

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Radical Empiricist Poetics in the New York School and Beyond

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1r8728zb>

Author

Emerson, Maude Chanson

Publication Date

2017

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

Radical Empiricist Poetics in the New York School and Beyond

by

Maude Chanson Emerson

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Charles Altieri, Chair

Professor Eric Falci

Professor John Campbell

Spring 2017

Abstract

Radical Empiricist Poetics in the New York School and Beyond

by

Maude Chanson Emerson

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Charles Altieri, Chair

This dissertation contends that the first-generation New York School poets—especially John Ashbery, Frank O’Hara, and James Schuyler—develop the aesthetic possibilities of the philosophical stance that William James called “radical empiricism.” James followed the British empiricists in granting priority to parts, individuals, and unanalyzed sensations, but he radicalized the empiricist perspective by holding experiences of cohesion and relation to be as real as those of disjunction and discrete sensation. Schuyler, Ashbery, and O’Hara each practice an empiricist poetics: a poetics of the everyday, the felt, and the miscellaneous. At the same time, their poetics pose challenges to the conceptions of experience on which empiricism historically has been based, from the presumption of a unified experiencing subject to the relegation of sensation and abstraction to separate orders of reality. I argue that these challenges should not be seen as a denial of experience, as some postmodernist readings of New York School poetry allege, but as part of a careful and critical commitment to experience. As radical empiricists, these poets understand experience not as an inward phenomenon but as a field in which inner and outer are merely potential and constantly shifting divisions.

In the first chapter, I locate a precedent for Ashbery’s radical-empiricist poetics in Gertrude Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation*, arguing that both Stein and Ashbery confound the conceptions of experience that predominate in critical assessments of modern and postmodern poetry and art. In the second chapter, O’Hara’s poetry presses the necessity of distinguishing between radical-empiricist poetics and the influential poetics of pragmatism. O’Hara shares pragmatism’s conception of experience as fluid and precarious, but his poems highlight affective dimensions of experience that are lost when poetry is understood pragmatically, as an instrument designed to provide the reader, or the poet, with momentary clarity and provisional ideals conducive to her progress in an unsteady world. Chapter Three analyzes the technique of bathetic deflation that Schuyler employs to forestall the idealization of notions like experience, self, and nature in an effort to keep the phenomena that those terms describe thoroughly suspended in the matrix of the empirical. Finally, in a chapter linking the poetry of the New York School to the art of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, I argue that these poets and artists respond in parallel ways to the models of experience associated with Abstract Expressionist painting. Johns and Rauschenberg recover the category of experience by unhooking it from the language of self, soul, and expression with which it had long been associated and resituating it in the world of material objects, including the human body.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Introduction	iv
Chapter One. John Ashbery's Conjunctive Poetics	1
Chapter Two. Precarious and Stable: Experience in Frank O'Hara's Poetry and the Problems with Pragmatism	24
Chapter Three. "The greens around them, and / the browns, the grays, are the park": James Schuyler's Empiricism	46
Chapter Four. "A Paper Rubbed Against the Heart": Robert Rauschenberg, Frank O'Hara and Jasper Johns	75
Works Cited	109

List of Figures

Fig. 1. Robert Rauschenberg, <i>Red Import</i> , 1954.	86
Fig. 2. Robert Rauschenberg, <i>Untitled</i> , 1954.	89
Fig. 3. Robert Rauschenberg, <i>Red Interior</i> , 1954.	97
Fig. 4. Jasper Johns, <i>Skin with O'Hara Poem</i> , 1963-65.	98
Fig. 5. Jasper Johns, <i>Memory Piece (Frank O'Hara)</i> , 1961-70.	101
Fig. 6. Marcel Duchamp, <i>Torture-Morte</i> , 1959.	103

Acknowledgements

During my years at Berkeley I have benefited from the support and guidance of a number of professors without whom this dissertation would not have been possible. Charles Altieri and Eric Falci have provided prompt and productive feedback on virtually everything I have written. The balance between the enthusiasm of the former and the gentle skepticism of the latter was just the tonic I needed to bring this project into being. Dan Blanton has been extraordinarily generous with his time and in his readings, which have a way of turning every sentence into the seed of exciting possibilities. Mitch Breitwieser shaped my sense of the relationship between literature and philosophy and made (continues to make) literary scholarship feel like a noble undertaking. I thank him especially for getting me hooked on William James, and giving me, as Dan Blanton (and Isabelle Stengers) put it, someone to “think with.” I found a new person to “think with”—a room full of them, in fact—in the Whitehead reading group of 2013-14. I am grateful to Lyn Hejinian for organizing that group, and for showing me the kind of reader I would like to be: patient and generous but not uncritical, and in the end, I think, pragmatic—looking, that is, toward the lives that words lead in the world.

I am grateful to James Turner for a grant-in-aid from the James D. Hart Chair of English and a matching grant from Charles Altieri that allowed me to observe the drips and crackles of Rauschenberg’s *Red Paintings* from up close.

My fellow graduate students have been an invaluable source of social and intellectual companionship. Years of conversations with Jocelyn Rodal, Juliana Chow, and Christopher Miller, in particular, have left their mark on this dissertation.

Immeasurable thanks to Nick, for listening to me think out loud, among many, many other things.

Finally, this dissertation owes a debt to my dad, scholar of pop music, who taught me to be suspicious of claims to authenticity, and that the borrowed and the faked are by no means incompatible with the best things in art, or life.

Introduction

This dissertation makes two central claims. The first is that the category of “experience” is key to understanding the work of the first-generation New York School poets, especially John Ashbery, James Schuyler, and Frank O’Hara. The second is that amid a wider impetus across the postwar American arts to reorient art around everyday experience, the New York School poets, along with certain of their contemporaries like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, handle the concept of experience in a distinctive and philosophically important way. I find a model for this way of treating experience in the thinking and writing of William James, especially in the worldview that James calls “radical empiricism.”

It might sound strange to identify the emulation of lived experience as characteristic of the postwar moment in the American arts. By most accounts, a turn toward subjective experience and everyday life is a defining trend of the modernism of the first half of the twentieth century, not the postmodernism of the second half. For a broad swathe of artists in the 1950s and 1960s, however, that’s not what modernism looked like, or if it did, it was a modernism that they felt had been lost or misinterpreted, overwhelmed by mid-century by a tide of academic formalism. (This is the implication, for instance, of Donald Allen’s claim in his preface to *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960* that the “one common characteristic” of the poetry included in that anthology is “a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse” (xi).) In this dissertation, I situate the New York School poets amongst a range of contemporaneous voices across the arts that called for renewed attention to the manner and makeup of experience—a call that may be understood alternately and sometimes even simultaneously as a departure from modernism and a return to its fundamental principles.

In Chapter One, for example, I argue that John Ashbery’s poetic development is continuous with the historically modernist work of Gertrude Stein, especially her *Stanzas in Meditation*. Furthermore, I argue that Stein and Ashbery not only carry forward the project of describing experience that James undertakes in different ways in both *The Principles of Psychology* and *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, they also highlight the extreme complexity of that project, already present in James’s writings, which literary (and other) critics have often failed to register. Chapter One begins by situating James in relation to two of his most significant philosophical interpreters, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Alfred North Whitehead, who point in the direction of two different visions for twentieth-century art. (The relationship of those visions to the periodizing and aesthetic categories of modernism and postmodernism is, here again, variable and complex.) If it was common among avant-garde poets and artists the 1950s and 1960s to conceive of their work as grounded in the terrain of experience, by the 1970s, those appeals to experience had come to seem dated and suspect, reflective of conceptions of authentic selfhood and idealized nature that the intellectual climate no longer supported. Critics wishing to champion the work of early postmodernists from an avant-garde perspective would have—and still continue—to be selective in their emphases, focusing on the more objectivist and critical sides of that work while downplaying its experiential aspects. In other words, they would, and continue to, interpret that work in a manner more consonant with the spirit of Wittgenstein than the spirit of James. I discuss this tendency in the reception of Ashbery in Chapter One and of Rauschenberg and Johns in Chapter Four, and trace similar patterns in the critical terms applied to James Schuyler’s poetry in Chapter Three.

Wittgenstein’s response to James is rich and complicated, taking the form of a conversation carried on in many different passages of Wittgenstein’s writings. But in the passage

on which I focus in Chapter One, his criticism of James is stark: what James takes to be “feelings” directly experienced and apprehended through acts of introspection, Wittgenstein declares, belong instead to structuring domain of grammar. Whereas Wittgenstein criticizes James by emphasizing the limits of experience, Whitehead, in contrast, continues in the direction of James’s radical empiricism, widening and refining even further than James did the sense of what experience includes. In this sense, I argue, Whitehead as well as Stein and Ashbery pick up on the complexity inherent in James’s construction of experience in a way that Wittgenstein does not. Indeed, a recent surge of interest in Whitehead has brought this more complex understanding of James’s experience to the fore. Isabelle Stengers, for example, writes of “the importance . . . of the role played for Whitehead by the type of psychology of which William James announces the possibility”:

If experience in the sense of William James could serve as a prototype for [Whitehead’s concept of] the actual occasion, it is because James’s description results from a deliberate project of “depsychologization” of experience in the usual sense of conscious, intentional experience, authorizing a clear distinction between the subject and its object. It is insofar as William James rejected reflective consciousness and its pretensions to invariance, the privilege of occupying center stage, that he rendered explicit what human experience requires from metaphysics, and more specifically what it demands that metaphysics resist. (202)

In other words, “[e]xperience” as James constructs it “is no longer ‘our’ experience but the concrete fact, which forces us to metaphysical creation” (204). Both Wittgenstein and Whitehead greeted enthusiastically the “depsychologization” of experience accomplished in James’s watershed essay of 1904, “Does Consciousness Exist?,” which insists that the word “consciousness” corresponds not to an entity but to a function. But whereas for Wittgenstein, this marks the end of “metaphysical creation,” for Whitehead, it marks the beginning.

This triangle of James, Wittgenstein, and Whitehead helps me to sketch some of the attitudes toward experience that inform the work of the New York School poets and structure critical discussions of twentieth-century literature. There is a strong tendency in critical assessments of modern and postmodern American poetry and art to judge that poetry and art as either committed to (or nostalgic for) experience, thereby granting the subject “the privilege of occupying center stage,” or critical of the category of experience, dedicated to exposing its fictions and foregrounding instead either the materiality of the medium or rational structures, like Wittgenstein’s grammar, conceived as external to experience. In Chapter One, I show this binary logic at work in scholarly assessments of Stein and suggest that her writing in fact pushes against the Wittgensteinian opposition between grammar and experience. In Chapter Four I take up a parallel example in the postwar decades, and attempt to redress the way that O’Hara, Johns, and Rauschenberg are often trapped within the terms of a dichotomy between a modernist nostalgia for experience and the critical postmodernism, dedicated to unstitching illusions of immediacy and authenticity, that burgeoned in their wake. While the art of Rauschenberg and Johns has aspects of a Wittgensteinian critique of experience from without, I argue that it ultimately has more in common with James’s (and Whitehead’s) renovation of experience from within, and that approaching their art in the light of O’Hara’s poetry helps to bring this affinity into focus.

In the writings of James and Whitehead, I explain in Chapter One, “experience ceases to look like the purely private realm of sensations and emotions—the realm that the modernist

‘stream of consciousness,’ for example, is often understood to describe—and appears, instead, as the complex fabric of the actual, from which individual subjects are only one type of event to emerge” (2-3). This is the vision of experience that I find realized in the work of Ashbery, O’Hara, Schuyler, Rauschenberg, and Johns. A similar vision, however, is more explicitly expounded by Charles Olson, who, unlike the New York School poets, was a serious reader of Whitehead. Why, then, do I turn to the New York School for a poetic instantiation of a radical-empiricist worldview? Could I just as easily find it in the poetry of Olson and Beat and Black Mountain poets for whom he was deeply influential? The answer to these questions unfolds in Chapter Three. Olson might expound a radical-empiricist worldview, but his poetry does not enact one—at least not to the extent that Ashbery’s, O’Hara’s, or Schuyler’s does. I argue that among their contemporaries, the New York School poets were singularly wary of the risk, in striving to craft a poetry reflective of lived experience, of abstracting experience itself, imbuing it with a character and an authority removed from the domain of the empirical. Focusing on the poetry of Schuyler, in particular, I demonstrate that he shares with James a technique of bathetic deflation that forestalls the idealization of experience, and I contrast this feature of his poetry to examples from the work of Olson, Gary Snyder, and William Everson.

*

To the contexts that I have enumerated here—the philosophical context of Wittgenstein, Whitehead, and James, the historical and poetic context of *The New American Poetry*, and the art-historical context of Johns and Rauschenberg and their critical reception—I want to add one more, which merges the poetic, the philosophical, and political. In *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940*, the historian James Livingston discusses Walt Whitman in terms that resonate with those of my study of the New York School. The New York School poets embody the legacy of William James in the later twentieth century, in my reading, in the same respect that Whitman, according to Livingston, is James’s most relevant poetic precursor in the nineteenth century. Comparisons between Whitman and individual poets of the New York School are common: it would be difficult *not* to find echoes of Whitman’s profligate intimacy, for example, in O’Hara’s daily encounters, especially queer encounters, with the scenes and inhabitants of New York City. The connection that Livingston’s reading of James’s reading of Whitman enables me to posit, however, is more specific and philosophically trenchant than these incidental comparisons, and supports my assertion of James as the vital theorist of the attitudes and efforts that define this poetic lineage.

James refers to Whitman at several points in his writings, treating him most expansively in his 1898 lecture to students, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings.” This lecture is one of the last places in James’s oeuvre that a reader might expect to discover a conception of experience that could be considered ahead of its time. Even James himself felt compelled to defend the talk as “more than the mere piece of sentimentalism which it may seem to some readers” (*Talks* v). In it, he celebrates the “inner joy” experienced by the likes of Emerson and Wordsworth upon the contemplation of nature, which suffuses the ordinary world with a vital glow. (The title of the talk refers to the “blindness with which we are all afflicted” to those inner feelings that color the worlds of “creatures and people different from ourselves” (*Talks* 229).) “A Certain Blindness” seems like an affirmation of a familiar, even clichéd Romantic individualism, but Livingston follows James in insisting that the essay is more revolutionary than it appears. It is the lecture’s portrayal of Whitman, especially, that saves it from romanticism and marks its affiliation with the more innovative currents of James’s thought, which Livingston characterizes as “postmodern in the strictest sense” (214)—a designation to which I will return in a moment.

An historian of political economy, Livingston frames his analysis of James and Whitman in terms of their relationships to political-economic conditions and their cultural correlates and consequences. (Specifically, he sees Whitman as a “prophet”—James’s word—of the turn-of-the-century transition from industrial or proprietary to corporate capitalism the dawn of consumer culture in the United States.) In “On A Certain Blindness,” James describes Whitman as “a sort of ideal tramp,” whose insight into the “essential divinity” of the world depends precisely on his being, from a practical standpoint, “a worthless, unproductive being” (*Talks* 248, qtd. in Livingston 169). It would be possible, Livingston writes, “to treat James’s distaste for commercial value as the typical mugwump’s response to the unsightly ‘grope of wealth’ that seemed to have reshaped American life or, more generally, as a species of ‘romantic reaction’ against the cash nexus and its sordid implications” (168). Indeed, this is the gist of Frank Lentricchia’s interpretation of the lecture, which he understands (as he understands James’s thought in general) as an attempt “to preserve a human space of freedom, however interiorized, from the vicissitudes and coercions of the marketplace, a theme repeated by all manner of American poets and novelists” (31). Livingston’s point, however, is that Whitman is not one of these poets and novelists: to the contrary, “he exalts almost everything he encounters, including the evidence of wealth and commerce as well as work,” and this indiscriminate exaltation is precisely “what makes him useful, and delightful, to James” (169). In the lines from “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” that James quotes in the lecture, Whitman exclaims with equal fervor “the gladness of the river and the bright flow” and “the thick-stemmed pipes of steamboats,” the “seagulls ... high in the air, with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies” and “the gray walls of the granite store-houses by the docks” (qtd. in *Talks* 249-50). Unlike Emerson’s “Poet,” who “cannot freely admire a noble landscape, if laborers are digging in the field hard by” (qtd. in Livingston 203), Whitman finds no impediment to poetry in “[t]he sailors at work in the rigging” (qtd. in *Talks* 250): they are an integral part of the scene that absorbs his attention—absorbs it so thoroughly, Livingston argues, that it constitutes his self (169).

Indeed, for Livingston, Whitman’s impartial embrace of the natural and the commercial—even, Livingston goes on to demonstrate, of the commodity in its fetishized form (204-205)—represents more than an attitude toward an economic regime. Rather, it stands as either a sign or a precondition—his account doesn’t make it exactly clear which—of a “fundamental reconstruction of subjectivity” (158) that exacts an acceptance of “the phenomenology of the market” (170) as its cost. Criticisms of the market that circulated in Whitman’s and James’s historical moments and just after, Livingston demonstrates, were based on a model of “modern subjectivity” that reinforced an opposition between mind and matter, with mind occupying “an Archimedean point outside of that culture, that historical moment,” from which that culture could be judged. In order to repudiate the political-economic circumstances of his moment, that is, Whitman would have to stand outside of them, abstracting his self from “the phenomenal world of others and objects”—an abstraction that his poetics of absorption emphatically does not allow (169). “[I]n Whitman’s conspectus,” Livingston writes, “the knower is not exterior to the known. So the integrity of the knower, that is, of the self, cannot be guaranteed by its withdrawal or abstention from the phenomenal world; indeed the usual distinction between the phenomenal world and a point of view on that world—between subject and object—becomes untenable” (170). This passage beyond “modern subjectivity” is what Livingston means by “postmodern in the strictest sense.”

Accepting the terms of Whitman’s bargain would not have been easy for someone with James’s political sympathies. In fact, many of James’s interpreters would staunchly deny that he

accepted those terms, interpreting him instead as an “antimodernist” critic of the increasingly technologized world of modern capitalism.¹ But as Livingston demonstrates, other interpreters, like Lewis Mumford, saw in James’s persistent use of economic metaphors a full-throated embrace of capitalism and criticized pragmatism “as the spirit, the culmination, of the Gilded Age” (225). A version of this bifurcation also marks James’s reception in the field of psychology, in which he is alternately taken to authorize behaviorist—that is, purely objective, positivistic—and introspective or phenomenological approaches. The fact that James can be interpreted in each of these incompatible ways suggests either the inconsistency or the subtlety of his position, and like Livingston, I am convinced of the latter. The bifurcation in James’s reception testifies to the tenacity of “the epistemological extremes enabled by modern subjectivity—that is,” the extremes of “*romanticism*, which typically glorifies the ‘organic’ or ‘subjective’ inner self as against the ‘mechanical’ or ‘objective’ circumstances that constitute outward existence; and *positivism*, which typically celebrates the increasing density of that external, thing-like realm of objects as the evidence of progress toward the species mastery of nature” (214). Whitman’s poetry is both “useful” and “delightful” to James, in Livingston’s reading, because it exemplifies an attitude that is neither romantic nor positivistic. At the cost of what may look like acquiescence to the state of things as they are, Whitman dissolves “the epistemological extremes” that constitute a fundamental impediment to meaningful change.

For Livingston, this achievement of Whitman’s poetry is also the essence of pragmatism. What Livingston champions as pragmatism, however, I find reason to call by the name of radical empiricism. Pragmatism as Livingston construes it—that is, in a very Jamesian fashion—reflects the same philosophical premises as radical empiricism, but with a difference in emphasis that is especially important when it comes to poetry. I illustrate this difference in Chapter Two by contrasting James’s writing of radical empiricism with the pragmatist aesthetics proposed by John Dewey in *Art as Experience* and echoed, with variations, in the past two and a half decades of pragmatist literary criticism. While the models of pragmatist poetics put forth by Richard Poirier and others are productive for thinking about modernist poetry, I am interested in the ways that Frank O’Hara’s poetry, in its response to the legacies of modernism, clarifies certain limitations and biases of those models. Taking O’Hara’s love poem “St. Paul and All That” as an example, I argue that his poetry highlights affective qualities of experience that a pragmatist understanding of poetry would obscure. Like in the case of Whitman, O’Hara’s radical empiricism, and that of the New York School in general, appears politically acquiescent in comparison with the more forward-looking, action-oriented poetics of pragmatism. This acquiescence, however, is the condition of a profound rewriting of the conceptions of experience and subjectivity that pragmatist poetics ultimately fails to transform.

¹ See, for example, Lentricchia or T. J. Jackson Lears.

Chapter One

John Ashbery's Conjunctive Poetics

Introduction: James, Wittgenstein, and "A feeling of if"

Richard Gale has remarked that Wittgenstein seems to have written his *Philosophical Investigations* with a copy of William James's *Principles of Psychology* open on his desk (qtd. in Goodman 61). Wittgenstein's numerous references to James, both implicit and explicit, reveal the considerable influence of the American psychologist and philosopher on Wittgenstein's thought, as both a spur to criticism *and* a positive source for some of Wittgenstein's most important ways of thinking, as Russell Goodman demonstrates in his illuminating book on the two thinkers. Wittgenstein's most pointed disagreement with James arises over a famous passage from Chapter IX of the *Principles*, "The Stream of Thought." "There is not a conjunction or a preposition," writes James,

and hardly an adverbial phrase, syntactic form, or inflection of voice, in human speech, that does not express some shading or other of relation which we at some moment actually feel to exist between the larger objects of our thought. ... We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*. Yet we do not: so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the existence of the substantive parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use. (1:245-46)

In Part II of the *Philosophical Investigations*, the fragment on the "Philosophy of Psychology," Wittgenstein interrogates James's "feeling of *if*." He doesn't mention James by name but seems to enter into conversation with him directly as he shifts from the first person "we" and "I" in which the foregoing paragraphs are phrased to the second-person singular "you":

39. Are you sure that there is a single if-feeling, and not perhaps several? Have you tried saying the word in a great variety of contexts? For example, when it bears the principle sense of the sentence, and when the following word does.

40. Suppose we found a man who, speaking of how words felt to him, told us that "if" and "but" felt the *same*. – May we not believe him? "He doesn't play our game at all," one would like to say. Or even: "This is a different type of human being." ...

41. One misjudges the psychological interest of the if-feeling if one regards it as the obvious correlate of a meaning; it needs, rather, to be seen in a different context, in that of the special circumstances in which it occurs. (190-91)

Wittgenstein may have taken James's assertion a bit too literally. James does not, I suspect, mean that there is "a single if-feeling," but that there are as many feelings of *if* as there are hypothetical or conditional situations that might arise in the stream of thought. Even so, Wittgenstein's line of questioning leads him to a compelling contradiction of James's claim that the word "if" corresponds to a felt experience: "43. The if-feeling is not a feeling which accompanies the word 'if'" (191).

Russell Goodman writes of how frustrating James's error, as Wittgenstein saw it, must have been for Wittgenstein. For some of the most exciting moments in *The Principles of Psychology* are those in which James identifies and refutes precisely this type of error. James's method of scrupulous introspection often leads him to discover no experience, or a shifting myriad of experiences, where language gives us a static (or hypostatic) noun. Goodman writes, "[t]he lesson that one can recognize one's desk without an act of recognition, that one can rise up without an act of will, and that one can speak without a separate layer of thought backing up one's words are the sort of positive lessons Wittgenstein was able to draw from James as he began reading the *Principles of Psychology* in the early 1930s" (88). The most spectacular example of this maneuver occurs not in the *Principles* but in the essay "Does Consciousness Exist?," in which James scours his experience for an entity corresponding to the word "consciousness" and comes up empty-handed. From Wittgenstein's perspective, the problem revealed by James's attachment to the feelings of *if*, *but*, and *by* is the problem of empiricism: as Goodman puts it, "[w]ith his general empiricism and his incipient radical empiricism, there is nothing in James's universe *other than experience*" for anything to be (84). Wittgenstein's investigations, in contrast, draw attention to things that we *don't* experience—things that belong, instead, to the logic of grammar.

Wittgenstein's divergence from James on the matter of *if* adumbrates the broader movement in twentieth-century philosophy known as the linguistic turn. But it also points to an ongoing question in the understanding of literary modernism, and, consequently, of the postmodernism that follows it. Is the primary impulse of modernism "to record or transcribe the movements & make-up of one's consciousness"—what Charles Bernstein calls "[t]he modernist assumption" (46)? Or is modernism essentially critical of the impulse to represent experience, and concerned instead with the ways in which words either stop short of representation—existing as objects in their own right—or reach beyond it, articulating rational structures that transcend the particulars of "the stream of thought"? Clearly, the answer depends on which works and writers one takes to be central to modernism, not to mention which literary genres and forms of art, and any attempt at an answer must begin from the understanding that the works we describe as modernist follow not one pattern but many. Nonetheless, the question continues to generate conflicting accounts of the modernist field—and, in the case of Gertrude Stein, of a single body of work.

This controversy over Stein is in turn an important context for the poetry of John Ashbery, because the questions at the heart of it remain central to accounts of postmodernism, and because Ashbery's interpretation of Stein has a special bearing on the understanding of his own work that he presents to the public. Writing over a period of decades in which experimental poetry came increasingly under the sign of Wittgenstein, I argue that Ashbery extends the project of William James. Like Stein, however, he does so in ways that complicate the opposition that Wittgenstein draws between experience and grammar: their radical empiricism, I argue, yields a conception of experience that changes the dynamics of the questions that shape critical understandings of the modernist and postmodernist fields. One consequence of the "methodological postulate" of James's radical empiricism, that "[e]verything real must be experienceable somewhere and every kind of thing experienced must somewhere be real" (*Essays* 160), is that experience ceases to look like the purely private realm of sensations and emotions—the realm that the modernist "stream of consciousness," for example, is often understood to describe—and appears, instead, as the complex fabric of the actual, from which

individual subjects are only one type of event to emerge. In both Stein and Ashbery, this transformation of experience is a product of their emphasis on conjunctive relations.

Before turning to Ashbery and his relationship to Stein, however, I want to illustrate what I see as two examples of an alternative to Wittgenstein's reading of James, which play out in the writings of Stein and Alfred North Whitehead. In the same way that James's introspective investigations led him to revise the atomistic conception of experience that experimental psychology had inherited from empiricist philosophy, in the writings of Stein and Whitehead, "feelings of *if*" arise within the field of experience and demand a more flexible, expansive conception of that field.

Stein between grammar and experience

Gertrude Stein's sense of grammar has been alternately aligned with James's and with Wittgenstein's. Like James, with whom she studied at Radcliffe in the 1890's, Stein is a champion of prepositions, articles, and conjunctions, the parts of speech that pass beneath notice but are "varied and alive"—that "work and as they work they live," as she writes in "Poetry and Grammar" (315-16).¹ For many scholars, this resemblance is more than superficial: Stein's writing, as they understand it, carries on James's project of describing the intricate workings of experience. Lyn Hejinian quotes the characterization of her writing that Stein, in the voice of Alice, offers in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*: "Gertrude Stein, in her work, has always been possessed by the intellectual passion for exactitude in the description of inner and outer reality" (865-66, qtd. in Hejinian 89). From this perspective, Stein's radically unconventional writing is a response to the challenge implicit in James's lines, quoted above: if "language almost refuses to lend itself" to experience as it actually occurs, then writing experience requires breaking the "inveterate... habit[s]" of language. This is what Hejinian means when she contends, *contra* nineteenth-century realists like Emile Zola, that realism *does* require a "special way of writing" (94); Ashbery makes a similar point when he compares *Stanzas in Meditation* to the late novels of Henry James (themselves often discussed in relation to the psychological theories of Henry's brother): "If these works are highly complex and, for some, unreadable, it is not only because of the complicatedness of life, the subject, but also because they actually imitate its rhythm, its way of happening" ("Impossible" 252). To designate Stein a realist in this sense is not to propose that she held a naïve view of language's referential capacity—as Hejinian explains, "Somewhat paradoxically perhaps, it is the autonomy of the writing—the high visibility of its devices and even its intrusive strangeness—that authenticates the accuracy of its portrayals and gives the work itself its authority" (94); it is, however, to emphasize the mimetic function of her modes of composition. In addition to the general Jamesian project of analyzing and describing experience, scholars frequently relate Stein's work to James's particular theories. Her employment of repetition with difference, for example, seems an extension of his claim, in "The Stream of Thought," that "*no state*" of the mind or body "*once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before*" (1:230). (Indeed, Stein herself explains her use of repetition with reference to "what William James calls 'the Will to Live'" ("Portraits" 289).) Recently, both Lisi Schoenbach and Liesl Olson have connected Stein's modernism to James's conception of habit. And Wendy Steiner and Steven Meyer each advance versions of the argument that after her early opus *The Making of Americans*, Stein developed a style of writing intended to impart what James calls "knowledge of acquaintance," in contradistinction to the more abstract mode of "knowledge about."²

If many Stein scholars emphasize her Jamesian realism, however, other interpreters see her work, and modernism itself, in a different light. Marjorie Perloff, one of Stein's most ardent and prolific explicators over the past several decades, casts Stein as a key progenitor of an avant-garde strain of modernism that has more in common with Wittgenstein's thought than with James's. Just as Wittgenstein denies that the word "if" names an event in the stream of thought that exists prior to its naming, the hallmark of the modernist aesthetic that Perloff champions is the "conviction that the poet begins, not with ideas to be embodied in words, but with the words themselves" (*21st-Century* 74). In books like *Wittgenstein's Ladder* and *21st-Century Modernism: the "New" Poetics*, Perloff presents a Stein whose experiments with language are emphatically *not* intended to represent experience, but to highlight the materiality of language. Jennifer Ashton, in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century*, disagrees with this portrayal of Stein as a "literalist,"³ but her own reading also echoes Wittgenstein's challenge to James's empiricism. Stein, Ashton argues, was not content with experience as an ultimate or sufficient category—and certainly not experience as James conceived it, as a continuously flowing stream of psychic states. In "The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans," for example, Stein describes encountering the limitations of writing in the mode of James's "knowledge of acquaintance": "When I was up against the difficulty of putting down the complete conception that I had gradually acquired by listening seeing feeling and experience, I was faced by the trouble that I had acquired all this knowledge gradually but when I had it I had it completely at one time" (277-78, qtd. in Ashton 49). Ashton relates Stein's need for a language capable of expressing abstract wholes to mathematics—a structure which, like Wittgenstein's grammar, is not part of experience but prescribes "the logical conditions of its possibility" (33). The major transition in Stein's style, in Ashton's assessment, is "a movement from ... a phenomenological model of composition to a logical one" (32).

The divergence between James and Wittgenstein on the subject of *if* appears to be absolute. Either *if* belongs to experience or it belongs to grammar: in neither Wittgenstein's writing nor James's do we see the possibility of a middle ground. Ashton, likewise, presents logic and experience as mutually exclusive. When it comes to the *ifs*, *ands*, and *bys* of Stein's writing, however, one would be hard pressed to discern between the phenomenological and the logical. Take, for example, the word "if" in "If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso," which appears eighteen times in the first eight sentences:

If I told him would he like it. Would he like it if I told him.
 Would he like it would Napoleon would Napoleon would would he like it.
 If Napoleon if I told him if I told him if Napoleon. Would he like it if I
 told him if I told him if Napoleon. ... (506)

For me, there is no question that these lines produce a feeling of *if*. The repetition of "if" and "would" produces in my mind a sustained feeling of conjecture, in which the state of conjecturing feels very definite while the content of the conjecture remains vague. It is entirely possible to understand this feeling as one color in a palette of psychic tones in which Stein has painted Picasso's portrait, in combination with other shades that emerge as the portrait continues, like presentness and exactitude. Whether the word *if* can produce a feeling of *if*, however, is a different question from whether it represents one. Furthermore, the "if" in "Picasso" has to be understood as a sound-particle and perhaps even a visual particle, entering into compositional

relations in the portrait that have nothing to do with its conventional signification *or* its grammatical function.

The *ifs*, *ands*, and *buts* of *Stanzas in Meditation* remain more situated in their grammatical functioning. Unlike the *ifs* in the portrait of Picasso, these conjunctions and other “colorless connecting words,” as Ashbery refers to them in his famous review of Stein’s *Stanzas* (“Impossible” 250), do not lead a double life as elements in a sound-collage; rather, they enter into compositional relationships in the poem precisely on the basis of their grammatical function of establishing relationships between other language elements. As in the portrait of Picasso, the connections themselves are much more precise than the matter they articulate. Both a logical and a phenomenological interpretation of this fact are available. The opening lines of Part Two, Stanza III feature the trailing wisps of narrative and the insistent presence of an unidentified “they” that characterize the poem as a whole:

They may lightly send it away to say
That they will not change it if they may
Nor indeed by the time that it is made
They may indeed not be careful that they were thankful
That they should distinguish which and whenever
They were not unlikely to mean it more
Than enough not to decide that they would not
Or well indeed if it is not better
That they are not cautious if she is sleepy
And well prepared to be close to the fire
Where it is as if outside it did resemble
Or may be they will relinquish. (83-83)

Of course it is possible to conjecture about the matter under discussion in this stanza: maybe the first part is about a book manuscript sent off to a publisher. The picture of a sleepy woman, or perhaps a girl, emerges quite distinctly at the end of this passage, but it is conditioned by an “if” that is itself more definite than the sleepy figure, whose sleepiness, after all, is only a possibility: “if she is sleepy.” On one hand, the definiteness of the logical operators in this stanza might be seen to confirm Wittgenstein’s suspicion about the “feeling of *if*”: through the vague and discontinuous context, the *ors*, *nors*, and *ifs* march on, establishing the form of continuous sense that is just that—mere form. In this way, the *Stanzas* might be said not to imitate experience but to expose experience’s conditions of possibility. On the other hand, this specious continuity might be understood as accurately mimetic of the Jamesian “stream of thought,” which is composed as much of feelings of transition and relation as it is of more stable impressions like blue or cold—and which, James points out, is as liable to unfold according to the form of a thought as it is to its content.⁴

Stein’s poetry conveys the impression that experience and grammar are bound together in a way that makes it impossible to imagine excluding one from the operations of the other. And this impression is borne out by her statement from “The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans,” “I was faced by the trouble that I had acquired all this knowledge gradually but when I had it I had it completely at one time.” To repeat, Jennifer Ashton sees Stein’s shift from “a phenomenological model of composition to a logical one” as a definitive turn away from “experience itself as the defining feature of knowledge” (51). If we look closely at Stein’s

statement, however, we see that Stein is not opposing knowledge gained through experience to an abstract knowledge that exists outside of experience, but noticing the experience of two different kinds of knowing: “when I had it I had it completely at one time.” The form of Stein’s remark is highly reminiscent of James’s methodology: through an act of introspection, she discovers a multiplicity of distinct psychic states that our psychological vocabulary—or in this case, her own compositional practice—had failed to distinguish or accommodate. In this case, what she discovers is a demand for a language of abstraction emanating from within experience itself.

Whitehead and the “imaginative perception of experiences”

In explaining the interest that mathematics held for Stein, Ashton quotes from Alfred North Whitehead’s popular *Introduction to Mathematics*: Whitehead writes, “Mathematics as a science commenced when first someone, probably a Greek, proved propositions about *any* things or about *some* things, without specification of definite particular things” (7, qtd. in Ashton 56). It isn’t hard to see the pertinence of this conception of mathematics to the writer who preferred pronouns to nouns because “[t]hey represent someone but they are not its or his name [and i]n not being his or its name they already have a greater possibility of being something than if they were as a noun is the name of anything” (“Poetry and Grammar” 316). Both Stein and Whitehead here extol a way of speaking about the world that abstracts from particular experience. But by the time he writes *Process and Reality*, published in 1929, Whitehead is unequivocal about his philosophy’s basis in a radical empiricism, expressed in what he calls the “reformed subjectivist principle”: “that apart from the experience of subjects there is nothing, nothing, nothing, bare nothingness” (167). What Russell Goodman, writing about Wittgenstein, criticizes in James as a shortcoming—that he can imagine nothing other than experience for anything to be—Whitehead, the mathematician, claims for himself in the strongest terms. Before he was able to reconcile his respect for logic with his commitment to empiricism, however, the relation between them struck him as a troubling dilemma.

Gertrude and Alice were guests of the Whiteheads on the day when England entered World War I. Because the war prevented them from returning to Paris, their weekend visit turned into a sojourn of more than two months at the Whiteheads’ country house in Lockeridge. During that time, according to *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, “Gertrude Stein and Doctor Whitehead walked endlessly around the country. They talked of philosophy and history” (807); “The long summer wore on . . . , and Doctor Whitehead and Gertrude Stein never ceased wandering around in it and talking about all things” (812). I am not the first reader to be tantalized by these references in *The Autobiography*.⁵ What would Stein and Whitehead have discussed as they rambled through the English countryside in August through October of 1914? The war itself, certainly; but judging from Alice’s remarks in *The Autobiography*, Stein’s interest in the particulars of current events would quickly have been exhausted. As a writer, Stein had left behind the prose style of *Three Lives* and *The Making of Americans* and been working, for several years, in the more abstract modes of the portraits and *Tender Buttons*, which had appeared in print that May. As for Whitehead, his philosophy was in a moment of transition. The *Principia Mathematica* had been published, and while he continued to teach mathematics during the war, in his writing, he began to turn to philosophy and the natural sciences (See Lowe, *Alfred North Whitehead* 92). This work would culminate in the publication of *The Concept of Nature* in 1920 and *Science and the Modern World* in 1925.

It is conceivable (although to imagine it is to engage in a speculative fiction—to entertain, that is, a feeling of “if”) that Stein and Whitehead discussed the problem of how the abstractions of logic, math, or grammar relate to the inchoate stream of experience. And it is possible to picture both of them straining towards a discovery which it would take Whitehead many more years to formulate, that the answer to the problem lay in radically reformulating the concept of experience. The problem itself arises in Whitehead’s writing two years after his walks with Stein. In September of 1916, he gave a lecture to the British Association for the Advancement of Science that broaches the relationship between the natural sciences and the “logical science” that was his field of expertise (105). What is fascinating about this lecture, titled “The Organisation of Thought,” is how emphatically Whitehead affirms both the empirical basis *and* the logical basis of science without being able (a) to overcome what he still perceives as the incompatibility between the worlds designated by the two modes of thought, or (b) to clarify the relationship between them, beyond insisting that there is one.

Whitehead takes as the “starting-ground” of the sciences the world of which we are aware through sensory and felt experience: what in *The Concept of Nature* he will define *as* nature. The task of science, Whitehead writes, “is the discovery of the relations which exist within that flux of perceptions, sensations, and emotions which forms our experience of life. The panorama yielded by sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, and by more inchoate sensible feelings, is the sole field of its activity” (“Organisation” 109). There seems to be a possibility for a rapprochement between logic and empiricism here in the notion of “relations which exist within” the flux of perceptions, etc., but as the lecture continues, *even though* Whitehead continues to insist that “[s]cience is essentially logical” (114), the two realms grow increasingly incompatible. Whitehead describes the relationship between the sensory “panorama” and the organizing operations of scientific thought in terms reminiscent of Bergson or James:

I insist on the radically untidy, ill-adjusted character of the fields of actual experience from which science starts. ... This fact is concealed by the influence of language, moulded by science, which foists on us exact concepts as though they represented the immediate deliverances of experience. The result is that we imagine that we have immediate experience of a world of perfectly defined objects implicated in perfectly defined events which, as known to us by the direct deliverance of our senses, happen at exact instants of time, in a space formed by exact points, without parts and without magnitude: the neat, trim, tidy, exact world which is the goal of scientific thought. (110)

By the time he arrives at *Science and the Modern World* and even *The Concept of Nature*, Whitehead will see modes of abstraction as much more tightly involved in “actual experience,” so I find it fascinating that in 1916 he is still writing about them in such antagonistic terms. Even in this lecture, however, there is a building sense that “actual experience” as it is here understood is itself too trim and tidy a concept. Like Stein, he finds that it leaves out too much, and again like Stein, he finds this *through* his careful consideration of experience itself. Where Stein felt that her psychological vocabulary needed to expand to include the experience of “knowing something all at once,” Whitehead feels the pressure of what, in the following passage, we might well call a “feeling of *if*.” “[N]either common sense nor science,” Whitehead avers,

can proceed with their task of thought organisation without departing in some respect from the strict consideration of what is actual in experience. Think again of the chair.

Among the experiences upon which its concept is based, I included our expectations of its future history. I should have gone further and included our imagination of all the possible experiences which in ordinary language we should call perceptions of the chair which might have occurred. This is a difficult question, and I do not see my way through it. But at present in the construction of a theory of space and of time, there seem insuperable difficulties if we refuse to admit ideal experiences. (112-13)

By “ideal,” Whitehead simply means “not actual.” That is, these “perceptions of the chair which might have occurred” do not have the same actuality as perceptions of the chair that have in fact occurred. But they do have actuality as perceptions of possibilities—of ways in which the chair might or will be, *if* certain conditions arise. And Whitehead feels strongly that these perceptions are part of experience: he goes on to say, “[t]his imaginative perception of experiences, which, *if* they occurred, would be coherent with our actual experiences, seems fundamental in our lives. It is neither wholly arbitrary, nor yet fully determined. It is a vague background which is only made in part definite by isolated activities of thought” (113, emphasis added). The feelings of possibility that were supposed to be “departures from the strict consideration of what is actual in experience” are discovered here *in* experience. At this stage, Whitehead can’t “see his way through” this; he can only pose it as “the fundamental question of scientific philosophy”: “How does exact thought apply to the fragmentary, vague continua of experience? I am not saying that it does not apply, quite the contrary. But I want to know how it applies” (110-11). Both Whitehead and Stein are Jamesians, I argue, in that they do not seek to articulate an alternative to experience, but make their writings a venue for creative and relentless inquiry into the “fundamental question[s]” that experience poses.

Sandford Schwartz, in *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot, & Early 20th-Century Thought*, describes James as one of four representative philosophers (along with Bergson, Nietzsche, and Bradley) whose “sharp opposition between conceptual abstraction and the flux of concrete sensations” is mirrored in the work of modernist poets (19). This characterization of James is valid, of course; but a different James is reflected in the work of Whitehead and Stein. For this James, immediate experience is not simply a refuge from the dehumanizing abstractions of science and capitalism, as some critics imagine it to be.⁶ Rather, James’s way of conceiving experience becomes an impetus for what Bruno Latour calls “the most arduous question of Whitehead”: “to decide whether or not empiricism can be renewed so that ‘what is given in experience’ is not simplified too much” (“What is Given” 226); for Brian Massumi, too, James issues a call for “an expanded empiricism.”⁷ From both Whitehead’s perspective and Stein’s, James’s conception of experience may indeed not be open *enough*; Latour explains that with James, “as with Bergson, rationalism is not given its full due” (229). Nonetheless, this James’s characteristic impulse is to expand, rather than to exclude. His example discourages the either/or distinctions that critics often employ to talk about twentieth-century literature: either logic or experience, either modernist or postmodernist, either romantic or avant-garde. And it invites us to recognize a strain of twentieth-century poetry which, in contrast to the familiar exclusionary rhetoric of Pound’s “go in fear of abstractions” (201) to Williams’ “no ideas but in things” (*Paterson* 6), is defined by its attention the possibilities that experience tenders in the form of “a feeling of *if*.” I have suggested that Stein’s writing belongs to this strain; in the rest of the chapter, I argue that it is in this respect that her influence on Ashbery should be understood. *Stanzas in Meditation*, in particular, implements a Jamesian conception of grammar that becomes a model for Ashbery’s own *ands*, *ifs*, *buts*, and *bys*.

Ashbery's "hymn to possibility"

Andrew Ross captures the vexed relationship of later postmodernism to the Romantic experientialism of its early flowerings by comparing the cover art of *The New American Poetry* to that of its 1982 update, *The Postmoderns: The New American Poetry Revised*. Whereas “[t]he 1960 design sports a rippling flag motif” symbolic of “those elemental freedoms of expression which are the bedrock of the new poetry’s appeal to the unmediated—the oral, the spontaneous, the confessional, the ‘natural,’” in 1982, the editors replaced that motif with Jasper Johns’s *Three Flags* (1958), “one of the first of the iconic Pop works to celebrate the principle of reproducibility ... and therefore to abandon the Romantic ethic of the solo craftsman, ... associated with the high modernist cultural values of originality and authenticity” (193-94). There are ways of understanding Johns’s flags that are more complex than the one that Ross offers; indeed, complicating that reading of early postmodernists like Johns and Ashbery is exactly what I find that radical empiricism allows me to do. Nonetheless, the difference between the two covers makes an effective shorthand for the way that practitioners and critics of postmodern poetry reinterpreted its own history even in the course of its unfolding: many of the poets who built on the examples of the *New Americans* would seize upon projective verse, for instance, not for its organicism, which they tend to repudiate, but for its efforts to expurgate the lyric ego and emphasis on poetry’s materiality.

Of the poets collected in either edition of *The New American Poetry*, Ashbery is not obviously one of the Romantics. His poems, as Ross point out, tend to deal in counterfeits and simulacra, painting landscapes whose naturalism they self-consciously recognize as the highest form of artifice (see Ross 196). And yet, when asked in interviews about his poetry, especially in the 1970’s, Ashbery repeatedly invokes the language of “experience.” “It’s a kind of mimesis of how experience comes to me: as one is listening to someone else—a lecturer, for instance—who’s making perfect sense but then suddenly slides into something that eludes one,” he explained to Louis Osti in 1973 (87). Discussing the variability of his diction with interviewers from the *New York Quarterly*, he calls it “the result of my wish to reflect the maximum of my experience when I’m writing: these are the ways in which one finds oneself talking to oneself or to someone else” (30). In an interview with A. Poulin, Jr. in 1972, Ashbery offers what remains the most frequently cited catchphrase for his work: “Most of my poems,” he surmises, “are about the experience of experience” (245).

Often, Ashbery turns to this language of “experience” as a counter to charges of obscurity and insularity. In response to readers who find his poetry impossible to understand, he relates it to this most mundane and intimate of categories. The experience he insists upon isn’t private, moreover, but, as he frames it, universally familiar: “the particular occasion is of lesser interest to me than the way a happening or experience filters through to me. I believe this is the way in which it happens for most people. I’m trying to set down a generalized transcript of what’s really going on in our minds all day long” (“Experience of Experience” 245). It would be possible to take Ashbery’s interest in the “general” over the “particular” as an example of the mathematical aesthetic described by Jennifer Ashton, which celebrates poetry’s capacity to abstract from the stream of thought to make “propositions about *any* things or about *some* things, without specification of definite particular things,” in Whitehead’s words. However, in the same way that Stein requires a language of abstract wholes to reflect her experience of different ways of knowing, Ashbery relates his indifference to particulars to his own “experience of experience”: referring to his habit of shifting pronouns, he explains, “I guess I don’t have a very strong sense

of my own identity and I find it very easy to move from one person in the sense of a pronoun to another and this again helps to produce a kind of polyphony in my poetry which I again feel is a means toward greater naturalism” (“Craft Interview” 25).⁸

In other words, Ashbery doubles down on the notion of “experience” at the very moment when postmodernism is beginning to regard “experience” as a naïve and suspect category. Moreover, whereas many poets in the seventies began to emphasize the objectivist, language-oriented aspects of their modernist predecessors, Ashbery, through his account of his own “naturalism,” consolidates his earlier reading of Stein as an experiential (to use a term more capacious than “psychological”) realist in the tradition of Henry (and implicitly of William) James. In implicitly placing himself, too, within this tradition, Ashbery doesn’t merely misdescribe his own poetry, as advocates of his postmodernism might be tempted to claim, nor does he naively perpetuate a literary idea whose genuinely experimental phase ended with the end of early modernism, nor does he align himself *against* postmodernism or the avant-garde to uphold a more traditional vision of lyric poetry. Instead, like Stein, he shows how the practice of radical empiricism—that is, the Jamesian effort, however “Impossible,”⁹ to attend to what is actual in experience—yields a conception of experience more complex and less idealized than the one imagined by postmodernist critics of “naturalism.” Radical empiricism doesn’t necessarily “appeal to the unmediated—the oral, the spontaneous, the confessional, the ‘natural,’” like some experience-based postwar poetries. To the contrary, Ashbery’s poetry, like James’s philosophy, leads to the conclusion that distinctions often taken to be primary—even to define the boundaries of experience—for example, between nature and artifice, self and other, or reality and illusion, are in fact retrospective interpretations of a more immediate field.

Conjunctive and disjunctive poetics

Ironically, the primary echo in Charles Bernstein’s characterization of “[t]he modernist assumption”—“to record or transcribe the movements & make-up of one’s consciousness”—is not of a historical modernist, but of Ashbery: “I’m trying to set down a generalized transcript of what’s really going on in our minds all day long.” In turn, this phrase and others from Ashbery’s interview with Alfred Poulin, Jr. echo formulations that he first used in his 1957 review of the posthumous Yale University Press edition of *Stanzas in Meditation*. Many critics have noted that in writing about Stein, Ashbery finds a way of talking about his own poetry—or perhaps, runs the bolder claim, a direction for his own poetry, since it is only in volumes subsequent to 1957 (that is, after his first book, *Some Trees*) that the Steinian qualities of his verse emerge. Emily Setina points out that when Ashbery tells Poulin, “What I am trying to get at is a general, all-purpose experience—like those stretch socks that fit all sizes” (“Experience of Experience” 251), “he recycles a line that [he] had used to describe *Stanzas*, as providing ‘a general, all-purpose model which each reader can adapt to fit his own set of particulars’” (Setina 148). For Setina, the aspect of Stein’s writing that hits closest to home for Ashbery is her difficulty, which—like his own, Setina argues—he understands as “a means of affective engagement”—a “shared province of the writer and the reader,” rather than a distance that the writer interposes between them (144). For many critics, Setina notes, the difficulty that Stein inspires in Ashbery is specifically that of *The Tennis Court Oath*, which, published in 1962, is Ashbery’s most manifestly experimental book of verse. The quality of that verse that critics usually identify as both the source of its difficulty and the badge of its experimentalism is its disjunctiveness.

“Disjunctive” has a particular meaning in the field of twentieth-century American poetry. For Peter Quartermain, it designates a “‘line’ of poetry running from Gertrude Stein

through Louis Zukofsky and the Objectivists to the Language Writers” (2). The characteristics of this “line,” according to Quartermain, are an emphasis on poetry’s objecthood over its symbolic, expressive, or representational dimensions, and a commitment to open form that represents an “oppositional stance” toward the conventions of epistemology as well as of poetry: “Writing of this sort . . . continually insist[s] that reality is not a preconstituted world ‘out there’ to be experienced, any more than a poem is a predetermined schematic of rhyme, organized rhythms, and identifiable themes” (1). If “disjunctive” refers to a break with poetic and intellectual traditions, however, it also refers more specifically to the disruption of syntax. In the poetry Quartermain champions, “things stand in no clear relationship to one another save contiguity. Much of the syntax is paratactic, for parataxis forces the reader to build hierarchies on no authority other than his or her own” (19). Parataxis is widely recognized as a hallmark of twentieth-century American poetry’s “other tradition,” to use a phrase coined by Ashbery and adopted, not unproblematically, by Marjorie Perloff to describe the *côté avant-garde* of American verse, whose heroes are Pound, Stein, and Williams rather than Stevens or (the later) Eliot.¹⁰ David Antin, whose essay “Modernism and Postmodernism: Approaching the Present in American Poetry” is a source for Perloff’s understanding of the two traditions, asserts that the essence of modernism—the essence abandoned or etiolated by the later Eliot, the New Critics, and the mainstream of American poetry—is paratactic: “*The Waste Land* and *The Cantos* are based on the principle of collage, the dramatic juxtaposition of disparate materials without commitment to explicit syntactical relations between elements” (106).

Ashbery, it is well known, stands in singularly vexed relationship to the divided field of postwar American poetry; indeed, his poetry can serve to challenge the usefulness of that divide as a critical and historical construct. Poets and critics on both sides of the schism, however, tend to agree that *The Tennis Court Oath* has more in common with the poetics of Pound, Stein, and Williams than with those of Eliot and Stevens, whose influence on Ashbery’s poetry is stronger in some of his other books. Many of the poems in *The Tennis Court Oath* are emphatically disjunctive in the senses mentioned above, manifesting a preference for abrupt juxtapositions over syntactical connections. The first and title poem may be one of those that Ashbery has in mind when he refers to some poems in the volume as “extreme collage” (*John Ashbery in Conversation* 44):

What had you been thinking about
the face studiously bloodied
heaven blotted region
I go on loving you like water but
there is a terrible breath in the way all of this
You were not elected president, yet won the race
All the way through fog and drizzle
When you read it was sincere the coasts
stammered with unintentional villages the
horse strains fatigued I guess . . . the calls . . .
I worry (11)

In this poem, syntactic continuity is coextensive with the unit of the line. The fact that words *within* the line follow one another in acceptable, though incomplete, syntactic patterns actually heightens the effect of disjunction *between* lines. Even more “extreme” is “Europe,” the famous

connection, and it is an irony of the critical literature that the legato of one has been tied to the staccato of the other.

Indeed, the feeling of continuity is a key theme in Ashbery's review. He associates the poem's productive monotony with Stein's use of precisely that relational vocabulary that collagist poetry excludes: "[t]hese austere 'stanzas,'" he writes,

are made up almost entirely of colorless connecting words such as "where," "which," "these," "of," "not," "have," "about," and so on, though now and then Miss Stein throws in an orange, a lilac, or an Albert to remind us that it really is the world, our world, that she has been talking about. The result is like certain monochrome de Kooning paintings in which isolated strokes of color take on a deliciousness they never could have had out of context, or a piece of music by Webern in which a single note on the celesta suddenly irrigates a whole desert of dry, scratchy sounds in the strings. (250)

Whereas the poetics of Pound, Marianne Moore, and the Eliot of *The Waste Land* inspire comparisons to the visual art of collage, and whereas the poetics of Williams and Stein herself are often compared to cubism, here Ashbery compares *Stanzas in Meditation* to monochrome, an important modernist visual style that is rarely discussed in relation to literary arts. And there is another sense in which Ashbery connects the "realism" of *Stanzas* with a feeling of continuity—in this case, between the poem and life beyond the page. "As we get deeper into the poem," Ashbery writes, "it seems not so much as if we were reading as living a rather long period of our lives with a houseful of people. . . . And, just as with people, there is no real escape from them: one feels that if one were to close the book one would shortly re-encounter the *Stanzas* in life, under another guise. As the author says, 'It is easily eaten hot and lukewarm and cold / But not without it'" (250-51). What Ashbery appreciates in *Stanzas*, then, has less to do with disjunctive relations than conjunctive ones: between words arranged in grammatical sequence, between life within and beyond the page. And beginning with his 1966 volume *Rivers and Mountains*, these conjunctive relations will become an essential feature of his own poetic style.

Neither "disjunctive" nor "conjunctive" poetics stands in any intrinsic relation to the effort to imitate experience's way of happening. Critics like Andrew Ross and Marjorie Perloff often write of collage as an alternative to mimesis: a technique for breaking up the dominance of language's representational function and the myth of the expressive subject. At the same time, other advocates of the very same aesthetic understand it as serving an ultimately mimetic objective. As I will discuss in Chapter Three, the music critic Leonard Meyer characterizes assaults on syntax in avant-garde music, painting, and literature as an aesthetic empiricism: that is, an expression of experience conceived as a chaos of sensations, devoid of relations of cause and effect. And Peter Quartermain gets at a similar idea when he claims in *Disjunctive Poetics* that the effect of the "objectivist" orientation of poets like Stein, Williams, and Olson is "to open the poem to registering and attending to areas of experience hitherto deemed unworthy of literary attention" (3)—or, again, when he writes of that poetry's "faith in a world realizable through continual and unflinching attentiveness to the immediacies and the potentialities of meaning and experience" (20). Indeed, Ashbery's famous comments on experience in the 1972 interview are apropos of "Leaving the Atocha Station," one of the most desultory poems in *The Tennis Court Oath*. "[I]t strikes me," he muses, "that the dislocated, incoherent fragments of images which make up the movement of the poem are probably like the experience you get from a train pulling out of a station of no particular significance" (245). For Ashbery, then, the collage mode of *The*

Tennis Court Oath and the strange fluidity of *Rivers and Mountains* might be equally valid strategies for representing the stream of experience. The nature of that stream as it appears in *Rivers and Mountains*, however, has a particular affinity with experience as conceived by William James.

Streams and rivers

When James, in the passage interrogated by Wittgenstein, claims that “[w]e ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*,” his specific target is associationist psychology. Discrete sensations or ideas, he argues, comprise only a fraction of mental life. Much more of it consists of feelings of relation and tendency that are difficult to isolate and name, and that slide into one another in a manner better captured by the metaphor of “[a] ‘river’ or a ‘stream’” than a “‘chain’ or ‘train’”: “Consciousness . . . does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. It is nothing jointed; it flows” (*Principles* 1:239). Ashbery likewise exhibits a preference for liquid metaphors, in his likening of *Stanzas in Meditation* to “water monotonously flowing over a dam,” and in book titles like *Flow Chart*, *A Wave*, and, of course, *Rivers and Mountains*, which, in addition to the title poem, contains the magnificent catalog of world rivers, “Into the Dusk-Charged Air.” But more importantly, Ashbery’s poetry registers the further consequence of James’s redescription of mental life, that granting prominence to words like “into,” “although,” “and,” and “until” doesn’t merely add a new category of elements to the stream of thought, it changes the nature of the stream. Some relations, like those between a sensation and its associates in memory or space, become internal to a given piece of experience, while others, like that between self and other or knower and known, become external—secondary, that is, to the fact of experience itself. Indeed, “consciousness” itself becomes “a kind of external relation” (*Essays* 25). In the remainder of this chapter, I will elaborate on the way in which Ashbery and the Stein of *Stanzas in Meditation* dramatize the internalization of relations, and then close with a discussion of the implications of the externalized relations for Ashbery’s relationship to postmodernism.

James does not fully develop these consequences in *The Principles of Psychology*, which, as a work of “natural science,” is at least nominally constrained to the mode of description. However, in the philosophical essays of 1904-05 collected as *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, it becomes clear that the tenets presented in “The Stream of Thought” as descriptions of mental life are in fact ontological claims. The 1905 essay “A World of Pure Experience,” for example, reprises the key points of “The Stream of Thought”—among them, the felt reality of relations, the sensible continuity of experiences belonging to a particular self, and the practical substitution of “knowledge about” for “knowledge of acquaintance”—only this time, they explicitly comprise a “*Weltanschauung*,” or world-view (“A World” 41). Experience, according to this *Weltanschauung*, “is a process in time, whereby innumerable particular terms lapse and are superseded by others that follow upon them by transitions which, whether disjunctive or conjunctive in content, are themselves experiences, and must in general be accounted at least as real as the terms which they relate” (62). This process, in turn, is the “only one primal material in the world, of which everything is composed” (“Does Consciousness” 4)—although James adds that he speaks of “a stuff of pure experience” only “for fluency’s sake,” for “there is no *general* stuff of which experience at large is made,” but “as many stuffs as there are ‘natures’ in the things experienced” (26). In these essays, the “stream of thought” is replaced by the “stream of experience,” of which thought is now only an aspect, but words of the class that James calls

“grammatical particles” (“A World” 45) still stand as markers of feelings that are integral to its composition:

Prepositions, copulas, and conjunctions, ‘is,’ ‘isn’t,’ ‘then,’ ‘before,’ ‘in,’ ‘on,’ ‘beside,’ ‘between,’ ‘next,’ ‘like,’ ‘unlike,’ ‘as,’ ‘but,’ flower out of the stream of pure experience, the stream of concretes or the sensational stream, as naturally as nouns and adjectives do, and they melt into it again as fluidly when we apply them to a new portion of the stream. (*Essays* 95)

Ashbery recognizes in *Stanzas in Meditation* the complex relational texture of experience imagined in this way when he compares the poems to Henry James’s novels, writing, “Just as life is being constantly altered by each breath one draws, just as each second of life seems to alter the whole of what has gone before, so the endless process of elaboration which gives the work of these two writers a texture of bewildering luxuriance...” (252). In the *Stanzas*, “the process ... whereby innumerable particular terms lapse and are superseded by others that follow upon them by transitions which, whether disjunctive or conjunctive in content, are themselves experiences” is achieved in large part through the way that Stein deploys those parts of speech that James is fond of listing.

Stein, of course, is not Ashbery’s only modernist precursor to thrust “grammatical particles” into the foreground of her writing. Wallace Stevens, whose influence on Ashbery is even more frequently invoked than Stein’s is, also pays special attention to articles, conjunctions, and prepositions. The “colorless connecting words” that play such an important role in *Rivers and Mountains*, however, are more closely related to those of *Stanzas in Meditation* than to Stevens’s in a crucial respect, which Fredric Jameson names in an offhand reference to “Stevens’ inveterate hypostasis of nonsubstantive parts of speech (‘the intricate evasions of as’)” (16). Often, Stevens makes conspicuous ordinarily inconspicuous parts of speech by placing them in unexpected grammatical positions, soemtimes by converting them into nouns: “Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the” (Stevens 186). *Stanzas in Meditation*, in contrast, showcases words like “or,” “that,” and “than” in motion, rather than holding them still, thereby preserving their non-substantive—that is, transitional, relational—nature.

In the twelve lines of Stein’s *Stanzas* quoted earlier in the chapter (beginning “They may lightly send it away to say”), the word “that” appears six times, every time in the role of subordinating conjunction. In fact, it appears with similar frequency throughout the 186 stanzas and virtually always as a subordinating conjunction, despite the extreme grammatical versatility of the word. The same word in “The Man on the Dump” makes a useful comparison: “One sits and beats an old tin can, lard pail. / One beats and beats for that which one believes. / That’s what one wants to get near” (Stevens 185). The drama of “that” in these lines is one of progression from relative pronoun (“that which one believes”) to demonstrative pronoun (“That’s what one wants to get near”)—that is, of a movement toward greater substantialization, with a corresponding promotion from grammatical object to grammatical subject, from the middle to the front of the line. Furthermore, what Stevens “wants to get near” isn’t *that*, but the *what* that *that* stands in for, whether or not the referent can ultimately be determined: the lines continue, “Could it after all / Be merely oneself ...?” The comparison of these *thats* is somewhat tendentious. Of course, Stein is just as interested in the relatively substantive pronoun as she is in the more transitive conjunction—witness the “they” in *Stanzas*. (Interestingly, when she desires a demonstrative or relative pronoun in the poem, she consistently reaches for “this” over “that”:

“All of this never matters in authority / But this which they need as they are alike” (57); “This which I wish to say is this” (229.) But faults in the comparison aside, it does clarify a difference between how Stevens uses parts of speech and how Stein does in *Stanzas*. The prevalence in *Stanzas* of the subordinating “that” propels the poem forward, marking, in each instance, the incipience of a further clause. And it suffuses the *Stanzas* with relationality: a clause rarely stands by itself, but instead arrives embedded in an elaborate syntactical context from which it cannot be easily extricated.

The poems of Ashbery’s *Rivers and Mountains*, like *Stanzas in Meditation*, are relentlessly relational. This is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the poem that comes closest to breaking the rule, “Into the Dusk-Charged Air.” “Into the Dusk-Charged Air” is a procedural poem: one that appears to be motivated not internally, by the flow of one idea into the next, but externally, by the imperative to name a different river in each line. Ashbery takes the typically paratactic form of the catalog, however, and gives it a hypotactic twist:

Far from the Rappahannock, the silent
Danube moves along toward the sea.
The brown and green Nile rolls slowly
Like the Niagara’s welling descent.
Tractors stood on the green banks of the Loire
Near where it joined the Cher.
The St. Lawrence prods among black stones
And mud. But the Arno is all stones. (17)

By inserting prepositions and conjunctions between the phrases and clauses that contain the names of the rivers, Ashbery creates a poem that, like its subject, flows. Each river, instead of appearing as a discrete entity like an item in an encyclopedia, is connected to others by spatial and logical relationships. These relationships seem highly artificial. The Danube’s distance from the Rappahanock, for instance, has no logical bearing on its progress toward the sea. Instead of naturalizing this artifice, Ashbery plays it up, asserting relationships between rivers that are absurd, although probably literally true:

If the Rio Negro
Could abandon its song, and the Magdalena
The jungle flowers, the Tagus
Would still flow serenely, and the Ohio
Abrade its slate banks. (18)

The pathos and humor of the poem, in my reading, are products of the tension between its syntax, which attempts to integrate everything into a fluent relational fabric, and the indissolubility of the proper nouns, so far removed from the sinuous and ramifying bodies to which they refer.

“Into the Dusk-Charged Air” is anomalous among the poems of *Rivers and Mountains*, but it lays bare the central role that relational and even subordinating connections play in the volume. Whereas the relational parts of speech in that poem operate between terms that are obdurately atomistic, however, in other poems, it is more difficult to abstract substantive images

or entities from the relational fabric and the movement of transition. This is true of the opening poem, “These Lacustrine Cities”:

These lacustrine cities grew out of loathing
Into something forgetful, although angry with history.
They are the product of an idea: that man is horrible, for instance,
Though this is only one example.

They emerged until a tower
Controlled the sky, and with artifice dipped back
Into the past for swans and tapering branches,
Burning, until all that hate was transformed into useless love.

Then you are left with an idea of yourself
And the feeling of ascending emptiness of the afternoon
Which must be charged to the embarrassment of others
Who fly by you like beacons. (9)

Ashbery’s use of the word “lacustrine” has been much discussed, and by now, many readers are familiar with its particular association for Ashbery with Geneva and the lake-dwelling civilization that belongs to the city’s prehistoric past.¹¹ The word, however, was initially hazy to most readers (which is why it provoked conversation in the first place), and that haziness would have had an important effect. Despite being the ostensible subject of the poem and the grammatical subject of the first sentence, “[t]hese lacustrine cities” would have made a less definite impression than the ensuing predicate, “grew out of loathing.” This poem emphasizes the movements between states over the states themselves, an emphasis that Ashbery establishes by smudging the points of arrival and departure: the cities grow into an indefinite “something”; the specificity of “the idea” “that man is horrible” is eroded by its being “only one example.” The relative pronouns that begin the last two lines of this passage contribute to the same general effect, much like the *thats* of *Stanzas in Meditation*. They take images that might be syntactical resting-places—the “ascending emptiness of the afternoon,” “others”—and insist on their incompleteness—their ongoing, constitutive involvement in the process of events.

Between the second and third stanzas is an apparently discontinuous transition. With no preparation, the poem shifts from the third to the second person and from a historical time scale to a personal one. The word “then,” however, establishes continuity on the level that James asserts it when he insists that “transitions . . . , whether disjunctive or conjunctive in content, are themselves experiences.” He explains in “The Stream of Thought” that the discontinuity often attributed to personal experience is in fact a property of things. (To recast that in the terms of radical empiricism, the discontinuity belonging to experience’s thing-aspect is mistattributed to its thought-aspect.) “[T]hings,” James writes,

are discrete and discontinuous; they do pass before us in a train or chain, making often explosive appearances and rending each other in twain. But their comings and goings and contrasts no more break the flow of the thought that thinks them than they break the time and the space in which they lie. . . . The transition between the thought of one object and

the thought of another is no more a break in the *thought* than a joint in a bamboo is a break in the wood. (240)

The word “then,” in the case of the poem, is a joint in the bamboo: a word that articulates the conjunctive quality of disjunctive transition. It is thrust into that function especially by its position at the beginning of the line. This position, in turn, points to the most insistent echo of *Stanzas in Meditation* in the poetry of *Rivers and Mountains*. The placement of relational terms at the beginnings of lines is a definitive feature of both books, giving them a common texture even where the bodies of the lines contain very different rhythms and vocabularies:

I know that twenty seven had been had
For which they know no name
But our equality may indubitably spell well
For it or for which or for might it be
That it is a change to think well
Of not only when but might they be just where
They will care
Now fancy how I need you. (*Stanzas* 163)

These decibels
Are a kind of flagellation, an entity of sound
Into which being enters, and is apart.
Their colours on a warm February day
Make for masses of inertia and hips
Prod out of the violet-seeming into a new kind
Of demand that stumps the absolute because not new
In the sense of the next one in an infinite series
But, as it were, pre-existing or pre-seeming in
Such a way as to contrast funnily with the unexpectedness
And somehow push us all into perdition. (*Rivers* 34)

The effect of these first words is one thing missing from Stephen Fredman’s account of the relationship between Stein and Ashbery. Fredman finds similarities between *Stanzas in Meditation* and *Three Poems*, Ashbery’s 1972 book of prose poetry. The features they share, he argues, include “the flatness and sameness of tone in a meditation; the mysterious energy generated by the persistence and seeming monotony of incomprehension;” and “the presentation of life’s ‘way of happening’—the experience of experience” (*Poet’s Prose* 103). In this sense, Fredman offers an important corrective to the critical habit of linking *Stanzas* to *The Tennis Court Oath*. But it is in *Rivers and Mountains*, I argue, that Ashbery establishes the habit of beginning every line, again and again, with relation.

Postmodernism and Radical Empiricism

In *Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry: O’Hara, Bishop, Merrill, and Ashbery*, Mutlu Konuk Blasing offers an interpretation of Ashbery’s poetry based on Fredric Jameson’s theorization of “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” Postmodernism, Jameson argues, reflects a condition in which “[t]he prodigious new expansion of multinational capital ends up

penetrating and colonizing those very precapitalist enclaves (Nature and the Unconscious) which offered extraterritorial and Archimedean footholds for critical effectivity” (49, qtd. in Blasing 113). According to Blasing, Ashbery’s poetry bears out this interpretation of the cultural logic of his historical moment:

In Ashbery’s historically unprecedented situation, “Nature” and the “Unconscious” have indeed been appropriated and colonized, so that these earlier ‘footholds’ are reduced to mere signifiers of what they once were—actual forces outside the system. As such, they offered perspectives on cultural arrangements and constructions and enabled not only political but also moral and aesthetic distance from them. (114)

“Ashbery’s new landscape,” Blasing convincingly demonstrates, offers no such footholds. His “impure language” is one sign of this state of affairs: the language of “business,” for example, “crops up everywhere in Ashbery, permeating everything from personal and sexual relations to poetry”—zones that in previous cultural configurations had seemed impervious to the logic of the market (118, 117). And she finds further support for her Jamesonian reading in what are perhaps the most characteristic moments in Ashbery’s poetry, in which the expectation of something solid or true gives way to the discovery of opacity, copy, or mirage.

The poems in *Rivers and Mountains* furnish many examples. In the title poem, attempts to navigate and to execute a “plan” are foiled by the confusion (literally, the con-fusion) between a map and the terrain that it represents:

Your plan was to separate the enemy into two groups
With the razor-edged mountains between.
It worked well on paper
But their camp had grown
To be the mountains and the map
Carefully peeled away and not torn
Was the light, a tender but tough bark
On everything. (11)

In a variation on Mallarmé’s adage that the world exists to end up in a book, “Rivers and Mountains” closes with the possibility that the whole purpose of “the great drama that was being won” is to end up depicted on a postage stamp, or to resolve in the final frames of a cowboy movie as the credits begin to roll:

... to place the letter
On the unassassinated president’s desk
So that a stamp could reproduce all this
In detail, down to the last autumn leaf
And the affliction of June ride
Slowly out into the sun-blackened landscape. (12)

Moments like these of forestalled or hoodwinked revelation are classic Ashbery; some of the most celebrated examples occur in “Clepsydra,” also in *Rivers and Mountains*. While Blasing is certainly right to place them in the context of Jameson’s theory of postmodernism, I want to

suggest that radical empiricism provides another illuminating context. For if an inability to immediately extricate the artificial from the natural—the sign from the signified—is a product of late capitalism, it is also, in a different sense, a consequence of radical empiricism.

Ashbery and Stein, I have argued, illustrate James's conception of experience as a sensibly continuous stream in which relations must be considered as real as the terms that they join—in which relations, in fact, are largely constitutive of those terms. The reader's experience of *Stanzas in Meditation* and *Rivers and Mountains* is often of being carried along by the fluid current of syntax, attuned first and foremost to the processes by which events supercede, merge with, and articulate one another. As a consequence of the dense relational fabric of the poetry, and the sensible continuity with which it unfolds, the categorical distinctions that separate one *type* of event from another come later, if at all. If experience is a sensibly continuous stream—if it doesn't "bifurcate" internally, to borrow Whitehead's keyword, into primary and secondary qualities, or into consciousness and content, or into discrete sensations and the logical operations that relate them to one another—then those bifurcations must be affairs of retrospect. This is the conclusion that James articulates in "Does Consciousness Exist?," the first of the *Essays in Radical Empiricism*:

The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the 'pure' experience. It is only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. For the time being, it is plain, unqualified actuality, or existence, a simple *that*. In this *naïf* immediacy it is of course *valid*; it is *there*, we *act* upon it; and the doubling of it in retrospection into a state of mind and a reality intended thereby, is just one of the acts. The 'state of mind,' first treated explicitly as such in retrospection, will stand corrected or confirmed, and the retrospective experience in its turn will get a similar treatment; but the immediate experience in its passing is 'truth,' practical truth, *something to act on*, at its own movement. If the world were then and there to go out like a candle, it would remain truth absolute and objective, for it would be 'the last word,' would have no critic, and no one would ever oppose the thought in it to the reality intended.

I think I may now claim to have made my thesis clear. Consciousness connotes a kind of external relation, and does not denote a special stuff or way of being. *The peculiarity of our experiences, that they not only are, but are known, which their 'conscious' quality is invoked to explain, is better explained by their relations—these relations themselves being experiences—to one another.* (23-24)

The "purity" of experience, in this sense, is somewhat counter-intuitive: it is not, for instance, the opposite of what Blasing means by Ashbery's "impure language." To the contrary, the heterogeneity of Ashbery's language belongs to the field of pure experience, which can only be sorted according to other paradigms of purity in the course of further experience. This principle is illustrated time and again in Ashbery: as the poem unspools in time, events take on the qualities of reality or illusion, authenticity or inauthenticity, based on their relationships to further events, and those sortings are never final.

For Jameson, the disappearance of strongholds outside the operations of the market goes hand in hand with what he calls "the waning of affect"—authentic feeling or emotion replaced, as in the example of Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*, with "the gratuitous frivolity of [a] final decorative overlay" (10). I want to suggest that in Ashbery's poetry, in contrast, it is the project of attending to the minutiae of experience, including its affective dimensions—a project

both instigated and exemplified by James's *Principles of Psychology*—that causes those strongholds to dissolve. In the following chapters, I will extend this argument to include other poets of the New York School, especially Frank O'Hara and James Schuyler, as well as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg in the visual arts. In my reading, the work of these poets and artists is concerned with capturing the more delicate modulations of affect that are only possible when they are not tied to a hypostatic conception of nature or self—when nature and self are seen as emergent, rather than foundational properties of experience.

In Blasing's view, faced with the disappearance of any space outside "the system"—coincident with the recognition that the strategies of older avant-gardes no longer have any oppositional purchase—the only political stance available to Ashbery is one of "waiting":

Any number of passages in Ashbery suggest that the notions of 'mind' and 'nature,' axes that once plotted poetic worlds, no longer hold. Yet a sense of moral responsibility for 'our participation and consent' remains. No infrastructure supports the subject, and no position exists from which to speak, yet the poet is accountable; this is just one of the anachronisms that give Ashbery's work its pathos.

Folded into this cultural 'text'—itself a discontinuous pastiche—from which there is no exit, Ashbery assumes the passive stance of 'waiting'—and 'waiting for the wait to be ended' (1975: 14)—for a clearing, a 'deliverance' outside the system. But his is a 'history of someone who came too late' (7), not only in history but to history, and his fantasy of a revelation remains just that. (115)

Blasing's assessment of Ashbery as inhabiting a position of permanent belatedness is at odds with my radical-empiricist reading of his poetry and of the New York School at large: I argue that the innovation of their work lies in the way that it *does not* remain oriented around structuring axes that it nonetheless shows to be obsolete, but rather turns its formal energies toward imagining what fields of experience might look like without them. In this sense, my reading of New York School poetry departs not only from the passive, belated modernist stance that Blasing identifies, but also from a more active response to a similarly conceived set of circumstances. For many critics of American poetry, the situation that Blasing, through Jameson, describes, in which "[n]o infrastructure supports the subject, and no position exists from which to speak, yet the poet is accountable," is not particular to the late capitalist culture of the end of the twentieth century, but has defined the circumstances of the American poet since the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson in the mid-nineteenth century. If "waiting" is one possible response to these circumstances, another is the restless, creative discovery of provisional ideals that many critics have characterized as the poetics of pragmatism. Distinguishing the New York School's radical-empiricist poetics from the poetics of pragmatism is the subject of Chapter Two. In Chapter Two, I focus especially on the challenge that Frank O'Hara's poetry poses to the pragmatic attitude's tendency to turn specific desires into tacit assumptions. Both Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens are frequently understood as practitioners of pragmatist poetics. To understand the New York School in terms of radical empiricism, however, is to emphasize their affinity not with the model of poetry that Stevens articulates as "The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice" (218), but the one that Ashbery suggests when he writes of *Stanzas in Meditation* as "a hymn to possibility; a celebration of the fact that the world exists, that things can happen" (251).

¹ One of the first to comment on the relationship between Stein's and James's treatments of grammatical particles was Ronald B. Levinson, who suggested in a 1941 essay that Stein's more experimental pieces represent "the attempt to put into practice some notions of the ideal function of language, ... which were in all probability derived from the distinguished teacher of her Radcliffe days, William James" (125).

² See Steiner 29-30 and 41-42 and Meyer, 6 and elsewhere.

³ Ashton objects to Perloff's characterization of Stein on the grounds that literalism, while it counters the idea that language is *expressive of* experience, simply replaces it with an emphasis on the experience of the reader. By disengaging language from its referential function, that is, literalism produces an indeterminacy of meaning that solicits the participation of the reader, whose experience becomes an essential component in the construction of the text. "Stein, by contrast," Ashton contends, "insists on the autonomy of the work of art precisely by refusing any relation whatsoever between the work and anyone who might experience it, including the author herself" (7-8).

⁴ See "The Stream of Thought," in *Principles*, 259-65.

⁵ Steven Meyer speculates that they might have discussed Whitehead's thoughts about rhythm and pattern that appear in his 1919 *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge*, and which he might have begun to incubate by the time of his rambles with Stein. See Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation*, 180-84. My own imagining of this encounter has benefited from conversations with the Whitehead Reading Group at Berkeley of 2013-14, especially Lyn Hejinian and Chloé Thomas.

⁶ See, for example, Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet* 30-31 and Lears, *No Place of Grace* 159.

⁷ Brian Massumi, "Too-Blue: Color-Patch for an Expanded Empiricism." In focusing attention on this aspect of James, I follow the magnificent example of Steven Meyer in *Irresistible Dictation*, although for Meyer, James remains a figure of nineteenth-century science whose influence Stein outgrows as she develops in the direction of Whitehead's "more radical empiricism" (xx).

⁸ At this point, I would like to distinguish between two kinds of "naturalism" in the earliest generation of postmodernists, in poetry as well as in other arts. On one hand, there is the organicism of "Projective Verse" and the Romanticism of the Beats. Ashbery, on the other hand, joins O'Hara and other New York School poets and (post-New York School) painters in a more "pedestrian" naturalism. His interview statements quoted above share the spirit of O'Hara's claim that "What is happening to me, allowing for lies and exaggerations which I try to avoid, goes into my poems. I don't think my experiences are clarified or made beautiful for myself or anyone else, they are just there in whatever form I can find them" (500). And Ashbery describes his diction, in the *New York Quarterly* interview, in terms that echo Robert Rauschenberg's conception of "pedestrian color" (Klüver 44). Where Ashbery notes that in his poem "The System," "the poetry keeps running afoul of clichés and pedestrian turns of phrase" (because "these are the ways in which one finds oneself talking"), Rauschenberg takes his approach to color from "the experience of walking on the street or being in the theatre or around any group of people," in which "[s]omeone might be wearing a bright tie or green shoes, but somehow it was absorbed because all of these things, even though they were individually brilliant, were accepted in a content [sic.] that made them both independent and neutral" (Klüver 43). Different registers of language enter Ashbery's poems in the same way that colors enter Rauschenberg's paintings: not in the context of calculated formal relationships, but in the "random order" in which they

occur in conversation or “on the street.” (In another interview, Ashbery remarks, “I often put in things that I have overheard people say, on the street for instance” (“The Art of Poetry” 54)).

⁹ It is, in fact, the project of experiential realism to which the title “The Impossible” refers:

“*Stanzas in Meditation* is no doubt the most successful of her attempts to do what can't be done, to create a counterfeit of reality more real than reality. And if, on laying the book aside, we feel that it is still impossible to accomplish the impossible, we are also left with the conviction that it is the only thing worth trying to do” (253-54).

¹⁰ See Perloff, *Poetics of Indeterminacy* 33.

¹¹ For example, see (or rather listen to) Ashbery's 1966 interview with Bruce Kavin.

Chapter Two

Precarious and Stable: Experience in Frank O'Hara's Poetry and the Problems with Pragmatism

*"Life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected; often, indeed, it seems to be there more emphatically, as if our spurts and sallies forward were the real firing-line of the battle..."*¹

The above quotation, from William James's 1904 essay "A World of Pure Experience," appears frequently in the work of scholars who trace the influence of pragmatist philosophy on American literary modernism. With its strikingly Emersonian theme and tone, James's line expresses the spirit that, according to Richard Poirier's foundational study *Poetry and Pragmatism*, animates the writing of Gertrude Stein, Robert Frost, and Wallace Stevens. Poirier argues that these writers inherit the skeptical aspect of Emerson's thought: not his transcendentalism, but his proto-pragmatist sense "that truths and systems of knowledge are ... in themselves ... contingent" (22), or as Emerson puts it, that "around every circle another can be drawn" (403). Convinced of the instability of language and the malleability of truth, poets in the Emersonian pragmatist tradition find power in the ceaseless activity of "turning or troping"—in the "transitions by which [they] abandon[...] one form or an incipient form for the always beckoning promise of another, though this 'other' will also prove a limitation" (25).

In the decades since the publication of *Poetry and Pragmatism*, many scholars have extended and elaborated Poirier's line of thought. Within this body of scholarship, it is possible to discern two closely related yet distinct conceptions of a pragmatist poetic. For the first, which predominates in Poirier's study, the way of poetry is by abandonment.² The progress of the writer, like that of "the soul," "is forever threatened by textuality, by contraction of work into a text. Thus the creative impulse which is the soul discovers in the very first stages of composition that it wants to reach out beyond any legible form, that it wants to seek the margins, to move beyond limits or fate" (24-25). The other, more familiar conception of pragmatist poetics emphasizes the activity of discovering provisional forms and values within the flux of experience. This second poetic finds its fullest expression in one of the very few works of aesthetics written by a founding pragmatist philosopher, John Dewey's *Art as Experience*. To frame the distinction in the terms of Emerson's "Circles," Poirier locates the poetic impulse in the overwhelming of a known circumference, and Dewey in the tracing of a new one. These two variations of pragmatist poetic jostle against each other in recent literary criticism, sometimes conflated or confused and sometimes, as in Rachel Buxton's discussion of Marianne Moore, acknowledged as tangled tendencies within the poetry itself. In this chapter, however, I will demonstrate that the two variations amount to similarly partial interpretations of the philosophical foundations from which they extend. At the same time, those same foundations contain the possibility of a differently imagined poetic: one that I call radical-empiricist, as opposed to pragmatist. Whereas pragmatist poetics—in both of its forms—continually looks forward to the production of new meaning, radical-empiricist poetics lingers in the terrain out of which meaning is produced, exploring the contours of what William James calls "a world of pure experience."

The example of radical-empiricist poetics that I offer in this dissertation appears not in the midst of modernism but after, in the New York School's poetry of the 1950s and 1960s. The difference between pragmatist and radical-empiricist poetics is a difference in orientations

toward experience. As such, it is useful for thinking about the postwar moment in American poetry and the arts more broadly—a moment whose defining feature, it might be argued, is the reimagining of art’s relationship to experience. I expand on this claim in Chapter Three: surveying a range of dispositions toward experience in poetry and across the arts, I argue that some of the key commitments and pitfalls of postwar American aesthetics replicate those of empiricist philosophy. In that chapter, I situate New York School poetics amid the variety of postwar empiricisms, focusing especially on James Schuyler’s strategies for thwarting his poetry’s inclinations toward ideality. The present chapter begins with an analysis of the problems with pragmatist poetics from a radical-empiricist perspective: that is, the ways in which pragmatism, as it is taken up by literary critics, often cancels, obscures, or underemphasizes qualities of experience that are central to the radical-empiricist worldview. In the second half of the chapter, I show how these criticisms run parallel to those that Frank O’Hara put to the poetics of modernism and the verse of many of his contemporaries. His love poem “St. Paul and All That” serves as a pointed dramatization of precisely those qualities and configurations of experience that are obfuscated when poetry is conceived of pragmatically, as an instrument of order whose purpose is to provide the reader, or the poet, with momentary clarity and provisional ideals conducive to her progress in an unsteady world.

A further reason to begin a study of the New York School with a critical examination of pragmatist poetics is that pragmatism is becoming an increasingly frequent reference point in discussions of postwar poetry in general and the New York School in particular. Pragmatist literary criticism has typically focused its lens on the American modernist literature that shared its historical moment with the height of pragmatist philosophy.³ Among poets, the core of the pragmatist canon consists of Poirier’s trifecta, Frost, Stein, and Stevens, while cases have been made for adding Williams, Moore, Pound, and even—reaching beyond the American context—T.E. Hulme. Increasingly, however, critics are recognizing pragmatist principles in the work of later poets, from Elizabeth Bishop, George Oppen, and Charles Olson to Amiri Baraka, Susan Howe, and David Antin.⁴ Poirier, in a review of the poet’s biography, places Frank O’Hara squarely in the pragmatist tradition, arguing that his “poetry and his theories of art are obsessively shaped . . . by a concern found everywhere in the work of the great American predecessors whom he read and admired, Emerson and Whitman, and in their successors Crane, Stevens, and Gertrude Stein” (“Reaching” 43). Not all of the writers on the postwar poets I have mentioned are concerned with the particular notions of pragmatist poetics developed in the context of modernism by critics like Poirier, Joan Richardson, and Patricia Rae. Many of them use more specific pragmatist concepts to illuminate aspects of the poets’ work: Raphael Allison, for example, argues that Antin’s talk-poetry exemplifies the particular “Deweyan position that language and pragmatist ‘experience’ have a socializing capacity” (114), while Frances Dickey compares Bishop’s construction of knowledge to the communitarian theory advanced by Dewey and Peirce. Writers on the New York School have also been especially interested in the social dimensions of pragmatist thought. In *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry*, Andrew Epstein identifies in New York School poetry a tension between individualism and friendship best described by Emerson and pragmatist philosophy. Michael Magee, in *Emancipating Pragmatism: Emerson, Jazz, and Experimental Writing*, argues that Frank O’Hara and Amiri Baraka inherit from pragmatism—and absorb from the “downtown jazz culture of the late 1950s and early 1960s,” itself an instantiation of pragmatist principles—a conception of poetry as a form of “democratic symbolic action” (130). While the readings performed by Magee and Epstein diverge from the contours of pragmatist poetics laid down by Poirier or, before him,

by Dewey, they do explicitly position the New York School within Poirier's Emersonian pragmatist tradition, emphasizing the transmission of pragmatist ideas through Williams and Stein and, more contemporaneously, through jazz and the critical writing of Paul Goodman. I take the extension of this pragmatist tradition into the postwar moment, then, as an opportunity to critically reexamine the poetics that so many critics have placed at the heart of it.

Dewey's Pragmatism, James's Radical Empiricism

It is an irony of the critical literature on poetry and pragmatism that it devotes vastly more attention to James, who never articulated a pragmatist aesthetic, than to Dewey, who did.⁵ My own study is no exception: it is in James's writings, rather than Dewey's, that I find a precedent for the way that experience is constructed in the poetry of the New York School. Dewey's writings on experience figure in this chapter, however, as an important counter-example to the Jamesian attitude I wish to specify. And I aim to redress the relative neglect of Dewey, to a small degree, by showing how *Art as Experience* makes clear and explicit certain ideas about the nature of art that continue to operate, often implicitly, in contemporary pragmatist criticism. Meanwhile, the radical-empiricist aesthetic that I propose does not pretend to be anything other than a highly selective interpretation of James. By focusing on *Pragmatism* and some of James's best-known essays, like "The Will to Believe," it would be possible to derive a Jamesian position consistent with Dewey's aesthetics and entirely supportive of the use of James that critics have made in their formulations of pragmatist poetics. I follow John McDermott, however, in holding that "the pragmatic attitude, so readily identified as Jamesian, often overshadows two other major aspects of his total work": first, the fact that he "spent a good part of his life rationalizing his decision not to commit suicide," and second, the doctrine of the empirical reality of relations as expressed in his *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (McDermott xx). Likewise, pragmatist poetics tends to emphasize the optimistic, constructive side of the pragmatist worldview, and although literary scholars frequently cite James's declaration that "[w]e ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*" ("Stream" 245-46), they rarely follow James's doctrine of relations through to its utmost implications. To do this requires separating the pragmatist William James, well known to literary studies, from the radical-empiricist James. James's most popular writings exhort the exercise of individual agency and emphasize the productive power of the will, but his *Essays in Radical Empiricism* and *The Principles of Psychology*—with the notable exception of "Habit"—are occupied with the work of description, rather than the framing of values. The experiences that, as a radical empiricist, he is concerned to describe are those that become difficult to see after values have been framed.

The crux of the difference between radical empiricism and pragmatism appears in the contrast between James's and Dewey's handling of the theme of transition. Both James and Dewey conceived of pragmatism as an attempt to construct a philosophy that would tally with the experiences of finite, actual individuals. Steeped as they were in Darwinian biology, and informed, especially in Dewey's case, by developments in the physical sciences, both thinkers emphasized the unfixed, uncertain, and unstable character of experience.⁶ Whereas philosophy tends to describe a world that is "simple, clean and noble" like a "marble temple shining on a hill," writes James, the world given in experience is "multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed" (*Pragmatism* 495). Dewey, in a chapter of *Experience and Nature* entitled "Existence as Precarious and Stable," argues that philosophers have shown a persistent bias toward the stable parts of experience, identifying those parts with reality while

relegating change and uncertainty to the realm of mere appearances. “We live in a world,” he writes, “which is an impressive and irresistible mixture of sufficiencies, tight completeness, order, recurrences which make possible prediction and control, and singularities, ambiguities, uncertain possibilities, processes going on to consequences as yet indeterminate”—but although the latter qualities have been celebrated by various thinkers, “[t]hey have rarely been frankly recognized as fundamentally significant for the formation of a naturalistic metaphysics” (282). James’s *Essays in Radical Empiricism* offer a glimpse of what such a metaphysics—one that gives full weight to the precarious aspect of experience—might look like. Before turning to James’s radical empiricism, however, I want to follow the thread that leads from Dewey’s *Experience and Nature* to his theory of art.

Dewey chastises philosophy for smoothing out and tying off life’s ragged and unfinished edges. The tendency he despises in philosophy, however, is very close to what he celebrates in, or rather *as*, the aesthetic. Like *Experience and Nature*, *Art as Experience* takes as its point of departure the “live creature” beset and sustained by an unpredictable environment:

No creature lives merely under its skin; its subcutaneous organs are means of connection with what lies beyond its bodily frame, and to which, in order to live, it must adjust itself, by accommodation and defense but also by conquest. . . . Life itself consists of phases in which the organism falls out of step with the march of surrounding things and then recovers unison with it — either through effort or by some happy chance. (*Art* 12)

“These biological commonplaces,” he continues, “reach to the roots of the esthetic in experience” (13). We experience *as* aesthetic the rhythms of struggle and reintegration that mark the progress of a thriving organism: disorder resolving into order, “moment[s] of passage from disturbance into harmony” (16). The operative distinction in Dewey’s conception of the aesthetic is not between art and non-art, but between “experience” as an ongoing phenomenon, characterized by “distraction and dispersion,” and “*an* experience . . . demarcated in the general stream,” which “carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency” and “is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation” (36-37). “Every work of art follows the plan . . . and pattern” of the latter type of experience (54), but the aesthetic quality is not restricted to art: “an experience of thinking,” for example, “has its own esthetic quality, . . . because it possesses internal integration and fulfillment reached through ordered and organized movement” (39-40). Without strife and instability, Dewey maintains, the aesthetic could not exist, but its relationship to that instability is negative. The disruption, disintegration, and disappointment that necessarily form part of the experience of precarious life are aesthetically valuable insofar as they give rise to wholeness, integration, and satisfaction.⁷

Unlike Dewey, William James never advanced a theory of art. Indeed, his casual remarks about literature might discourage any hope of finding insight into the aesthetic in his writings: after reading *The Golden Bowl*, he implored his brother Henry to “please . . . sit down and write a new book, with no twilight or mustiness in the plot” (qtd. in Richardson *Maelstrom* 464), and although he had the foresight to praise *Three Lives* as “a fine new kind of realism—Gertrude Stein is great!”—he confessed to having read only the first thirty pages, making the excuse that “[a]s a rule reading fiction is as hard to me as trying to hit a target by hurling feathers at it” (Gallup 50). The possibility for poetics that I discover in James lies not in his thoughts about literature and art, but in the philosophy he calls radical empiricism, which insists on aspects of experience that pragmatist philosophy, and especially pragmatist literary criticism, tend to

occlude. The content of James's radical empiricism, however, is difficult to separate from the dynamics of his writing, and so these too are central to my reading. Richard Poirier and Steven Meyer, authors of the most sensitive and illuminating accounts of James's relevance for literary studies, both maintain that James paid insufficient attention to the act of writing in his theorizing and his own practice. Poirier finds that James, like Emerson, encourages the practice of repetition-with-difference, of turning or troping, that keeps open a sense that meanings are always incipient—and yet James merely states what Emerson “enacts,” “in a style far more calculated, conscientious, and entangled” (27, 131). Likewise, Meyer claims that “[i]n order to read James, . . . one can readily bracket the literary aspects of his philosophical and psychological studies (with ‘literary’ understood broadly as marking explicit references to writing as well as implicit self-consciousness with respect to one’s writing practices).” While “[s]omething is lost” when one does so, Meyer continues, “one’s reading remains relatively unaffected by the loss” (xvii). My rejoinder to these claims will unfold in stages over the following chapters. I begin, here, by calling attention to the full complement of writerly resources that James employs in presenting his radical-empiricist philosophy. Although James never attributes an aesthetic function to the energies of his writing, I want to suggest that crediting them with such a function will put needed pressure on Dewey’s conception of art, and constitute a step towards imagining how pragmatism’s philosophical background might serve as the basis for a more generous sense of what art can do—a sense, I will argue, that aligns with some of the major commitments of postwar American poetry.

The quotation with which this chapter began—“Life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected”—comes not from *Pragmatism* but from “A World of Pure Experience,” the essay that contains the most general statement of James’s radical empiricism. It appears in the context of a densely written passage that attempts to illustrate, through metaphor, the metaphysics underlying the many branches of James’s thought. I quote from it at length because my interest is in the way that James’s position gradually unfolds over the course of the paragraph:

With this we have the outlines of a philosophy of pure experience before us. At the outset of my essay, I called it a mosaic philosophy. In actual mosaics the pieces are held together by their bedding, for which bedding the Substances, transcendental Egos, or Absolutes of other philosophies may be taken to stand. In radical empiricism there is no bedding; it is as if the pieces clung together by their edges, the transitions experienced between them forming their cement. Of course such a metaphor is misleading, for in actual experience the more substantive and the more transitive parts run into each other continuously, there is in general no separateness needing to be overcome by an external cement; and whatever separateness is actually experienced is not overcome, it stays and counts as separateness to the end. But the metaphor serves to symbolize the fact that Experience itself, taken at large, can grow by its edges. That one moment of it proliferates into the next by transitions which, whether conjunctive or disjunctive, continue the experiential tissue, can not, I contend, be denied. Life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected; often, indeed, it seems to be there more emphatically, as if our spurts and sallies forward were the real firing-line of the battle, were like the thin line of flame advancing across the dry autumnal field which the farmer proceeds to burn. In this line we live prospectively as well as retrospectively. It is of the past, inasmuch as

it comes expressly as the past's continuation; it is of the future in so far as the future, when it comes, will have continued *it*. (86-87)

James and Dewey can both be called “radical empiricists”: they construct their philosophies out of what is given in the experience of individuals, eschewing reference to “Substances, transcendental Egos, or Absolutes.” James’s metaphor of the mosaic literalizes the stabilizing role that these transcendental terms can play in philosophy and animates, through the image of clinging pieces, the feeling of tenuousness that follows from their removal. When the metaphor stretches to encompass the “radical” aspect of empiricism, however, that feeling of tenuousness infects the figure itself. The empiricisms of James and Dewey are “radical” insofar as they find *within* experience certain limited forms of order and cohesion, whereas classical empiricism held all forms of relation to be imposed on experience from without. One might expect this radicalized empirical field to lend itself to a more orderly and cohesive metaphor, but James’s attempt to devise an image for it leaves the reader without bearings, since a mosaic without cement or separate tiles is not a mosaic at all. As the passage progresses, the reader has little trouble following from clause to clause, but it becomes increasingly difficult to generate a gestalt from the individual parts. In this way, James forces his reader to inhabit the terrain of experience that his philosophy describes: there is no cement prescribing its shape from without, no outside from which to command a view. Earlier in the essay, James explains that by “pure experience” he means “[t]he instant field of the present . . . , as yet undifferentiated into thing and thought, and only virtually classifiable as objective fact or as some one’s opinion about fact” (74). Experience is “pure,” according to James, not because it isn’t mediated by interest, desire or convention—it always is—but insofar as it is anterior to division into subject and object. Dewey heralds the dissolution of epistemological dualism as the most important step that philosophy can take towards enabling progressive social action.⁸ James, on the other hand, captures its dual nature as both a liberation and a terrifying constraint as he draws experience down into a two-dimensional tissue and then a one-dimensional, inexorably advancing line.

While the philosophy represented by James’s “mosaic” metaphor is also at the base of his own and Dewey’s pragmatism, and while James and Dewey would agree that this philosophy occasions a condition of precariousness, their writings on the subject reveal slightly different inflections. The sentence that begins “Life is in the transitions as much as the terms connected; often, indeed, it seems to be there more emphatically” makes a productive comparison with the following lines from Dewey’s *Art as Experience*: “The live being recurrently loses and reestablishes equilibrium with his surroundings. The moment of passage from disturbance into harmony is that of intensest life” (16). Both statements are re-workings of a line from Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance”: “Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim” (271). Both James and Dewey preserve the idea that transitions are the residence of power and intensity, but Dewey is closer to Emerson in his optimistic bias. Transitions signal progress from the past to the new, and the new equilibrium is always higher than the old: again from *Art as Experience*, “Life grows when a temporary falling out is a transition to a more extensive balance of the energies of the organism with those of the conditions under which it lives” (13). James’s version of the sentence, in contrast, conveys a sense of transitions as blind, a battle experienced from the midst of the battle, as likely to result in irreparable injury as in a more extensive equilibrium. He replaces Emerson’s “shooting” and “aim,” words suggestive of target practice, with the confused barrage of the “firing-line of the battle.”

For James's radical empiricism, transitions are both blind and difficult to arrest or contain. This is an important aspect of James's philosophy that is articulated here through the literary energies of his writing, both figurative and compositional, and to miss this aspect is to miss a slight but significant difference between James's thought and Dewey's. Like "Experience" in the passage above, James's writing grows by its edges. The dominant rhythm of the passage is one of unruly proliferation, rather than disturbances giving way to progressively higher equilibria. The metaphor of the mosaic modulates by conjunctive transitions from one configuration to the next without culminating in a finally satisfying image. The "firing-line of the battle" transforms into a literal line of fire, which in turn generates the context of the burning autumnal field. Sonority acts as a creative motor. "[S]purts and sallies forward" leads alliteratively to the "firing-line of the battle"; the sounds of this phrase—its *i*'s, *a*'s, *f*'s, and *l*'s—are reconfigured to form "the thin line of flame." Out of the "a" in "flame" comes the alliteration of "advancing across the autumnal field." The reader is led through the paragraph by relations of association and contiguity more than intrinsic logic or unified design.

The prose of Emerson himself, of course, is famous for just this kind of volatility and excess, and in some respects, the literary criticism inspired by Emersonian pragmatism captures very well the feeling of experience growing by its edges. Nonetheless, I argue that pragmatist criticism shares the bias toward optimism and agency that in the above quotations belongs to Dewey and Emerson, but not to James's radical empiricism. As a result, it gives us a poetry built upon the constructive implications of a "world of pure experience" that does not fully countenance the conditions of uncertainty and confusion that give rise to those constructive opportunities.

Problems with Pragmatism

There are four interrelated ways in which pragmatist poetics departs from its radical-empiricist foundations, and each one corresponds to a limitation on the kinds of shape that poetry can take, the kinds of state it can represent, and the kinds of function it can perform. First, while pragmatist poetics appears to honor the open-ended and disorderly aspects of experience, it does so within a structure that prioritizes the resolving, harmonizing capacity of art. Second, although it insists that any ideals a poem might express are provisional, it continues to frame the project of poetry as a quest after ideals. Third, it consistently construes the unfixedness of experience as an opportunity for progress, both individual and cultural, emphasizing the agency that writer and reader alike can exercise in the face of indeterminacy. These three tendencies all have the effect of neutralizing the disruptive qualities of experience as James imagines it, by assigning them a dependable role in the production of a poetry defined by its capacity to harness them. The fourth way in which pragmatist poetics cancels the meaning of flux—or transition, as these writers sometimes figure it—is by elevating it to the status of an ideal. What begins as a description of a world without transcendental guarantees sometimes becomes, in pragmatist criticism, "a sacred energizing spirit" (Levin *Poetics* 14) that courses through works of genius—a state of perpetual unsettlement that is nonetheless tenaciously tied to a sense of both literary and political virtue.

James's insistence that "life is in the transitions as much as the terms connected" is intended to redress our tendency, when speaking of experience, to extract substantive, stabilized entities from "the stream of thought" and ignore the vague, unnameable states that make up the greater part of it. Pragmatist critics celebrate poetry that strives to catch experience on the wing: poetry, that is, that foregrounds the feelings of tendency and relation to which "language almost refuses to lend itself" ("Stream" 246) and confirms experience's propensity to overwhelm or slip

past any fixed formulation designed to contain it. At the same time, however, those same critics frequently mix their interest in the vague and unfinished with a conception of poetry that tends toward closure and clarity. Whether or not they mention Dewey by name, many commentators on the pragmatist strain in American poetry echo Dewey's contention that art fulfills, if not a biological, at least a psychological need for order in the midst of a chaotic environment. This order may be understood formally, as when Rachel Buxton explains that "[f]or pragmatists, form-finding is one of the most effective means we have of grasping, and of adapting to, the experience of living in the world" (534)—or morally and intellectually, as when Jonathan Levin asserts that art "is the process whereby humans devise and test the values, pleasures, and meanings that make life worth living" (*Poetics* 5-6). In other words, poetry might be an ideal medium in which to reflect the unreliable and inchoate qualities of experience, but its essence is to serve as a prophylactic against them.

In *A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein*, Joan Richardson offers a description of Wallace Stevens's poetry that at first seems to hold off Dewey's "moment of passage from disturbance into harmony" and retain the open-endedness of James's "world of pure experience." "Woven into the texture of his poems," she writes, "are experiments mimicking an uncertain universe in uncertainties of predication and meaning" (22). But in fact, Richardson simply stretches out the Deweyan rhythm so that its consummation arrives in the act of reading. Faced with unresolvable "semantic equivocations,"

Readers ... are ... called on to perform the paradigmatic Pragmatist act, to choose a way of reading that will make "truth happen" to the shimmering ideas offered, to reach at least temporary closure. The effect of these repeated disturbances on careful readers of Stevens is break-down, a quizzing of all sounds, all words, all everything in the search for a momentary resting-place, a perch, specious, "a fiction," to catch onto. This "catching on," this "apprehension," is, in Stevens's perfect phrase, "momentary existence on an exquisite plane," the aesthetic platform, the "stay against the violence without" which provides an organism with the temporary homeostatic balance essential to its being able to go on, to continue. (22)

Although Richardson mentions Dewey only once in *A Natural History of Pragmatism*, her conception of the aesthetic is deeply congruous with the one Dewey puts forth in *Art as Experience*. Like Dewey, she constructs an analogy—perhaps even an identity—between the aesthetic subject and the biological subject as imagined by Darwin.⁹ And like Dewey, she finds the aesthetic in those particular moments in which the organism achieves a temporary equilibrium with its surroundings. Meanwhile, the litany of phrases that appears in this passage—a "resting-place," a "perch," a "platform"—underscores pragmatism's investment in a model of poetry that tends toward stillness—and, as I will discuss in a moment, toward progress.

To Richardson's litany one could add another phrase, which repeats some of the very words used by Stevens, and which both Jonathan Levin and Richard Poirier cite as an exemplary expression of the pragmatist spirit: "a momentary stay against confusion." Robert Frost proposes the following description of "The Figure a Poem Makes": "[i]t begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion" (777). For Poirier and Levin, the pragmatist character of this statement lies in its modesty, which Levin contrasts to the less

circumscribed ambitions of T.S. Eliot. Both *The Waste Land* and Eliot's formulation of "the mythical method," Levin writes, "are precisely about clarifications on which cults and sects are founded—those ancient cults and sects outlined in Eliot's own notes to *The Waste Land*, but also their modern analogues, hinted at in that poem and more fully and less ambivalently in Eliot's later poetry" ("Frost" 137). In *The Practical Muse: Pragmatist Poetics in Hulme, Pound, and Stevens*, Patricia Rae draws a similar contrast between the poets named in her title and their Symbolist precursors. According to Rae, "Hulme, Pound, and Stevens reacted to Symbolist claims about poetry's connection with 'God' or the 'Absolute' or the 'Infinite' with all the suspicion appropriate to psychology and pragmatism"; in place of those claims, they "recommend provisional modes of expression" (37, 41). The assertions that poems can make, in other words, are only momentary hypotheses, "contingent on empirical testing," subject to revision from line to line and poem to poem. This shift in the status of poetic assertions isn't trivial, but it leaves the poem pointing to the place where "'God' or the 'Absolute' or the 'Infinite'" would have been, rather than imagining—as James does in his mosaic metaphor—how experience might be reconfigured without them. And meanwhile, in Frost's statement, the word "necessarily" holds open the possibility that the poem *might* end in a clarification great enough to found a new religion.

In the same way that Joan Richardson's biological metaphor figures poetry as "essential" to an organism's "being able to go on," Rae thinks of these provisionally fixed points as fundamentally constructive. Borrowing an image from James's seminal Berkeley lecture on pragmatism, she writes that pragmatist poetry employs figures and devices that "play the role of a 'blaze' in the forest." "For Hulme," Rae writes, "the poem is a provisional 'map,' tracing a path through the cinders; for Pound it is an 'equation' for building helpful 'bridges and devices'; for Stevens it is a 'hypothesis,' intended 'to help people live their lives'" (42). As I mentioned at the start of the chapter, Poirier's *Poetry and Pragmatism* appears to espouse a different poetic from the one these images suggest. Poirier's poetic, which is based on an interpretation of "pragmatism as a form of linguistic skepticism" (4), is darker than those elaborated by Levin or Richardson or Rae. He describes the energies of writing as centrifugal, rather than centripetal: it is a fear of stasis more than a desire for order that drives the poet to write; a sense of the insufficiency of all formulations, more than a quest for the provisionally sufficient. At the same time, however, Poirier retains an emphasis on "human agency" (137) that brings his poetic into closer alignment with more straightforwardly constructive ones. Although he warns that the pragmatist's "assent to the fact that instability adheres to language" must come with the awareness "that any exertions of authority over it ... can be only temporary and sporadic," his emphasis continually falls on those temporary and sporadic exertions: "the stability of words is achieved only in their fluid relations to other words, and ... these are set in motion by the person using the words" (136-37). Ultimately, for Poirier—as for many commentators on the pragmatic strain in American poetry—the most compelling aspect of pragmatism is its vision of "*reality ... still in the making*," and hence responsive to influence by human hands and words (James *Pragmatism* 599). For all its talk of skepticism, *Poetry and Pragmatism* is actually grounded in faith in poetry's power to change the world for the better. "We are enjoined by [Emerson's] essays," Poirier writes, "...to participate as readers in a recurrent discovery about the language we inherit: that by a conscious effort of linguistic skepticism it is possible to reveal, in the words and phrases we use, linguistic resources that point to something beyond skepticism, to possibilities of personal and cultural renewal" (11).

In *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, and American Literary Modernism*, Jonathan Levin articulates the problem with interpretations of pragmatism that move too confidently from its philosophical premises to its progressive implications. Speaking in particular of Cornel West's prophetic pragmatism, Levin explains,

One reason I am skeptical of West's narrative is that it ignores the unsettled, unsettling quality of the Emersonian moment of transition. A moment of transition may ultimately have what will eventually come to be defined as politically progressive consequences, but as it unfolds it remains undetermined in ways obscured by such retrospective characterizations. This is precisely what is unsettling about a poetics of transition. Although many pragmatists have followed Dewey by linking pragmatism to specific, often radically democratic political perspectives, pragmatists have also recognized something in pragmatism that is constantly exceeding the defined and defining boundaries of political categories and agendas. The poetics of transition throws everything into question, including, at least in its most extreme form, the comforting assurance that an unfolding transition is an instrument of morally sanctioned, politically progressive interests. (xii)

Levin's critique is as pertinent to poetry as it is to cultural criticism. A poetry that registers the full implications of "a world of pure experience" would have to be less sanguine than Dewey or Richardson about poetry's ability to "provide[... the reading or listening] organism with the temporary homeostatic balance essential to its being able to go on"; it would recognize that "going on" is itself a contingent value, and that while individual actions do indeed contribute to "reality... in the making," those contributions can be difficult to perceive in the moment or direct in advance. In *The Poetics of Transition*, Levin attempts to correct the skewed interpretation of pragmatism he diagnoses in West by focusing on the figure of transition itself within the texts of American literary modernism, but his attempt is ultimately unsuccessful. The writers he treats in his study, Levin contends, devise Emersonian solutions to the same problem that he observes in the writing of West. Recognizing that without "appeal[ing] to any external, objective standard of moral truth or goodness," there is no guarantee "that our moral and social ideals will ultimately promote the interests of what we already recognize as good or true," Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens "typically emphasize that only the ongoing process of continuous imaginative activity can provide adequate protection against intellectual error and moral disaster" (42, 43-44). This ongoing imaginative activity becomes, for these writers, the locus of "a sacred energizing spirit, even as they remain skeptical of the vocabularies, theological or otherwise, that would describe that spirit" (14). The attempts of both Levin and Poirier to honor the uncertainty of transition is undercut by the note of religious reverence in their own writing: for Poirier, linguistic skepticism is "a liberating and creative suspicion" (5) and language "the instrument of a saving uncertainty and vagueness" (4.)

This brings me to the fourth problem with pragmatist poetics from the perspective of radical empiricism. If pragmatist poetics neutralizes flux, in some instances, by emphasizing poetry's capacity to bring it momentarily to rest, it does so in other instances by investing flux itself with quasi-religious significance. Dewey recognized this latter problem as a risk for philosophy. In *Experience and Nature*, after berating philosophers since Plato for privileging the stable over the precarious, he allows that there *are* philosophies of flux—"metaphysics of change," he calls them—but that from Heraclitus to Bergson, these philosophies "have deified

change by making it universal, regular, sure” (206), and so they don’t survive as philosophies of flux at all. There is a fine line between emphasizing the role of transitional and transitory states in experience—an undertaking that James calls “the re-instatement of the vague” (“Stream” 254)—and substantizing and stabilizing those states, as either adversities to be overcome or deities to be worshipped. Walking that line is what I take to be the project of radical empiricism. And just as James felt this project to be crucial for philosophy, it is also, I argue, a directive that insistently shapes the poetry of Frank O’Hara.

O’Hara’s Radical Empiricism

It is possible to read Dewey’s aesthetics with two different emphases, which in turn suggest affiliations with two different tendencies in American poetry. These tendencies both exist within modernism, but in the postwar moment, they emerge as opposite poles of a divided poetic field. When the stress falls on the rhythmic, processual nature of aesthetic experience, and on the continuity that Dewey perceives between aesthetic experience and experience at large, then *Art as Experience* harmonizes with the postwar poetics of Charles Olson—an affinity remarked by Olson’s close associate, Robert Duncan.¹⁰ Both Olson and Dewey describe art in figures for dynamic interrelationality borrowed from biology and physics; both imagine the work of art as a transfer of energy “from where the poet got it . . . by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader” (Olson 240). (Dewey’s version of this transfer is his claim that the work of art is only actualized in perception, when the natural rhythms “embodied in an outer object that is itself a product of art, become a rhythm in experience itself” (169).) When, on the other hand, the stress falls on “fulfillment reached through ordered and organized movement,” or on “[e]quilibrium [that] comes about not mechanically and inertly but out of, and because of, tension,” Dewey’s aesthetics appears more closely aligned with the poetics of the New Criticism, itself a weak version of those aspects of modernist poetry that poets like Olson strove to leave behind. Charles Altieri explains that “[a]s it entered the academy, New Criticism domesticated the prophetic symbolist claims of high modernism into a poetic mode best represented by Richard Wilbur’s elegant celebrations of the mind’s capacity to revel in its aesthetic ordering of natural flux” (*Enlarging* 53). Dewey would emphasize that what Sanford Schwartz identifies as the “tensional relationship between form and flux” at the heart of New Critical poetics (210) can only exist in time, and so the poem must be understood not as an object but as a process. Nonetheless, as we have seen, he identifies the work of art (with “work” operating as a verb as well as a noun) with those *phases* of the rhythm of living in which process is brought temporarily to rest—in which “there is an overcoming of factors of opposition and conflict; [and] a transformation of them into differentiated aspects of a higher powered and more significant life” (13).

Like the rest of the poets included in Donald Allen’s 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry*, the first-generation New York School poets share, to a certain degree, Olson’s connection to the open side of Dewey’s aesthetics. In Chapter Three I discuss their divergence from this company, taking James Schuyler as exemplary of the New York School’s more skeptical attitude toward forms of transcendence. First, however, I want to establish what is at stake in rejecting the latter, more conservative aspect of Dewey’s aesthetics, and it is in Frank O’Hara’s poetry that I find these stakes most pointedly articulated. The brief statement of poetics that O’Hara composed for *The New American Poetry* registers a shift away from pragmatist models in which a poem arcs, as Frost puts it, toward “a clarification of life”: “What is happening to me, allowing for lies and exaggerations which I try to avoid, goes into my poems. I

don't think my experiences are clarified or made beautiful for myself or anyone else, they are just there in whatever form I can find them" (*Collected* 500). While O'Hara's admission of "lies and exaggerations" humorously concedes the untenable faux-naïveté of his statement—his experiences never *actually* get into a poem "just in whatever form he finds them"—he nonetheless indicates one direction of the New York School's departure from a poetic orientation congruent with many versions of pragmatist aesthetics. His remark suggests that experience has an aesthetic value for O'Hara that doesn't come in the shape of (even provisional) "fulfillment reached through ordered and organized movement," but is allied more closely with the Jamesian attitude that attempts to scrupulously acknowledge both the cohesive and disjunctive aspects of experience as they happen to occur. It would be easy, of course, to identify more dramatic challenges to pragmatist aesthetics than the ones offered by the first-generation New York School poets. Even within O'Hara's own works, there are poems more resistant to various forms of order—formal, sonic and semantic—than the poem I address in the following pages. Some of his early, Surrealist-influenced poems like "Second Avenue" contain images of such exaggerated heterogeneity that they defy the energies of reintegration, while in the later poems written during his period of close collaboration with Bill Berkson, he experiments in a style more ostentatiously free-form and free-associative than the majority of his work. I turn to "St. Paul and All That," however, because it supplies an especially thorough, vivid account of the implications of James's doctrine of the reality of relations—an illustration, that is, of experience conceived as a fluid mosaic, in which "one moment of it proliferates into the next by transitions which, whether conjunctive or disjunctive, continue the experiential tissue."

"St. Paul and All That" (*Collected* 406-407) narrates an experience—or rather, a portion of experience, because the episode lacks the qualities of self-sufficiency and harmonious closure that would mark it as *an* experience, in Dewey's sense. From the first line to the last, the matter of the poem reveals its inextricable relationship to a past that is continually reshaping itself in the present, and to a future that is felt in the present as both inevitable and uncertain. The poem begins with the reestablishment of order after a disturbance:

Totally abashed and smiling
I walk in
sit down and
face the frigidaire
it's April
no May
it's May
such little things have to be established in morning
after the big things of night

The causes of the speaker's disorientation, the "big things of night," are conspicuously left unnamed. To a reader familiar with O'Hara's biography, the poem drops enough hints to fill in its context. "St. Paul" was one of O'Hara's cognomens for Vincent de Paul Warren, a dancer with whom he was romantically involved. O'Hara wrote numerous poems to Warren and published many of them in a volume he poignantly called *Love Poems (Tentative Title)*. The manuscript date of May 20, 1961 places "St. Paul and All That" at the end of their two-year affair. Contextual data aside, the poem itself will gradually reveal distance and uncertainty

within a relationship to be its central theme. In its opening lines, however, the context of the speaker's feelings is suspended, and to fill in the gaps with biographical details would be to miss the poem's complex staging of a drama of feeling.¹¹

In the absence of their precipitating cause, the feelings themselves are immensely articulate, even if one of the facts they articulate is their own confusion. The opening line is both ambiguous and highly specific: ambiguous because "totally" can't be definitively parsed (Does it modify "abashed and smiling," or only "abashed"? If he is "*totally* abashed," how can he also be smiling?), and specific because it would take a very particular set of circumstances to leave a person both "abashed" *and* "smiling." The word "abashed" contains less information than some of its near synonyms, like "ashamed" or "dismayed": a person might feel abashed upon being praised, kissed, scolded, rejected, or astounded. In fact, unlike "ashamed," "abashed" specifies a degree of perplexity in the emotion itself—a state of discomposure that makes clear analysis momentarily impossible. By withholding the details of the "big things of night" and placing their emotional aftermath at the center of attention, O'Hara reproduces in the reader the affective experience that the poem recounts. Like the speaker, the reader is wholly preoccupied with a very precise feeling that is defined in part by a distracted relation to its own source or referent and an inability to analyze its own composition of desire and grief, embarrassment and gratification.

In this way, the first lines of the poem testify to the condition of precariousness that Dewey describes, depicting a state of lost equilibrium that invites the work of reintegration he identifies with the aesthetic. But they also reflect the precariousness of James's field of pure experience, in which the distinction between thoughts and things is not immediately given and the present moment of experience cannot see clearly beyond itself, although around its edges we perceive "the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead" ("Stream" 255). Judith Butler, whose 2004 *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* might be taken as a development of these earlier accounts of precariousness,¹² explains why the kind of discomposure that we encounter in "St. Paul and All That" goes hand in hand with what she calls "the experience of not knowing" (22). "[A]bashed and smiling" places the speaker at precisely the intersection of attachment and vulnerability that is the subject of *Precarious Life*. To feel "abashed"—embarrassed, discomposed—is to run into the limit of one's self-possession: to feel, as Butler writes, that "we are not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them" (24). Butler's examples of experiences that reveal the limits of self-possession are varieties of loss:

When we lose certain people, or when we are dispossessed from a place, or a community ... something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us. It is not as if an "I" exists independently over here and then simply loses a "you" over there, especially if the attachment to "you" is part of what composes who "I" am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. (22)

In the *second* half of "St. Paul and All That," the pronouns "you" and "I" perform a dance, like the one performed in this passage, that exhibits their interdependence at the very point when the ties between them are beginning to fray. In the *first* half of the poem, it is the inscrutability occasioned by the fact of these ties that is on display. If the poem seems to contain both the

giddy uncertainty of the beginning of a relationship and the aching premonition of its ending, it is because, as Butler writes, what is “so clearly the case with grief ... can be so only because it was already the case with desire”: desire, like grief, “displays ... the thrall in which our relations with others holds us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain” (23). The poem gives form to this delicate hinge between grief and desire in the eighth line, where O’Hara’s use of the phrase “in morning” instead of the more conventional “in *the* morning” introduces the specter of mourning, with a *u*, into the poem. This in turn lends symbolic heft to the “frigidaire,” a cold presence sitting opposite the speaker that points up the absence of a warmer body—the same absence, one might presume, that is indicated by the unanswered question in the tenth line, “do you want me to come?”

In fact, these opening lines perform work that resembles a process of mourning, not in Freud’s sense of the gradual decathexis of the libido from the lost object, but in Lacan’s sense of repairing ruptures in the symbolic order: “...[t]he work of mourning,” Lacan asserts in the seminar on *Hamlet*, “is first of all performed to satisfy the disorder that is produced by the inadequacy of signifying elements to cope with the hole that has been created in existence, for it is the system of signifiers in their totality which is impeached by the least instance of mourning” (38). “[I]t’s April / no May / it’s May” is a version of this re-stitching of the symbolic. The task of mourning is reflected on a metrical level, too, in the redistribution of the three stresses of the first line—“Tóttally abáshed and smíling”—into the neat vertical columns of the three-line microstanzas that follow. This redistribution calms the emotional upheaval by imposing a steady rhythm of short, manageable beats, in much the same way that James Schuyler’s short lines establish a stabilizing rhythm in the poems he wrote during his stay in the Payne Whitney psychiatric hospital:

This morning I
 changed bedding.
 At lunch I watched
 someone shake out
 the tablecloth, fold
 and stow it in a side-
 board. Then, the
 cigarette moment. (Schuyler, *Collected* 254)

Both this poem, “Linen,” and “St. Paul and All That” might be said to mimic the rhythms of a “live creature” reestablishing equilibrium with its surroundings. In neither poem, however, is the “ordered movement” towards integration identical with the aesthetic energy of the poem. Schuyler tends to undercut that identity with what John Wilkinson has described as the gentle bathos of his poems: drops into banality that attenuate their drive towards wholeness or transcendence. The bathetic plays a similar role in “St. Paul and All That”: in the lines, “when the tears of a whole generation are assembled / they will only fill a coffee cup,” O’Hara aims for the sublime anguish of D.H. Lawrence, whom he quotes two lines later, but falls laughably, intentionally short. As I will elaborate in Chapter Three, the particular force of Schuyler’s poems, and to a certain extent O’Hara’s, resides not in their achievement of provisional unity but in the deflection of that achievement.

Moreover, the fact that in these Schuyler and O’Hara poems the rhythm of reintegration is so explicitly doing the work of psychological recovery vitiates its relevance as aesthetic work.

In “St. Paul and All That,” the symmetry of the initial 3-line microstanzas and the parallelism in lines 8-9 (“little things . . . in morning,” “big things of night”) are poignant and pleasing. But these instances of rhythmic re-composure occur at the beginning of the poem, not as its culmination, and are followed by lines that emphatically discompose the poem again, with their open question, their breathless rush, and their awkward enjambment: “do you want me to come? when / I think of all the things I’ve been thinking of I feel insane.” Instances of harmony and rhythms of reintegration will periodically reappear in the poem, and when they do, they perform important work that I will discuss at some length. But the poem as a whole does not easily fit into the pattern of “fulfillment reached through ordered and organized movement.” For one thing, the question “do you want me to come?” remains unanswered, and there is no way for the reader to decide whether the phrase is literal or sexually euphemistic, casual or searching. Indeed, the last line of the poem will perpetuate that ambiguity, suggesting that the unresolved is a more powerful category in this poem than the forms of resolution an artist can orchestrate.

If the opening lines establish a rhythm of order and simplicity, the middle of the poem is dominated by a rhythm of unruly proliferation. Just as William James’s writing mimics experience that “grow[s] by its edges,” “St. Paul and All That” proceeds by associations that produce each line out of the last without a clear sense of direction or overarching design. In the poem, the associations are largely psychological, although the logic isn’t always apparent: “when / I think of all the things I’ve been thinking of I feel insane / simply ‘life in Birmingham is hell’ / simply ‘you will miss me / but that’s good.’” The image of tears in a coffee cup expands into a tenuous conceit, attenuated even more by the distance the eye has to travel between its parts:

when the tears of a whole generation are assembled
 they will only fill a coffee cup
just because they evaporate
 doesn’t mean life has heat
“this various dream of living”

Growing by conjunctive transitions, the metaphor barely stays within the confines of conceptual coherence. In picking up the chill of the frigidaire from the opening lines, it pokes fun at the principle of the objective correlative: the poet seems to be constructing this figurative landscape out of what he happens to find around him in the kitchen, and the emotion that it conveys is mawkish and excessive, in stark contrast to the subtle affective states evoked elsewhere in the poem. Meanwhile, the unattributed line from Lawrence’s poem “Martyr à la Mode” marks a disjunctive transition. Its relevance isn’t completely unimaginable—awaking “abashed” in the morning, a person might wonder if she is still dreaming—but to connect it to the surrounding lines still requires an uncertain leap: in James’s words, the separateness of the quotation “stays and counts as separateness to the end.”

The heterogeneity of the quotations included in this middle section of the poem might be taken as evidence of O’Hara’s resistance to a model of organicism, like Dewey’s, that stresses the harmonious interrelation of parts. Like the series of exclamations at the end of the poem—“O the Polish summers! those drafts! / those black and white teeth!”—the quotations are recalcitrant points in a poem that poses relatively few obstacles to interpretation, and as such they forestall the possibility of complete resolution or assimilation. But more importantly, they have the effect of making heterogeneity a property of “the experiential tissue”: “you will miss me / but that’s good” and “life in Birmingham is hell” share the same valence in the field of experience that

the poem constructs, despite the fact that one seems to come directly from the speaker's thoughts and the other from the news or the movies. This admission of heterogeneity within the experiential field is not incidental but critical to the affective experience that the poem constructs. Combined with other features of the poem that I have detailed—the foregrounding of feelings and suspension of their context, the rhythm of associative proliferation, and the inclusion of both conjunctive and disjunctive transitions—O'Hara's evenhanded treatment of dissimilar quotations has the effect of drawing experience into a single plane. In "St. Paul and All That" and throughout the *Collected Poems*, O'Hara refuses to stratify experience into deep and superficial layers.¹³ To allow such a stratification would be to initiate the process, lamented by Dewey, of separating out the precarious and the stable aspects of experience: on the surface, a crowd of extraneous elements; beneath them, an immutable core. Critics have demonstrated O'Hara's resistance to this surface-depth model in his treatment of selfhood, most notably in the gorgeous serpentine evasions of "In Memory of My Feelings." I return to this aspect of O'Hara's work in Chapter Four, where I compare O'Hara's radical-empiricist construction of selfhood to those of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. Here, I focus on the way that the consequences of this un-stratified conception of experience emerge in the second half "St. Paul and All That." If William James shows us that the fluid mosaic of experience is backed by no transempirical bedding or cement, in the second half of the poem, that lack of cement is keenly felt. An attempt to forge the particles of experience into a reliable pattern reveals, instead, that those particles are bound together by as tenuous a habit of association as the one that leads us to believe that the when the sun sets in the evening, it continues to exist beyond the horizon of our present experience.

A distinctive rhythmic patterning emerges in the second half of the poem. Counter to the slide of associative proliferation, O'Hara's lines begin to double back on themselves, resulting in a series of chiasms:

I am alive with you
 full of anxious pleasures and pleasurable anxiety
 hardness and softness
 listening while you talk and talking while you read
 I read what you read
 you do not read what I read
 which is right, I am the one with the curiosity
 you read for some mysterious reason
 I read simply because I am a writer

Here, the poem returns to a version of the ordering work that characterized the opening lines. Like "it's April / no May / it's May," these lines represent an attempt to reestablish an intelligible pattern of relationships, this time between "you" and "I." The speaker gives the respective roles of "you" and "I" a character of fixity by using the habitual present tense; by pointing to the logical underpinnings of the roles—"which is right," "because I am a writer"—he strives to place them beyond fortuity. But this attempt to make the relationship between your talking and my listening as certain as the fact that May follows April doesn't quite succeed. The figures of chiasmus and parallelism deployed in this passage initially give an impression of balance and completion, but they soon give way to imbalance and obscurity: "I read what you read / you do not read what I read"; "you read for some mysterious reason." Derrida, somewhat counter-

intuitively, held asymmetry to be inherent in the figure of chiasmus itself. As Jonathan Culbert explains, following Derrida, chiasmus is a “paralyzing” figure, a doubling-back that impedes movement forward (18, 360n). Seen in this light, a line like “anxious pleasures and pleasurable anxieties” encapsulates the affective state of the entire poem: suspended in a moment of uncertainty between the beginning of a relationship and the end of it, between gratification and grief. If “anxious pleasures and pleasurable anxieties” captures the poem’s feelings of suspension and discomposure, those feelings are compounded by the imperfect chiasmus that occurs two lines later, “listening while you talk and talking while you read.” Set up to expect perfect symmetry, the reader is startled to hear “read” instead of “listen,” and then struck by the deeper imbalance that the line seems to register but not to acknowledge.

While Derrida’s interpretation of chiasmus helps to illuminate the procedures of “St. Paul and All That,” the poem itself points to a relevant poetic precedent: the writing of Gertrude Stein. Beyond its moments of definite chiasmus, this passage of O’Hara’s poem has a Steinian quality, evoked by the repetition of series of simple words in multiple permutations. The changes that O’Hara rings on “talking” and “listening,” for example, call to mind the chiasmic interplay of the same words in Stein’s “Portraits and Repetition”: “As I say I had the habit of conceiving myself as completely talking and listening, listening was talking and talking was listening and in so doing I conceived what I at that time called the rhythm of anybody’s personality” (293). The prevalence of chiasmus in Stein’s own writing has been little remarked, presumably because it appears less of a distinctive rhetorical figure amid the myriad permutations and repetitions of her prose. (The chiasmus hardly stands out, for example, in these lines from her second portrait of Carl Van Vechten: “Tied and untied and that is all there is about it. And as tied and as beside, and as beside and tied. Tied and untied and beside and as beside and as untied and as tied and as untied and as beside” (qtd. in “Portraits” 305).) But O’Hara would certainly have read the striking chiasmus in the lines that his friend John Ashbery quoted in his 1957 review of *Stanzas in Meditation*:

I should think it makes no difference
That so few people are me.
That is to say in each generation there are so few geniuses

And why should I be one which I am
This is one way of saying how do you do
There is this difference
I forgive you everything and there is nothing to forgive. (252-53)

In Stein’s hands, chiasmus may be a figure of paralyzing aporia. “I forgive you everything and there is nothing to forgive” is a line that gives with one hand as it takes away with the other, transforming a potent gesture into a site of stasis. Alternatively, Stein’s chiasms can be seen to demonstrate the power of the writer to manipulate the patterns of commonplace language—to seize, in Richard Poirier’s terms, upon the instability that adheres to a phrase like “how do you do” or “I forgive you everything” and to harness it in service of articulating the “difference” made by her particular “genius.” But in addition to both its creative and aporetic functions, in Stein’s writing, the chiasmus is always one configuration of words in a field of many possible configurations. The effect of a particular chiasmus—whether paralyzing, or redeeming, or

both—is tempered by the sense that it arose as much by chance as by design, out of the jostling interaction of its component parts.

O'Hara had employed an explicitly Steinian mode of repetition in another love poem to Vincent Warren, written two years before "St. Paul and All That," which he playfully subtitled "*À la recherche d' Gertrude Stein*": "when I am in your presence I feel life is strong / and will defeat all its enemies and all of mine / and all of yours and yours in you and mine in me" (*Collected* 349). In both poems, O'Hara's permutations of pronouns and prepositions have the effect of building habits of association between the particles of language—which for Stein, according to William Gass, are analogous to the particles of experience: "Almost at once she realized that language itself is a complete analogue of experience because it, too, is made of a large but finite number of relatively fixed terms which are then allowed to occur in a limited number of clearly specified relations" (112). A radical empiricist reading of Stein's repetition would, in addition to affirming her insistence that really "there can be no repetition" ("Portraits" 290), argue that the particles in their combinations and the relations between them are the very fabric of what James calls "pure experience." These particles are the pieces of the mosaic that "cl[i]ng together by their edges" and, in their changes, constitute a changing world. In "Poem (*À la recherche de Gertrude Stein*)," the world that the pieces constitute is complete and harmonious, as expressed in the poem's central image, "the perfect symmetry of your arms and legs / spread out making an eternal circle together / creating a golden pillar beside the Atlantic." In "St. Paul and All That," in contrast, the pieces appear hopelessly inadequate to the task of composing a coherent world. Lisi Schoenbach argues in *Pragmatic Modernism* that "Stein takes as one of her most serious engagements the duty of rendering habit visible: from the minutiae of daily life, to textual 'habits' such as punctuation and cliché, to the habits that constitute national identity..." (51). In this poem, O'Hara makes visible the extent to which habit underlies our activities and assumptions by illustrating the breakdown that occurs when those habits are challenged.

The end of the poem demonstrates that when the habitual association between "you" and "I" is challenged, the resulting disruption is general, rather than confined to that particular relationship. (Recall Lacan's assertion that "it is the system of signifiers in their totality which is impeached by the least instance of mourning.") The poem establishes this fact by juxtaposing two absences:

the sun doesn't necessarily set, sometimes it just disappears
when you're not here someone walks in and says
"hey,
there's no dancer in that bed"
O the Polish summers! those drafts!
those black and white teeth!
you never come when you say you'll come but on the other hand you do come

O'Hara's line about the sun echoes empiricism's most famous declaration, from David Hume's *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*: "That the sun will not rise to-morrow is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction than the affirmation, *that it will rise*" (31). Hume's is, to a great extent, the "empiricism" in James's radical empiricism. Like Hume's, James's philosophy promises not to "admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced" ("A World" 42), and while experience attests the regularity of the sun's

behavior in the past, it contains no guarantee of its future behavior. As Hume admits, a strictly held empiricism makes inference a tenuous operation: “All our reasonings concerning fact are of the same nature. And here it is constantly supposed, that there is a connection between the present fact and that which is inferred from it. Were there nothing to bind them together, the inference would be entirely precarious” (32). For Hume, habit does the work of binding them together; it is a habit of association that leads us to believe that the sun sets, even on evenings when we don’t watch it slip below the horizon. “St. Paul and All That” is precisely about the changeability of the elements of experience on which habits of association are based. In a more optimistic love poem, O’Hara transforms a synecdoche for Vincent Warren—the suggestive “[t]win spheres full of fur and noise”—into a metaphorical pair of suns that achieve permanence in the form of myth, despite the impermanence of the heaven they traverse:

you give that form to my life the Ancients loved
 those suns are smiling as they move across the sky
 and as your chariot I soon become a myth
 which heaven is it that we inhabit for so long a time
 it must be discovered soon and disappear (406)

In “St. Paul and All That,” the sun itself threatens to disappear. The absence of the dancer from the bed is a version of what Judith Butler describes as a loss that exposes the fundamental precariousness of our existence, which under favorable circumstances we manage to forget. Elaborating the same idea from a different perspective in “A World of Pure Experience,” William James explains, “the immensely greater part of all our knowing never gets beyond [a] virtual stage” (68). “Mainly,” James writes, “we live on speculative investments, or on our prospects only. But living on things *in posse* is as good as living in the actual, so long as our credit remains good. It is evident that for the most part it is good, and that the universe seldom protests our drafts” (88). Sometimes, however, it does protest our drafts, and those occasions remind us of the speculative nature of our investments, and hence the magnitude of our risks.

The last line of “St. Paul and All That” discloses what makes this poem radically, and not just classically, empiricist. James differentiates his radical empiricism from Hume’s empiricism in the following way:

Now, ordinary empiricism, in spite of the fact that conjunctive and disjunctive relations present themselves as being fully co-ordinate parts of experience, has always shown a tendency to do away with the connections of things, and to insist most on the disjunctions. Berkeley’s nominalism, Hume’s statement that whatever things we distinguish are as ‘loose and separate’ as if they had ‘no manner of connection,’ James Mill’s denial that similars have anything ‘really’ in common, [and] the resolution of the causal tie into habitual sequence ... are examples of what I mean.

... *Radical empiricism*, as I understand it, *does full justice to conjunctive relations*, without, however, treating them as rationalism always tends to treat them, as being true in some supernal way, as if the unity of things and their variety belonged to different orders of truth and vitality altogether. (“A World” 42-44)

Memorializing the unpredictability of the other on whom the speaker depends, the last line of “St. Paul and All That” also refuses to make that unpredictability itself predictable. James’s

writings and O'Hara's poem attest that to do "full justice" to both conjunctive and disjunctive relations requires the resources of composition, because the slightest overemphasis on one aspect or the other risks consigning "the unity of things and their variety ... to different orders of truth and vitality altogether." The unpunctuated, almost entirely monosyllabic rush of O'Hara's line achieves an equality of emphasis that might also be described as a flatness of tone: "you never come when you say you'll come but on the other hand you do come." Meanwhile, the hint of an erotic double entendre keeps the line suspended between two registers. The poem ends on a note of indeterminacy that gently declines the Deweyan contours of "internal integration and fulfillment reached through ordered and organized movement" and keeps alive the precise, perplexed emotional state with which the poem began.

¹ William James, "A World of Pure Experience" 87.

² The echo here is of the famous line from "Circles," "The way of life is wonderful: it is by abandonment" (Emerson 414).

³ See, for example, Kadlec, Levin, Rae, Schoenbach, and Buxton.

⁴ See Dickey, Spinks, Case, Magee, Case again, and Allison, respectively.

⁵ One notable exception is Levin's *The Poetics of Transition*, which discusses Dewey in chapters on "The Aesthetics of Pragmatism" and "Santayana, Dewey, and the Politics of Transition."

⁶ The relationship between these two contexts, the Darwinian and the pragmatic, is discussed by Dewey in "The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy"; also see Menand 140-43. Dewey's engagement with the physics of his moment is perhaps best displayed in his 1928-29 Gifford Lectures, published as *The Quest for Certainty*. In these lectures, we can see the connection between his interest in physics and his emphasis on the social and environmental aspects of psychology. For Dewey, the import of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle is that it replaces the Newtonian postulate "that the position and velocity of any particle can be determined in isolation from all others" with a relational conception: in Heisenberg's model, "[t]he particle observed does not *have* fixed position or velocity, for it is changing all the time because of interaction" (193-94).

⁷ "Since the artist cares in a peculiar way for the phase of experience in which union is achieved, he does not shun moments of resistance and tension. He rather cultivates them, not for their own sake but because of their potentialities, bringing to living consciousness an experience that is unified and total" (*Art as Experience* 14).

⁸ See Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy."

⁹ But there is a flaw in Richardson's Darwinian analogy that underscores the active, optimistic bias of pragmatist criticism. Richardson's argument extends from the idea that thinking and language develop according to the same evolutionary principles as living organisms: they operate by repetition with variation, and the variations that happen to be "successful" at any given moment survive and are replicated, while other variations pass out of currency. There is some confusion, however, about the role that great writers play in this evolutionary process. In the following passage, the analogy is ostensibly between those writers and Darwin, but the language suggests that they are engaged in a process of artificial, as opposed to natural, selection:

Darwin, as we know, revised *Origin* five times and attempted to rid his sentences of the idea of teleology, of design, trying to transform the inherited language of intention that his discoveries had disturbed. Similarly, Edwards, Emerson, William and Henry James, Stein, and Stevens repeatedly performed the reflexive gesture of looking back at the

forms of language in use and at earlier forms they used, aligned those forms against newly imagined projections of the shape and movement of the cosmos that came more and more to replace the idea of heaven, and transcribed these imaginings into their verbal stock. The recombinant forms of their visions and revisions produced vigorous hybrids that reflect continuing, asymptotic adjustments of what Emerson described as the “axis of vision” to things as they are in the “flying Perfect.” (xi)

The writers on Richardson’s list, like Darwin, are adjusting their instruments, using the fact of language’s contingency to attune it to an evolving understanding of the world. Whereas the evolution of species, however, is a process devoid of “teleology, of design,” the evolution of language as Richardson represents it is more properly a case of selective breeding. What is lost in Richardson’s metaphor is a sense of the cumulative operations of chance; what is gained is an emphasis on human agency not strictly merited by Darwin’s data.

¹⁰ In his “Notes on Poetics Regarding Olson’s *Maximus*,” Duncan relates Olson’s poetry to Dewey’s aesthetics, echoing, in the process, Emerson’s statement that “Power . . . resides . . . in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim”: “In American poetry the striding syllables show an aesthetic based on energies. . . . John Dewey in *Art as Experience* points to the difference ‘between the art product (statue, painting or whatever), and the *work* of art.’ Again, he writes: ‘Order, rhythm and balance simply means that energies significant for experience are acting at their best.’ I point to Emerson or to Dewey to show that in American philosophy there are foreshadowings or forelightings of *Maximus*. In this aesthetic, conception cannot be abstracted from doing; beauty is related to the beauty of an archer hitting the mark” (68).

¹¹ Keston Sutherland also cautions against attaching O’Hara’s pronouns too firmly to the specific person to whom they appear to refer. In the poem “For Grace After a Party,” for example, Grace Hartigan is clearly the “you” to whom the poem is addressed, but to overstate this identification is to miss the suspense, anonymity and indeterminacy that suffuse the poem, transforming “you” from a determinate interlocutor into a figure for “the limit of [the poet’s] solitude” (128). According to Sutherland, the drama of the poem is the drama of knocking against that limit, a knocking that registers in the shifting valence of the second-person pronoun: the speaker uses “the possessive pronoun ‘your’ as though suddenly it were indefinite, when just a few lines back this same person has used the very definite pronoun ‘you’ in a passionate utterance of love” (125).

¹² Butler cites neither James nor Dewey as influences, but her use of Dewey’s keyword “precarious” points to an overlap that, although probably coincidental, is more than superficial. Butler’s premise in *Precarious Life* that “vulnerability seems to follow from our being socially constituted bodies” (20), constituted as much by unknown as by intimate others, would have struck Dewey as a deeply familiar idea. Just as Dewey conceives of the organism, in biological terms, as the product of constant interaction with its environment, he understands human psychology as fundamentally a product of social interaction: even the mind itself, he writes, “is not an original possession but is a consequence of the manifestation of instincts under the conditions supplied by associated life in the family, the school, the market place and the forum” (“The Need for Social Psychology” 272). Butler, in a sense, brings Dewey full circle, providing a link between his social psychology and his metaphysics of experience in *Experience and Nature*: if we are constituted by our relations to the others who surround us, then we are also exposed to the risk of being “undone by each other” (Butler 23). Butler reminds us that precariousness is

distributed unequally and “becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions” (29), but for both Butler and Dewey, it is a fundamental condition of existence.

¹³ Regarding O’Hara’s relation to the concept of “immediate” experience, I take Lytle Shaw’s statement in the concluding pages of *Frank O’Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* as an indispensable starting point:

He is famously attracted to immediacy. But what links all of the writings we have been considering is a process of denaturalizing the field of attributes one associates with seemingly immediate markers or marks: the meaning of a proper name, painterly gesture, or collage configuration. The phantom immanence of the proper name might thus be considered along a continuum with the seeming immediacy of gestural painting and supposedly autobiographical collage: would-be markers or designators in language behave instead as wild signs; seemingly emphatic and particular marks by painters that would index private psychic states instead keep escaping into the more public fantasies and nightmares of popular culture (especially Hollywood) and the Cold War; or, what appears to be the visual proof of a self and its history in collage keeps turning in on the syntactical codes by which such a self has been educed, mingling with other selves and with culture more broadly. It is the gradually destabilized rhetoric of immediacy that guides each of these processes—the vanishing of secured immanence. (233)

My reading of O’Hara builds on Shaw’s by arguing that the disruption of fantasies of immanence is not a problem for O’Hara, or a cause for nostalgia, but a poetic achievement that affords him a more nuanced engagement with affective experience.

Chapter Three

“The greens around them, and / the browns, the grays, are the park”: James Schuyler’s Empiricism

In Chapter Two, I identified a key difference between Dewey’s pragmatism and James’s radical empiricism and drew a corresponding distinction between pragmatist poetics and the radical empiricist poetics of Frank O’Hara. In this chapter, I want to expand on what it means to practice a radical empiricism in the context of postwar American poetry and the arts more broadly. The work of James Schuyler—apparently the least dazzling, least experimental poet of the New York School—is also perhaps the most instructive for situating the New York School within this broader landscape. Among the numerous varieties of immanentist and empiricist aesthetics that blossomed in the United States in the postwar, post-modernist moment, Schuyler’s quiet, careful poetry of experience both highlights and deftly avoids some of the contradictions that beset other attempts to elaborate an immanentist aesthetic in words, paint or music. Like William James, Schuyler is sensitive to the difficulty of constructing a poetry—in James’s case, a philosophy—grounded in lived experience without abstracting or idealizing that ground. Like James, I argue, his radical empiricism consists in the vigilance and tenacity with which he attempts such a construction. The most recognizably empiricist of the New York School poets, Schuyler allows us to perceive the basis of the New York School’s difference from their Beat and Black Mountain counterparts in a form of radical empiricism: experience appears in wildly different aspects across the range of their poetry, but their poems remain persistently oriented toward disclosing it, rather than transcending it or finding within it a source of transcendence. Seen in this light, Schuyler’s poetry looks less like a minor accessory to the more ambitious works of O’Hara and Ashbery, and more like a limpid illustration of the principles that undergird their work.

Postmodern Empiricisms

In his seminal study *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s*, Charles Altieri argues that the defining feature of postmodern poetry is a shift from a symbolist poetic to an immanentist one. The former, which emphasizes “the creative, form-giving imagination and its power to . . . construct[.] coherent, fully human forms out of the flux of experience” (17), was the dominant poetic throughout the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. Altieri traces the symbolist poetic from its origins in “Coleridge’s meditations on poetic structure and on the mind’s dialectical pursuit of an ideal unity,” through “its fruition in Eliot, Yeats, and some Stevens,” to its eventual “narrow[ing] into the academic criticism of second-generation New Critics and the attenuated verbal artifice characteristic of poetry in the 1950s.” In contrast, poets who broke with the dominant mode of 1950s poetry tended to focus on order discovered, rather than order imposed, “placing value in the forces the poet can reveal at work in ordinary experience” (29). For these poets, the power of poetry is not to attain an ideal beyond what is given in nature or experience, but to present nature or experience in its richness and complexity.

Donald Allen’s 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry* was a major locus for the elaboration of this postmodern immanentist poetic. Allen expressed the anthology’s unifying theme simply as “a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse” (xi), but in many cases, the poets’ specific rejections correspond to a more deeply rooted opposition to the

philosophical idealism in which that academic verse was ultimately grounded. An attack on idealism is sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit in the statements of poetics the artists contributed to the anthology. It is present in Robert Duncan's "longing ... to return to the open composition in which the accidents and imperfections of speech might awake intimations of human being" (401); in Olson's assertion "that beauty (Schonheit) better stay in the thingitself: das Ding—Ja!—macht ring (the attack, I suppose, on the 'completed thought,' or the Idea...)" (397); in LeRoi Jones's interdiction, "There must not be any preconceived notion or *design* for what the poem *ought* to be" (424-25); and in Jack Spicer's dream that his poems might contain real objects, like a lemon that can be squeezed and tasted and will eventually grow furry with mold: "The poem," Spicer writes, "is a collage of the real" (413). For all of the differences between and within their bodies of poetry, each of the "schools" represented in *The New American Poetry*, from the Beats to Black Mountain to the New York School, conceived of poetry in terms of process rather than finished product; they embraced, to varying degrees, the role of chance in composition; and they derived the matter and language of their poetry from the everyday world around them. The poets themselves rarely, if ever, referred to their poetics as empiricist,¹ but each of these commitments represents an empiricist aspect of their poetics. And in each of these respects, the avant-garde poetry of the postwar period shared in a shift in orientation occurring contemporaneously across the arts.

In 1963, the music critic Leonard Meyer published an essay in *The Hudson Review* entitled "The End of the Renaissance?: Notes on the Radical Empiricism of the Avant-Garde." In the essay, Meyer argues that the use of chance procedures in contemporary avant-garde music is part of a more widespread revolution in aesthetics based on a philosophy of "radical empiricism." Meyer is not referring to the philosophy of William James; in fact, the position he describes is more consistent with Hume's skeptical empiricism than with James's sweeping revision of it.² The "radical empiricism" of the aesthetic that he identifies consists in a Humean "denial of the reality of cause and effect" (178). According to Meyer, the relationship between cause and effect is the implicit basis of "the music of Bach or Haydn, Wagner or Bartok":

Because of its marked, though not necessarily obvious, structure and pattern, as well as because of our past experience with its grammar and syntax, such music is perceived as having a purposeful direction and goal. As we listen, we make predictions—albeit unconscious ones—as to where the music is going and how it will get there. Of course, our predictions may not be correct. What we expect may not occur or may do so at an unexpected time or in an unexpected way. But whether expected or not, what actually does take place is colored by the fact that predictions were made. That is, musical events are felt to be normal and regular, surprising, amusing, or even shocking, as they conform to, or deviate from, our predictions. (172-73)

Classical aesthetics, in other words, are teleological. The art of the mid-century avant-garde, in contrast, is "anti-teleological": it "directs us toward no points of culmination—establishes no goals toward which to move." It resists narrative and even form, "[f]or implicit in relational concepts such as beginning, middle and end, antecedent-consequent, or periodicity, is the belief that the events in question are causally connected" (182). Meyer's foremost examples come from contemporary music, but he sees this aesthetic extending from Cage's compositions to the canvases of Pollock and Rothko to the novels of Robbe-Grillet, from Mac Low's *The Marrying Maiden* to Beckett's *Malone Dies*:

Just as composers have sought, by chance or calculation, to destroy musical syntax by avoiding tonal relationships, repetitions, regular rhythmic patterns and the like, so painters have avoided symmetry, perspective, and the presence of recognizable objects or patterns because these tend to structure visual experience, creating goals and points of focus. Similarly in literature the elements of syntactical organization—plot, character and conventions of grammar—have been progressively weakened until almost only words remain. (175)

It follows that the destruction of grammar allows us to experience words *as* words, in the same way that “if a color slide is so out of focus that the objects depicted cannot be recognized, one becomes intensely aware of the experience of color as color” (175). If this kind of immanentism is postmodernist, it is also deeply Romantic: as Meyer explains, “[i]t is to the naïve and primitive enjoyment of sensations and things for their own sakes that these artists seek to return.”³

The destructive impulse of the aesthetic Meyer describes is more extreme than that of any of the poets included in *The New American Poetry* or in Altieri’s study *Enlarging the Temple*. Nonetheless, both Meyer and Altieri point to anti-formalism and an immanentist orientation as defining characters of postmodern art. And these commitments lead many of the artists discussed in each account to an impasse. In the vehemence with which they repudiate the ideals of classical, formalist, or symbolist aesthetics, some of these artists—especially when they play the role of artist-theorists—effectively exchange one idealism for another. In the work of Olson or Cage, for example, the authority that had once been located in tradition, the form-giving intellect, or the symbol-generating imagination often seems to be transferred onto nature, process itself, or an idealized field as yet undivided into subjects and objects.⁴ As Altieri puts it, “the poets define as source of value and basis for whatever ethical effects their poetry can have a numinous quality which is essentially natural”—but because “the natural is essentially pre-moral,” “arguments for value based on nature, or for that matter on any pre-reflective qualities of experience, require an act of faith” (“From Symbolist” 636). In other words, what begins as an empiricist determination to re-ground poetry in the world as it is actually experienced—“the accidents and imperfections of speech,” the lemon with its juice and its mold—ends by abstracting experience itself, pursuing the idea of it more than the actuality and investing it with values that cannot be empirically ascertained. For a few of the poets in Altieri’s study, like Gary Snyder and Robert Duncan, this religious aspect of immanence is an explicit foundation of their poetics. (We might call this the difference between an immanentist and an empiricist aesthetic: the former can support the possibility of spiritual faith in forces immanent to nature or experience, while the latter, in theory, precludes it.) But even in the work of Robert Creeley, whom Altieri describes as skeptical of the kind of faith that Duncan and Snyder exhibit, experience takes on a quality of ideality—a quality that Miriam Nichols captures when she observes, “[a]s Creeley so ably demonstrates in ‘The Language,’ the words seem to have holes in them where living presences should be. Words are not feelings or things; at most the poet may trick the language into indexing a real it cannot really express” (142).

The ways in which an immanentist or empiricist aesthetic can slip into an idealist one are many and various. In painting, Mark Rothko, cited as a practitioner of Meyer’s “radical empiricism,” follows a route similar to Robert Duncan’s from the immanent to the spiritually transcendent. Additionally, Meyer’s aesthetic, more than the poetics that Altieri explores, is vulnerable to the classic avant-garde conundrum that oppositionality itself can become a fixed

posture, rendering it no more capable of disclosing the flux of actuality than the forms or traditions that it sets out to disrupt. The poets of the New York School, I have been arguing, write poetry that is exceptionally wary of and resistant to sliding from the immanent to the transcendent, from an empiricist orientation to an idealist one. Their attitudes towards experience—their sense of in what it consists and how a poem should relate to it—are much less programmatic than those of many of their contemporaries. Ironically, it is this absence of a program that allows their poetries to construct fields of experience that are strikingly diverse, but consistent in the sense they convey that what matters is present, in the words on the page and the materials of language and life.

Writing Radical Empiricism

The radical empiricism of William James is relevant to the poetic practices of the New York School because it is born out of the desire to construct an empiricism that will remain empirical, giving to experience neither less nor more than its empirical due. In his writings, James developed strategies for curtailing some of the same patterns that arise in postmodern aesthetics, from reflexive oppositionality to the investment of experience with extra-empirical value. His resistance to these patterns is a matter of the substance of James's philosophy, but as a scholar of literature, I am especially interested in the ways in which he constructs his philosophy in language. Rhetorical and figurative maneuvers play at least as serious a role in James's philosophy as logical ones. I want to concentrate on a particular, and particularly consequential, stylistic habit that James shares with the poet James Schuyler: a habit of rhetorical deflation or anticlimax, of willingly descending into banality. John Wilkinson names this feature of Schuyler's poetry *discesa*, after the Italian for descent. Before turning to Schuyler, I will take a moment to illustrate the functioning of *discesa* in James's philosophy.

James spent his career as both a psychologist and a philosopher navigating between what he saw as the twin poles of idealism, or rationalism, and the classical empiricism descended from Locke and Hume. One side offered a soul, an Absolute, a principle of unity running through all things; the other side offered a manifold of sensory experience, chaotic and free from the tyranny of rational constructs. James himself was a committed empiricist, but he objected to the empiricist assumption, still operative in late nineteenth-century psychology, that experience is composed of discrete, repeatable units or "simple ideas." He found that empiricism, by excluding transitional and relational states from its conception of experience, arrived at a picture of the world that is every bit as abstracted from lived experience as the ideals of rationalism. In place of classical empiricism's "brickbat plan of construction" (*Principles* 1:196), James proposed a radical empiricism founded on a conception of experience as fluid and unrepeatable—a Heraclitean "stream of thought" in which every definite sensation is "steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it" (1:255).

In the following passage, James introduces his own philosophy of radical empiricism in relation to the established schools of empiricism and idealism:

Prima facie, if you should liken the universe of absolute idealism to an aquarium, a crystal globe in which goldfish are swimming, you would have to compare the empiricist universe to something more like one of those dried human heads with which the Dyaks of Borneo deck their lodges. The skull forms a solid nucleus; but innumerable feathers, leaves, strings, beads, and loose appendices of every description float and dangle from it, and, save that they terminate in it, seem to have nothing to do with one another. Even so

my experiences and yours float and dangle, terminating, it is true, in a nucleus of common perception, but for the most part out of sight and irrelevant and unimaginable to one another. This imperfect intimacy, this bare relation of *withness* between some parts of the sum total of experience and other parts, is the fact that ordinary empiricism over-emphasizes against rationalism, the latter always tending to ignore it unduly. Radical empiricism, on the contrary, is fair to both the unity and the disconnection. It finds no reason for treating either as illusory. It allots to each its definite sphere of description... (*Essays* 46-47)

What interests me in this passage is how vividly James figures the two worldviews that he is refusing and, in contrast, how unmemorably he describes the view he actually espouses. What reader wouldn't be attracted by the crystal aquarium or the weird, exotic shrunken head? Radical empiricism, on the other hand, is presented without figurative language, in writing that doesn't take pleasure in itself as writing, as James's writing so often does: it "is fair to both..."; "[i]t finds no reason"; "it allots to each its definite sphere of description." Following upon two such fantastic spheres, this "definite sphere" is distinctly anticlimactic. That anticlimax, I want to suggest, is integral to the meaning of the passage. Part of James's criticism of the philosophical environment into which he is intervening is that philosophers tend to be seduced by their own systems, gradually substituting a commitment to the images they have constructed for the goal of offering actual descriptions of the world. Idealist and empiricist philosophies, he sees, are equally vulnerable to this kind of abstraction. By presenting the radical empiricist worldview in imageless and perfunctory language, he installs an initial protection against idealizing the "pure experience," or "stream of thought," that it takes as its foundation. Over the course of his writings, James will use many vivid figures to illustrate aspects of his philosophy, and he will not always succeed at his attempt to remain purely empirical. His commitment to that enterprise, however, and the central role of his writing in achieving it, become especially apparent through a comparison with his contemporary and correspondent, Henri Bergson.

James and Bergson were engaged in parallel transformations of empiricism at the nexus of psychology and philosophy at the turn of the century. Bergson developed the notion of *durée* around the same time that James was writing about "the stream of thought" in his *Principles of Psychology*, and the two concepts have a great deal in common. They both represent experience as an integral, shifting continuum of thought and feeling that stands opposed to the fixed words and concepts with which we inevitably describe it. To a greater degree than James, however, Bergson portrays this stratum of preconceptual experience as a privileged locus of authenticity and value. In his writings, *durée* is anything but banal, and all the more scintillating for its constitutive inexpressibility. In *Time and Free Will*, Bergson imagines an artist of *durée*—a "bold novelist" who, "tearing aside the cleverly woven curtain of our conventional ego, shows us under this appearance of logic a fundamental absurdity, under this juxtaposition of simple states an infinite permeation of a thousand different impressions which have already ceased to exist the instant they are named"—who, in short, "br[ings] us back into our own presence" (133-34). In a passage like this one, *durée*, despite its origin in a resolute empiricism, begins to take on the quality of an ideal. This situation is intensified by the fact that the novelist can only convey an impression of *durée* by means of an illusion, "spread[ing] out our feeling in a homogeneous time, and express[ing] its elements by words" in such a way that unverbalizable experience appears as their ghostly negative (133). (This is a more optimistic version of the attitude towards language that Miriam Nichols attributes to Robert Creeley, quoted above.) In his own

discussions of experience, William James's cautious rhetoric helps to forestall a similar slide towards hypostasis or ideality. "[A]n infinite permeation of a thousand different impressions which have already ceased to exist the instant they are named": James sometimes describes "the stream of thought" and "pure experience" in similarly glittering prose, but he counters such moments with a tendency to understate—to willingly fall flat.

This difference between the two thinkers—and between the two thinkers as writers—is especially pronounced in the way they write about selfhood. Bergson thinks of the self as divided into two aspects, which he depicts using images of surface and depth. *Durée* characterizes the "deeper strata of the self" (136), "the fundamental self" (128), while the public, social aspect of the self is made up of ideas that "float on the surface, like dead leaves on the water of a pond" (135). Meanwhile, in the chapter of his *Principles of Psychology* devoted to "The Consciousness of Self," James performs an act of deflation that turns the depth-surface hierarchy on its head. In laying out a definition of the self, he begins broadly and moves inward, considering first the body and its material extensions, then the "social self," and finally the "spiritual self" (1:292). When he arrives at "the innermost sanctuary," however—the "*self of all the other selves*," "the active element in all consciousness"—he purports to discover nothing more than a "*collection of ... peculiar motions in the head or between the head and throat*" (1:301). James's tone here is matter-of-fact, rather than iconoclastic, but he clearly enjoys the abrupt descent from the high rhetoric of "the innermost sanctuary" to the banality of "cephalic adjustments." For Bergson, introspection gives us access to an authentic core of selfhood: "... we perceive this self whenever, by a strenuous effort of reflection, we turn our eyes from the shadow which follows us and retire into ourselves" (231). James also champions the method of introspection, but in his case, it does not yield the depth, stability or certainty that it does for Bergson: "*Whenever my introspective glance succeeds in turning round quickly enough to catch one of these manifestations of spontaneity in the act, all it can ever feel distinctly is some bodily process, for the most part taking place within the head*" (1:300). My point here is not to emphasize James's materialism, which I discuss in the following chapter, but to highlight a moment in which his deployment of rhetorical anticlimax forestalls the temptation to idealize that inevitably arises when the social, rational world is set in opposition to the infinitely subtle workings of consciousness.

One last passage from "The Consciousness of Self" will demonstrate James's commitment to his empiricist orientation and the role that tone and rhetoric play in maintaining it. Regarding the concept of the soul, James concludes that it raises more problems for philosophy than it solves. His consideration of the question, however, is circumspect. "One great use of the Soul," he writes,

has always been to account for, and at the same time to guarantee, the closed individuality of each personal consciousness. The thoughts of one soul must unite into one self, it was supposed, and must be eternally insulated from those of every other soul. But we have already begun to see that, although unity is the rule of each man's consciousness, yet in some individuals, at least, thoughts may split away from the others and form separate selves. As for insulation, it would be rash, in view of the phenomena of thought-transference, mesmeric influence and spirit-control, which are being alleged nowadays on better authority than ever before, to be too sure about that point either. The definitively closed nature of our personal consciousness is probably an average statistical resultant of many conditions, but not an elementary force or fact.... So long as our self,

on the whole, makes itself good and practically maintains itself as a closed individual, why ... is not that enough? And why is the *being-an-individual* in some inaccessible metaphysical way so much prouder an achievement? (1:349-50)

In admitting that “our personal consciousness” is not *always* definitively closed, it would be easy to proclaim its essential fragmentation, as many writers of the modernist period would do. The delicate task that James undertakes in this passage is to preserve a sense of its average, practical closure while prying it apart from the notion of an entity, like the soul, that explains and guarantees it. Once again, an act of writerly deflation helps him to achieve a subtle but philosophically important effect. The statement, “the definitively closed nature of our personal consciousness is probably an average statistical resultant of many conditions,” would sound pedestrian under any circumstances, but it sounds especially so when it follows upon two more glamorous alternatives, the ideal unity of the soul and the sublime dissolution suggested by multiple personalities and mesmerism. It is no accident that James presents the soul theory in simple declarative sentences and the theory of disunity in a tangle of subordinate clauses from which the names of psychic phenomena dangle like beads and feathers from a shrunken head. By prefacing it with two such thoroughgoing alternatives, James ensures that his third way, the self of statistical likelihood, won’t tip over into one or the other. It is sustained in its unassuming precision by the tension between the crystalline and the baroque.

The poet James Schuyler knew first-hand that a unified consciousness is “not an elementary force or fact.” A sufferer of repeated psychotic episodes, he had versions of that experience in which “thoughts may split away from the others and form separate selves.” But in his poetry, Schuyler doesn’t insist on the inchoate, either in celebration or alarm. Instead, his poetry takes for granted a contingent and fragmented subjectivity, so that what becomes surprising is that the self seems to cohere at all. I will return later in the chapter to the Jamesian sense of selfhood that emerges from Schuyler’s poems, especially the group known as the “Payne Whitney Poems.” Written in the aftermath of a severe psychiatric crisis, these poems demonstrate how puncturing the conventional drama of mental breakdown can produce the most nuanced psychological portraiture. First, however, it is necessary to establish a picture of the empiricist poetic that allows that particular sense of selfhood to arise.

Schuyler’s Empiricist Poetic

Of all the poets of the New York School, Schuyler’s poetry is the most recognizably empiricist in multiple senses of the term. First of all, it is a poetry of things: of cardinals, petunias, and the lamp on the writing table. Feelings are not absent from his poems, but they are rarely the focus of attention; people occasionally wander into the frame, but are usually handled with the touch of a painter of landscapes and domestic interiors, as opposed to that of a portraitist. Often, the sign of their presence is not visual but a scrap of dialog—a piece of found text or objectified sound. Like in the poetry of William Carlos Williams, whose influence on Schuyler is instantly apparent, the slightest, most ordinary things seem to gleam with their own inherent dynamism. Schuyler states his own variation on “no ideas but in things” in a poem from *The Crystal Lithium*: “All things are real / no one a symbol” (*Collected* 125). Even the word “things,” however, may be inadequate to the objects that inhabit his lines (as indeed it is to Williams’s objects, despite his sloganeering). Schuyler’s words about the painter Jane Freilicher also apply to himself: “She has always an uninsistent respect for the character of what she paints; not its thing-ness, but its alive-ness” (*Selected Art* 30).

Secondly, Schuyler practices an empiricism grounded in the senses. He is justly celebrated for his exquisite attention to the subtleties of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch: the autumn air is “crisp as a / Carr’s table water / biscuit” (*Collected* 195); a lover’s body, damp from a bath, “exhales a soft wet smell / of March” (12). Even more than in Williams’s poetry, Schuyler’s attention to sensory detail indexes the presence of an embodied observer. Things in his poems balance delicately between autonomy and relation to a perceiver—one whose habitual stance is seated at a window, or, like the title of one poem, “Standing and Watching” (196). Like the sensory details in Elizabeth Bishop’s poems, those in Schuyler’s subtly demarcate the horizon of the poet’s experience:

... The wind
in trees, a
heavy surge, drowns
out the water-
fall: from here,
a twisted thread. (199)

Rather than transgress that horizon, his poems regularly take detours around gaps in experience, whether sensory or cognitive: “A greasy sense-eclipsing fog ‘I can’t see / Without my glasses’ ‘You certainly can’t see with them all steamed up / Like that...’” (117); in a garden, “tubs of ... / memory / for a moment / won’t supply a name” (24).

Schuyler’s reluctance to assert what falls beyond the range of his experience corresponds with the deep-seated resistance to abstract generalization that his poems exhibit from the beginning of his career to the end. The early poem “An Almanac” serves as a kind of primer for the empiricist principle that operates throughout his work. “An Almanac” does not select a series of images to represent the four seasons of the year so much as it records a selection of particulars that point less or more directly to cyclical patterns of change. Here is one of its four stanzas:

Seats in the examination hall are staggered.
The stars gleam like ice;
a fragment of bone;
in the woods matted leaves;
a yellowish shoot.
A lost key is found;
storm windows are stacked on the beams of the garage. (*Collected* 19)

Over these assorted particulars hovers the efficient but unsubtle designation “spring”—a word, like “summer,” “fall,” and “winter,” that the poem does not pronounce, as if to point out that such generalizations are extraneous to the fabric of reality. (“March,” “April,” and “May,” on the other hand, take on a character of utmost particularity in his poems, like in “The Crystal Lithium,” where they appear as a procession of idiosyncratic personages.) Instead of the traditional emblems of springtime, like lambs and daffodils, this stanza focuses on details that might be seasonless in themselves, but which, in concert, pinpoint a specific moment in the cycle of the year. A “fragment of bone” could belong to any season, but here it combines with “matted leaves” and “a yellowish shoot” to compose a description of what the snowmelt uncovers.

“An Almanac” is one of several poems in Schuyler’s first major collection, *Freely Espousing*, that experiment with different species and degrees of empiricism. Some of these are written in very different modes from the descriptive one Schuyler typically employs. The marvelous poem “Walter Scott” (*Collected* 8-9) verges on the aesthetic that Leonard Meyer calls “radical empiricism”: that is, the poet doesn’t invent or transform, but merely presents what he happens to find, this time in a book, rather than outside his window. The poem’s twenty-two lines consist entirely of fragments copied from *Memoirs of Sir William Knighton*, a figure of the Regency court whose acquaintance with Scott is captured in the next-to-last line. Despite its genteel tone and understated lyric appearance, “Walter Scott” is in a certain respect more radical than the Poundian poetics of quotation, so crucial to the New York School’s Black Mountain counterparts, because it includes no original writing and because, being collaged from a single source, it underplays the role of the poet as selector and arranger of the poem’s materials. The oddly displaced title—Scott is incidental both to Knighton’s memoirs and, it would appear, to the poem—confounds the assumption that either the author or the ostensible subject is central to the work. The lines are taken chronologically from Knighton’s narrative, but the poem underscores the difference between chronology and teleology. The original author, Knighton, is mentioned nowhere. Writing in an era before Google, Schuyler must have assumed that only the rarest of readers would be able to identify the source text, or even confirm that the poem *is* sourced from an existing text, or a single one.⁵ (This is in contrast to Schuyler’s much later work of composition-by-excerption, “Under the Hanger,” which advertises itself “*from Gilbert White’s journals.*”) In these ways, “Walter Scott” anticipates the twenty-first century migration of the avant-garde toward citation-based poetic practices that Marjorie Perloff chronicles in *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*. These practices have played a role in poetics at least since the beginning of the *last* century, but until very recently, Perloff demonstrates, even the avant-garde remained centered around the principle of “verbal originality”—“the poet’s *inventio* as constructive principle” (9).

The thorough unoriginality of “Walter Scott,” then, makes it a vanguard poem. Some critics have been anxious to emphasize this vanguard dimension of Schuyler’s work, and their anxiety is understandable, given the work’s unassuming self-presentation. “When we think of Schuyler as primarily a poet of realism and mimesis, the quotidian snapshot and the limpid lyric,” writes Andrew Epstein in a recent essay, “we overlook some of what makes his poetry so powerful, lasting, and timely. At every turn, Schuyler’s work remains skeptical of the classic realist project and distrustful of claims to objectivity, mastery, and transparency in language and representation” (n. pag.) The aspect of Schuyler’s poetry that proves his timeliness and experimentalism, according to Epstein, is his use of collage techniques.⁶ Poetic collage works against both the Romantic, expressive model of authorship and a naïve view of language’s referential function, since it owns its borrowings from other authors and treats language less as a window than as a material thing, whose multiple ways of meaning are shown up by the process of transplantation. By stressing the affinity between Schuyler’s poetry and the art of Kurt Schwitters, Joseph Cornell, and Robert Rauschenberg—as opposed to the figurative painting of Fairfield Porter or Jane Freilicher to which it is usually compared—Epstein brings him into line with the values of the current poetic climate, which he indirectly enumerates in his list of Schuyler’s avant-garde practices. The Schuyler he wishes to emphasize is given

to experiment with parataxis, fragmentation, and the incorporation of found materials and overheard, “ordinary” language; to interweave hyperprecise observations of experience

with tart skepticism about the fidelity of any kind of representation; and to use catalogs and lists[;] . . . to blur the genre boundaries between poem, diary, and letter, and to develop a new kind of long poem that depends on a continuous seriality that avoids climax and closure.⁷

Schuyler's use of these practices, Epstein contends, connects him to "the recent surge of interest in documentary poetry and Conceptual projects that register the quotidian," making his poetry a forerunner of contemporary works like Brenda Coultas's "Bowery Project" and Kenneth Goldsmith's *The Weather*.

William Watkin's analysis of Schuyler in *In the Process of Poetry: the New York School and the Avant-Garde* also emphasizes the ways in which his poetry complicates the qualities of immediacy and representational accuracy for which past critics have praised it. Like Epstein, he argues for Schuyler's avant-gardism on grounds related to collage. For Watkin, Schuyler's poetry exemplifies Lyotard's concept of the *differend*, which "exists," Watkin explains, "between phrases and testifies to the conflict of different phrases based on their radical heterogeneity" (69). Like elements in a collage, phrases in a language respond to heterogeneous and incommensurable laws, and the *differend* appears in the disjunctive transitions that indicate the failure of one law to apply to any given whole. The New York School poets emphasize the *differend* "by using one phrase per line, or by stressing the lack of semantic unity between one phrase and the next"; indeed, Watkin notes, "in avant-garde poetry each phrase, even when spoken by the same person, exists as if spoken by a different party" (69, 70). Rosalind Krauss's distinction between "the Cubist use of collage elements" and Rauschenberg's postmodern collage is pertinent here: her account might be taken to suggest that the aesthetic of the former is based on the assimilation of heterogeneous elements under a new law—"a bit of newspaper absorbed into the shape of a wineglass"—whereas in Rauschenberg's art, the assembled elements retain their heterogeneity (see "Rauschenberg" 50).

Watkin and Epstein are right that Schuyler's poetry is more critical, complicated and experimental than it first appears. At the same time, however, neither of them explains why, if Schuyler took such a skeptical view of language and lyric's traditional principles of originality, continuity and closure, he wrote poems that so closely resemble traditional lyrics—or why, among the host of twentieth-century poets who take skepticism and experimentalism to further extremes, Schuyler's fractional iconoclasm deserves attention. In the case of "Walter Scott," the understated lyric quality of the poem seems equally important as the radical method of its composition. Wilder possibilities were available to Schuyler. In the period during which he composed the poems of *Freely Espousing*—it was published in 1969, but the earliest poems in the book date from 1951—some New York artists were using citational practices to compose works that posed more extreme challenges to readers' assumptions about meaning and authorship. Jackson Mac Low's 1958 "Sonnet for Gérard de Nerval" (41) is much like "Walter Scott," in that it is composed of words pulled from an other's book and arranged in conventional-looking lines and stanzas. However, whereas "Walter Scott" consists of intelligible phrases and truncated but grammatically complete sentences, Mac Low pulled his words one at a time, rather than in groups, resulting in a complete disruption of syntax. While the fragments that comprise "Walter Scott" appear to have been selected by the casual eye of a reader, the words of Mac Low's sonnet are derived from a complex series of chance operations that further remove the work from the poet's intentions. John Cage's *Empty Words*, written in 1974, subjects Thoreau's journals to an even more extreme process of decomposition: its four "lectures" are collaged first

of phrases, then words, then syllables, and finally individual letters gleaned by aleatory procedures from the original text.

A Schuyler poem will never be mistaken for an excerpt from *Empty Words*. And yet a text like *Empty Words* is a more consistent elaboration of the principles that emerge from Epstein's essay as avant-garde poetic values—"parataxis," "fragmentation," "continuous seriality," and a conception of language that emphasizes its opacity over its transparency. According to Leonard Meyer, an aleatory art like Cage's or Mac Low's is, in addition, a more thorough application of empiricist principles than an aesthetic partially informed by collage, like Schuyler's. First, I want to demonstrate that Schuyler's art not only stops short of complete disarticulation, but that it self-consciously counters its own tendencies in that direction. Then, I will argue that Schuyler offers an implicit counter to Meyer's claim that an art of complete disarticulation is the fullest expression of a radical empiricism. There are a number of possible reasons why Schuyler, although conversant with the strategies of the avant-garde, chose to adopt them only by half-measures in his poetry. One is that the appeal to Schuyler of the values championed by the avant-garde was not strong enough to supplant those exemplified by the poetry he most admired—chiefly, the Romantic lyricism of Wordsworth and Whitman. As I will show, however, Schuyler's most interesting poems are as challenging to the patterns and premises of the Romantic lyric as they are to the principles of the avant-garde. What those poems reveal is a radical-empiricist desire to do justice, in James's words, to "both the unity and the disconnection"—and therefore to depart from poetic models that prescribe the poem's relationship to one or the other aspect of experience.

Not only do Schuyler's poems not fully embody the avant-garde principles that critics have rightly discovered in them, they actively register the possibility of those principles and just as actively curtail them. One more example of Schuyler's experiments with modes of empiricism in *Freely Espousing* will demonstrate that if Schuyler both courts and curtails the empiricist extreme characterized by Leonard Meyer, he does the same with its more Romantic counterpart, the attempt to recover a zone of prereflective sensation.⁸ (Recall the way that these two empiricist extremes converge in Meyer's contention that "[i]t is to the naïve and primitive enjoyment of sensations and things for their own sakes that these artists"—Cage, Beckett, the Abstract Expressionists—"seek to return.") The poem "Flashes" (*Collected* 22-23) is anomalous in Schuyler's oeuvre for its chaotic impressionism. It belongs to the sizable sub-genre of Schuyler's roof-gazing poems, like "February," "Roof Garden," and "An East Window on Elizabeth Street," but compared to these others, "Flashes" hesitates to bring the cityscape into objective focus. Instead, the reader confronts a series of sense impressions relayed by adjectives, many of which refuse to attach to particular objects:

Dark day
 hard, swarming
 west
 the Chrysler Building
silver, soluble
 south
 not a hole
 a depth
 brightening
 almost to pinkness

The title, “Flashes,” prepares us for the poem’s mode of fractured sensationalism. It also calls to mind a critical moment in Walt Whitman’s poem “There was a Child went Forth.” Schuyler’s engagement with Whitman in *Freely Espousing* (as well as in *The Crystal Lithium*) is well documented, and the preponderance of present-participial forms in “Flashes” (“hanging dissolving forming going renewing”) signals his presence in this poem, especially. In Whitman’s miniature bildungsroman, as the horizon of the child’s experience begins to extend beyond the dooryard and the circle of his family, he encounters a feeling of skeptical doubt:

... the sense of what is real—the thought if, after all, it should prove unreal,
The doubts of day-time and the doubts of night-time—the curious whether and how,
Whether that which appears so is so, or is it all flashes and specks?
Men and women crowding fast in the streets—if they are not flashes and specks, what are
they? (307)

The thought that what appear to be men and women might merely be “flashes and specks” recalls the empiricist fascination with Molyneux’s question (see n. 2). Echoing notions about the nature of perception put forth by contemporaneous scientists like Hermann von Helmholtz, John Ruskin—like Whitman, born in 1819—exhorted painters to strive for an “*innocence of the eye*”: “a sort of childish perception of ... flat stains of color, merely as such, without consciousness of what they might signify,—as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight.” Both the newly sighted and the newborn child, according to this empiricist model, see stains and patches—flashes and specks—as yet unresolved into particular objects in three-dimensional space.

As careful a reader as Schuyler would notice, however, that Whitman reverses the sequence of this developmental pattern. In the poem, the child’s earliest perceptions are of “grass, and white and red morning-glories, and white and red clover, and the song of the phoebe-bird” (306): objects whose appearances are fused to precise identities. Only later does the child imagine that things might be different from what they appear. Following as it does the child’s experience of his parents and “the yearning and swelling heart, / Affection that will not be gainsay’d” (307), the appearance of “flashes and specks” seems not so much perceptual as psychological—that is, not the pure optical experience that Helmholtz and Ruskin imagined it to be, but a product of the burgeoning imaginary.

Schuyler’s poem “Flashes” flirts, not exactly with the vision of an innocent eye, but with the experience of an innocent sensorium. (The poem is predominantly visual, but the impression of motion seems more primary than that of color or form, while some adjectives like “hard” and “soluble” do not suggest the operation of any one sense in isolation.) In the passage above, the poet attempts to organize the space of the poem according to familiar, rational coordinates, turning “west” and then “south.” To the west, however, the solid landmark of the Chrysler Building literally dissolves. The view to the south yields nothing but disorientation, visual clues that provide barely enough information to distinguish “a hole” from “a depth.” From somewhere within this disorganized field, “flashes / in puddles / on a tar roof” catch the poet’s eye and create the illusion that “it’s raining / just in one spot”—an illusion that goes unmarked as such in the poem’s flattened experiential plane. If a colon were inserted after “spot,” the last lines of the poem would form something close to a complete sentence:

Schuyler's willingness to follow the logic of empiricism that would register bug-like flecks and a blue blur unprocessed by the intellect—or, in a different but complementary scenario, the scattered letters of the final lecture of Cage's *Empty Words*. His willingness to follow that logic ends, I want to argue, at the point where it diverges from the testimony of the senses: that is, Schuyler's poetry betrays an interest not in the *logic* of empiricism but in its basic imperative to attend to what is given in experience.

"Freely Espousing"

"Flashes" and "Walter Scott" are two poems at the periphery of Schuyler's production that help us to sketch out some of the primary inclinations and limits of his aesthetic. The first and title poem of *Freely Espousing*, meanwhile, contains these inclinations and limits in much more densely compacted form. From its position at the very opening of the *Collected Poems*, "Freely Espousing" introduces the reader to Schuyler's favorite topics, one after another, in the form of a tumbling collage: from wordplay, to skyscrapers, to wildflowers, to a pair of lovers. The poem is crossed by two complementary motions. Like the closing lines of "An East Window on Elizabeth Street," it repeatedly counters its own tendency toward dissolution with assertions of cohesion. At the same time, the poem's restless energy prevents those moments of cohesion from taking root in any more comprehensive order. The result is a poem that looks nothing like a naively empiricist "nicely wiped window on the world" (Larrissy 8),⁹ but which nonetheless gives the impression, at every turn, of following the directive of fidelity to experience.

"Freely Espousing" begins in a hybrid vein of Whitmanian expansiveness ("... when I thought up the title I thought of it as Whitmanesque," Schuyler remarked (Hillringhouse 8)) and Surrealist disjunction. It exhibits the property that William Watkin has observed is common to much New York School poetry: the unit of composition is the phrase, the phrase often coincides with the line, and the transitions between phrases tend to be abrupt, as though each line belonged to a different conversation (69). In this poem, like in many of O'Hara's, the phrases exhibit a madcap variety that amplifies the impression of disjunctiveness. The poem begins,

a commingling sky

a semi-tropic night
that cast the blackest shadow
of the easily torn, untrembling banana leaf

or Quebec! what a horrible city
so Steubenville is better?

the sinking sensation
when someone drowns thinking, "This can't be happening to me!"
the profit of excavating the battlefield where Hannibal whopped the Romans

These lines exhibit Schuyler's collage technique at work, incorporating fragments of conversation and heterogeneous images and mixing high and low registers of language. Just as Lautréamont's famous umbrella and sewing machine are united only by the operating table on which they happen to meet, these phrases at first appear to be linked only by their presence in this particular poem. "Steubenville" makes a plausible alternative to "Quebec," since both are

cities—but according to what more cohesive logic might either of them figure as an alternative (“or”) to “a commingling sky” or “a semi-tropic night”?

One logic that does run through these initial fragments relates to the poet’s biography. “Quebec,” “the battlefield where Hannibal whomped the Romans,” and “a semi-tropic night” each suggest an allusion to a scene from Schuyler’s past. He spent the summer of 1945 with his lover in a cabin by Lac St. Jean, north of Quebec City (Kernan, “Past = past,” n. pag.). Hannibal defeated the Romans at what is now Barletta, a city Schuyler might easily have visited in 1948 or 1949 while staying with W.H. Auden on the island of Ischia (Kernan, “A Chronology” 281-82). The referent of the “semi-tropic night” becomes clearer much later in Schuyler’s career, when the banana leaf, which seems in “Freely Espousing” like a piece of surrealist fancy, reappears in a determinate context. In “The Morning of the Poem,” the poet recalls “walking under the palms on liberty in / 1943 with a soldier / I had just picked up” (*Collected* 270). The memory triggers a rhapsodic inventory of the pleasures of Key West, including “heavy oaks densely hung / With Spanish moss” and “a face- / Enveloping moon I want to see again casting / black velvet shadows of / The palms and broad banana leaves.” The point of ascribing biographical contexts to some of the opening lines of “Freely Espousing” is not to destroy the impression of random heterogeneity, but to suggest that the random heterogeneity belongs to experience, and not simply to the artist’s act of bricolage. By presenting biography in the style of a collage, both this poem and “Walter Scott” diminish the distance between collage and representation (without approaching anything like representational collage, which is less practicable in poetry than in visual art). In the virtually infinite assemblage of images, memories and encounters that make up the life of a person—as in the poem—there are through-lines that help make sense of some of the terms, but no one logic that encompasses all of them. Schuyler’s biography may have nothing to tell us about the experience of drowning, for example, or whose profit is at issue in the excavation of a battlefield. But if it does, this passage of “Freely Espousing” is no way less an assemblage.

As the poem progresses, an additional logic emerges: not one that specifies the arrangement of the fragments, but one that suggests a criterion for each item’s inclusion. About one third of the way through the poem, its list-like lines retroactively come into focus as a catalog of what things “are worth celebrating” and what, on the other hand, the poet is “not going to espouse.” This sense of the poem as something of an *ars poetica* crystallizes, appropriately, when Schuyler’s attention turns to language:

the sinuous beauty of words like allergy
the tonic resonance of
pill when used as in
“she is a pill”
on the other hand I am not going to espouse any short stories in which lawn
mowers clack.
No, it is absolutely forbidden
for words to echo the act described; or try to. Except very directly
as in
bong. And tickle. Oh it is inescapable kiss.
Marriages of the atmosphere
are worth celebrating...

In this passage, the first person pronoun makes its only appearance in the poem to declare a prohibition on certain uses of language: this, it might seem, is as close to a statement of poetics as Schuyler gets. What is interesting, however, is the way that the poem either can't or won't sustain the dogmatic assertion. The opposition that these lines construct is between words married to their meanings and words divorced from them. On one side is the mimetic clacking of lawnmowers, while on the other, connotations of illness and wellness swap sounds and shuffle contexts. If words bore an intimate and indestructible relation to their meanings, the word for allergy would be congested and fitful, rather than sinuously beautiful, and "pill" would never have migrated so far from its "tonic resonance" as to describe a pain in the neck. At first, Schuyler expresses his preference for the more disjunctive conception of language, associated here with "beauty" and "resonance," and places a corresponding prohibition on words that "echo the act described." There is even the suggestion that the former kind (or conception) of language is proper to poetry, since the clacking lawnmowers belong to "short stories," as well as to the longest, most prose-like line in the poem. The dense wordplay in this passage, however, preemptively undermines the force of Schuyler's proscription against mimetic language, even before the moment of explicit self-revision that begins at "Except." "[S]inuous" snakes out of "sinus," involving the word "allergy" in a tangled network of relationships among sounds and senses. "[T]onic" relates both to the medicinal implications of "pill" and to the way in which, when "pill" sounds in one context, tones relating to its other contexts sound, too. ("Tonic," in music, refers to the keynote of a scale; it can also pertain to the kinds of spoken accents and inflections that contribute to the meaning of a word.) "No, it is absolutely forbidden" is meant to reinforce the poet's resolution "not . . . to espouse," but has the converse effect of expressing the futility of any attempt to take "absolute" control of the ways in which language can mean.

Part of what causes Schuyler's resolution to weaken is language's refusal to be contained: language itself seems to be the animating spirit that proliferates exceptions to the poet's rule, like "bong" and "tickle." Another part is the very vehemence of the proscription. An unqualified "No" is a rarity in Schuyler's poetry, as is the adverb "absolutely." Such restrictiveness is at odds with the equanimous, equivocating character of Schuyler's poetic voice. Nor does it suit the tone of a poem called "Freely Espousing," with its dominant theme of "celebrating" "[m]arriages." The marriage between signifier and signified isn't necessary or universal, the poem suggests, but total divorce is as poor a description of the poet's experience of language as perfect marriage. Critics often point out that Schuyler's poetry is full of moments that tally with the poststructuralist conceptions of language that would become so important to Language poetry. Some of these moments are incidental: "The sky is pitiless. I beg / your pardon? OK then / the sky is pitted" (*Collected* 113). Others are more direct: "lousy poets," Schuyler surmises, have

No innate love of
 Words, no sense of
 How the thing said
 Is in the words, how
 The words are themselves
 The thing said: love,
 Mistake, promise, auto
 Crack-up, color, petal... (268)

What these moments in Schuyler's poetry never do, however, is add up to a theory of how language works, or how it functions aesthetically. Even the excerpt just quoted offers two different models, each of which is ambiguous in itself: "the thing said / Is in the words" and "The words are themselves / The thing said." Gillian Conoley has characterized Schuyler's attitude toward language in terms that are almost vague enough to be adequate to it:

Language's property to have a life of its own and still open itself to the writer patient and generous enough to attend language by letting it speak through what he says, the mysterious region where the word and the thing meant coincide, however precariously, however momentarily, *this* is the inescapable kiss. For Schuyler the moment of grace and the presence of beauty and truth happen somewhere in the give and take between the thing said in words, and the words present in the thing said." (46)

Conoley's assessment may stand, as long as it is clear that what she calls "grace," "beauty," and "truth"—words that somewhat overstate the aesthetic aims of Schuyler's poetry—occur "somewhere in the give and take" between words and things said, and not necessarily in that precarious moment in which "the word and the thing meant coincide." "Freely Espousing" may be a poem that "celebrat[es]" "[m]arriages," but what Conoley calls "*the* inescapable kiss" (emphasis added) does not arrive as a culmination or resolution. Rather, it arrives in a line that wavers indeterminately between the giddiness of play and the resignation of a sigh: "Oh it is inescapable kiss." To pull a hypostatized thing, *an* "inescapable kiss," out of this deliberately undecidable grammatical context, threatens to give both the kiss and the theory of language toward which it gestures a weight that Schuyler does not give it.

"How does this poem avoid being weighed down?" is the question that John Wilkinson investigates in his luminous essay on Schuyler in the collection *On Bathos: Literature, Art, Music* (79). He asks this question specifically of one of the series of "Payne Whitney Poems" published in *The Morning of the Poem*, but "lightness of touch" (81) is a quality he admires in Schuyler's poetry at large. The answer that he proposes lies, counter-intuitively, in Schuyler's deployment of a form of bathos. The particular bathos of Schuyler's poetry, which Wilkinson calls *discesa*, is more of a gentle collapse than a precipitous fall. Like William James, Schuyler often delivers banality at moments when his readers expect elevation, and treats in perfunctory language those topics that seem like they should be his poetry's most profound and intimate concerns. Wilkinson's essay establishes the centrality of these gestures to Schuyler's writing. He shows how they enact a refusal of the sublime, and how this refusal gives rise to the singular effect of Schuyler's poetry. Wilkinson's analysis serves as a foundation for my argument that Schuyler's poetry is shaped by its effort to hew to a rigorous, if frequently unfamiliar, empiricism. In the last part of this chapter, I will demonstrate that it isn't merely the sublime that Schuyler resists, but hypostasis in all of its guises, and that the instances and passages of experience that his best poems construct are opened up precisely by his declining to tie them, in James's words, to "an elementary force or fact."¹⁰ If Schuyler's poetry convinces us, in Wilkinson's words, that "the world [can] be made more substantial through lightness of touch" (81), the example of James's radical empiricism begins to show us why.

As Wilkinson explains it, *discesa* in Schuyler's poetry occurs both in individual moments of rhetorical deflation and as an overall declension "from general cultural assumptions about how lyric should do its business" (71). Especially, Schuyler's poems—at least the majority of them—disappoint the assumption that lyric should court the sublime. Wilkinson associates this

assumption not only with Romantic lyrics but with the greater part of postmodern poetry, from the anguished intensity of the Confessionals to the textual sublime of a poet like Susan Howe: “the empty paginal space of any number of text-miners and collagists,” he writes, “claims sublimity as assuredly as that minimalism in sculpture which sought to evade the symbolic order” (72). This characterization of Schuyler’s work accords well with my account of the New York School’s difference from many of the other poets of *The New American Poetry*, and especially from the empiricist aesthetic identified by Leonard Meyer. The sublimity of Abstract Expressionism can be added to the list of aesthetic possibilities that circulated around the scene of Schuyler’s writing. And if minimalism, sculptural or textual, invokes the sublime, then so does the visual, textual, and musical art of John Cage, while at the same time, if one approaches Cage from another direction—from his affinity with Duchamp and Dada—one discovers sublimity by an alternate route, since the bathos of Dada, as Sara Crangle demonstrates in another essay in *On Bathos*, is inextricable from the very exaltation it attempts to obliterate (Crangle 33). Unlike the bathos of Dada, Schuyler’s *discesa* measures, in Wilkinson’s words, his “resistance to both the sublime and the depths of extremity” (78). By deflecting these weightier extremes, he achieves a lyric that is nimble in the shades of experience it is able to convey. I will return to the particular functioning of *discesa* in “Freely Espousing” before turning, in the last section of the chapter, to the relevance of Wilkinson’s analysis to Schuyler’s radical empiricism.

If Schuyler’s poetry thwarts the sublime, it also departs, slightly but consequentially, from poetic models oriented toward a more moderate degree of transcendence. Wilkinson points out that “[s]ome Schuyler poems, throughout his career, do trope towards the sublime” (75). Schuyler’s sublime is decidedly humbler than that of other poets, but still we find it, to cite Wilkinson’s example, in the way that ordinary lamplight “shift[s] towards the transcendental” in the poem “The light within” (*Collected* 402). What we find more commonly, however—and what, I will argue, *discesa* works equally well to confound—are the Wordsworthian “spots of time” that Robert Thompson discovers in Schuyler’s poetry.¹¹ Schuyler displays less of an inclination toward the sublime than a propensity to linger over “concentrated instances,” a phrase he uses with reference to Fairfield Porter (qtd. in Thompson 290). To call these instances transcendent would be an overstatement, but they hover at an elevation slightly higher than the humdrum, everyday world that is always their source. Like Wordsworth’s “spots of time,” they hold out the promise of “[a] renovating virtue” by allowing a glimpse of harmony or wholeness, as in the poem “February,” when the poet pauses to wonder at the coalescence of visual elements in his immediate environment:

The green leaves of the tulips on my desk
 like grass light on flesh,
 and a green-copper steeple
 and streaks of cloud beginning to glow.
 I can’t get over
 how it all works in together... (5)

Borrowing a framework from Paul de Man, Geoff Ward similarly notes Schuyler’s cultivation of “moments” of suspended temporality. In the poem “June 30, 1974,” for example, “[t]he individual life, the lives of others in the vicinity, and the nonhuman surroundings with the possibilities they afford for pleasure and contemplation, are celebrated for the precious but provisional balance in which they can be held for the moment the poem records” (27). Ward

moderates this reading by observing that Schuyler's poems often display a sense of humor about their own desire to retreat from temporality—evidenced, for instance, in the camp tone of his apostrophe, “Silver day / how shall I polish you” (*Collected* 235, qtd. in Ward 17)—and that a deconstructive reading of Schuyler's work “does not in the end disclose anything that the poetry did not know about itself” (Ward 28-9). Nevertheless, Ward's analysis shows us how nearly Schuyler seems to approach a model of lyric whose reason for being is the achievement of these still moments of “provisional balance”—a model related to the pragmatist aesthetics discussed in Chapter Two. In the passage quoted above, Gillian Conoley wavers at the edge of expressing a language-oriented version of this aesthetic, in which the achievement of the poem would be to step, just for an instant, into “the mysterious region where the word and the thing meant coincide.”

“Freely Espousing” both introduces the reader to the possibility of these moments in Schuyler's oeuvre and also demonstrates his refusal to invest them with the weight that they necessarily take on when they are perceived as the basis of an aesthetic. If Schuyler's poetry pushes back against the impulse toward extreme dissolution—whether in the form of a desire to recover an unrationalized world of sensation or of a total disarticulation of conventional forms of meaning—it also works, in his best poems, to ensure that the “spot of time” or the “momentary stay against confusion” does not become the objective towards which the poem drives. Schuyler's primary tool for relieving the pressure a poem might place on a particular moment is *discesa*. The line, “Oh it is inescapable kiss,” incorporates *discesa* into what is also, simultaneously, a high point in the poem. The line's expression of resignation and its syntactic ambiguity both perform a minor bathetic slump. Softness of will supplants the firm resolution of “No, it is absolutely forbidden,” while the hyper-articulation of the preceding three lines, effected by frequent punctuation, collapses into a lazy abdication of syntactic control.

The other thing that keeps this moment of coincidence from bearing too much weight is that the poem simply keeps moving. Schuyler's modified collage aesthetic allows him to rapidly shift topics without laboring over the development of one complex of lines into the next. On the heels of “Oh it is inescapable kiss,” the poem immediately offers another series of images of harmonious “commingling”:

Marriages of the atmosphere
are worth celebrating
 where Tudor City
catches the sky or the glass side
of a building lit up at night in fog
“What is that gold-green tetrahedron down the river?”
“You are experiencing a new sensation.”

Many of Schuyler's poems are dedicated to describing the view from his apartment, but the view enters this one at an oblique angle. From the apartment on 49th St. that he shared with O'Hara and then Ashbery, Schuyler could see the United Nations Building, the East River, and Tudor City—landmarks that appear repeatedly in his poems, even in ones written decades after his tenancy. O'Hara's poem “St. Paul and All That” contains the line, “the sun doesn't necessarily set, sometimes it just disappears” (O'Hara, *Collected* 406). In contrast, Schuyler's “indolence,” as Mark Silverberg calls it—his capacity to sit for hours on end at a window¹²—puts him in a position to witness the everyday spectacles of the atmosphere, like moments when the glazed

brick façade of “Tudor City / catches the sky.” The poem “February” makes out of a moment like this one an epiphany, lingering over the details of the scene before rising to the exclamation, “I can’t get over / how it all works in together.” In “Freely Espousing,” the moment is denoted, rather than described, and clarity (“lit up”) transitions swiftly to obscurity (“night,” “fog,” and an unidentified structure “down the river”). Instead of a glimpse of completeness, this “marriage[...] of the atmosphere” opens onto disembodied dialogue and an answer that glances oddly off of an unsatisfied question.

One effect of deflecting the epiphanic moment is that it allows an intense relationality to emerge all over the poem without insisting that it coalesce into a deep or single order. If the typical collage aesthetic operates by suppressing the relationships between terms so that new and unexpected (even “shocking”) relations may emerge, “Freely Espousing” finds things so deeply and multiply embedded in relationships that neither the revelation nor the disruption of any one instance of relational order carries an especially forceful charge, although both of them, for Schuyler, are occasions for poetry. The banana leaf in the opening lines of the poem appears as a shadow projected by whatever light illuminates the “semi-tropic night,” while the leaf itself, “easily torn” and “untrembling,” is characterized in relation to other of its potential states. “Quebec” appears as part of a relational network that includes “Steubenville,” but also whatever is imagined to precede the word “or,” either within or beyond the poem.

This context makes all the difference in the effect of the last third of the poem, which trains its attention on three relationships: the first ecological, the next painterly, and the last interpersonal. These relationships are affirmed in the same matter-of-fact tone heard in the closing lines of “An East Window on Elizabeth Street”:

*if the touch-me-nots
are not in bloom
neither are the chrysanthemums*

the bales of pink cotton candy
in the slanting light
 are ornamental cherry trees.
 The greens around them, and
 the browns, the grays, are the park.
It’s. Hmm. No.
 Their scallop shell of quiet
 is the S.S. *United States*.
 It is not so quiet and they
 are a medium-size couple who
 when they fold each other up
 well, thrill. That’s their story.

As if prompted by the reminder of an empirical relationship between late-summer touch-me-nots and early-fall chrysanthemums, the lines in the middle of this passage undo the painterly acts of imagination that would transform cherry trees into bales of cotton candy and dissolve the park into sensational browns, greens and grays. The end-stopped lines with their terminal monosyllables effect a perfunctory reversal of these impulses toward surrealism and impressionism, resolving the bales into trees, the greens and grays into the park. This comedown

is an instance of *discesa*. An effect of candor and even a degree of banality is created by the repetitive sentence structure that the passage shares, again, with the last lines of “An East Window”: “The furthest off people are tiny as fine seed / but not at all bug like. A pinprick of blue / plainly is a child running.” Nearly every verb in these passages is a form of the verb “to be,” with the copula in almost every instance followed by a predicative nominal: “the bales of pink cotton candy / . . . / are ornamental cherry trees.” “Their scallop shell of quiet / is the S.S. *United States*.” “[T]hey / are a medium-size couple.”

The sentence structure repeated in these lines calls to mind an anecdote from Roland Barthes’s lectures on *The Neutral*. To write with nuance and subtlety, Barthes explains, a writer needs special strategies to combat language’s natural arrogance, a condition that stems from the fact that “the *yes* (the affirmation) is implicitly inscribed in all of language, while the *no* requires a special mark at each occurrence” (42). Barthes is of the opinion that “*it doesn’t help to add rhetorical caveats as softening devices* (‘*in my humble opinion*,’ ‘*it seems to me*,’ ‘*according to me*,’ *etc.*),” but he relates an encounter with “*a typically arrogant sentence [he] read in the newspaper*” that made him “*miss the presence of a ‘softener’*” (48). In the *Telerama* of March 11, 1978, a journalist had written, “*Do you remember? It’s not so distant; eighteen years ago. When the greatest French pianist of this century died, June 15, 1962, there was, as one would say, ‘a feeling of unease.’*” The journalist is speaking of the pianist Cortot. Of his formulation, Barthes writes,

I had the impression to discover that, curiously, but in an interesting way, the arrogance of the judgment comes in large part from the obliqueness with which the syntax smuggles it in: “Cortot is the greatest pianist of the century” = altogether more a provocation than an arrogance; but the incident clause naturalizes the affirmation: it goes so much without saying that it is enough to allude to it in passing: as if it were a natural attribute. (48)

The formulations at the end of “Freely Espousing” are instances of direct statement that do more to combat language’s natural arrogance than any act of “oratorical precaution” (45).¹³ For the remarkable thing about the series of statements is the way they reverse our expectations of what goes without saying. The more metaphorical expressions—“the bales of pink cotton candy,” “[t]heir scallop shell of quiet”—occupy the position of the grammatical subject, which endows them with a feeling of givenness. The terms that we would expect to take for granted, on the other hand, are a point of arrival, rather than the point of departure. The “ornamental cherry trees” in “the park” appear as if “*from the far side of abstraction*”—a phrase Geoff Ward has used to describe Larry Rivers’s approach to realism (23). In these lines, Schuyler’s directness counter-intuitively unsettles the *givenness* of the world as a person might ordinarily perceive it, while at the same time attesting the empirical persistence of that ordinary perception. While the more typical disruptive strategies of the avant-garde share the former goal of unsettling, they tend to leave no way of acknowledging the extent to which experience falls in predictable patterns—in the same way that classical empiricism, in James’s view, could account for the “bare relation of *witness* between some parts of the sum total of experience and other parts,” but could say nothing about the measure of unity, however limited, that experience undeniably exhibits. In other words, the world as we ordinarily experience it emerges from Schuyler’s poem as “probably an average statistical resultant of many conditions, but not an elementary force or fact.”

The last lines of the poem suggest a reason why Schuyler is concerned to sever experiences from the notion of an “elementary force or fact” operating behind or through them. “[T]hey / are a medium-size couple who / when they fold each other up / well, thrill”: these lines describe a relationship in a tone about as romantic as James’s description of the self as “probably an average statistical resultant of many conditions.” And yet it may be that the unromantic tone is what allows the romance of the partnership to emerge: that it achieves resonance by refusing transcendence. The “It’s. Hmm. No” that prefaces the lines stands as a mark of that refusal, as well as a mark of the self-censorship with which Schuyler, as a gay man, would have had to tell the “story” of any of his romantic relationships in Cold-War era America, figured in the poem as both the patriotic symbol and the claustrophobic environment of the world’s fastest ocean liner, the S.S. *United States*. The “scallop shell of quiet” is borrowed from Sir Walter Raleigh: “Give me my scallop-shell of quiet, / My staff of faith to walk upon, /.../ My gown of glory, hope's true gage; / And thus I'll take my pilgrimage.” Schuyler’s poem introduces the possibility that the S.S. *United States* might serve as a sanctified conveyance only to immediately reject it, leaving the end of the poem emphatically devoid of spiritual implications. The closing image is not holy, but practical: two people “fold each other up” like items in a suitcase or stowable ship’s furniture. Whether “fold[ing] each other up / well” is a way of talking about sex or about partnership more generally, it may be that the refusal to grant it the status of a sublime event is what justifies its claim to the “thrill.” What makes the thrill thrilling, in other words, is that it’s produced by nothing more exalted than the convergence of two medium-sized bodies.

“...probably an average statistical resultant of many conditions, but not an elementary force or fact.”

In other words, Schuyler’s tendency to understate and even undercut the very things that seem to be at the center of his poems, like, for instance, romantic love and natural beauty, should be seen as a way of salvaging them, rather than disparaging them. Schuyler’s radical empiricism, his prying apart experiences from the sense of “an elementary force or fact,” is not motivated by an arbitrary philosophical commitment. Rather, it is driven by his awareness of the problem that overstatement can be every bit as damaging to the expression of an experience as denial. His sensitivity to this problem is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the poems that touch on his experience of mental illness.

Critics often contrast “The Payne Whitney Poems,” a group of short lyrics written in the psychiatric hospital where Schuyler spent several weeks in 1975, to the hospital poems of the Confessional school. “[U]nlike [Lowell’s ‘Waking in the Blue’], or Plath’s ‘Tulips,’” Mark Silverberg writes, the Payne Whitney poems “lack what seems to be the obligatory hospital drama and sense of consequence” (194). The drama of Confessional poetry is generated by the sense of a “self or subject” which, Silverberg reminds us, lies at the heart of the genre. Even when that subject is shattered or degraded, the portrayal of mental illness as “a tragic assault” (192) points to an initial conception of selfhood that is strong and integral enough that its destruction must be imagined in terms of violence. Silverberg makes the point that Schuyler is much less invested in the subject than the Confessional poets, and that the recent “falling off of interest in Lowell, Berryman, and Sexton reflects a societal trend that Schuyler’s poetry also speaks to: a shift in interest from the subject to the object, center to margin, self to other” (198).

This is not to say, however, that the self is absent from the Payne Whitney poems. Rather, these poems explore aspects of a subject’s experience that are only accessible because Schuyler refrains from dramatizing his psyche and his illness. The poem “Pastime” conveys palpable

feelings that verge on loneliness and boredom but can't quite crystallize into such, because the subject who feels them is too unsettled for loneliness or boredom to settle in. Either one would signify a lack that implies a possible state of completeness. Because the poem imagines no such state, it conveys an intense impression of the limited range and tenuous composure of a mind in recovery:

At visiting hours the cars
below my window form up
in a traffic jam. ...
... I read
a dumb detective story. I
clip my nails: they are as hard
as iron or glass. The clippers
keep slipping off them. Today
I'm shaky. A shave, a bath. (257)

The speaker's shakiness manifests in the poem's persistent enjambment. Schuyler does not imagine that shakiness welling up from within; instead, he captures the experience of discovering one's state through practical contact with the object world. Where another poet might erect "mind" and "body" as essential categories, there is no sense in this poem that physical shakiness and psychological shakiness can be discriminated from each other. This is a field of experience, in other words, in which subject and object are emergent properties, and Schuyler's remarkable feat is to create such a field not by annihilating the conventional ego or the lyric form, but through an engagement with utterly mundane—mental illness notwithstanding—subjective experience.

The first poem of the Payne Whitney sequence furnishes a different example of the kinds of experience that Schuyler is able to construct by refusing to figure either the self or its dissolution as "an elementary force or fact." John Wilkinson explains how in "Trip," a combination of bathos and syntactic ambiguity "permits at once an unironized affirmation of a miracle, and a circular confirmation of the importance of brain-washed thought to the stabilizing of signification" (87)—that is, the poem celebrates "simple and unambiguous communication as a major human achievement" (88). The poem ends,

... When I think
of that, that at
only fifty-one I,
Jim the Jerk, am
still alive and breathing
deeply, that I think
is a miracle. (252)

In Wilkinson's analysis, the lowbrow, self-deprecating register of "Jim the Jerk" allows Schuyler "both to undercut and further to exalt the claim to the miraculous" (88). The syntactic ambiguity in the second-to-last line forces the reader to turn backwards just as the sentence drives towards its conclusion, frustrating the rise to sublimity that the word "miracle" would otherwise encourage: is it a miracle "that I think," or that "I / ... am / still alive and breathing"? The word

“deeply” simultaneously extends and revokes an invitation to profundity, stolidly attached, as it is, to the physical act of breathing. Like at the end of “Freely Espousing”—“The greens around them, and / the browns, the grays, are the park”—a condition that would ordinarily be taken for granted arrives as a revelation. At the same, the language in which that revelation unfolds is by turns so terse, so silly, and so gauchely excessive as to purge it of its religious force. In this way, Schuyler gives full expression to feelings of wonder and relief at finding the self surprisingly intact, without bruising either the feelings or the discovery with an overemphatic touch.

As a final example of the way in which severing an experience from the idea of “an elementary force or fact” can heighten that experience, rather than diminish it, I turn to Schuyler’s treatment of nature. Schuyler, as we have seen, has an insatiable eye for the details of the natural world: the posture of wildflowers, the textures of clouds. His nature poems, however, have a very different effect from those of other poets of the postwar avant-garde who share a similar relish for precise observation of the non-human world. In Gary Snyder’s *Myths and Texts*, passages of keen-eyed description are embedded in a network of rhymes and correspondences that point to deep structures of nature-culture: “Birds in a whirl, drift to the rooftops / Kite dip, swing to the seabank fogroll / Form: dots in air changing line from line, / the future defined” (20). In the poems of Brother Antoninus, another contributor to *The New American Poetry*, natural details are revealed to be expressions of an explicitly religious power:

Salt grasses here,
Fringes, twigging the crevice slips,
And the gagging cypress
Wracked away from the sea.
God *makes*. On earth, in us, most instantly,
On the very now,
His own means conceives. (*New American* 122)

The nature of the force that animates the diverse facts of the natural world is less important than the perception that those facts are animated by, or participate in—or, in the most immanentist formulation, constitute—an elemental force. As is often the case, Charles Olson provides a programmatic illustration of that perception, which is basic to much of the poetry of the postwar avant-garde. His “Variations Done for Gerald Van De Wiele” (*New American* 36-37) exhibit a treatment of the natural world that cannot be described as traditionally symbolist, because the elements of that world do not stand for something other than themselves. And yet the poet finds in them an impetus that extends to human activity, conceived at the most universal level: “the night is drummed / by whippoorwills, and we get // as busy, we plow, we move, / we break out, we love.” The third variation, “Spring,” begins,

The dogwood
lights up the day.

The April moon
flakes the night.
...
The flowers are ravined
by bees, the fruit blossoms

are thrown to the ground, the wind
the rain forces everything. ...

Those last two words, “forces everything,” intimate that the real interest of the poem is not in nature’s particulars, but in the cosmic energy that persists through them: “The secret // which got lost neither hides / nor reveals itself, it shows forth // tokens.” The final lines of the poem discover in this season a value, “singleness,” to which human life in its divided state can aspire:

... The fault of the body and the soul
—that they are not one—

the matitudinal cock clangs
and singleness: we salute you

season of no bungling

Because “singleness” responds directly to the “fault” registered in the previous line—“not one”—we must take it to refer to the kind of nondualistic state that Olson sought to recreate in the poetic “field.” However, the word also points to the way in which this poem conceives of the season as one, not as many—a conception opposite to the one performed by Schuyler’s “Almanac.” Nature, as Olson represents it, is less a collection of diverse particulars than a vital, “elementary force.”

The contrast with Schuyler’s poem “Spring” is profound. The season this poem describes isn’t characterized by a universal charge or even the more modest life-force that animates William Carlos Williams’s “Spring and All”: “rooted, they / grip down and begin to awaken” (183). Schuyler’s season is a bedraggled and unsynchronized confusion of signals:

Spring
snow thick and wet, porous
as foam rubber yet
crystals, an early Easter sugar.
Twigs
aflush.
A crocus
startled or stunned
(or so it looks: crocus
thoughts are few) reclines
on wet crumble
a puddle of leas. It
isn't winter and it isn't spring
yes it is the sun
sets where it should and
the east
glows
rose. No

Willow. (*Collected* 82)

Like the earlier poem “An Almanac,” this poem challenges the idea that “spring,” much less “nature,” signifies a unified set of circumstances. Judging by the position of the sun, it has arrived; judging by the willows, not yet. *Discesa* works to keep the poem grounded in the actually observed. The hokey, Frostian aside, “or so it looks: crocus / thoughts are few,” is a mild riposte to Williams’s pathetic fallacy: “Lifeless in appearance, sluggish / dazed spring approaches” (183). The resonance of this poem, to my mind, lies in two accomplishments. The first is the precise complex of images that it constructs: a crocus languishing amid snow of a particular texture; willows bare, but “[t]wigs / aflush.” In a classically imagistic poem, those images would all be etched as cleanly as the single sentence, “Twigs / aflush.” Here, however, what Barthes calls language’s affirmative bias is tempered by prevarication, relieving snow and crocus of the pressure that comes with a poetic, like Imagism, that aligns the power of poetry with the bare creative function of constation. In the context that Schuyler gives them, snow and crocus appear more as they do to the eye of the observer: as hardly significant, but indubitably there. The second source of the poem’s resonance is the way in which the unglamorous bickering of the middle of the poem gives way, all of a sudden, to an unexpected, sustained instance of assonance: “the east / glows / rose. No / Willow.” The sonic harmony does not resolve the semantic dispute—the sun says spring, the willow says winter—but it ends the poem with a note of gratuitous beauty.

There are moments when Schuyler’s poetic allows for a more spectacular beauty. Even in these cases, however, that beauty never comes across as more than “an average statistical resultant of many conditions.” It is usually heightened by the slightness of its occasion, as in the poem titled simply “8/12/70”:

In early August among the spruce
fall parti-colored leaves
from random birch that hide
their crowns up toward the light—
deciduously needle-nested—
among the tumbled rocks—a
man-made scree below a house—
a dull green sumach blade
slashed with red clearer than
blood a skyblue red a first
fingertap, a gathering, a climax (100)

In the last line, the poem does make a gesture beyond the particulars of the scene, toward a force or a future more comprehensive than the individual leaves. But at the same time, this gesture seems to arise entirely out of the particulars themselves, out of the momentum generated by the single red-streaked sumach blade. Even in this most classically lyric of Schuyler’s poems, beauty appears as the haphazard consequence of chance arrangements among the “random birch” and “tumbled rocks.” These arrangements reveal no deep structure and exemplify no values for human life to aspire to. By relieving them of such heavy responsibilities, Schuyler frees them to participate in a much wider, more subtle range of experiences—from “climax” to anticlimax, banality to beauty.

¹ At the same time, the influence of Alfred North Whitehead on many of these poets—especially Charles Olson, whose theorizing had a powerful influence on many of the poets included in *The New American Poetry*—suggests that their poetics were partially founded on an empiricist project continuous with William James’s. Whitehead repeatedly acknowledged his debt to James (see, for example, *Science and the Modern World* 143). In 1941, Victor Lowe argued that Whitehead’s philosophy should be understood as radically empiricist, in James’s sense of the phrase (see Lowe, “William James”). This assessment has been echoed, expanded, and complicated in recent years by Steven Meyer, Bruno Latour, and Isabelle Stengers.

² The confusion is exacerbated by Meyer’s use of a quotation from Whitehead at the end of the essay, which misleadingly attributes to the philosopher a classically empiricist view of causality that is in fact the target of his critique in the lecture from which the excerpt is taken. Meyer invokes the following passage in support of the “radical empiricism” he is espousing:

Suppose that two occurrences may be in fact detached so that one of them is comprehensible without reference to the other. Then all notion of causation between them, or of conditioning, becomes unintelligible. There is—with this supposition—no reason why the possession of any quality by one of them should in any way influence the possession of that quality, or of any other quality, by the other. With such a doctrine the play and interplay of qualitative succession in the world becomes a blank fact from which no conclusions can be drawn as to past, present, or future, beyond the range of direct observation. Such a positivistic belief is quite self-consistent, provided that we do not include in it any hopes for the future or regrets for the past. Science is then without any importance. Also effort is foolish, because it determines nothing. (Qtd. in Meyer 185)

Any reader familiar with Whitehead’s thought would know that he would never admit either the initial supposition, that two occurrences might be so detached, or the subsequent provision, “that we do not include in it any hopes for the future or regrets for the past,” that together allow the empiricist position to appear self-consistent. In fact, this “positivistic” line of thought is explicitly under attack in the lecture (“Nature Alive,” published in *Modes of Thought*). Whitehead, like James, was engaged in the project of radicalizing empiricism; in his case, he was especially concerned to establish a conception of experience capacious enough to include both “hopes for the future” and “regrets for the past.” From Whitehead’s perspective, an empiricism that fails to account for either of these is hardly an empiricism at all, and certainly not a radical one.

³ As Altieri points out, Romanticism has both an idealist and an immanentist legacy. He associates the former with the symbolist tradition that descends from Coleridge, described above. The latter he traces to “early Wordsworth’s exploration of values immanent in the experience of secular, familiar objects” (35), expressed, for example, in the “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads*. More than Wordsworthian immanentism, however, the desire to return to “the naïve and primitive enjoyment of sensations and things for their own sakes” recalls the later Romanticism of John Ruskin, who in *Modern Painters* declared that “[t]he whole technical power of drawing depends on our recovery of what may be called the *innocence of the eye*; that is to say, of a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of color, merely as such, without consciousness of what they might signify,—as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight” (qtd. in Crary 95). In *The Rhetoric of Empiricism*, Jules David Law explains that Ruskin’s famous assertion recapitulates the Molyneux question: what would the world look like to a person born blind who

suddenly recovered the faculty of sight? Law argues that the Molyneux question, which was first posed to John Locke in 1688 and continued to occupy scientists and philosophers throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (see Law 20), should be seen as “the central dramatic scene of empiricist philosophy” (131). While many critical narratives have understood British Romanticism as a reaction *against* philosophical empiricism, Law and others propose that the relationship between them is a much more complex imbrication (see Law 8-11). Looking ahead to the nineteenth century, Jonathan Crary has shown that ideas about vision that we associate with legacy of Romanticism, like those of Ruskin and Monet, were thoroughly continuous with ideas being developed by the empirical sciences, still deeply informed by empiricist philosophy of the previous two centuries.

⁴ Cage invokes this latter ideal in the context of his most famous anecdote: when “one enters an anechoic chamber, as silent as technologically possible in 1951, to discover that one hears two sounds of one’s own unintentional making (nerve’s systematic operation, blood’s circulation), the situation one is clearly in is not objective (sound-silence) but rather subjective (sounds only), those intended and those others (so-called silence) not intended. If, at this point, one says, ‘Yes! I do not discriminate between intention and non-intention,’ the splits, subject-object, art-life, etc., disappear . . .” (*Silence* 14). Olson, meanwhile, advocates “getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the “subject” and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects” (*New American* 395).

⁵ Andrew Epstein quotes from an interview in which Schuyler admits to a habit of unmarked borrowings: “sometimes in other poems I’ve popped ‘found’ things in, but I don’t think it shows” (from “An Interview with James Schuyler,” interview by Carl Little, *Talisman* 9 (1992): 179. Qtd. in Epstein, n. pag.)

⁶ In equating Schuyler’s collage practice with vanguardism, Epstein draws on an established literary and art-critical line of thought. Stephen Fredman explains, “[i]n skeletal form, collage can be defined as combining two actions: the selection of objects from the real world for incorporation into an artwork, and the juxtaposition of objects in unexpected—that is, nonlinear, irrational, or antihierarchical—ways. For theorists such as Theodor Adorno, David Antin, Marjorie Perloff, and Gregory Ulmer, collage became, in the words of Ulmer, ‘the single most revolutionary formal innovation in representation to occur in [the twentieth] century’” (*Contextual Practice* 4-5).

⁷ One other poetic value implicit in Epstein’s discussion is a sense of poetry’s critical function. Epstein asserts that Schuyler’s work is “driven by a need to expose the ambiguity, doubleness, and elusiveness of the everyday.” This is not quite right. The criticism of the everyday is *there*, but it’s not “driv[ing].”

⁸ The Romanticism of this poem, “Flashes,” bears more than a coincidental relation to the postmodern Romanticism of Charles Olson and the poets most closely associated with him. Schuyler discussed the influences on the poem in an interview:

MH: A few of your poems have that Olson-Creeley look in the way they’re broken up and stretched out across the page.

JS: That came through John Wieners who suggested that I look at Olson and try using that field that he used.

...

[T]here's a poem in *Freely Espousing* called 'Flashes' that's written in that style.
(Hillringhouse 8-9)

⁹ Edward Larrissy uses this phrase with reference to the self-described “empirical” style of poets associated with The Movement, but which he argues is broadly characteristic of most British and Irish poetry from the 1950s to the end of the century. This is worth mentioning because Schuyler, in contrast to contemporaneous trends in British poetry, develops an empiricist poetic that does *not* entail a commitment to an uncomplicated view of language’s referential function, as the poem “Freely Espousing” readily demonstrates.

¹⁰ This emphasis will also lead me, in subsequent chapters, to contest Wilkinson’s suggestion that Schuyler’s gentle bathos marks his difference from the other poets of the New York School—from O’Hara’s “abstract expressionist or Byronic heroism” and “the linguistic prodigiousness of John Ashbery’s poetry, whose roots in surrealism tie it into the Romantic genealogy” (73)—and to show, instead, that *discesa* works in subtle but fundamental ways to shape the work of all three poets.

¹¹ Thompson refers to the following indelible lines in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*:

There are in our existence spots of time,
That with distinct pre-eminence retain
A renovating virtue, whence, depressed
By false opinion and contentious thought,
Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight,
In trivial occupations, and the round
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
Are nourished and invisibly repaired. (Qtd. in Thompson 291)

¹² Silverberg’s conception of Schuyler’s “poetics of indolence” runs deeper than the impression his poetry creates of long hours sitting at a window. He explains that this poetic “is particularly hard to pin down because it keeps insisting on its right to demur, to not take a stance (as in the interviews), indeed, to not act at all (‘if one/remembers what one meant/to do and never did, is/not to have thought to do/enough?’)” (79). In this sense, it is closely (and avowedly) related to Moira Roth’s “aesthetics of indifference,” which I discuss elsewhere in the dissertation.

¹³ In fact, Schuyler performs many of the types of operations that Barthes alludes to in his account of how to achieve “the Neutral” in writing. Barthes’s discussion of language and affirmation closes with a brief section entitled “Drags, Dodges, Hollow Corrections”: ways, that is, of “sidestepping assertion” without relying on outright negation, since negation “doesn’t undo assertion but counters it: it is itself assertion of the no, arrogant affirmation of the negation” (44). Dodges, drags, and corrections are, as John Wilkinson shows us, some of the most characteristic figures of Schuyler’s poetry. In fact, it is difficult to think of a body of poetry that better exemplifies the qualities that Barthes associates with the Neutral: it is frequently “Shirking,” “Muffled,” or “Limp” (70); it manifests “sweetness” (36), “weariness” (16), and “tact” (29). (Mark Silverberg’s discussion of “Schuyler’s Poetics of Indolence” touches on qualities of his work that resonate with these terms.)

Chapter Four

“A Paper Rubbed Against the Heart”: Robert Rauschenberg, Frank O’Hara and Jasper Johns

“I was so involved in the materials separately that I didn’t feel as though... Oh I didn’t want painting to be simply an act of employing one color to do something to another color when my response was much more direct than that. The reds I liked were the reds I looked at and they just looked red. The same thing was true about a blue or a green[....] I was more interested in working with them than I was in their working for me. And I always thought about materials as though whatever I use, whatever the results are, however I use them, that the method was closer to a collaboration than these materials being in the service of art.”
– Robert Rauschenberg, interviewed by Billy Klüver¹

“Rauschenberg’s extraordinary repertory of marking or registering the image on the surface, most of them a refusal to use the autographic mark of conventional drawing (because that kind of mark had become compromised as an extension outward of the private, internal space from which it was supposed that the hand was directed), is testimony to his insistence that it is the stuff of experience—the things one bumps into as one moves through the world—that forms experience.”
– Rosalind Krauss, “Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image”²

In Chapter Three, I compared James Schuyler’s deployment of a form of gentle bathos, which John Wilkinson calls *discesa*, to the rhetorical means by which William James constructs his visions of selfhood and experience. Both James in his philosophy and Schuyler in his poems, I argued, use anticlimax and deflation to forestall the idealization of notions like experience, self, and nature, in an effort to keep the phenomena that those terms describe thoroughly suspended in the matrix of the empirical. In one of the instances I cited, from Chapter Ten of *The Principles of Psychology*, “The Consciousness of Self,” James produces an anticlimax by substituting events in the physical body for the motions of a spiritual principle: “*Whenever my introspective glance succeeds in turning round quickly enough to catch one of these manifestations of spontaneity in the act, all it can ever feel distinctly is some bodily process, for the most part taking place within the head*” (1:300). My emphasis in that chapter was on the rhetorical contours of this passage of the *Principles*; here, I shift my attention to the relationship that it implies between materiality and felt experience.

The radical coincidence of the material and the spiritual or emotional is a salient feature of James’s writings, although not a principle to which he adheres with systematic consistency. It informs the purely empirical account of selfhood that he attempts in “The Consciousness of Self,” defines the controversial James-Lange theory of emotions, and plays an important role, as I argue elsewhere,³ in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Each time that he asserts this coincidence, James takes pains to differentiate his view from the reductive materialism that he encountered in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scientific and philosophical circles. In the chapter of *The Principles* dedicated to “The Emotions,” James famously argues that emotions do not *cause* particular constellations of physiological events, but are in fact identical with them. Recognizing how readily this theory might be misconstrued, he urges,

Let not this view be called materialistic. It is neither more nor less materialistic than any other view which says that our emotions are conditioned by nervous processes. . . . Such processes have, it is true, always been regarded by the platonizers in psychology as having something peculiarly base about them. But our emotions must always be *inwardly* what they are, whatever be the physiological ground of their apparition. If they are deep, pure, worthy, spiritual facts on any conceivable theory of their physiological source, they remain no less deep, pure, spiritual, and worthy of regard on this present sensational theory. They carry their own inner measure of worth with them; and it is just as logical to use the present theory of the emotions for proving that sensational processes need not be vile and material, as to use their vileness and materiality as a proof that such a theory cannot be true. (2:453)

In articulating his theory of emotions, James found himself caught between an idealism that claimed for the phenomena of mental life an existence in excess of their material conditions—an essence of fear, for example, apart from its physiological correlates—and a materialism that, in denying the immaterial basis of felt experience, also denied its worth and significance. As James suggests in this passage, both positions, despite their mutual antagonism, rest on the same assumption that value resides in the immaterial: feelings are more than material and therefore valuable; feelings are no more than material, and therefore valueless. In order to assert the physiological basis of mental and emotional life without discounting their existence, James had to battle an entrenched dualism that was only reinforced by oppositional thinking. Battling this dualism is the primary undertaking of the philosophy he calls “radical empiricism.”

The example of William James’s radical empiricism helps me to illuminate a parallel set of pressures and concerns that shape the poetry and art of Frank O’Hara, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg. Like James, these artists faced the challenge of reinventing the conceptions of subjectivity that were active in the domains in which they worked. Critics often situate all three artists at the leading edge of a postmodernism defined, in large part, by its rejection of these same conceptions of subjectivity—a wave of aesthetic and critical energies, building over the course of the postwar decades, directed against the expressive subject of lyric poetry and abstract expressionist painting. The terms of this postmodernism, however, have a tendency to cleave along oppositional lines that leave Rauschenberg, Johns, and, to a lesser but still active extent, O’Hara stranded in the middle. Many of those critics who judge their work according to the parameters of postmodernism either deem it too invested in subjective experience to be fully postmodernist or, focusing on its critical dimensions, fail to account for the inclusive, affirmative tenor shared by much of that work: its affection for objects in the world, its exploration of shades of difference, and its engagement with feelings.⁴

The reason why many postmodernist readings sit uneasily with the work of Rauschenberg, Johns, and O’Hara, I argue, is that, like the reductive materialisms that William James fought against, those readings often simply invert, and thereby reinforce, an opposition between feeling and material—between the affective life of subjects and the objecthood of paint, canvas, words, and collage materials—that the work of the artists, in contrast, dissolves. Rauschenberg, Johns, and O’Hara do enact a pointed critique of late-modernist constructions of the subject as heroic individual and spiritual principal, and they frequently do so by replacing intimations of transcendent selfhood with an emphasis on the material—think, for instance, of the mechanical wooden stick of Johns’s “device” paintings in place of the inspirited body of the action painter, or the substitution of trivial daily encounters for psychological depths in many

poems by O'Hara. The effect of these substitutions, however, is never exactly one of *reduction of the spiritual to the material*. Rather, they serve the purpose of curtailing the mode of interpretation that sees material qualities as signs of immaterial ones—which I will be discussing especially in one of its guises, the “expressive paradigm”—and thus shift attention to the extraordinary, unexaggerated amplitude of the material itself.

Years after publishing his thoughts on “The Consciousness of Self” in *The Principles of Psychology*, James returns to his suspicion that the “*self of all the other selves*,” “the active element in all consciousness,” consists of a “*collection of ... peculiar motions in the head or between the head and throat*” (*Principles* 1:301). In the essay “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” (1904), he proposes a slight alteration of his original hypothesis:

There are other internal facts ... (intracerebral muscular adjustments, etc., of which I have said a word in my larger Psychology), ... but breath, which was ever the original of ‘spirit,’ breath moving outwards, between the glottis and the nostrils, is, I am persuaded, the essence out of which philosophers have constructed the entity known to them as consciousness. *That entity is fictitious, while thoughts in the concrete are fully real. But thoughts in the concrete are made of the same stuff as things are.* (37)

With “thoughts,” James includes not only cognitive states but also emotions and the whole range of phenomena belonging to mental life. James’s name for the “stuff” of which both thoughts and things are made is “experience.” It is this sense of “experience” that I want to keep in mind as I turn to Rauschenberg, O’Hara, and Johns.

“*For Bob Rauschenberg*”

“They even assigned seriousness to certain colors,” Robert Rauschenberg once complained about the Abstract Expressionist painters who expounded their ideas at the Cedar Tavern and The Club (Tomkins 89). Expanding on this complaint, Rauschenberg draws an example not from painting, but from poetry: “It got into the poetry later, when the Beats started to hang around the New York artists. I used to think of that line in Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*, about the ‘sad cup of coffee.’ I’ve had cold coffee and hot coffee and lousy coffee, but I’ve never had a sad cup of coffee.” Rauschenberg’s rejection of Ginsberg’s “sad cup of coffee” might seem to mark a fundamental incompatibility with the work of Frank O’Hara, not a Beat, but author of lines like the following:

Melancholy breakfast
blue overhead blue underneath

the silent egg thinks
and the toaster’s electrical
ear waits

(315)

It is hard to imagine a breakfast scene more thoroughly suffused with the mood of the speaker. O’Hara’s feelings are everywhere in his poems, whereas a Rauschenbergian poetics, one might imagine, would keep the artist’s feelings out of it: blue would be blue, a toaster a toaster.

This chapter explores the different but complementary ways in which O’Hara and Rauschenberg—and in the last section of the chapter, Jasper Johns—negotiate what Branden

Joseph has called the “expressive paradigm” that prevailed in both poetry and art in the 1950s (Joseph 95). O’Hara’s career intersected with Johns’s and Rauschenberg’s during a period when attitudes toward subjectivity in art and poetry were beginning to undergo a seismic shift. Over the course of the 1960s, the dominance of Abstract Expressionism—which, for all the emphasis Clement Greenberg would place on its purely formal innovation, was steeped in a rhetoric of subjectivity⁵—was substantially displaced by art and criticism of an anti-expressive cast, informed by the work of Marcel Duchamp and leading the way toward a critical postmodernism that Rosalind Krauss would summarize in 1981 as “a complex of cultural practices, among them a demythologizing criticism and a truly postmodernist art, both of them acting now to void the basic propositions of modernism, to liquidate them by exposing their fictitious condition” (“Originality” 170).

From the network of references that extends between O’Hara’s poetry and the work of Rauschenberg and Johns from the mid-1950s through the early 1960s, however, it is possible to construct a picture of all three artists engaging with the expressive paradigm in more subtle and complex ways than typical accounts of *anti*-expressivity can accommodate. It is well known that Rauschenberg and Johns deflate the high seriousness of Abstract Expressionism, often by literalizing its tropes. Johns’s *Painting with Two Balls* (1960) and *Painting Bitten by a Man* (1961) parody its rhetoric of primal, masculine energy, while Rauschenberg’s *Monogram* (1955-59) lampoons Pollock’s famous claim to be “*in the painting*” by placing *in the painting* a stuffed Angora goat.⁶ Frank O’Hara, too, has long been understood to reject or at least to complicate the models of subjectivity that prevailed in the arts of the 1950s, whether in Abstract Expressionism or confessional poetry. Moira Roth, in a footnote to her influential essay “The Aesthetics of Indifference,” cites the work of O’Hara and Ashbery as “[c]ontiguous” with the Duchampian critique of Abstract Expressionism she finds in the work of Cage, Cunningham, Rauschenberg, and Johns (171 n.1). For Charles Altieri, O’Hara exemplifies a generation of poets who developed models of contingent selfhood “in large part in order to provide alternatives for what they saw as the self-heroizing existentialist melodrama exemplified by Pollock in painting and Lowell in poetry” (“Contingency” 371).

All three artists perform gestures that puncture, often humorously, the inflated models of ego that they found in the art and poetry of their predecessors and some of their contemporaries. In many ways, the work of all three can be seen, in Krauss’s formulation, to “void the basic propositions of modernism . . . by exposing their fictitious condition.” The effect of that work, however, is almost never exclusively or even primarily critical. This is more obviously true of O’Hara’s poetry, which liberally broadcasts emotions. Reading the art of Johns and especially Rauschenberg in concert with O’Hara’s poetry suggests a way of seeing their work, too, as concerned with feelings—albeit feelings that look quite different from those associated with discrete, depth-model subjectivities. Meanwhile, placing O’Hara in the context of art criticism since the 1960s provides a fuller picture both of the models of art and selfhood from which his poetry diverges and of the more negative reactions against those models that he also refuses. In other words, if O’Hara follows Jasper Johns’s injunction to “[a]void a polar / situation” (in Varndoe 56), the art-critical context exemplifies the polar situation that he avoids, and highlights, by contrast, the dexterity of O’Hara’s modulated critique. I will argue that, like James Schuyler, O’Hara, Rauschenberg, and Johns are concerned to eradicate from their art any conception of experience as “an elementary force or fact,” not in order to discredit the concept of experience, but in order to forge a more capacious one. By refusing to adopt either an expressive or an anti-expressive orientation, their poetry and art offer versions of experience tied to an open,

rather than a closed, conception of the self, seen as coextensive with, rather than separated from, the intricate dynamics of the material world.

*

Robert Rauschenberg was not one of O'Hara's many close friends and collaborators among the visual artists in New York in the 1950s and '60s, although they knew each other professionally as well as through O'Hara's closer friend Jasper Johns. On May 17, 1959, however, O'Hara wrote a fascinating poem titled "For Bob Rauschenberg" (*Collected* 322). This poem has neither the confessional intimacy of O'Hara's letter-poem to Johns, "Dear Jap," nor the social intimacy of "Adieu to Norman, Bonjour to Joan and Jean-Paul," which assumes such a familiar rapport with the three painters of the title that it finds no reason to mention their last names. "For Bob Rauschenberg" does, however, have the special urgency of a poem written by a 33-year-old poet to, or rather *for*, another artist of the same age at a key moment in the development of each of their aesthetics. For a poem marking the intersection of two such momentous careers in the postwar American arts, it is surprising that "For Bob Rauschenberg" hasn't received more attention.

At first glance, "For Bob Rauschenberg" reads as an acquiescent response—presumably O'Hara's—to a demand—presumably Rauschenberg's—for immediacy. Here is the poem in its entirety:

Yes, it's necessary. I'll do
what you say, put everything
aside but what is here. The frail
instant needs us and the cautious
breath, so easily drowned in Liszt
or sucked out by a vulgar soprano.

Why should I hear music? I'm not
a pianist any more, and in truth
I despise my love for Pasternak,
born in Baltimore, no *sasha* mine,
and an adolescence taken in hay
above horses—

what should I be
if not alone in pain, apart from
the heavenly aspirations of
Spenser and Keats and Ginsberg,
who have a language that permits
them truth and beauty, double-coin?
exercise, recreations, drugs—

what
can heaven mean up, down, or sidewise
who knows what is happening to him,
what has happened and is here, a
paper rubbed against the heart
and still too moist to be framed.

What Rauschenberg demands and O'Hara accepts, it would seem, is to "put everything / aside" and focus on "what is here," a formulation introduced in the first stanza and reiterated ("what has happened and is here") in the last. "What is here" is aligned with "[t]he frail / instant" and "the cautious / breath," over and against the music of Liszt and "a vulgar soprano" in the first stanza, references to childhood and adolescence in the second, and "the heavenly aspirations of / Spenser and Keats and Ginsberg" in the third. The poem ends with an image the grammatical placement of which demands that it be read as an equivalent to "what has happened and is here": "a / paper rubbed against the heart / and still too moist to be framed." This "paper," one might surmise, is a poem by O'Hara, now emulating the immediacy—"too moist to be framed"—of a painting by Rauschenberg.

To read the poem this straightforwardly, however, is to miss how complexly and ambivalently O'Hara constructs the tension between a restrictive demand for immanence and an attraction to modes of expression that seem to allow for a fuller—perhaps excessive—range of feelings. The specificity of "For Bob Rauschenberg" is in its tonal modulations, which effect over the course of the poem a subtle distance between the speaker and both the aesthetic he appears to renounce *and* the one he appears to accept. Furthermore, I argue that the poem situates Rauschenberg, as well as the poet, in ambiguous relation to this set of aesthetic options and imperatives: never definitively identifying Rauschenberg as its addressee, it bears the more flexible designation of being "[f]or" him. In my reading, the poem may be *both* an offering of tentative identification *and* an ostensibly conceded struggle with Rauschenberg and his art, and this open-endedness is precisely what is so interesting, and apt, about O'Hara's response to the artist. It captures O'Hara's perception that Rauschenberg might share a version of his own struggle to define the place of feelings and the balance of immanence and excess in his poetry, while allowing the equal possibility that Rauschenberg's is a version of the critical voice, both external and internalized, with which he struggles. This ambiguity, I will argue with particular reference to Rauschenberg's *Red Paintings* of the early-mid 1950s, adequately reflects the complexity of the artist's relationship to questions of subjectivity, expression, and feeling.

The status of the material in Rauschenberg's work, or O'Hara's, is an issue that "For Bob Rauschenberg" does not obviously address. It does, however, address Rauschenberg's relationship to aesthetic paradigms that prescribe the orientation of the work of art either toward or away from some conception of "what is here." That materiality is one important way in which to understand "what is here" is hinted subtly by the poem's final image. I will draw out this implication of "a / paper rubbed against the heart" in the last three sections of the chapter by following the image into three different contexts. Reading the image as a reference to Rauschenberg's *Red Paintings*, I suggest that O'Hara might have found in those works an illustration of how critically dismantling modernist models of symbolism and expressivity can coincide with—even produce—a mode of positive expansiveness and a way of thinking about experience that complements O'Hara's own. Then, reading the "heart" in the context of O'Hara's use of the word elsewhere in his poetry, I show how the poet refuses transcendent or depth-model accounts of selfhood without delegitimizing the domain of personal experience. Finally, reading "a / paper rubbed against the heart" as reference to a mode of indexical mark-making that was central to the art of both Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns allows me to generalize about the role that materiality plays in the way that all three figures rework the expressive paradigm. First, however, it is necessary to elucidate the poem's difficult matrix of attitudes and identifications.

*

One major difficulty of reading “For Bob Rauschenberg” in the twenty-first century stems from the sheer number of art-critical and art-historical theories and narratives with which the art of the 1950s and early 1960s has by now been overwritten. This difficulty is dramatized by Lytle Shaw’s reading of the poem in a chapter of *Frank O’Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* entitled “Coterie and Allegory: Rauschenberg’s Raw Materials.” Shaw’s reading brings to bear on the poem the story of modernist autonomy and medium-specificity promulgated by Clement Greenberg, its extension in Michael Fried’s opposition between theatricality and absorption, Peter Bürger’s declensionist comparison of the historical and neo-avant gardes, Craig Owens’s account of a postmodernist shift from visuality to textuality, and Rosalind Krauss’s account of a shift from symbolism to materiality.⁷ Elements of O’Hara’s poem may be found to speak to each of these theoretical constructs, although all them, with the exception of Greenberg’s, were developed after the poem was written. I have no quarrel with Shaw’s contention that O’Hara was “interested in interdisciplinarity before it became a rallying point for postmodernism” or “viewed abstract expressionism from aesthetic and social paradigms more closely identifiable with movements in art criticism which came after his death in 1966” (158). At the same time, however, the slight anachronism of reading “For Bob Rauschenberg” as an engagement with these later discourses—especially with the idea of postmodern allegory—torques Shaw’s analysis of the poem in ways that obscure, rather than clarify, its basic structure and intent.

Any reading of the poem has to begin by interpreting its structure of address. As Shaw points out, the poem appears to be set in motion “by a second-person interlocutor who calls out for one to pay attention” (201). The poem is addressed from an “I” who claims the details of O’Hara’s biography (“born in Baltimore,” trained as a pianist) to a “you” whose identity must be inferred from the content of the I’s address. What we know is that O’Hara’s relationship to the interlocutor is defined, at least in the first two stanzas, by concession, a change in attitude occasioned by the interlocutor’s urging or example: “Yes, it’s necessary. I’ll do / what you say.” If we identify O’Hara with the speaker, then “put[ting] everything / aside but what is here” requires renouncing some of his most cherished artists, Liszt and Pasternak,⁸ and, implicitly, his own tendencies towards emotionalism and romanticism.⁹ That he performs these renunciations half-seriously, half-ironically is suggested by the duplicity of the line, “I despise my love for Pasternak”—unnecessarily qualified by the phrase “in truth,” which has the perverse effect of casting doubt on the statement’s ingenuousness—and by his ostensibly disparaging use of the word “vulgar,” which in the O’Hara lexicon almost always has positive connotations, as in the lines from “My Heart,” “I want to be / at least as alive as the vulgar” (231).

Settling the referent of the pronoun “you” is more problematic, both because the poem never exactly specifies the nature of the second person’s aesthetic demands, and because O’Hara might have understood Rauschenberg’s own aesthetic in a few different ways. One way to interpret the demand to “put everything / aside but what is here” is as a version of Greenberg’s medium-specificity or Michael Fried’s “absorption.” This is Shaw’s interpretation of the interlocutor’s imperative, even though it produces a conflict with his assumption that Rauschenberg is the interlocutor. According to Shaw, for O’Hara to cast Rauschenberg as a protector of “the frail / instant” would have involved a performance of faux naïveté: “O’Hara knows to ‘put everything / aside’ is precisely what Rauschenberg—famous dabbler with urban detritus—has been charged with *not doing*, that this charge has generally come from within a version of modernism based on the rhetoric of immanence” (203). That is, by bringing everyday objects, photographs, and textual and theatrical dimensions into his paintings, Rauschenberg

violated that principle that had made Greenberg such a champion of Abstract Expressionism, its reduction of painting to the essential components of the medium.

But if Rauschenberg's work defies one modernist conception of immanence, it exemplifies immanence in another sense. Branden Joseph explains that through his association with John Cage, Rauschenberg had come to see his early all-white paintings not as the endgame of Greenbergian modernism, but as, in Cage's words, "airports for the lights, shadows and particles" (qtd. in Joseph 69). Like Cage's 4'33, a piece they likely inspired (see Joseph 45), the *White Paintings* were a means of showcasing properties immanent not to art but to the surrounding world. Seen from this angle, as a development of the aesthetic inaugurated by the *White Paintings*, Rauschenberg's assemblages of bed linens, umbrellas, and newspapers are the ultimate homages to "what is here"—artworks that give back to the viewer the materials of everyday life, neither transfigured nor transcended. Taken in this sense, O'Hara's immanentist characterization of Rauschenberg is thoroughly consistent with the reading of the artist put forth by Rosalind Krauss in her 1974 essay "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image," as well as her argument for the centrality to postmodernism of the indexical sign, to both of which I will return.

For the first two stanzas, whether or not we understand Rauschenberg as the "you" of the poem, it is possible to align O'Hara's interlocutor with either of these versions of immanence, each of which implies its own kind of austerity. "Why should I hear music?" would be an appropriate response to both a Greenbergian demand for medium-specificity and a Cagean imperative to listen to the noise of the world. The third stanza, however, offers a fuller sense of the aesthetic situation that O'Hara is confronting. Here, Shaw's choice of "allegory" as a governing category produces a second difficulty in his reading of the poem. The third stanza, like the fourth one after it, poses a question that mirrors the question of the second, "Why should I hear music?":

what should I be
if not alone in pain, apart from
the heavenly aspirations of
Spenser and Keats and Ginsberg,
who have a language that permits
them truth and beauty, double-coin?

Structurally, the poem demands that "Spenser and Keats and Ginsberg" be read as parallel to Liszt, Pasternak, and the "vulgar soprano"—that is, as artists who exercise options that O'Hara's interlocutor would censure for damaging or departing from "the frail / instant." Shaw, however, having identified Rauschenberg as the "you" of the first stanza, here aligns him *with* the trio of poets, whom he reads as practitioners of allegory (Spenser) and negation (Keats and Ginsberg). While the connection that he draws between Rauschenberg's work and the "supplementary verbal quality" of Spencerian allegory is compelling, it is a stretch to relate him to Keats, as Shaw does, by comparing "negative capability" to Dadaist "negation of value" (204). But more importantly, Shaw's desire to find O'Hara celebrating Rauschenberg as a postmodern allegorist causes him to misread the aesthetic situation that the poem describes and to contort the rhetorical structure that articulates the speaker's relationship to that situation.

Whereas for Shaw, the opposite of the paradigm of immanence suggested in the first stanza must be discursiveness, the opposite that the poem in fact proposes is transcendence. The aspect of "Spenser and Keats and Ginsberg" from which O'Hara feels compelled to distance

himself is not their propensity for negation or textual doubling, but their “heavenly aspirations.”¹⁰ This is reinforced in the final stanza, which opposes “heaven” to “what has happened and is here.” At this point, the aesthetic with which O’Hara grapples in this poem appears to have more in common with Rauschenberg’s Cagean sense of immanence than with the one that Shaw associates with Greenberg, Fried, and the modernist art they promoted. After all, the monumental works of abstract expressionism were hardly free from “heavenly aspirations,” and as Shaw himself demonstrates, O’Hara celebrated them more for their “life-giving vulgarity,” to borrow a phrase from “Personism: A Manifesto,” than for their purity (*Collected* 499).¹¹ Most importantly, however, it is only by hearing the repetition in the poem’s three questions, “Why should I hear music,” “what should I be / if not alone in pain,” and “what / can heaven mean,”—their parallel structure as rhetorical responses to the single injunction with which the poem begins—that the reader can also hear the subtle differences in tone that develop over the course of the poem. These subtleties of tone are in turn necessary to understanding the aesthetic dilemma, as well as the relationship between O’Hara and Rauschenberg, that the poem constructs.

On one hand, O’Hara’s poetry often demonstrates a commitment to “the frail / instant.” “The Day Lady Died,” written exactly two months after “For Bob Rauschenberg,” is an exquisite study in how to capture a resonant moment without drowning it in sentiment or bombast. (In fact, the indeterminate syntax in the last two lines produces an instance of *discesa*, which, like in Schuyler’s poetry, prevents “the moment” from becoming too momentous.) At the same time, almost paradoxically, O’Hara is too fond of excess to say “Yes” unequivocally to an aesthetic of austerity—hence the difficulty of hearing the tone of the second stanza as entirely earnest. If O’Hara uses playful irony to distance himself *both* from his love for Pasternak and Liszt *and* from the aesthetic imperative that would compel him to renounce them, however, his relation to “Spenser and Keats and Ginsberg” is less ambivalent. In the third stanza, the poem’s tone takes on a darker cast. To refrain from “hear[ing] music” is one thing, but here, O’Hara raises the stakes of the immanentist aesthetic: its necessary consequence, he suggests, is being “alone in pain.” At the same time, whereas in the first half of the poem, piano music and Pasternak still seem like potentially viable sources of comfort and community, the alternative to being in pain that O’Hara proposes in *this* stanza seems less available. The repetition of “alone... , apart” places a double distance between the speaker and “the heavenly aspirations of / Spenser and Keats and Ginsberg.” This distance is reinforced by the succeeding lines, which slip momentarily into iambic tetrameter: “who have a language that permits / them truth and beauty, double-coin[.]” It is equally possible to hear the tone of this couplet as acerbic, envious, or matter-of-fact, but however one hears it, the regular meter detaches it from the habitual voice of the speaker in a way that confirms that his own language “permits” him no such luxury.

Nothing in these lines, or indeed in his poetic career, suggests that O’Hara was tempted to seek a higher truth through the doorway of “exercise, recreations, drugs,” as his friend Ginsberg was—or, for that matter, through the doorway of poetic “language.” In fact, O’Hara’s “Personism: A Manifesto,” written in September of 1959, is a humorous screed against the pretensions of “serious” poetry of all kinds—including, implicitly, verse that strives for a coincidence of “truth and beauty.” O’Hara’s own attitude toward his craft is much more pragmatic: “As for measure and other technical apparatus, that’s just common sense: if you’re going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you. There’s nothing metaphysical about it” (*Collected* 498). Indeed, O’Hara mentions both Keats and Ginsberg in “Personism.” He opposes his own poetic to a quality of “abstract

removal” that he associates with “Keats and Mallarmé” and refers to Ginsberg’s essay “Abstraction in Poetry,” which he would have read soon before writing “For Bob Rauschenberg,” since it was published in the spring 1959 issue of the art journal *It Is*. When O’Hara writes of “heavenly aspirations,” he might well be thinking of the transcendentalist urge that infuses Ginsberg’s descriptions of Gregory Corso’s surrealist spontaneity and William Burrough’s opiate-fueled visions.

If the transcendentalism of Ginsberg and his Beat compatriots provides one example of the fusion of “truth and beauty,” Keats provides another, in the romantic conception of poetic truth that he articulates in a famous letter: “What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not. . . . The Imagination may be compared to Adam’s dream—he awoke and found it truth.” While the O’Hara of “Personism” seems poised to mock a theory that makes such grand claims for imaginative literature, other of his writings suggest that he gave serious, if ambivalent, consideration to the idea that poetry has a special relationship with truth. In fact, it appears in another essay of 1959 with particular relevance to his poem for Rauschenberg, “About Zhivago and His Poems”: “Pasternak insists in *Doctor Zhivago* on identifying poetry with truth to the supreme extent: in no other work of modern literature do we wait for the final revelation of meaning to occur in the hero’s posthumous book of poems” (*Collected* 501). *Zhivago*’s romanticism may be precisely the aspect of Pasternak that, in “For Bob Rauschenberg,” O’Hara feels he must renounce, but the poem gives the impression that this renunciation is more easily accomplished in the case of “Spencer and Keats and Ginsberg” than in the case of the Russian poet-novelist whom O’Hara greatly admired.

The situation that O’Hara constructs over the course of “For Bob Rauschenberg,” then, is that of an aesthetic bind: he cannot comfortably submit to an aesthetic that forbids him to “hear music,” but neither can he subscribe to an aesthetic that finds its meaning in reaching beyond “what is here” for a more ultimate cosmic or aesthetic truth. An abstraction like “heaven,” the poem suggests, is beside the point for an artist “who knows,” and feels with urgency, “what is happening to him, / what has happened and is here.” Whether Rauschenberg is on the side of immanence or excess—whether he is the “you” to whose demands the poem responds with an ambivalent “Yes”—is never finally determined. By suspending the reference of “you,” and by marking the poem’s relation to Rauschenberg with a preposition more suggestive of a dedication (“for”) than direct address (“to”), O’Hara leaves open the possibility of understanding Rauschenberg *either* as an ascetic immanentist *or*, like the poet, responding with irony and ambivalence to a prohibition on the personal and excessive. At the same time, without settling the question of his position, the poem extends toward Rauschenberg a tentative proposal of identification—a subtle suggestion of solidarity contained in the second person plural pronoun: “The frail / instant needs us”—inviting the reader to understand the artist’s work as an engagement with the same dilemma that the poem describes.¹²

Beyond its title, the most direct interpellation of Rauschenberg in the poem occurs in its closing image, which evokes for the first time a work of visual art: “a / paper rubbed against the heart / and still too moist to be framed.”¹³ Far from pinning Rauschenberg to one side of the aesthetic conversation, these lines sustain the ambiguity of the poem’s address. In its position at the poem’s conclusion, the image reads as a culmination: an answer, perhaps, to the series of questions that the poem asks as much in earnest as rhetorically. At the same time, the repetition of “what is here” that prefaces the image returns the reader to the first stanza—“I’ll do / what you say, put everything / aside but what is here”—so that “a / paper rubbed against the heart”

appears as both a culmination *and*, perhaps, as the work of art that inspired the poem's deliberations in the first place.

Rauschenberg's Red Paintings

My first approach to the closing lines of "For Bob Rauschenberg" is to imagine what would happen if we were to take the "moistness" O'Hara refers to more literally than Shaw does, as a description of the appearance of a painted surface, rather than a metaphor for self-disclosure. In 1953-54, Robert Rauschenberg painted a series of monochromes in red. In an interview with the artist decades later, the critic Barbara Rose comments, "*Those red paintings are so fresh that it makes me think that you knew a lot more about technique than you've admitted. They haven't changed a bit in all these years*" (53). Rauschenberg responds,

I was desperate. I didn't have a good technical background. I had a lucky foreground. For example, the *Bed*. I remember the day I asked Leo [Castelli] if he knew what the red was up at the top. I said it was fingernail polish. Then I pointed to another place and asked him if he remembered when striped toothpaste first came out. I mean, now it looks like Windsor Newton. ... I know it drives the restorationists crazy because they can't figure out why they haven't changed.

While some of Rauschenberg's works from this period have faded dramatically—the red passages in *Collection* (1954/55), for instance, are now a dusty pink—many, like *Red Painting* (1954), still appear glisteningly fresh.¹⁴ When Rauschenberg explains why he chose to work with red following his series of white and black monochromes, he makes it sound like that freshness was precisely the challenge and the point: "I was trying to move away from the black and white. ... So I picked the most difficult color for me to work in. If you're not careful, red turns black when you're dealing with it" (52-3).

The echo between Barbara Rose's observation about the "freshness" of the *Red Paintings* and O'Hara's evocation of "a / paper rubbed against the heart / and still too moist to be framed" may be serendipitous. By 1959, Rauschenberg's Combines would have been more vivid in the minds of his audience than the handful of red monochromes he had painted five years earlier. He had exhibited the final state of the memorable *Monogram* (1955-59) at the Leo Castelli Gallery in April, and *Odalisk* (1955/1958), an assemblage comprised of "oil, watercolor, pencil, crayon, paper, fabric, photographs, printed reproductions, miniature blueprint, newspaper, metal, glass, dried grass, and steel wool, with pillow, wood post, electric lights, and Plymouth Rock rooster, on wood structure mounted on four casters," had been on view at the Time-Life Building in January (Hopps and Davidson 112).

It is by no means impossible, however, that O'Hara had the *Red Paintings* in mind when he wrote "For Bob Rauschenberg." The *Red Paintings* occupy a special position in the history of their intersecting careers. In December 1954-January 1955, Rauschenberg showed his red monochromes together with a few of his first Combines, all dominated by the color red, at the Egan Gallery. The review of the show that Frank O'Hara wrote for *Art News* was the first truly positive review that Rauschenberg's work received in the press.¹⁵ One painting in the series, *Red Import* (ca. 1954), features the clumsy outline of a heart, daubed in dots on a rectangle of red fabric just above the center of the canvas. O'Hara had occasion to revisit those earlier paintings in the spring of 1959: he wrote "For Bob Rauschenberg" during the same period when, in his capacity as an assistant at MoMA's International Program, he was choosing selections of the



Fig. 1. Robert Rauschenberg, *Red Import*, 1954. Oil, fabric, newspaper, and wood on canvas. 18 x 18 inches. Private Collection. Courtesy of The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

artist's work to travel to Germany as part of a major exhibition of modern and contemporary art. The *Red Paintings* were not among the works selected, but O'Hara's notes show that *Charlene* (1954), the largest painting in the Egan Gallery show, was initially considered.¹⁶ The title of another work from that show, *Yoicks* (1954), appears in a poem of O'Hara's dated February 1959, just a few months earlier than "For Bob Rauschenberg" (CP 320).

My reason for reading "a / paper rubbed against the heart" as a reference to the *Red Paintings*, however, has as much to do with the analysis that it enables as with its historical probability. For it is regarding his early monochromes that Rauschenberg articulates in one particular sense a demand to "put everything / aside but what is here." Along the same lines as his objection to the Beat poets' "sad cup of coffee," Rauschenberg voices in numerous interviews from the 1960s his frustration with the fact that critics insisted on reading his use of color symbolically. Speaking with Billy Klüver in 1963, he explained,

...I became disturbed with the fact that the outside assumptions, the prejudices about colors being black or white, and being monochrome; the people thought the black was about old and burned and tarred; and they thought the white was about negation, and nothing—some philosophy of nothing. So they were misrepresenting themselves, and I had already had the experience, so the next move was obvious, to try some other color. I picked the hardest color I'd found to work with, which was red, and then I became conscious of the gaudiness of red. (*On Record* 42-43)

These remarks add another dimension to the slipperiness of red: it is a material quality of the paint, which “turns black” if you’re not careful, and also a function of the habits of an audience eager to slide from red to gaudy, from white to nothing, from black to burned. In another interview two years later, he expanded on the psychological dimension of his complaint:

...there had been a lot of critics who shared the idea with a lot of the public that they couldn't see black as color or as pigment, but they immediately moved into associations.... And that began to bother me. Because I think that I'm never sure of what the impulse is psychologically. I don't mess around with my subconscious. I mean I try to keep wide awake. And if I see in the superficial subconscious relationships that I'm familiar with, clichés of association, I change the picture. (Seckler n.p.)

With these comments in mind, the closing image of “For Bob Rauschenberg” might seem almost farcically contrary to the artist’s intentions, with its unabashed evocation of interiority via the cliché of the heart—but in fact, I will argue that it represents a knowing and nimble variation on Rauschenberg’s concerns.

Speaking with Richard Kostelanetz in 1968, Rauschenberg notes a change in the critical atmosphere since his earliest reception: “if you do anything where an idea shows up, particularly in those years when an act of painting was considered pure self-expression, then it was assumed that the painting was a personal expressionistic extension of the man. The climate isn’t like that now” (97). Indeed, by the end of the 1960s and over the course of the following decades, the repudiation of expressionism, along with the model of subjectivity that it implies, would become at least as prominent a critical and artistic paradigm as the expressionist one had been in the 1950s. Already in 1965, Barbara Rose observed the emergence of “an art world whose blank, neutral, mechanical impersonality contrasts so violently with the romantic, biographical Abstract-Expressionist style which preceded it that spectators are chilled by its apparent lack of feeling or content” (“ABC Art” 722-23). And in 1983, Hal Foster continued to find the work of a number of contemporary artists, like Cindy Sherman and Jenny Holzer and Peter Nadin, dedicated to critically dismantling what he calls “the expressive fallacy”—that is, the “the Expressionist claim to immediacy and stress on the self as originary,” which by necessity “denies its own status as a language” while in fact operating by means of the same structures of code and convention that it purports to circumvent (80). The status of “the expressive fallacy” within modernism itself is open to debate: Greenberg’s modernism, for example, stressed art’s self-reflexive engagement with its own medium *to the exclusion of* its concern with representation, even of so abstract a subject as the “inner self.”¹⁷ The vehemence and the duration of the anti-expressivism that began to take hold in the 1960s, however, indicate how strongly impressed were both artists and critics by the subjective orientation of the art that preceded them.

It is easy to find in Rauschenberg’s art the materials for critiques of Greenbergian modernism, Abstract-Expressionist subjectivity, and the institutions of art; indeed, these critiques have been the focus of much commentary on his art since the 1960s. At the same time, readings that emphasize the critical or negative qualities of his work often seem to mistake one facet of that work for its dominant impetus, leaving little to say about its evident variety and expansiveness.¹⁸ (In this way they are merely the flipside of “iconographic” readings, the worst of which presume to resolve the meaning of an entire work by decoding certain of its references.) Lytle Shaw’s reading of Rauschenberg through Frank O’Hara identifies and attempts to redress

this limitation of the critical paradigm of allegory, which, once it has demonstrated that Rauschenberg's signifying procedures end in "fundamental illegibility," has exhausted its analytical objective (193). In his focus on the ways in which both O'Hara and Rauschenberg challenge easy conceptions of immediacy, however—the impression they convey of "the slipperiness...of immanence" (206), which he discusses in Peter Bürger's critical terms of disruption and institutional recuperation—Shaw continues to underemphasize the degree to which O'Hara and Rauschenberg were invested in immanence in a particular, positive sense. For while neither artist subscribes to a conception of the subject as originary and inviolable, or of art as directly expressive of that originary subjectivity, both O'Hara and Rauschenberg are more interested in the possibilities that the critical dismantling of these concepts opens up than in the tired, false possibilities that their dismantling finally forecloses.

The *Red Paintings* are a good ground for testing this theory because they respond especially poorly to the kinds of criticism that have prevailed in Rauschenberg scholarship over the past fifty years. On one hand, Rauschenberg felt they were ill served by the genre of symbolic and psychological reading that dominated their early reception; on the other hand, more critically oriented interpreters have tended to either neglect or disparage them. The *Red Paintings* are notable for marking a major transition in Rauschenberg's art. Roughly monochromatic, they are related to the series of all-white and all-black paintings that he had executed between 1951 and 1953—works that remain assimilable, in some readings, to the narrative of Greenbergian modernism. At the same time, they point the way forward toward his Combines: whereas the *White Paintings* consist of one shade of white paint applied evenly to stretched canvas, the *Red Paintings* incorporate scraps of wood, paper, silk, lace, and other fabrics, some painted over in red, others left unpainted. By the end of 1954 these heterogeneous collage elements had attained a new degree of prominence and three-dimensionality in Rauschenberg's first Combines.¹⁹ There is a tendency in Rauschenberg scholarship to construe this development as progress, not simply as change, and to favor the Combine and later aesthetics in accounts of the artist's work. In other words, the *Red Paintings* are caught in between the outmoded psychologism that artists like Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns helped to usher out and the critical approaches that their work helped to usher in, which are better suited to Rauschenberg's Combines, transfer drawings, and silkscreens—modes of collage in which the juxtaposition of images, objects-as-images, and images-as-texts play a central role.

Even the modification of allegory that Shaw proposes, for example, is based on the aesthetic of Rauschenberg's Combines. Shaw's "[u]nderstanding [of] allegory not as an essential dissociation but as a mode that stages the contingency of links, competition, and even mutual inscription between two registers of interpretation" (195) necessarily pertains to works that foreground the potential of their materials to act as signs within a variety of discursive contexts. The piece that he selects to illustrate the workings of this modified allegorical framework—the untitled 1954 Combine known as "Man with White Shoes"—is replete with printed matter, drawings, and especially photographs, and although Shaw identifies it as belonging to "the period of the 1954-1955 Egan Gallery show," it was not one of the works included and is markedly different from those that were. (The Combine-style pieces in the show, like *Charlene* and *Collection*, include a plethora of potentially "readable" materials, but they also show a stylistic continuity with the *Red Paintings* through their rectangular formats and painterly emphasis on color.) The textual dimension of the *Red Paintings*, in contrast, is not especially developed. There is literally text in them in the form of pieces of newspaper, but the newsprint is painted over in red, imperceptible from any distance, barely legible at close range, and frequently

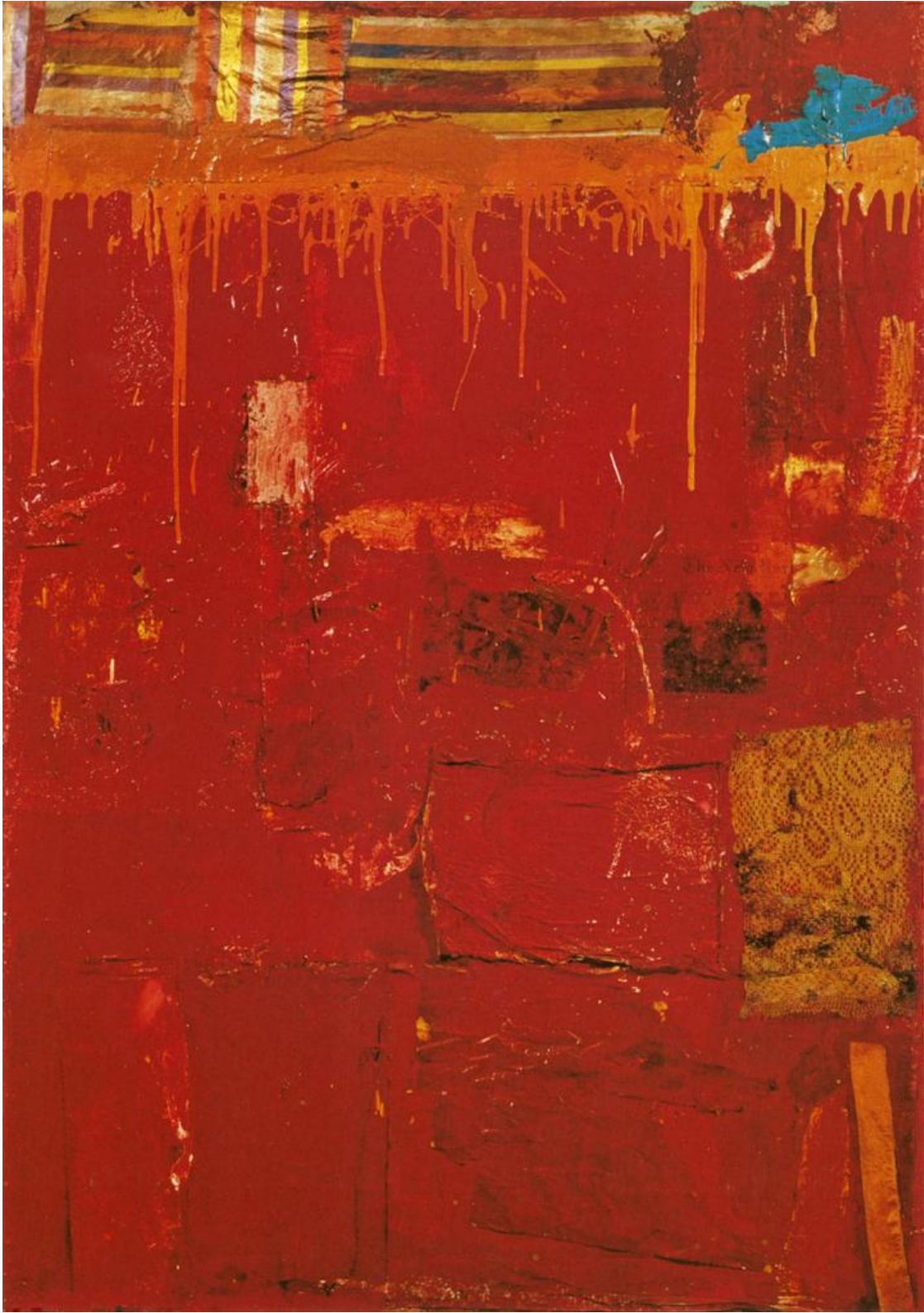


Fig. 2. Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled*, 1954. Oil, fabric, and newspaper on canvas 70 3/4 x 47 7/8 inches. The Eli and Edythe L. Broad Collection, Los Angeles. Courtesy of The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

affixed to the canvas upside-down, as if to further downplay its presence as text. The *Red Paintings* have the loosely grid-like structure, common to many of Rauschenberg's compositions, that has been compared to the layout of a newspaper,²⁰ but the contents of the grid—a square of canvas, a square of silk—do not hold out the promise of legibility or fundamentally stymie it. The coincidence of these two gestures, of course, is the essence of postmodern allegory as Owens defines it, but even Shaw's revised version requires that both narrative promise and narrative incompleteness be central to the art it describes.

Branden Joseph's 2003 book about Rauschenberg, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde*, makes explicit the judgment that Shaw's neglect of the *Red Paintings* implies. In the narrative of Rauschenberg's development that Joseph constructs, they play a merely transitional role: "The series of all-red paintings that he undertook at the time moved only very tentatively in a new direction," he writes. "Although he learned much from the *Red Paintings*, ... Rauschenberg ultimately found them no more successful in escaping the representational paradigm than his previous works had been" (95). Using "representational paradigm" to refer to the same phenomenon that he elsewhere calls the "predominant expressive paradigm" (92), Joseph follows Rauschenberg's lead in dismissing symbolic readings of the *Red Paintings*, but he collapses the artist's frustration with the paintings' reception into a dismissal of the paintings themselves. The Combines that followed the *Red Paintings*, on the other hand, are more congenial to the critical framework that informs Joseph's scholarship. He argues that after the *Red Paintings*, Rauschenberg adopted an approach to color that echoes the extreme anti-expressivity of Duchamp's readymades: he chose colors arbitrarily and used them straight from the tube so as to expunge the influence of his taste from the artwork and expose the status of paint "as a commercially manufactured substance just like any other commodity" (106). The color red was already something of an arbitrary constraint, as we can gather from the artist's statements quoted above, but Rauschenberg would only achieve true anti-expressivity with, for instance, the rainbow of commercially produced color samples in *Rebus* (1955).

I want to suggest that the *Red Paintings* don't stop one step short of the achievement Joseph proposes; rather, they take it one step further. Certainly, they show paint to be "a commercially manufactured substance just like any other commodity"—like toothpaste even, or nail polish. But where Joseph portrays this critical gesture as the telos or ultimate achievement of Rauschenberg's early development, I find that the *Red Paintings* occupy a position closer to the one that O'Hara seems to reach for in his poem "For Bob Rauschenberg": they refuse expressivist, symbolic models of meaning in order to focus on "what is here," but at the same time, they baffle any stringent or reductive interpretations of what that "here" might include. On one hand, the *Red Paintings* forgo a number of orientations that can be described as "transcendent" insofar as they present "what is here" as a vehicle for something other or greater. They are not intended to evoke scenes and emotions, like the tone poems of Liszt; in painterly terms, they contain little of the gestural vocabulary of Abstract Expressionism, which a 1960s audience was accustomed to read as expressive of psychic states. Neither Rauschenberg's statements nor his paintings propose art as a special form of truth; instead, both reflect a sense of the artwork as experimental and provisional and as an extension, rather than a refinement, of the energies of the surrounding world. Finally, if the collage materials of the *Red Paintings*—ragged scraps of fabric and newspaper—evoke the squalid remnants of urban life, the paintings do not, like Ginsberg's poems, invest those remnants with cosmic significance. In these senses, the *Red Paintings* are congruent with critical programs that stress the rejection of modernist myths. At the same time, the effect they produce is anything but one of renunciation. Like those of

O'Hara's poetry, their critical operations work subtly in the background, expanding the possibilities available in the features of the work by dismantling some of the presumptions that would circumscribe their meaning. The most striking thing about Rauschenberg's *Red Paintings* is the intricacy and diversity of effects they reveal as possible, and perhaps even inevitable, *within* the conditions of mundane materiality, *without* the addition of psychology or symbolism.

Rauschenberg's *Untitled (Red Painting)* of 1954 is typical of the works that hung in the 1954-55 Egan Gallery show. At four feet wide by roughly six feet tall, it shares the characteristic dimensions of Abstract Expressionist painting—dimensions that Frank O'Hara was not alone in relating to those “of the painter's body,” making the canvas a “field” upon which “the physical energies of the artist operate in actual detail, in full scale” (*Art Chronicles* 34). If the scale of *Untitled* recalls Abstract Expressionism, however, its layout elicits a different comparison. Across the top of the painting, Rauschenberg has arranged several pieces of striped, silk-like fabric to form a horizontal banner, which is separated from the rest of the work by a wide, messy line of orange paint. In its relation to the painting below, this top portion resembles the banner of a newspaper. Several factors work to heighten this resemblance, from the horizontal orientation of most of the stripes, to the irregular grid-like arrangement of materials in the body of the painting, to the visible presence, halfway up the right side of the painting, of a painted-over front page of *The New York Times*. Unlike the fragment of a comic strip that appears just to the left of it, and unlike much of the newsprint in his works from this period, this front page is oriented right side up, echoing in miniature the layout of the painting as a whole.

In his seminal essay on Rauschenberg, Leo Steinberg argues that the prevalence of grid-like structures in the artist's early Combines marks a revolutionary departure from the aesthetics of Abstract Expressionism: “... these pictures no longer simulate vertical fields but opaque flatbed horizontals. They no more depend on a head-to-toe correspondence with human posture than a newspaper does” (28). According to Branden Joseph, this shift in orientation away from the human body also entails a shift in the artwork's symbolic orientation. The scale of Abstract Expressionist painting invites the viewer to connect motions of the paint to motions of the body and from there to motions of the spiritual or psychological “self.” In contrast, Rauschenberg's use of the rough grid is “a compositional means so immediately evident as not to require any hermeneutic of interpretation or any search for internal motivation” (141-42). Joseph points out that this “compositional strategy thus complements on a formal level the other aspects of his work's externalization of personality and personal memory” (142). His argument, however, slides immediately from the “externalization” of experience to its “loss or breakdown”:

[T]he affinity between Rauschenberg's work and the newspaper layout further confirms the Combines' relationship to the loss or breakdown of an experiential relation to the world. For as Benjamin observed, it is in the formal makeup of its pages as much as its journalistic style that the newspaper inhibits the reader's assimilation of ‘the information it supplies as part of his own experience.’

Benjamin's verdict on the newspaper supports Joseph's view of Rauschenberg's early career as a progression toward critical anti-expressivity. I will argue, to the contrary, that it is precisely that space in between “externalization” and “loss or breakdown” that the *Red Paintings*, and Rauschenberg's work more generally, fight to preserve. The strategies that he employs to frustrate the models of experience available within Abstract Expressionism and modern art more

broadly—strategies like the newspaper-style grid—do not effect a turn away from experience, but a reconceptualization of it.

Because *Untitled* exhibits both the scale of the body *and* the grid-like layout of a newspaper, it thwarts the kind of thinking that holds these two references in opposition. If the painting resembles a newspaper, it also has affinities, in terms of both structure and scale, with *Bed* (1955), a work that exemplifies what Walter Hopps calls Rauschenberg's habitual "spectrum of ergonomic reference" (Hopps and Davidson 28). This comparison serves at the very least to draw attention to an oversight in Steinberg's claim that the Combines "no more depend on a head-to-toe correspondence with human posture than a newspaper does," for in fact, the design of a printed paper is addressed to the requirements of human eyes and arms. What is cancelled in *Untitled*, then, isn't reference to the human body or even experience, but the metaphorical construct that relates the actions of the body to a conception of experience as "inner life," expressed on the canvas in structures defined by the dynamic interrelation of their parts. The newspaper-like format of *Untitled* frustrates this conception by substituting for "inner necessity" a structure that reflects the haphazard coincidence of events in the world, and, at the same time, their arrangement on the page in purely conventional patterns. Likewise, Rauschenberg undermines Abstract Expressionism's metaphors of gesture: in *Untitled*, the drips that descend from the orange strip below the "banner" do not follow Pollock's in indexing the rhythmic arcs of the painter's hand as he moves over the canvas; rather, they index the prosaic action of gravity on wet paint.

Comparing *Untitled* to a newspaper might seem to contradict my claim that the textual dimension of the *Red Paintings* isn't highly developed. The "stories" that make up the grid, however, differ from the "reading material" assembled in subsequent Combines: for the most part, they consist of squares and columns of fabric and paper, distinctive for their material qualities, rather than their legibility.²¹ In place of the gestural vocabulary of Abstract Expressionism, *Untitled* displays an extraordinary multiplicity of material effects, which compounds dramatically the closer one approaches to the painting. Even from a distance, the monochrome is punctuated by instances of turquoise, orange, and a tan exactly the color of packing tape, in addition to the violet and yellow stripes of the fabric at the top and the dingy ivory of a remnant of lace to the lower right. Most of these instances are concentrated in the "banner" of the painting, like headlines proclaiming a boldface version of the more subtle differences that proliferate through the region below. Within the red paint alone, the diversity of shades and textures is incredible. There is a thickly impastoed orange-red and a thin, glossy, dark red. Midway up the left side of the painting, a liquid red spreads in crackling veins into a sea of orange. The effects vary with the type of paint, the mode of its application, and the surface to which it has been applied to produce a seemingly endless catalog of particular differences. The red has a dull, matte quality where it has soaked into loose squares of canvas. Roughly torn edges of newspaper create regions of dry friability, while in places where the newsprint has been more heavily lacquered onto the canvas, the crumpled paper heightens the shine of the paint. Where the paint itself has been built up into three dimensions, its own textural qualities are highlighted: here a bubbly deliquescence, there a gleamless putty.

Near the upper right-hand corner of the canvas, a rosette of orange-red paint retains some of the shape of the tube from which it was squeezed. Just beneath it, thick strokes of the same paint preserve the actions of the artist as he spread it with his brush from left to right in shallow upward diagonals. Gestural marks like the latter occur here and there in the painting—for instance, in an area of narrow, dense, vertical strokes on the left side of the canvas. The detail of

the upper right corner, however, gives a vivid sense of the status of these gestures within the work. There is no difference in emphasis between the rosette, shaped by the paint tube, and the brushstrokes, shaped by the sweep of an arm. Moreover, both have been applied to a strip of canvas affixed to the larger canvas with a staple, and the features of that canvas—as well as the staple—also contribute to the visual interest of the region. From close range, the viewer can see that the left edge of the strip is hemmed with a running stitch, the right edge has been sharply cut, and the top edge displays the selvage weave used by the manufacturer to finish the end of the cloth. Throughout the piece, Rauschenberg displays a fascination with the edges of materials, from the zig-zag cut of newsprint to the fraying of torn fabric. Whereas Branden Joseph understands Rauschenberg's use of undisguisedly factory-made materials, like paint squeezed directly from the tube, as a Duchampian assault on the presumptions of art, here, Rauschenberg is unconcerned with the distinction between hand-torn edges and those produced by machines. The function of commercially produced materials in his work is not primarily or finally critical; instead, the effect of Rauschenberg's critical maneuvers is to open his work to the possibilities inherent in selvedge and stitching.

In suggesting that the qualities of *Untitled (Red Painting)* are a function of the materials of which it is composed, I find myself echoing Rosalind Krauss's 1974 essay, "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image." In that essay, Krauss cites "the first *Red Paintings* of 1953" as a point of origin for a way of treating images—as material presences, rather than immaterial traces—that she identifies as the key innovation of Rauschenberg's art. According to Krauss, the "practice of materializing images" that he developed in his Combines and transfer drawings "had entered Rauschenberg's art through an earlier experience of materializing color": in the *Red Paintings*, that is, "the impression of color ... was seen to be a function of the color of things" (45-6). I want to expand Krauss's argument to suggest that by foregrounding the power of materials to determine such a diversity of qualities—colors, and textures, in the extreme plural—the *Red Paintings* offer their own rebuff to the "expressive paradigm." The fact that these qualities in the painting are so obviously and thoroughly qualities of the materials of which the painting is composed makes the language of psychological association seem extraneous and misguided. And if psychological expression is already beside the point, so too is the language of anti-expressivity that critics like Joseph apply to Rauschenberg's work.

In many ways, "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image" seems like an early example of just the kind of anti-expressivist reading I am contesting. It certainly belongs to the school of thought that emphasizes the textual dimension of Rauschenberg's art: the materialization of images that it describes depends on "the particular way that Rauschenberg enforced a part-by-part, image-by-image reading of his work" (40). Like Craig Owens in "The Allegorical Impulse," Krauss finds in Rauschenberg's art a mode of postmodern discursiveness that incorporates an insistence on the arbitrariness and opacity of signs. (The difference between their accounts is that whereas for Krauss, this combination throws the materiality of the artwork into the foreground, for Owens, it unleashes a dizzying proliferation of text that displaces even the physicality of objects. Hal Foster, comparing "The Allegorical Impulse" to Krauss's 1977 "Notes on the Index," which can be seen as a development of the ideas proposed in "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image," writes that the former "mark[s] a further dissolution of the sign: from its *indexical* grounding in the *presence* of the body or the site to its *allegorical* dispersal as a *play* of signifiers" (*Return of the Real* 86).)

Given this postmodernist orientation, the reader might be surprised to find that discursivity and materiality are linked, in Krauss's essay, to the category of "experience." This

aspect of the essay certainly goes unremarked by Lytle Shaw, who criticizes her reading of Rauschenberg on the grounds that it dissolves difference into a uniform materiality: for Krauss, he writes, “Rauschenberg’s images signify materiality and then stop signifying” (193). But in fact, Krauss suggests that Rauschenberg’s practice of materializing images has a further consequence: it “giv[es] to images the property of actual physical resistance that objects or actions have in our ordinary experience” (52). In her analysis, Rauschenberg’s work is far from expressive in the conventional psychological sense, but the function of its critical dimension is to reconfigure, rather than demolish, a “compromised” conception of experience. This is the import of the sentence quoted in full as an epigraph to this chapter: “Rauschenberg’s extraordinary repertory of marking or registering the image on the surface,” she writes, “is testimony to his insistence that it is the stuff of experience—the things one bumps into as one moves through the world—that forms experience (53). From one angle, Krauss’s concept of the materialization of images appears reductive of difference: in a Rauschenberg assemblage, “because each image is given the same level of density as object, one is struck not by their multivalence as signs, but rather by their sameness as things” (50). From another angle, however, this same argument can be seen as productive of difference. In Chapter Two, I discussed the way in which William James, attempting to construct a “radical empiricist” philosophy purged of reference to “Substances, transcendental Egos, or Absolutes,” draws all experience—the conjunctive and the disjunctive parts of it, the “subjective” and the “objective”—into a single “tissue.” A comparable radical empiricism, I argued, is on display in Frank O’Hara’s poem “St. Paul and All That.” In the case of Rauschenberg’s *Red Paintings*, to call this tissue “materiality” is beside the point, because the word depends for its meaning on the concept of an immaterial other—which is precisely the concept that Rauschenberg’s rejection of “the autographic mark of conventional drawing” works to extinguish. And it is in the context of their “sameness”—“as things” only for want of a better word—that the almost infinite differences within the *Red Paintings* are able to emerge.

O’Hara’s Heart

“[T]hat it is the stuff of experience—the things one bumps into as one moves through the world—that forms experience”: if Rauschenberg’s paintings and assemblages testify in one way to this condition, then Frank O’Hara’s poetry does so in a different way. In O’Hara’s work, that “stuff” is never free from psychological association; like the silent egg and the expectant toaster, the materials that appear in his poems are colored by emotions and situations. But while O’Hara is untroubled about associating the color blue with the feeling of melancholy, he had his own reservations about modes of symbolic interpretation that take psychological associations too seriously. In his poetry, O’Hara addresses these reservations not by disassociating objects from feelings, but by blurring the distinction between objects and the subjects to whom the feelings might be supposed to belong. The word “heart” in his poetry is often a site of this blurring. Taken in the context of O’Hara’s many other references to “the heart,” the closing image of “For Bob Rauschenberg” appears to challenge, rather than exemplify, the metaphors of Abstract Expressionism—that is, the sense of the painted surface as “an extension outward of the private, internal space from which it was supposed that the hand was directed,” in Krauss’s words.

It is no surprise that a poet known for his emotionalism should make frequent reference to the heart. What is more surprising is how carefully O’Hara manipulates the conventional associations of the word, given the apparent offhand casualness of his style. In his poems, the heart never loses its symbolic meaning as the seat of emotions, but at the same time, O’Hara

subtly deconstructs the symbol by drawing out its anatomical basis and its status as a cliché. An example from very early in O'Hara's career illustrates the traditional metaphors of the heart. "A Camera" ends, "I observe a heart tangled in the lines of my verse, as / in those surrealist paintings where an object wails of / intended magnificence" (35). These lines suggest a typical topography of both selfhood and art in which the heart is figured as interior, "tangled" in lines that both express and obscure it. Like the "wail[ing]" object in a surrealist painting, it is the heart that is understood to speak through the poem. At the same time, the comparison of the heart to "an object" presages one way in which O'Hara, throughout his career, plays with the topographies of self and art implied by the expressive paradigm.

O'Hara's earlier, more surrealist poetry frequently involves the heart in juxtapositions that point up the conventionality, and even absurdity, of its common usage. These juxtapositions often take the form of mixed anatomical metaphors, for example in lines like "you have ... / ... conquered / the tempestuous bulging of my cloud-borne heart / which strains to burst this slender fist" (81) and "No! in my heart the golden tongue of love mutters its worldly little tango" (156). In "The Afternoon," the heart takes its place in a catalog of body parts derived from the scrambling of several clichés:

Yes it's necessary to step on one
neck, just any one, to be a free and witty monk.
I have a starry lap for you while you are stepping
on my face, O flattering memories of being held!

And lest you die of a broken heart or foot,
I am another and you are kneeling before your family
though you are a man without a country
and the horses are amusing themselves with me. (174)

"[A] broken heart or foot" humorously flouts the distinctions between the literal and figurative and the central and peripheral, contributing to the same de-centering effect as the allusion to Rimbaud in the following line, "I am another"; meanwhile, both phrases engage in a genre of self-conscious wordplay that highlights the role of linguistic convention in constructing conceptions of selfhood.

When, in the mid-1950s, O'Hara began to move away from the densely surrealist style of his earlier work, he preserved the habit of mixing metaphors of the heart. "Homosexuality" includes an instance of anatomical catachresis that also opens onto a broader confusion between selves and objects:

I start like ice, my finger to my ear, my ear
to my heart, that proud cur at the garbage can

in the rain. It's wonderful to admire oneself
with complete candor, tallying up the merits of each

of the latrines. 14th Street is drunken and credulous,
53rd tries to tremble but is too at rest. ... (182)

This excerpt begins with an “I” possessed of fingers, ears, and a heart, but O’Hara swiftly complicates the apparent reference to an individual person: the particular “I” shifts to the general “oneself,” while the proposed exercise of self-observation becomes an assessment of New York City’s latrines, which take on the character of human subjects. Even “that proud cur at the garbage can” stands in ambiguous grammatical relation to the rest of the sentence in such a way that it may be read as an appositive modifying “my heart”: in short, the passage works in every way to unsettle a sense of the subject as a discrete individual, and to extend the realm of subjectivity across the urban environment.

Related to what Branden Joseph calls Rauschenberg’s “externalization of personality and personal memory,” this effect is widespread in O’Hara’s poetry, despite its habitual organization around a first-person speaker. The “I” of his “I do this, I do that” poems is a locus of the kinds of feelings, memories, and events that aggregate to form what we think of as personal experience. At the same time, however, that experience often refuses to honor the conventional boundaries of the self, which may be dispersed across the environment of a room, a party, or a city. In “L’Amour Avait Passé Par Là,” the self seems to be coextensive with O’Hara’s office at the Museum of Modern Art:

they have painted the ceiling of my heart
and put in a new light fixture
and Arte Contemporaneo by Juan Eduardo Cirlot
and the Petit Guide to the Musée National Russe
it is all blankly defending its privacy
from the sighing wind in the ceiling
of the old Theatre Guild building (333)

The two mentions of the heart in O’Hara’s poetry that bear the closest comparison to the final image of “For Bob Rauschenberg” are also two of the best known. “A Step Away From Them” famously concludes, “My heart is in my / pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy” (258). In the poem “My Heart,” apart from the title, the heart only appears in the last three lines:

I want my feet to be bare,
I want my face to be shaven, and my heart--
you can't plan on the heart, but
the better part of it, my poetry, is open.

On one hand, the heart lends each of these poems a note of resolution, as if wrapping it back around its generative emotional center—the same effect produced by “a / paper rubbed against the heart / and still too moist to be framed.” But at the same time, that center is turned outward by the irreducible multiplicity of the word “heart,” which operates simultaneously on levels of anatomy, metonymy, symbol, and cliché. Moreover, in these poems, O’Hara uses syntactical structures of equivalence to create an indefinite lateral slide where the figure of the heart would ordinarily serve to anchor meaning: the copula repeated in the last lines of “A Step Away From Them,” the appositional phrase in “My Heart.” At the end of “My Heart,” the heart is the culmination of a progression inward—from “feet” to “face” to “heart”—but at the same time, “my heart” slips sideways into “my poetry,” just as in “A Step Away From Them,” “my heart” slides into “Poems by Pierre Reverdy.” By displacing his heart onto his own poems, or on to

Reverdy's, O'Hara externalizes and materializes the seat of emotions, opening the poet out into the city and the world of writers and readers that surround him. His heart is not lodged deep in his breast, but tucked into his pocket in the form of a text written by someone else, which is also the material form of a *livre de poche* and a linguistic pun.



Fig. 3. Robert Rauschenberg, *Red Interior*, 1954. Oil, fabric, and newspaper on canvas, with plastic, wood, metal-and-porcelain pulley, pebbles, and string. 56 1/4 x 61 1/2 inches. Private collection. Courtesy of The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

As in Rauschenberg's artwork, the impetus behind these displacements is not primarily the desire to debunk expressivity, although it is partially that. But it is more powerfully a recognition of the extent to which all of these factors participate in feelings: the organ that pumps blood, pages that turn, words on the pages, Valentine's clichés. O'Hara's poetry is full of feelings, but these feelings don't occupy an interior space set apart from an exterior one. It is in this sense that O'Hara might have appreciated Rauschenberg's *Red Interior* (1954), with its red-silk center, its flesh-tones and the hint of a pun in its title—not as an evasion or refusal of self-disclosure, but as a gently ironic reproof of the separation from the world of things that the notion of self-disclosure implies.

Heart-prints, Head-prints, and Footprints

As important as "the heart" in the last lines of "For Bob Rauschenberg" is the way in which it is applied to "paper." For if O'Hara uses "heart" in ways that destabilize the symbolic

paradigm to which the word seems so inextricably tied, in these lines, he brings those ways together with a corollary strategy of the visual arts: the replacement of a symbolic mode of signification with an indexical one. As an allusion to an indexical trace of a body part, “a / paper rubbed against the heart” connects the conversation that O’Hara holds with Rauschenberg in “For Bob Rauschenberg” to the intertextual conversation that he carries on with Jasper Johns through a number of different poems and artworks.

Johns made three major artworks with Frank O’Hara’s name in the title: *In Memory of my Feelings – Frank O’Hara* (1961), *Skin with O’Hara Poem* (1963-5), and *Memory Piece (Frank O’Hara)* (1961/70). Each of these works either features or refers to an imprint made by a part of the body. Johns created *Skin with O’Hara Poem* by slathering his head with oil and rolling it against a lithographic stone, which was then inked and printed to produce a haunting impression of his face spread out from ear to ear (Castleman 20).²² *Memory Piece (Frank O’Hara)* consists of a rubber cast of O’Hara’s foot that Johns made in 1961, and years later affixed to the lid of a box full of sand in which the foot has left its print. *In Memory of my Feelings – Frank O’Hara* contains no actual bodyprint, but careful study has revealed its connection to the idea of one. Barely distinguishable within a large field of blue-gray brushwork, the words “DEAD MAN” appear twice in the painting’s lower right hand corner. Fred Orton (and, following him, Marjorie Perloff) has linked the painting through these words to a page in Johns’s notebook from 1960-61 (see Orton 61-65 and Perloff, “Watchman,” 208-10). On a page bearing the title “A Dead Man,” Johns has scrawled the directive, “Take a skull / Cover it with paint / Rub it against canvas.” Beneath these words appear a smudged drawing of a skull and crossbones and what look to be two cursory sketches for works that incorporate the skull motif. Orton solidifies the link between



Fig. 4. Jasper Johns, *Skin with O’Hara Poem*, 1963-65. Lithograph. 22 x 34 inches. Published by Universal Limited Art Editions.

these sketches and *In Memory of My Feelings—Frank O’Hara* by showing an x-ray image of the painting that reveals an image of a skull completely hidden behind the painted surface, positioned similarly to the skull in the sketch. While it isn’t inconceivable that Johns painted *In Memory of My Feelings* over the discarded beginnings of a different work, the incorporation of the phrase “DEAD MAN” into the finished painting, in addition to thematic connections to the poem, strongly suggest a relationship between the painting and the notebook sketch, with its notion of a skull rubbed against canvas.

Johns’s use of bodyprints is hardly particular to works that refer to O’Hara, but it is consistent across them. At the same time, out of the three mentions of “Jap” in O’Hara’s *Collected Poems*, two are accompanied by references to footprints.²³ “What Appears to be Yours” (1960), a surreal and fragmentary narrative that includes a taxi ride “... on the East River Drive / zooming downtown to Jap’s,” ends with “... the sole of a foot substantial in the snow / warm through the hole in the stocking the sky” (380). O’Hara’s 1963 letter-poem “Dear Jap” alludes to the cast and attendant drawing that Johns made in preparation for *Memory Piece (Frank O’Hara)*: “when I think of you in South Carolina I think of my foot in the sand.”

It is possible that there is a gay subtext to the foot imagery that circulated between O’Hara and Johns. Russell Ferguson has connected *Memory Piece (Frank O’Hara)* to one of Rauschenberg’s illustrations of Dante’s *Inferno* (1959-60), in which Jonathan Katz finds a reference to the punishment of sodomites: “According to Dante, sodomites are sentenced to run forever barefoot over hot sand. And at the top of his drawing, Rauschenberg has outlined his foot in red” (“Art of Code” 202). Katz again associates the footprint with homosexuality in his reading of one of Rauschenberg’s earliest pieces, *Should Love Come First?* (1951), which “prominently features an imprint of Rauschenberg’s foot contiguous with a collaged dance studio progressive waltz diagram delineating the male position; together they constitute a male-male waltz” (“Committing” 39).

Extending Katz’s reading of foot imagery to O’Hara should be undertaken with caution. There are, however, enough instances in O’Hara’s poetry in which feet are directly or obliquely associated with Johns or Rauschenberg to warrant considering that he might have perceived his relationship to them in terms of their sexuality, and that his poetry registers that identification by participating in the exchange of coded references that Katz argues was such an important mode of expression for two artists “liv[ing] as gay men and lovers in the midst of what was probably the singular most homophobic decade in American history” (“Lovers” 18). O’Hara would not have been familiar with *Should Love Come First?*, which Rauschenberg painted over to create one of his all-black paintings, but there is a minute reference in his *Collected Poems* that links Rauschenberg with feet. “Dream of Berlin,” dated just a few months before “For Bob Rauschenberg,” is at once sexy and cryptic, written in a procedural style atypical for O’Hara, but one whose rules are opaque. The next-to last stanza reads,

these (hairs)
are the soldiers (armor)
of Fidelio (dark)
Yoicks! (feet)
hunting in the abyss (parade)
what’s in the sky (reversed)
they blink (smiling)

Yoicks (1954), as I mentioned earlier, had been part of the Egan Gallery show that O'Hara reviewed in 1955. Consisting of bright red and yellow stripes painted over a collage of polka-dotted fabric and newspaper comic strips, critics have tended to focus on the painting's unusual formal properties, viewing it as a transition between the monochromatic *Red Paintings* and the Combines. Katz, however, has also found in the painting an abundance of coded references to Johns ("Committing" 46). And if the sexual innuendo in "Dream of Berlin" is too nebulous, it is less so in "Liebeslied," a "love song" written on the same day as "What Appears to be Yours" that offers a different context for the image of a shoeless foot in the snow: "I came to you / wearing one shoe / what could I do / the other one was on my prick" (380).

If Rauschenberg, Johns, and O'Hara did share a symbolic understanding of feet, however, it seems equally significant that the feet in their work appear in the context of a mode of representation that has been understood as an alternative and even a challenge to symbolism. *Should Love Come First?* is an intimate autobiographical collage, but on a formal level, it shares a preoccupation with indexical traces that Rauschenberg explored in much less personal works from the same early period. Katz recounts that "one of Rauschenberg's first works, executed while he was still a student, consisted of putting butcher paper on the floor of the Art Students League in order to capture the imprints of foot traffic" ("Art of Code" 196). He would undertake a related experiment in 1953, pouring paint under a tire of John Cage's car and driving it over a twenty-two foot length of paper.²⁴ This is the mode of indexical mark-making central to the series of prints that Jasper Johns intended to pair with O'Hara poems (not just *Skin With O'Hara Poem*, but also *Pinion*—see note), and that he explores in a different material context in *Memory Piece (Frank O'Hara)*. And O'Hara, in turn, makes a figure of the index in the last lines of "For Bob Rauschenberg," "a / paper rubbed against the heart / and still too moist to be framed."

As an allusion to a work of art based on the index, "a / paper rubbed against the heart" suggests a way of managing the aesthetic situation with which O'Hara struggles in the poem: it allows for the emotional drama typically associated with "the heart" while at the same time replacing the dualistic logic of the expressive symbol with a model in which the sign and what it represents are more nearly coincident. Indeed, critics like Rosalind Krauss have understood the indexical sign as a major tool in the movement of American art, over the course of the postwar decades, away from a mode of "traditional picture-making" that exemplifies certain philosophical assumptions as much as certain formal ones: "[t]he ground of Western illusionism," as she puts it, "is an entrenched Cartesianism" ("Sense" 46). Whereas the structure of the sign that operates in this tradition of painting is essentially symbolic, in the two-part essay "Notes on the Index," Krauss notes the rise in 1970s art of a different kind of sign—the "impression, the trace"—that is "connected to a referent along a purely physical axis" ("Part 2" 215). The index, as Roland Barthes presents it in his famous analysis of photography, is a "message without a code" (Krauss, "Part Two" 211), and as such, "could be called sub- or pre-symbolic, ceding the language of art back to the imposition of things" ("Part 1" 203).

Rauschenberg's "materializ[ation of] image[s]" in the 1950s and '60s—his "extraordinary repertory of marking or registering the image on the surface"—is clearly a precedent for the works described in "Notes on the Index," although Krauss tends to cast both Johns and Rauschenberg as more closely related to the pictorialism of Abstract Expressionism than to the new art emerging in the 1970s.²⁵ Other critics, however, understand their use of indexical signs as precisely that rejection of symbolic logic championed in "Notes on the Index."

Hal Foster, for instance, considers Johns's bodyprints early examples of a broader effort "[t]o deconstruct Expressionism": "In a work like *Target with Plaster Casts* he revealed Abstract-Expressionist marks of presence to be ambiguous traces—'casts,' in effect, of absence" ("Expressive Fallacy" 81). For Jonathan Katz, of course, this maneuver has a queer dimension.



Fig. 5. Jasper Johns, *Memory Piece (Frank O'Hara)*, 1961-70. Wood, rubber, Sculp-metal, lead, brass, and sand. 18 3/8 x 6 3/4 x 13 inches (open). Collection of the artist. In Basualdo and Battle (410).

He argues that Johns's plaster-cast bodyparts, in particular, "engage the body in a way that is not premised on self-exposure . . . but in a sense on its very opposite: on disclaiming the meanings which inhere in the body" ("Dismembership" 171). Katz calls this practice a way of "queering the body," by which he means "simply to offer a body that evades immediate citational reinscription"—to present the body, that is, as an uncoded message (181). In an essay that returns to C. S. Peirce's turn-of-the-century semiotics, Michael Leja cautions against art-critics' tendency to overstate (following Barthes) the purity of the index in the aesthetic context, arguing that "[t]he physical trace of a gesture made in aesthetic space will be fundamentally different in semiotic terms from the record of a nonaesthetic gesture" ("Peirce" 119). In the context of art, at least, there is no such thing as an uncoded message; every instance of the index is necessarily "mixed with iconicity and symbolism."²⁶ Keeping Leja's warning in mind, however, it is nonetheless possible to understand the heart-prints, head-prints, and footprints that circulate between O'Hara, Johns, and Rauschenberg as granting each of these artists a degree of distance from the codes of subjectivity and expression that prevailed in the literary and artistic contexts in which they worked. This distance is granted, moreover, in a way that doesn't simply invert the hierarchy between material sign and immaterial referent, because the critical aspect of these bodyprints is directed not at a particular conception of subjectivity itself, but at the dualism that underwrites it.

I want to end this chapter by turning briefly to one of the artworks that, like the *Red Paintings*, resonates with the last lines of "For Bob Rauschenberg." When O'Hara wrote to Johns in 1963, "when I think of you in South Carolina I think of my foot in the sand," he was referring to what was still at the time an unfinished work of art. Johns had commenced work on it in 1961. He recalls, "'I remember casting his foot on Front Street in my studio . . . I cast his foot and did a drawing for the piece, which included a cabinet with the drawers full of sand. At that time I had a house in South Carolina. I needed a carpenter but could never find anyone to do it. I think it was done after his death. But I gave Frank the drawing for it'" (qtd. in Gooch 395). *Memory Piece* (Frank O'Hara) was completed in 1970. That timeline gives the piece an eerie resonance, since it was conceived before but completed after O'Hara's death from an accident on the beach at Fire Island. Indeed, the rubber cast of his foot has a purplish and bruised, death-like aspect. Like the elegiac *In Memory of My Feelings—Frank O'Hara* and the poem after which it is titled, *Memory Piece* might be understood as a ghostly marker of experience—"Feelings," a subject—no longer present. I want to suggest, however, that *Memory Piece*—especially when compared to another cast foot, Duchamp's *Torture-Morte* (1959)—emphasizes the capacity of the index to reflect a fuller sense of "what is happening to him, / what has happened and is here."

Memory Piece was displayed alongside *Torture-Morte* in 2012 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art's *Dancing Around the Bride*, an exhibition organized to illustrate the influence of Duchamp on Johns, Rauschenberg, Cage, and Cunningham. In this case, however, the contrast between the two pieces is as telling as the quotation. Duchamp's foot is frozen in time, worried by artificial flies that cannot actually participate in the process of decomposition. In its static isolation, *Torture-Morte* emphasizes the index as a marker of absence—the impress of a living foot that was there and then moved on. Whereas the foot in *Torture-Morte* has been reduced to an object, I would argue that the objecthood of the foot in *Memory Piece* is not a reduction. In its disembodied state, the foot nonetheless participates in a network of relationships with other components of the work that asks to be understood in terms of process, even though the viewer in a museum is prevented from switching the drawers, shaking the sand, and opening and closing the lid. Unlike *Torture-Morte*, *Memory Piece* suggests the possibility of the repeated renewal of



Fig. 6. Marcel Duchamp, *Torture-Morte*, 1959. Painted plaster, synthetic flies, and paper mounted on wood, with glass. 11 5/8 x 5 1/4 x 4 a/16 inches. Centre Pompidou, Paris. In Basualdo and Battle (411).

the trace, and this possibility is available because of, rather than in spite of, the very ordinary, material mechanism of the box, with its hinges, its chain, and its drawer-pulls. The mundane materiality of the box, it seems to me, is analogous to the way that *Memory Piece*, like O'Hara's poetry, plays with clichés: footprints in the sand, the sands of time. They are analogous in that both are antithetical to a tenacious conception of experience, the authenticity of which is defined in opposition to cliché, and the ineffability of which is opposed to the kind of rote mechanism suggested by Johns's cabinet. The indexical sign in the art of Johns and Rauschenberg, seen through the lens of O'Hara, works to replace this conception with experience understood, to paraphrase Rauschenberg's statement quoted at the start of the chapter, as a collaboration between materials.

¹ *On Record* 40-41.

² "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image" 53.

³ I address the place of materiality in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in an article in progress, "A Certain Vagueness: William James and the Boundary-Line of the Mental."

⁴ See, for example, Marjorie Perloff's assessment that in comparison to Jasper Johns, "O'Hara is still very much a post-Romantic poet, yearning for presence, for a particular palpable self that is

anchored in a particular body. However much his “I” clowns around, ... the driving force of the poem is *anxiety* ..., a free-floating fear whose ultimate object, death, is never far away...” (“Watchman” 214).

⁵ Michael Leja has illustrated the extent to which Abstract Expressionism was “an art that thematized subjectivity—it claimed to issue from and represent mind and experience, as these were revealed in mythic and unconscious materials and structures held to constitute the submerged foundations of human nature and being” (*Reframing* 258).

⁶ Just as Leja argues that the principal subject of Abstract Expressionist painting “was the artist as subject” (*Reframing* 8), Caroline Jones argues that “the critique of abstract expressionism by subsequent generations of American artists was engaged primarily with this subjectivity”—that is, with an “abstract expressionist ego ... held to be highly individualized, albeit barely the master of its id; given prominence by the postwar power and prestige of America itself, it was dominant and pervasive in the culture of the time” (639).

⁷ Specifically, Shaw frames the relationship between O’Hara and Rauschenberg in a set of terms that would come to define art-critical accounts of postmodernism in the 1970s and ’80s—accounts that often cast Rauschenberg in a central or founding role. Critics like Rosalind Krauss and Craig Owens saw in Rauschenberg’s work a property of discursiveness—what Owens called allegory, drawing on the development of that concept by Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man—that flew in the face of the late modernist aesthetics that dominated the art world in the 1950s, when Rauschenberg was emerging as an artist. This assault on the aesthetics of late modernism is double-edged. On one hand, allegory violates Clement Greenberg’s influential narrative of modern art, in which painting progressively excludes all but the “purely plastic or abstract qualities” proper to its medium (566), by introducing a dimension of signification that unfolds temporally and points beyond the confines of the canvas. On the other hand, because postmodern discursiveness highlights the fundamental *illegibility* of signs, it draws attention to the sheer materiality of the artwork, exposing it as neither essentially different from other objects in the world nor capable of containing the kinds of meaning that expressivist and “iconographic” modes of interpretation purport to discover in it.

Shaw’s choice of allegory as a framing concept enables a useful insight into the intersection between Rauschenberg’s and O’Hara’s aesthetics. Reading Rauschenberg through O’Hara, including through the poem “For Bob Rauschenberg,” Shaw discovers a way of approaching Rauschenberg’s work “that can account for an allegorical impulse that is neither iconographic nor fundamentally illegible” (215)—that is, a modified understanding of allegory that does justice to the partial, fragmentary narratives that his materials suggest. Both O’Hara and Rauschenberg, Shaw argues, trouble the idea of the autobiographical subject and, more fundamentally, “the institutions and conventions of image reading that would render a subject legible or place an artwork within an art-historical category” (215). They do so, however, not by shutting down iconographic readings, but by allowing apparently autobiographically referential details in their work to oscillate between “their status as texts and their status as things,” frustrating both the iconographer’s attempt to reconstruct from them a complete narrative of a self *and* the postmodernist critic’s desire to reduce them to “self-evidently mute material” (206). Like the postcards, photographs, and neckties that Rauschenberg includes in his Combines, the proper names and intimate anecdotes that feature in O’Hara’s poetry tell stories about the poet’s life and its relation to his art, without ever suggesting that the *whole* story of either the life or the art exists to be told.

Shaw's contention that O'Hara and Rauschenberg "stage[...] interiority as a discourse on par with others" (215) is fundamental to my understanding of both artists. He summarizes this aspect of O'Hara's work in words that apply equally to Rauschenberg's: "what appears to be the visual proof of a self and its history in collage keeps turning in on the syntactical codes by which such a self has been educed, mingling with other selves and with culture more broadly" (233). My analysis in this chapter builds on Shaw's while shifting its emphasis. Rather than exposing the critical gestures by which O'Hara and Rauschenberg frustrate simplistic conceptions of immediacy, my aim is to show how these gestures open space in their work for a more complex conception of experience.

⁸ Alongside his interest in avant-garde music, O'Hara retained a life-long passion for the Romantic composers Liszt and Rachmaninoff, writing seven poems commemorating Rachmaninoff's birthday and two entitled "Lisztiana" (see Gooch, 28; O'Hara, *Collected* 159, 189, 190, 242, 259, 321, 418, 419, 474). In 1959, the same year in which he wrote "For Bob Rauschenberg," he also wrote an essay full of praise for Boris Pasternak, whose poetry he had long admired. O'Hara may never have "despise[d his] love for Pasternak," but according to Brad Gooch, he did worry self-consciously over the rhapsodic effusion of the essay's closing line, which reads, "If love lives at all in the cheap tempestuousness of our time, I think it can only be in the unrelenting honesty with which we face animate nature, inanimate things, and the cruelty of our kind, and perceive and articulate and, like Zhivago, choose love above all else" (see Gooch 316).

⁹ The "you" of "For Bob Rauschenberg" was not the only voice that O'Hara imagined chastising him in the spring of 1959. "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday," written in April, ends with the following lines addressed to the composer: "where we can shroud ourselves in the / mechanized clarity of emotional vandalism we / do not see your owlish obstinacy staring back" (*Collected* 322). Here, Rachmaninoff seems to represent not romanticism but discipline, both musical and emotional, which the poet lacks or craves; the poem furthers this impression through a reference to O'Hara's childhood piano lessons. This discipline is counterposed throughout the poem to the poet's maudlin emotional state: "I am sitting crying at the corner / of Ninth Street and Avenue A."

¹⁰ The poem suggests a broad definition of transcendence, encompassing not only "heavenly aspirations" but a whole array of aesthetic orientations that elevate "what is here" or point beyond it toward some kind of symbolic meaning. In this sense, the mention of Liszt might be taken to refer not only the romantic expressivity of his style, but to the structure of his symphonic poems, in which the music is intended to illustrate an extra-musical scenario, such as a work of literature.

¹¹ T. J. Clark famously discusses the "vulgarity" of Abstract Expressionism in "In Defense of Abstract Expressionism."

¹² It is also possible to find an expression of solidarity in the autobiographical details that O'Hara incorporates into the poem, which include an allusion to his first homosexual encounter: "an adolescence taken in hay / above horses." According to his biographer, O'Hara lost his virginity to a stable hand on the farm where he spent his childhood; the periodic references to hay and horses in his poetry always carry a sexual charge (Gooch 51-2). I agree with Shaw that the way in which O'Hara presents this reference is analogous to the way in which Rauschenberg incorporates references to his homosexuality, such as photographs of his lovers, into his Combines—"not as a veiled central content (as more recent iconographers claim) but in the

context of a wide variety of intertexts that operate on quite different discursive registers” (204). While I support Shaw’s implicit disagreement with Jonathan Katz, who reads Rauschenberg’s references as instances of the “veiled” or “coded” language of the closet, I do follow Katz in stressing the importance of intertextual communication at a historical moment when “[s]ocial isolation [of homosexual men and women] enforced by law was ... an enormously effective strategy of containment, interfering not only with the formation of community, but concomitantly, with the formation of identity, and thus a politics of liberation as well” (“Lovers and Divers” 20). In other words, I think it is important to recognize the possibility that O’Hara’s reference to his sexual past, and to his childhood more generally, forges a link between the poet and Rauschenberg on a personal level, as well as on the level of compositional technique. And it is possible to recognize this possibility, I believe, without relying on “an anachronistic conception of the ‘gay’ closet” (Folland 348) or an essentialized conception of “a coherently formed, knowable homosexuality” (357).

¹³ Shaw interprets the last lines of “For Bob Rauschenberg” in Bürger-esque terms of the inevitable institutional absorption of avant-garde disruption. Reading “a / paper rubbed against the heart” as an allusion to the personal, emotional implications of some of Rauschenberg’s collage elements, Shaw concludes:

O’Hara thus seems careful not to frame these effects of rawness and disruptive moistness as essentially subversive. They are, instead, temporarily so—temporarily because O’Hara implicitly imagines these practices within the history of art, within a series of institutional recuperations... It is precisely in relation to such later recuperations that one might read Rauschenberg’s famous statement—‘Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.’). This ‘gap’ is less spatial than temporal and historical—a gap separating an object ‘too moist to be framed’ from its eventual framing. (206-207)

This reading strikes me not as wrong, but as somewhat extraneous to the poem’s concerns. As with his focus on allegory, Shaw overlays the poem with a theoretical model that has become extremely familiar since the 1970s, which O’Hara may indeed have presciently grasped, but which exists at an oblique angle to the problems he actually articulates.

¹⁴ Photographs taken in 1969 and 2013 document the fading of *Collection*. See Roberts, n.p. *Red Painting* (1954) is in the permanent collection of the new Broad Museum, where its vibrant color and moist appearance can be experienced first-hand.

¹⁵ *Frank O’Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* contains a brief but useful discussion of O’Hara’s review (Shaw 197-200).

¹⁶ Frank O’Hara Papers, 4. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

¹⁷ The phrase “inner self” occurs frequently in the discourse surrounding Abstract Expressionism; one famous instance is Mark Rothko’s assertion, “If previous abstractions paralleled the scientific and objective preoccupations of our times, ours are finding a pictorial equivalent for man’s new knowledge and consciousness of his more complex inner self” (qtd. in Leja, *Reframing* 37). Michael Leja emphasizes the degree to which the Abstract Expressionist painters themselves agreed that the subject-matter of their art “was, in significant part, the self” (36).

¹⁸ Readings of Rauschenberg that emphasize his critical orientation, like Branden Joseph’s, often emphasize his affinities with Dada, Duchamp, and the deconstructive spirit of an earlier avant-garde. In interviews, however, Rauschenberg repeatedly countered charges of Dadaist negation

with assertions of affirmative, creative intent. Asked whether his 1951 *White Paintings* were a Dada gesture, he replied, “No. They had to do with shadows and the projection of things in a room onto the blank whiteness” (*An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg* 65). About his black and white monochromes, he recalled, “Everybody used remarks like ‘burned black,’ ‘nihilism,’ ‘destruction’ (for the blacks), and ‘empty.’ None of those early things were about negation or nihilism. They were—I don’t know—more like celebrating the abundance of color” (in de Antonia and Tuchman 88). He put the issue most concisely in conversation with a French critic, who translated his comment as follows: “Dada était anti, je suis pro” (Choay 84). Françoise Choay’s 1961 review points out, with some dismay and condescension, that Rauschenberg’s art cannot be considered “sous l’étiquette de néo-dada” precisely because of its positive celebration of the world of things. She illustrates Rauschenberg’s misapprehension of the ethos of Dada and Duchamp through an anecdote of his first encounter with a Duchamp readymade: “‘C’était une roue de bicyclette posée au bord d’une chaise,’” Rauschenberg recalled. “Je l’ai trouvée plus belle qu’aucun tableau de l’exposition” (84). In finding the object beautiful, Choay maintains, Rauschenberg was missing the point: for Duchamp, “la beauté résidait non dans la chose mais dans l’attitude de l’individu qui avait décidé contre la société et ses valeurs de la proposer comme objet d’art.” The object was not an end in itself but “le moyen d’opérer la révolution dans l’art, de dire non au confort intellectuel, au concept de beauté, à un certain humanisme.” Whether Rauschenberg’s response to Duchamp’s bicycle wheel was a deliberate or an ingenuous misreading, the different status of the object in his own work is obvious and fundamental. As he remarked to Richard Kostelanetz on the subject of the *White Paintings*, “I think of them as anything but a way-out gesture. A gesture implies the denial of the existence of the actual object. If it had been that, I wouldn’t have done them. Otherwise it would only be an idea” (95).

¹⁹ The collection of works displayed in the Egan Gallery show readily illustrate both the continuity and the change that took place between the *Red Paintings* and the Combines. The diversity of materials involved in the red monochromes is striking, while pieces in the show that are more readily identifiable as Combines, like *Charlene* and *Collection*, are dominated by the color red—an effect both of paint and of the red silk fabric that Rauschenberg used in works throughout this period. See Davidson in Hopps and Davidson 100.

²⁰ The comparison is implicit in Leo Steinberg’s concept of the “flatbed picture plane,” a term “borrow[ed] ... from the flatbed printing press—‘a horizontal bed on which a horizontal printing surface rests’ (Webster)” (27). See below for further discussion of the *Red Paintings*’ newspaper-like layout.

²¹ Tom Folland reads Rauschenberg’s liberal use of textiles in his work of this period as constitutive of “a queered vision in which decorative and abject materials with all sorts of domestic, feminine, and debased connotations are enlisted in a rejection of modernist culture, with its attendant formulations of postwar subjectivity. This queered vision, as I am describing it, is a willful misrecognition of the ‘appropriate’ contours of the picture plane, a decisive blurring of boundaries between public/private, male/female, and high/low” (350).

²² “The poem by O’Hara was added to the composition two years after the imprint was made, and remains the sole example from what was intended to be a portfolio of prints on unusual papers in a variety of shapes and sizes incorporating new works by the poet” (Castleman 20). *Pinion* (1963-66), another print initially imagined as part of this series, features the imprints of the hands, feet, and knee of a person crouched in “a runner’s starting position” (19).

²³ The first reference to “Jap,” chronologically, is in “Joe’s Jacket” (329).

²⁴ As Cage remembers, “I know he put the paint on the tires. And he unrolled the paper on the city block. But which one of us drove the car?” (*Silence* 98).

²⁵ In a footnote to “Notes on the Index,” she writes, “[t]he pressure to use indexical signs as a means of establishing presence begins in Abstract Expressionism with deposits of paint expressed as imprints and traces. During the 1960s, this concern was continued although changed in its import in, for example, the work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. . . . However, . . . there is a decisive break between earlier attitudes towards the index and those at present, a break that has to do with the role played by the photographic, rather than the pictorial, as model” (“Part 2” 212, n.2). This assessment is consistent with her 1965 assessment of Jasper Johns’s bodyprints in works like *Periscope (Hart Crane)* as a return to illusionism, rather than a collapse of symbolism. And although “Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image” emphasizes Rauschenberg’s *distance from* illusionism, here, Krauss argues that in their “tendency towards reckless illusionistic projection,” “Johns’s paintings since 1963 move closer and closer toward Rauschenberg’s characteristic organization of space and surface” (“Jasper Johns” 93).

²⁶ Taking the example of literalist interpretations of Pollock, Leja explains the error of neglecting to take into account the importance of the aesthetic context or “frame”:

The index within the frame secures some of its significance by virtue of invoking established expectations of aesthetic activity, specifically conventions of abstract painting. The anti-aesthetic intent of modernist gesturalism can be understood only through reference to a history of painting, and this types the marks as symbols. . . . Moreover, as soon as Pollock's marks become recognizable as a trademark style—when forms come to resemble one another in ways that distinguish them as his—they have acquired an iconic aspect as well. Under the pressure of the frame, the indexicality of Pollock's marks is mixed with iconicity and symbolism. (119)

Works Cited

- Allen, Donald. *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*. 1960. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999.
- Allison, Raphael. "David Antin's Pragmatist Technophobia." *Journal of Modern Literature* 28 (2005): 110-34.
- Altieri, Charles. "Contingency as Compositional Principle in Fifties Poetics." In Terrence Diggory and Steven Paul Miller, eds. *The Scene of My Selves: New Work on New York School Poets*. Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 2001, 3359-84.
- . *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1979.
- . "From Symbolist Thought to Immanence: The Ground of Postmodern American Poetics." *Boundary 2* 1:3 (Spring 1973), 605-642.
- Antin, David. "Modernism and Postmodernism: Approaching the Present in American Poetry." *boundary 2* 1.1 (1972): 98-133 .
- Ashbery, John. "Craft Interview with John Ashbery." *New York Quarterly* 9 (Winter 1972): 11-33.
- . "The Impossible." *Poetry* 90.4 (1957): 250-54.
- . Interview with A. Poulin, Jr. "The Experience of Experience: A Conversation with John Ashbery." *Michigan Quarterly* 20.3 (Summer 1981): 242-55.
- . Interview with Bruce Kawin. WKCR, New York, NY, May 5, 1966. .mp3 file available at Pennsound: <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Ashbery.php>.
- . Interview with Louis Osti. "The Craft of John Ashbery." *Confrontations* 9.3 (1974): 84-96.
- . Interview with Peter Stitt. "The Art of Poetry XXXIII: John Ashbery." *Paris Review* 25 (Winter, 1983): 31-59.
- . *John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford*. By Mark Ford. London: Between the Lines, 2003.
- . *Rivers and Mountains*. 1966. New York: The Ecco Press, 1977.
- . *The Tennis Court Oath*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1962.
- Ashton, Jennifer. *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)*. Trans. Rosalind Krauss and Denis Hollier. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Basualdo, Carlos and Erica F. Battle, eds. *Dancing Around the Bride: Cage, Cunningham, Johns, Rauschenberg, and Duchamp*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.
- Bergson, Henri. *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. Trans. F.L. Pogson. Mineola, NY: Dover, 2001.
- Bernstein, Charles. "Stray Straws and Straw Men." *Content's Dream: Essays, 1975-1984*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1986. 40-49.
- Blasing, Mutlu Konuk. *Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry: O'Hara, Bichop. Ashbery & Merrill*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins." *Other Inquisitions, 1937-1952*. Trans. Ruth L. C. Simms. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964. 101-103.
- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. New York: Verso, 2004.
- Buxton, Rachel. "Marianne Moore and the Poetics of Pragmatism." *The Review of English*

- Studies* 58 (2007): 531-51.
- Cage, John. "Empty Words." *Empty Words: Writings '73-'78*. Middletown, Ct: Wesleyan University Press, 1979. 11-78.
- . *Silence*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961.
- Case, Kristen. *American Pragmatism and Poetic Practice: Crosscurrents from Emerson to Susan Howe*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2012.
- Castleman, Riva. *Jasper Johns: A Print Retrospective*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1986.
- Choay, Françoise. "Dada, Néo-Dada, et Rauschenberg." *Art International* 5.8 (Oct. 20, 1961): 83-84, 88.
- Clark, T. J. "In Defense of Abstract Expressionism." *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999. 371-403.
- Conoley, Gillian. "The Inescapable Kiss." *James Schuyler: A Celebration*. Ed. Donald Revell. Spec. issue of *Denver Quarterly* 24:4 (Spring 1990), 42-47.
- Crangle, Sara. "Dada Is Bathos! Or, of the Hobbyhorse Endlessly Rocking." *On Bathos: Literature, Art, Music*. Ed. Sara Crangle and Peter Nicholls. London: Continuum, 2010. 27-48.
- Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990.
- Culbert, Jonathan. *Paralyses: Literature, Travel, and Ethnography in French Modernity*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press,
- de Antonia, Emile and Mitch Tuchman. *Painters Painting: A Candid History of the Modern Art Scene*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1984
- Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. 1934. New York: Perigee, 2005.
- . "Existence as Precarious and Stable." *The Philosophy of John Dewey (Two Volumes in One)*. Ed. John McDermott. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981. 277-300.
- . "The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy." *The Philosophy of John Dewey (Two Volumes in One)*. 31-41.
- . "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy." *The Philosophy of John Dewey (Two Volumes in One)*. 58-97.
- . "The Need for Social Psychology." *Psychological Review* 24 (1917): 266-77.
- . *The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action*. London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1930.
- Dickey, Frances. "Bishop, Dewey, Darwin: What Other People Know." *Contemporary Literature* 44 (2003): 301-31.
- Duncan, Robert. "Notes on Poetics Regarding Olson's *Maximus*." 1956. *Fictive Certainties: Essays*. New York: New Directions, 1985.
- Folland, Tom. "Robert Rauschenberg's Queer Modernism: The Early Combines and Decoration." *The Art Bulletin* 92.4 (December 2010): 348-365.
- Foster, Hal. "The Expressive Fallacy." *Art in America* 71.1 (January 1983) 80-83, 137.
- . *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Essays and Lectures*. Ed. Joel Porte. New York: The Library of America, 1983.
- Epstein, Andrew. *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

- . "‘Building a nest out of torn up letters’: James Schuyler, Trash, and the Poetics of Collage." *A Schuyler of Urgent Concern*. Ed. David Kaufmann. Spec. issue of *Jacket2*. 30 June 2012.
- Fredman, Stephen. *Contextual Practice: Assemblage and the Erotic in Postwar Poetry and Art*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010.
- . *Poet’s Prose: The Crisis in American Verse*. 1983. 2nd ed. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Frost, Robert. *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*. Eds. Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson. New York: *The Library of America*, 1995.
- Gale, Richard. *The Divided Self of William James*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Gass, William. "Gertrude Stein and the Geography of the Sentence." *The World Within the Word: Essays*. 1978. New York: Basic Books, 2000. 63-123.
- Gallup, Donald Clifford, ed. *The Flowers of Friendship: Letters Written to Gertrude Stein*. New York: Knopf, 1953.
- Ginsberg, Allen. "Abstraction in Poetry." *It Is* 3 (Winter-Spring 1959): 73-75.
- Gooch, Brad. *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O’Hara*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1994.
- Goodman, Russell. *Wittgenstein and William James*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Greenberg, Clement. "Towards a Newer Laocoon." 1940. *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. 562-568.
- Hejinian, Lyn. "Two Stein Talks." *The Language of Inquiry*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. 83-130.
- Hillringhouse, Mark. "James Schuyler: An Interview." *The American Poetry Review* 14.2 (March/April 1985), 5-12.
- Hopps, Walter and Susan Davidson, eds. *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1997.
- Hume, David. *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. 1748. *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*. Vol. 4. Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996. 1-226.
- James, William. "A World of Pure Experience." *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. 39-91.
- . "Does Consciousness Exist?" *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. 1-38.
- . *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. 1912. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.
- . *Pragmatism*. 1907. *Writings 1902-1910*. Ed. Bruce Kuklick. New York: The Library of America, 1987. 479-624.
- . *The Principles of Psychology*. 2 vols. 1890. New York: Dover, 1950.
- . "The Stream of Thought." *The Principles of Psychology*. Vol. 1. 224-290.
- . *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: And to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals*. 1899. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1915.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.
- Jones, Caroline. "Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract-Expressionist Ego." *Critical Inquiry* 19.4 (Summer 1993): 628-665.
- Joseph, Branden. *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press/October Books, 2003.
- Kadlec, David. *Mosaic Modernism: Anarchism, Pragmatism, Culture*. Baltimore: The Johns

- Hopkins University Press, 2000.
- Katz, Jonathan. "The Art of Code: Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg." *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*. Ed. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993. 198-207.
- . "‘Committing the Perfect Crime’: Sexuality, Assemblage, and the Postmodern Turn in American Art." *Art Journal* 67.1 (2008): 38–53.
- . "Dismembership: Jasper Johns and the Body Politic." *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*. Ed. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.
- . "Lovers and Divers: Interpictorial Dialog in the Work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg." *Frauen/Kunst/Wissenschaft* 25 (1998): 16-31.
- Kernan, Nathan. "James Schuyler: A Chronology." *The Diary of James Schuyler*. Ed. Nathan Kernan. Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1997.
- . "Past = past: Some Notes on James Schuyler’s ‘Salute.’" *A Schuyler of Urgent Concern*. Ed. David Kaufmann. Spec. issue of *Jacket2*. 30 June 2012.
- Krauss, Rosalind. "Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd." *Art in America 1945-1970*. Ed. Jed Perl. New York: The Library of America, 2014. 764-770.
- . "Jasper Johns." *Lugano Review* 1, no. 2 (1965): 84-98.
- . "Notes on the Index, Part 1." 1976. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1985. 196-209.
- . "Notes on the Index, Part 2." 1977. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1985. 210-220.
- . "The Originality of the Avant-Garde." *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1985. 151-170.
- . "Sense and Sensibility: Reflections on Post 60’s Sculpture," *Artforum* 12.3 (November 1973): 43-53.
- . "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image." *Robert Rauschenberg*. October Files 4. Ed. Branden Joseph. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002. 39-56.
- Lacan, Jacques. "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet." Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. James Hulbert. *Yale French Studies* (1977): 11-52.
- Larrissy, Edward. *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry: The Language of Gender and Objects*. Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990.
- Latour, Bruno. "What is Given in Experience?" *boundary 2* 32.1 (Spring 2005): 223-37.
- . *What is the Style of Matters of Concern? Two Lectures on Empirical Philosophy*. Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 2008.
- Law, Jules David. *The Rhetoric of Empiricism: Language and Perception from Locke to I.A. Richards*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- Lears, T. J. Jackson. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- Leja, Michael. "Peirce, Visuality, and Art," *Representations* 72 (Autumn 2000): 97-122.
- . *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.
- Lentricchia, Frank. *Modernist Quartet*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Levin, Jonathan. *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, & American Literary Modernism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.

- Levinson, Ronald B. "Gertrude Stein, William James, and Grammar." *The American Journal of Psychology* 54.1 (Jan. 1941): 124-28.
- Livingston, James. *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997.
- Lowe, Victor. *Alfred North Whitehead: The Man and His Work*. Vol. 2, 1910-1947. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.
- . "William James and Whitehead's Doctrine of Prehensions." *The Journal of Philosophy* 38.5 (Feb. 27, 1941), 113-126.
- Mac Low, Jackson. *Representative Works: 1938-1985*. New York: Roof Books, 1986.
- Magee, Michael. *Emancipating Pragmatism: Emerson, Jazz, and Experimental Writing*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004.
- Massumi, Brian. "Too-Blue: Color-Patch for an Expanded Empiricism." *Cultural Studies* 14.2 (2000): 177-226.
- McDermott, John. "Introduction." *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*. Ed. John McDermott. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977. xix-l.
- Menand, Louis. *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.
- Meyer, Leonard. "The End of the Renaissance?: Notes on the Radical Empiricism of the Avant-Garde." *The Hudson Review* 16.2 (Summer, 1963), 169-186.
- Meyer, Steven. *Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Nichols, Miriam. *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2010.
- O'Hara, Frank. *Art Chronicles 1954-1966*. New York: George Braziller, 1975.
- . *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*. Ed. Donald Allen. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Olson, Charles. "Projective Verse." *Collected Prose*. Ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. 239-49.
- Olson, Liesl. "Gertrude Stein, William James, and Habit in the Shadow of War." *Twentieth Century Literature* 49.3 (Autumn 2003): 328-59.
- Orton, Fred. *Figuring Jasper Johns*. London: Reaktion Books, 1994.
- Owens, Craig. "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism." *October* 12 (Spring, 1980): 67-86.
- . "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism, Part 2." *October* 13 (Summer, 1980): 58-80.
- Perloff, Marjorie. *21st-Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002.
- . *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*. Northwestern University Press, 1999.
- . *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- . "Watchman, Spy, and Dead Man: Johns, O'Hara, Cage and the 'Aesthetic of Indifference.'" *Modernism/Modernity* 8, no. 2 (2001): 197-223.
- Poirier, Richard. *Poetry and Pragmatism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- . "Reaching Frank O'Hara." *Trying it Out in America: Literary and Other Performances*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999. 36-54.
- Pound, Ezra. "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste." *Poetry* 1, no. 6 (1913): 200-206.

- Quartermain, Peter. *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe*. Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Rae, Patricia. *The Practical Muse: Pragmatist Poetics in Hulme, Pound, and Stevens*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1997.
- Raleigh, Sir Walter. "His Pilgrimage." *The Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250-1900*. Ed. Arthur Quiller-Couch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908. 103.
- Rauschenberg, Robert. Interview with Billy Klüver. In *On Record: 11 Artists, 1963*. By Billy Klüver. New York: Experiments in Art and Technology, 1981.
- . Interview with Dorothy Seckler. "Oral History Interview with Robert Rauschenberg, 1965 Dec. 21." *Archives of American Art*. Smithsonian Institution. Web.
- . Interview with Richard Kostelanetz. "A Conversation with Robert Rauschenberg." *Partisan Review* 35.1 (Winter 1968): 92-109.
- . *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg*. By Barbara Rose. New York: Vintage Books, 1987.
- Richardson, Joan. *A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Richardson, Robert D. *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*. Mariner Books, 2007.
- Roberts, Sarah. "Collection." *Rauschenberg Research Project*. SFMoMA. Web. July 2013. 31 January 2016.
- Rose, Barbara. "ABC Art." *Art in America 1945-1970*. Ed. Jed Perl. New York: The Library of America, 2014. 722-743.
- Ross, Andrew. "Taking *The Tennis Court Oath*." *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry*. Ed. Susan Schultz. Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1995. 193-210.
- Roth, Moira. "The Aesthetics of Indifference." In *Difference/Indifference: Musings on Postmodernism, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage*. Moira Roth and Jonathan D. Katz. Amsterdam: G + B Arts International, 1998. 33-47.
- Schoenbach, Lisi. "'Peaceful and Exciting': Stein's Dialectic of Habit." *Pragmatic Modernism*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- . *Pragmatic Modernism*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Schuyler, James. *Collected Poems*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993.
- . *Selected Art Writings*. Ed. Simon Pettet. Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1998.
- Schwartz, Sanford. *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot, and Early Twentieth-Century Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.
- Setina, Emily. "From 'Impossible' Reading to a Poetics of Intimacy: John Ashbery's Gertrude Stein." *Genre* 45.1 (2012): 143-66.
- Shaw, Lytle. *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie*. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2006.
- Shoptaw, John. *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.
- Shusterman, Richard. "Dewey's Art as Experience: The Psychological Background." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 44.1 (Spring 2010): 26-43.
- Silverberg, Mark. *The New York School Poets and the Neo-Avant-Garde: Between Radical Art and Radical Chic*. Farnham, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010.

- Snyder, Gary. *Myths and Texts*. 1960. New York: New Directions, 1978.
- Spinks, Lee. "Oppen's Pragmatism." *Journal of American Studies* 43 (2009): 477-95.
- Stein, Gertrude. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas. Writings 1903-1932*.
 ----- . "If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso." *Writings 1903-1932*.
 ----- . "The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans." *Writings 1932-1946*.
 ----- . "Poetry and Grammar." *Writings 1932-1946*.
 ----- . "Portraits and Repetition." *Writings 1932-1946*.
 ----- . *Stanzas in Meditation: The Corrected Edition*. Ed. Susannah Hollister and Emily Setina. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010.
 ----- . *Writings 1903-1932*. Ed. Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman. New York: The Library of America, 1998.
 ----- . *Writings 1932-1946*. Ed. Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman. New York: The Library of America, 1998.
- Steinberg, Leo. "Reflections on the State of Criticism." *Robert Rauschenberg*. October Files 4. Ed. Branden Joseph. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002. 7-38.
- Steiner, Wendy. *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978.
- Stengers, Isabelle. *Thinking With Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*. Trans. Michael Chase. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poetry & Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1997.
- Sutherland, Keston. "Close Writing." *Frank O'Hara Now: New Essays on the New York Poet*. Ed. Robert Hampson and Will Montgomery. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010. 120-130.
- Thompson, Robert. "James Schuyler's 'Spots of Time.'" *The Scene of My Selves: New Work on New York School Poets*. Ed. Terrence Diggory and Stephen Paul Miller. Orono, ME : National Poetry Foundation ; Distributed by University Press of New England, 2001. 267-286.
- Tompkins, Calvin. *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time*. New York: Doubleday, 1980.
- Varnedoe, Kirk, ed. *Jasper Johns: Writings, Sketchbooks Notes, Interviews*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1996.
- Ward, Geoff. *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets*. London: MacMillan, 1993.
- Watkin, William. *In the Process of Poetry: the New York School and the Avant-Garde*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2001.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. *Introduction to Mathematics*. 1911. London: Oxford University Press, 1958.
 ----- . "The Organisation of Thought." *The Organisation of Thought: Educational and Scientific*. London: Williams and Norgate, 1917. 105-133.
 ----- . *Process and Reality*. 1929. Corrected ed. Ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne. New York: The Free Press, 1978.
 ----- . *Science and the Modern World*. 1925. New York: The Free Press, 1967.
- Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*. Ed. Michael Moon. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co., 2002.

- Wilkinson, John. "Jim the Jerk: Bathos and Loveliness in the Poetry of James Schuyler." *On Bathos: Literature, Art, Music*. Ed. Sara Crangle and Peter Nicholls. London: Continuum, 2010. 71-89.
- Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*. Ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan. Vol. 1. New Directions: New York, 1986.
- , *Paterson*. New York: New Directions, 1963.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Rev. 4th ed. Ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.