless Time* (New York: Brussel & Brussel, 1964), 25.
- 18 O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 49.
- 19 Ibid., 'Personism', 498.
- 20 Michael Clune, *American Literature and the Free Market, 1945-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 55, 57.
- 21 Paul Goodman, 'Advance-guard Writing 1900-1950', *The Kenyon Review* 13:3 (Summer 1951), 375-6 (his emphasis).
- 22 Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 40. The phrase is taken from Duncan's 'Ode to Dick Brown'.
- 23 John Cage, 'Lecture on Something', in *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (London: Marion Boyers, 1978), 129.
- 24 O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, viii.
- 25 Letter from John Ashbery to Jane Freilicher, August 8, 1950, in the Freilicher archive at the Houghton Library, Harvard.
- 26 Qtd. in Lehman, *Last Avant-Garde*, 7.
- 27 John Ashbery, 'Out of the Ferment: an Interview with Ben Hickman', *Poetry Review* 98:4 (Winter 2008/9), 80-85: 81.
- 28 James Schuyler, *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993), 286-87.
- 29 John Ashbery, *Some Trees* (New York: Corinth Books, 1970 [1956]), 27.
- 30 Recording of 'Schubert's Unfinished' lecture, in Lamont Library, Harvard.

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- 31 Letter from James Schuyler to John Ashbery, October 13, 1959, in the John Ashbery Papers at the Houghton Library, Harvard.
- 32 Barbara Guest, *The Collected Poems of Barbara Guest* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), 14.
- 33 I'm indebted to Claire Hurley for suggesting this reading of the poem.
- 34 Joe LeSueur lists Baraka as someone how 'who saw [O'Hara] all the time, who confided in him, and who in some instances went to bed with him' (126).
- 35 O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 499; Amiri Baraka, *Home: Social Essays* (New York: Akashi Books, 2009), 63 (his emphasis).
- 36 O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 335-6.
- 37 Amiri Baraka, *Transbluesency: The Selected Poems of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones* (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1995), 107.
- 38 See Brad Gooch, *Frank O'Hara: City Poet* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), 425.