

The New York School Poets

Anna Heitmann

Introduction

The New York School of poetry began in the 1950s with John Ashbery, James Schuyler, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, and Barbara Guest. The poets were intimately connected with the painting scene in New York. O'Hara and Schuyler worked at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and Guest, Ashbery, and Schuyler were critics for the *Art News*. Since the poets were involved in the visual art world, their work later took on the descriptive term “painterly.” Their poetry was influenced by the surrealism and modernism of the time, as well as abstract expressionist art, so the term “painterly” seems fitting.

The New York School poets had friends among the painters, and saw the paintings as an extension of what they were attempting to accomplish in their own poetry. As critic David Lehman writes in *Fables of Representation*, “from Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, they learned that it was okay for a poem to chronicle the history of its own making—that the mind of the poet, rather than the world, could be the true subject of the poem—and that it was possible for a poem to be (or to perform) a statement without making a statement” (3). The poem is itself the art—like a painting—and any attempt to paraphrase or simplify it would destroy it.

Another “painterly” characteristic of the New York School is the poets' use of tone in their poems. Paul Hoover, award-winning poet and the editor of the anthology *Postmodern American Poetry*, writes that, “influenced by French poetry and therefore by

what Ashbery has called the ‘Other Tradition,’ these poets are innovative yet respectful of traditional form. They are fond of wild juxtapositions and changes of tone but also of lyrical beauty of expression” (??). The “wild juxtapositions and changes of tone” with a “lyrical beauty of expression” are characteristics which lend to the poetry’s having a “painterly” quality. The poets use colloquialisms and clichés as they describe daily events and objects which they encounter. At the same time they do not abandon a higher tone in their poetry which sometimes borders on prophecy, but more often simply lends a natural sounding music to the ordinary events and objects as described. The juxtapositions in tone create a brushstroke effect, in which each different tone or “stroke” is discernible from those around it. A colloquial “brushstroke” contrasts against a backdrop of lyricism, and a prophetic “brushstroke” stands out against the ordinary talkiness common in the poems.

Hoover describes “the breadth of New York School practice” as stretching from “the radical denaturing of the sentence...” seen most explicitly in the more recent L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E School of poetry, to “the personal lyric” on the other hand, “associated with Frank O’Hara’s ‘I do this I do that’ poems...a technique of offering the dates and times of events being observed” (20). The poems tend in some degree toward indeterminacy (what Ashbery calls a “leaving-out business”), even as they continue to take interest in particulars and the naming of objects and persons. The presence of details hooks the poetry in the realm of reality, while the leaving-out of details lends an expressionist quality to the poems.

Other noteworthy characteristics of New York School poetry are slow rhythm and a playful humor or irony which is sometimes a natural side-effect of the juxtaposition of

tone and diction in the poems. The rhythm often slows as a result of the “easygoing everydayness” of the poetry as it records daily events, or the stream of the poets’ consciousness (Hoover, 23). Each poet’s writing is different enough from the others’ that the New York School resists classification, yet as part of the same avant-garde resistance to the norm these poets share a common goal and interest in what they do. Since there is breadth to New York School poetry, some characteristics show more definitely in one poem than they do in others.

Ashbery writes verbally complex poems that end inconclusively. He values the process of writing poems, and prefers to remain unnoticed in his own poetry. His poem “Unusual Precautions” is mysterious, and certainly inconclusive, talking in a roundabout fashion about the roundabout nature of lives.

Schuyler describes things around him “as they are,” as Lehman says, without romanticizing them, and in so doing still gives ordinary things an extraordinary aura. His poem “Evening Wind” has to do with objects of nature, but describes them in a manner which brings all the objects to life in the wind and water of the landscape. The animate quality in this poem does not always show in Schuyler’s work.

Guest shows an interest in playing with words in her poetry, and of these five poets she comes closest to writing like the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets. Images are important and are rendered more vivid and interesting by the way the language is arranged in the poems. Her poem “Red Lilies” is a household scene in which objects and things seem to take the place of other words that might have been used. This wordiness is fairly typical of Guest’s poetry.

O'Hara is known for the talky quality of his poetry since it narrates ordinary successions of events. His poem "How Roses Get Black" is about a fiery scene, with seemingly trite details thrown which make it tangible, feeling like an ordinary scene at the same time. This ordinariness is typical of O'Hara, but this poem's tone and circumstances are somewhat atypical.

Koch is the witty one of the bunch. His poetry normally contains juxtaposed words and ideas which produce a level of irony and humor. His poem "Down at the Dock" is not as witty as some of his poetry but still contains some juxtapositions. It has to do with nature, philosophy, and love, and there is a consistent voice in the poem ("I") which observes nature for the reason of determining the source of love. Despite its philosophical bent, the poem itself dwells mainly on objects.

The following pages of this essay examine New York School of poets, looking particularly at these poems by Ashbery, Schuyler, Guest, O'Hara, and Koch. There are five poem explications, a synthesis, and an analysis. The explications stay close to the text of the poems to discover what is happening on a basic level of tone, diction, etc. The details gleaned from explication are then tied into a coherent overview of the five poems as representative examples of the New York School of poetry. Once major characteristics are established, the philosophical value of the poems will be assessed.

Ashbery: Unusual Precautions

Unusual Precautions does not stand out among the works of Ashbery, but it does manifest some of the common attributes of his poetry. For example, it is not particularly formal, though it does use imagery and musical language. The tone is conversational, intimate and friendly. The particulars will become evident later on.

The poem begins with opening quotation marks, which close only at the very end, turning the entirety of the poem into a quote. These quotations have some influence on the feeling of the poem. The words are easier to understand since there is an assumed context: one person is speaking to another person or group of people. If it were a meditation, it would have a private meaning, with words spoken to oneself or a limited audience. Since it is an address, it communicates some public meaning.

The poem begins with a twice repeated first person plural pronoun. It sounds like the speaker is an orator, beginning his speech with dramatic effect. It also emphasizes the presence of the quotation mark, that it is an address. The word “children” stands out in this rhetorical context; speeches are more often addressed to gentlemen or soldiers than to children. The tone is pastoral—rhetorical *instruction* to those who are inexperienced—whether or not the audience is made up of children in a literal sense. To whom is the poem addressed? A group who understands the language of mathematics, a simile of a gadfly and of a theater, and who with the speaker wanders through life as through a park.

The next part of the line has an unexpected structure; it seems to have a misplaced verb. From the rhetorical feel of the first three words, the expectation would be that the word “why” would introduce a question. Instead, with the verb placed farther along the

phrase is a kind of flat statement, or could be a title for a speech (“Why Our Lives Are Circumscribed, Circumferential”). The words “our” and “we” indicate that the speaker includes himself in the address. Then there are the words “circumscribed” and “circumferential.”

These two words are a likely pair, beginning both with the prefix ‘circum’. “Circumscribed” describes their “lives” as having been *drawn around*, encircled, or limited. “Circumferential” refers to a circumference, meaning that their “lives” are of a roundabout or indirect nature. These mathematical terms take on a philosophical bent in the context of rhetorical instruction.

The mathematical imagery continues in the next line with the word “center”, if only by association with “circumscribed” and “circumferential.” Their lives are “close, too close to the center,” the “too” indicating that being close to the center is undesirable in some way. Paradoxically, they are also “haunted by perimeters” as if they are at the same time too close to the outer edge of the circle. The perimeters are ghost-like, following them around—even when they are “too close to the center.”

The third line builds on this center versus perimeter imagery. Their lives “seem to go in and out, in and out all the time” which sounds as if they are bouncing back and forth between being “too close to the center” and being “circumscribed”, “haunted by perimeters.” This repeating pattern is illustrated by the repeating language Ashbery uses. Their lives repeat “in and out, in and out” just as the words do, and as the rhythm does.

The mathematics and philosophy show up again in the fourth line. But first the speaker switches voices, and refers no longer to “our” lives, but to “yours”, the lives that seem as though they “were diagonal, vertical, shallow, chopped off / At the root...”. Their

lives are not horizontal or level, but seem to have problems: “diagonal” as in off-balance, or “vertical” as a difficult cliff to climb, or “shallow”, having little depth or meaning, or “chopped off.” There is emphasis placed on “chopped off” because it comes at the end of the line, and the line is enjambed—the sentence is chopped in half right after “chopped off.” The beginning of the next line “At the root” does not necessarily improve the situation, but since “chopped off” comes right before a pause at the end of line four, its meaning and its sound are stressed. It seems as though the lives of these “children” are in bad shape, though the reason for it is unclear.

To describe the life that is “chopped off / At the root”, Ashbery uses a strange simile: “like the voice of the famous gadfly: ‘Oh! Aho!’” To whom does “the famous gadfly” refer? Socrates? And what a strange statement, or rather exclamation, for the gadfly to make! And why a comparison with a gadfly? Perhaps the gadfly chops things off “at the root” with his voice. In addition to saying ‘Oh! Aho!’ the gadfly also “sits in the middle of the roadway” (line 6). He makes an obstruction of himself, which is natural for a gadfly, though normally a gadfly uses words to obstruct, not the physical body.

And “that’s it.” This short phrase embodies its meaning: the phrase ends quickly, and ends the discussion tersely. Because the phrase is short it also calls attention to the contraction “that’s.” Ashbery uses contractions freely, which contributes to the relaxed, conversational tone of his poetry. In this case, the conversational tone contrasts with the instructional tone. Though the first four lines sound like an ordered speech, these lines have a different feel to them—descriptive, choppy, wandering.

“Worry and brown desk / Stain it by infusion” is a peculiar phrase. “Worry” and “brown” are things that might “infuse” or “stain” something, but a “desk” would sooner

be stained than “stain” something else. And if “it” refers to the gadfly (which is comparable to the “lives” of lines 1-4), then the meaning is even more obscure. How can “worry” and “brown desk” stain a “gadfly” or “lives” “by infusion”? “Worry” makes sense, but “brown desk” is like a random idea placed in the poem arbitrarily.

The next phrase in line 7, “there aren’t enough tags at the end”, does not seem to have enough context for its meaning to be clear. What is the “end” and why does it have “tags”, or not “enough tags”? This is the beginning of a sentence which continues onto the next line (12).

Again, here is a difficult phrase that combines images and words in a way that is surprising and unexpected. Line eight reads, “And the grove is blind, blossoming, but we are too porous to hear it.” There is a lovely image of a blossoming grove, and there is a musical sound to the phrase with the alliteration of “blind,” “blossoming”, and “but.” However, the idea of a grove being blind, as well as the idea that “we” could “hear” the “blossoming” except that “we are too porous”—these are incongruous. Porosity is an unusual obstacle to hearing, and as such is a striking, effective image.

Porosity is an obstacle to hearing the grove (8), and the gadfly makes an obstruction of himself in the roadway (6). This second stanza is describing obstructions to the “lives” which chop them off “at the root”: blindness, porosity, not “enough tags,” “worry and brown desk,” and the “famous gadfly.” None of these obstructions seem to fit into their context properly; the art is rough, the placement of the words in the stanza communicating a larger meaning, but being difficult to understand individually.

The third stanza contains a different simile: “It’s like watching a movie of a nightmare, the many episodes / That defuse the thrust of what comes to us.” Again, the

use of a contraction creates a conversational tone. The genre of movie (“a movie of a nightmare”) captivates the mind like “horror movie” could not. A nightmare has elements that are dreamy or non-sensical which could “defuse” the greater meaning of the plot. “Defuse” evokes the image of disarming a bomb; the episodic nature of the nightmare disarms or prevents the “thrust”—or meaning. “Many episodes” break down the movie into parts and pieces. These “episodes” “defuse” the “thrust” of the “movie” leaving it in a fragmented, dreamlike state. The meaning of the poem itself also comes in parts and pieces, episodes which give it a dreamlike quality, and “defuse” its “thrust.”

The next phrases illustrate not a movie, but a stage production. There is a “girl who juggled Indian clubs” and she “Belongs again to the paper space that backs the black / Curtain.” Again, unlikely combinations of images create a dreamlike quality in the phrase. A dream would be a fitting context for a girl juggling Indian clubs, as well as a “paper space” behind the stage “curtain.” The word “again” is important in line 11, since it indicates the girl belonged to the paper space before, and now “belongs again” to it. Also, the word “paper” stands out; the “space that backs the black / Curtain” apparently is as thin as paper, or at least narrow. The music of this line (11) must not be overlooked.

The “g” sounds in “belongs” and “again”, the “p” sounds in “paper” and “space”, and the “b” and “ck” sounds in “backs” and “black” (as well as “curtain” in line 12) create an increasingly snappy sound in the phrase. It begins with soft consonants, and ends with hard ones. The music of this line contrasts with the prosaic sound of the rest of the poem.

The meter of the poem is structured, though the patterns are not consistent throughout. Consider the next line, for instance: “as though there were a reason to have

paid for these seats.” The first six words have an iambic meter, whereas the final six words have an anapestic meter. The meter of the poem varies, giving it a poetic, musical sound.

The last stanza returns to the themes and tone of the first stanza, except for the image in the first line (13), which reads “Tomorrow you’ll be walking in a white park.” The use of the contraction here fits with the meter of the line, which is iambic again. The two unstressed words, “in” and “a”, put extra emphasis on the two stressed words, “white” and “park.” This causes the unusual word in the phrase (“white”) to carry more weight. Unless the “park” is covered in snow, it must again be a dreamlike place. The phrase sets the stage for the rest of the stanza. It is “tomorrow” and in a “white park” where the “children” will be “walking.”

Here the speaker returns again to the use of “our” and “too close” as in the first stanza. He says, “Our interests / Are too close for us to see.” There are two parts of the poem that this line refers back to: line two (“too close to the center”), and line eight (“we are too porous to hear it”). It seems that being too close to the center prevents one from seeing his interests, or from hearing the blossoming grove.

In the next sentence, “There seems to be no / Necessity for it, yet in walking, we too, around, and all around” the rhythm is interrupted repeatedly by commas, which is like the “in and out, in and out” of the first stanza. The repetition of “around” communicates the same kind of wandering, and is like the use of “circumscribed, circumferential” in the beginning of the poem. The “lives” are “circumferential” like “walking” “around, and all around” in the “white park.”

In the final line, because of the walking around and around, “we’ll come to one,” (perhaps a crossroad) “where the street crosses your name, and feet run up it.” This is the second occurrence of the word “street.” It is a street that “crosses your name” instead of crossing another street. The image is reminiscent of the “diagonal” and “vertical” from the first stanza. And strangely, the “vertical” also seems to concur with the “feet” that “run up it.” While it is possible to “run up” a normal street that is horizontal, the image evoked in this case is a “vertical” street. But why does the street cross “your name”? While wandering “around, and all around” through the “white park” there is a street; this street is a crossroad, or something that happens to change the trajectory of your “life.” It is not something a block away, or on the other side of the city, but a street that “crosses your name,” that reaches to your very identity (since a name identifies, and is a symbol for who you are). The feet that “run up it” may refer, then, to people who are significant to that point in your life.

Unusual Precautions (719)

“We, we children, why our lives are circumscribed, circumferential;
Close, too close to the center, we are haunted by perimeters
And our lives seem to go in and out, in and out all the time,
As though yours were diagonal, vertical, shallow, chopped off

At the root like the voice of the famous gadfly: ‘Oh! Aho!’ it
Sits in the middle of the roadway. That’s it. Worry and brown desk
Stain it by infusion. There aren’t enough tags at the end,
And the grove is blind, blossoming, but we are too porous to hear it.

It’s like watching a movie of a nightmare, the many episodes
That defuse the thrust of what comes to us. The girl who juggled Indian clubs
Belongs again to the paper space that backs the black
Curtain, as though there were a reason to have paid for these seats.

Tomorrow you’ll be walking in a white park. Our interests
Are too close for us to see. There seems to be no
Necessity for it, yet in walking, we too, around, and all around
We’ll come to one, where the street crosses your name, and feet run up it.”

Schuyler: Evening Wind

“Evening wind” paints a scene in October with the wind traveling across a rich landscape, as the landscape begins to come to life and objects become animate. It has the meditative mood of one who is sitting still, observing his surroundings, and the intimate tone of a confidant.

The season is October. The season is not just atmosphere, but takes the form of tangible objects; it “hangs in grape / bunch lights.” The word “hangs” gives the impression that October is passing slowly, or *hanging around*. There is also weight to the word, as a bunch of grapes has weight. October “hangs” heavy as a grape bunch. The image of a grape bunch is fitting because the fall season is when grapes come ripe and are harvested.

But the word “lights” is incongruous. The question is: what are “grape bunch lights?” Maybe the grape bunches are lit up by the October sunlight (though this assumes the presence of sunlight). Or perhaps they are glowing—or not glowing—like lights on a Christmas tree. Neither of these images captures the essence of “lights”, however the latter image at least places the “lights” in a tree.

The “grape bunch lights” are “among the leaves / of a giant tree.” The word “lights” bridges the gap between grape vines, and a “giant tree.” Grape bunches do not hang in trees, nor do lights generally hang in grape vines; but “grape bunch lights” could possibly hang in a “giant tree.”

This “giant tree” almost has its own personality as if it is alive. The word “giant” denotes a height—or large girth—to the tree, but produces a fairy-tale feeling in the poem. The tree could have a “giant” being with “giant” thoughts and “giant” feelings

(assuming that giants have thoughts and feelings). This idea is enforced by the following word, “whose.” Though the possessive pronoun “whose” may be used with an impersonal noun (tree), it gives the impression that the tree is a person possessing leaves: “a giant tree whose leaves / are not unlike grape leaves.”

Instead of using “like” in this phrase, Schuyler wrote “not unlike.” This could have been to keep line lengths consistent, or “not unlike” may have a better sound in the ear. Perhaps it increases the difference between the tree leaves and grape leaves. If the tree “leaves” were *like* “grape leaves,” the leaves would be more alike than if they are “not unlike” each other.

“Grape leaves” repeats two words that came earlier in the sentence, but pulls them together into a single image. “Grape bunch lights” and “leaves” are two objects in the same “giant tree” but are combined in the image of the “grape leaves.” “Leaves” as the final word in line four also repeats the “leaves” at the end of line two and line three.

Line five brings the tree back from its fairy-tale, personified state by attempting to classify it. If it has leaves that are “not unlike grape leaves” it must be “a plane tree, or a sycamore.” These two are names for the same type of tree, so there is parallelism in this line. The two names have a sing-song rhythm that only one name would not have.

The next subject, after October hanging in a tree, is “the wind.” It does not blow across “the water,” but “comes up the water.” Does “up” mean vertically or is it “up” as in north? The poet provides a simile in the next lines: “as water from a faucet / runs across a palm.” The water has a horizontal movement as it flows off “a palm” but does it have a vertical movement? The water falling from the faucet sinks down into the depression of the palm, and has to rise in order to flow up over the edge of the hand. It

still does not move vertically. The wind could be “coming up” the water colloquially, as in *come on down to visit*. It is not “down” in a “toward the center of the earth” sense; neither does “up” mean “into the sky.”

The part of the simile that stands out in lines 6 through 8 is the word “faucet.” The poem is about a landscape with a tree, and wind, and water, but it changes to a manmade object found indoors. Faucet sets the stage for the imagery in the following lines.

The repetition of “palm” in line 8 makes it sound like someone is speaking, and has to revise what they say as they go. “A palm” is not specific enough (and could almost refer to a palm tree), so “the palm of your hand” is needed for clarity. The repetition also continues the bisyllabic rhythm begun in the first part of the line. This repetition echoes the earlier repetition of “water” in lines 6 and 7. Since “palm” flows off the tongue slowly, it slows the rhythm of the poem. The repetition of “water” has a similar effect, slowing the poem to a gentle rhythm.

Lines 6-12, those describing the flow of water from the faucet, also reverberate with the slow, gentle sound that the water would have. These lines *sound* like water that “runs across a palm” or water “turned / on gently.” There are unpunctuated line breaks with no capitalization; this also helps to slow the poem without interrupting the flow of the rhythm, or the flow of the “water.”

This gentle rhythm fits with the description of the water in line 10: the water is “turned on gently.” Though “gently” describes the volume of water, it refers also to the action of turning on; there is an image of a hand carefully turning on the faucet.

Lines 10-12 describe the water coming from the faucet as “broken into / cool molten wooly glass.” Since water is a liquid it does not break like glass literally. It makes

sense for the water to be “cool,” but “cool” and “molten” at the same time is incongruous. “Molten” implies that something has been softened to liquid form by heat, whereas the water from the faucet is “cool.” The word “wooly” alludes to sheep’s wool, which is white and fuzzy. And “glass” fits with “molten” and is a metaphor for water. The water is being compared to glass that is in liquid form with a broken, fuzzy appearance. And the explanation for these images is that the water is “broken” “by an aerator.”

Line 11 rhymes “cool” and “wooly” and has a syllabic pattern: one two, two one. It contains only adjectives and a noun, which emphasizes the image behind the words on the page.

Here the poem returns to the wind’s direct effect on the landscape: “and each / responds by his or its / own bending to it.” The phrase serves as an introduction to the next several lines of the poem. There are objects responding to the wind, but they are not named in this phrase. The words “each,” “his,” and “its” are referring to these objects, but not revealing any information about them. They sound like animate *beings* of some sort since they “respond” and “bend” to the wind. “Own” implies that they *possess* themselves, like beings.

Instead, there are “tall tops / of hedge” that “move all in a sideways / way.” There is alliteration in “tall” and “tops” and repetition with “sideways” and “way.” The “tops of hedge” are the first *beings* listed, and are reminiscent of the “giant tree” in line three. Plants in the poem have a fairy-tale existence, seeming to think and move autonomously. Enforcing this idea, the word “all” indicates a community of “tall tops.”

The next *being* is the “grass.” It “begins / to have its matted resting / up for winter look.” This continues the theme of plants having personality. Instead of the grass turning

brown, or going dormant, the diction here is not horticultural. “Resting up for winter” sounds more like hibernation. It also “begins / to have its...look” almost as if it has a face—the grass has a “look” on its face. The word “matted” could refer back to the “wooly” water in line 11. They are both fuzzy, furry words like animals.

The grass is also “freaked / by shade and quartz grit / bits of light.” The light and shade that filters through trees onto grass is seldom described in this way. The verb “freaked” could mean that the grass has an unusual appearance—like a freak. The “quartz grit/ bits” echo the “glass” of line 11. There are also repeating “t” and “i” sounds in these three words. The “bits of light” are like “quartz grit” spread over the grass.

The third object that “responds” to the wind is “a pear tree” that “rocks at its roots.” A pear tree would naturally “bend” to the wind, but since this one “rocks at its roots” it sounds less like a natural pear tree. It seems to be detached from the ground, moving about, maybe even dancing (“rocks” alluding to a genre of music). It also rocks “from the eyebrow curves of branches.” The whole pear tree is alive with movement.

These “eyebrow curves of branches” build on the earlier personification. Branches could curve like a bow, but curving like an “eyebrow” is evidently referring to a face, which only a person or animal possesses.

The wind also “under them flutters absurdly / its leaves like lashes.” Here “them” is the “branches” of the line above. The leaves are likened to eyelashes, which are found underneath eyebrows, just as the leaves in the “pear tree” are “under” the “branches.” Just as eyelashes might flutter “absurdly”, so also do the leaves in the pear tree. When the wind comes past the “pear tree” it takes on the qualities of a person.

The last thing moved by the wind is the narrator, who really is a person. He says, “And I / am troubled by hatred for / the dead.” The presence of an “and” shows that his “hatred for / the dead” is related to what came before. It could be that “troubled” is a similar word to “broken,” “freaked,” and “rocks”—the way “each responds” to the action of the wind. Or maybe “by hatred for / the dead” is like “by an aerator”—causes for “troubled” and “broken,” respectively. Though the speaker does not explain why he is so “troubled,” there is a definite contrast between his reaction and those of the “water,” “tall tops / of hedge,” “grass,” and “pear tree.” They seem to have human reactions, but his truly human reaction is far beyond the personified-plant world. They respond in tangible ways to tangible wind, but the narrator is “troubled” by something beyond the physical realm.

He complains, “Wind, you don’t / blow hard enough, though / rising, in the smoky blue / of evening, mindless and in love,” as if the wind can hear and understand. The use of a contraction (“don’t”) matches the conversational tone of direct address, or apostrophe in these lines.

The wind is “rising” in the same way it “comes up” the water (line 6). Both indicate an upward movement, but “rising” can mean increasing, just as “comes up” has colloquial meaning. The evening does not have smoke, but the darkening blue of evening has a “smoky” color. And the wind does not “blow hard enough” because it is “mindless and in love” instead of being an angry wind. Whereas the narrator is “troubled by hatred for / the dead,” the wind is “mindless and in love”—it does not suit his mood.

The wind is “mindless and in love. / Or would be if the wind / were not above such thoughts, / above thought, in fact.” Even though the narrator speaks to the wind as if

it is a person, it is also “mindless.” This is a fitting description for wind. But “in love” returns to the personification of the wind. But then the narrator qualifies his statement: the wind “would be” if it “were not above such thoughts.” The wind’s thoughtfulness shifts back and forth; the wind is “mindless”, but it is “in love”, but it is “above such thoughts.” It is striking that “above” is used, as though the wind has higher, better thoughts. But it does not think at all. It is “above thought.” Even in this phrase, the presence of “above” makes it sound like the wind has a higher existence.

The “in fact / of course” in lines 32 and 33 bunches words together in a confusing way. There is no comma to separate them, only a pause between lines. The “in fact” seems to refer to the wind being “above thought”, and the “of course” could refer to the same thing. Since “of course” rhymes with “coursing” (also in line 33) it feels tied to the last phrase of the poem. Perhaps it bridges the gap, referring to what came before it, and being connected by rhyming and alliteration with “coursing” and “cool.”

“Though” and “through” also echo each other. The rhythm of the last two lines continues, by its repetition, the slow movement of the poem. The wind is “above thought” “though coursing, / cool as water, through it.” This final phrase refers back to line 11 (as other lines have), with “cool,” and the “water” which is metaphorically equal to “glass” in that line.

The question is: what is “it”? The wind may be coursing through “thought” or perhaps it is coursing through “water.” The first image is difficult to grasp. The wind courses through the whole poem which are the thoughts of the poet; in that sense the wind could be coursing through thought. It could also be coursing through “water,” but that is an anticlimactic conclusion to be drawn at the end of the poem. If the plants are

personified, perhaps they have thoughts, or *are* thoughts, and the wind blowing through “branches” and “leaves” is “coursing” through “thought.” The ambiguity about “it” causes a mysterious ending, which fits the metaphysical themes in the poem.

The poem is reminiscent of a cut-and-paste art project. If there are no trees in the magazine with branches to cut out, one can simply use the woman's eyebrow, glued in a vertical position to look like a branch. Objects are placed in the poem so that the meaning is clear, despite their being the wrong objects, or wrongly placed. These combined objects make up a coherent scene of wind blowing through a landscape with rippling

water.Evening Wind

October hangs in grape
 bunch lights among the leaves
 of a giant tree whose leaves
 are not unlike grape leaves:
 a plane tree, or a sycamore?
 The wind comes up the water
 as water from a faucet
 runs across a palm, the palm
 of your hand, the water turned
 on gently or broken into
 cool molten wooly glass
 by an aerator. And each
 responds by his or its
 own bending to it, tall tops
 of hedge move all in a sideways
 way, the grass (it begins
 to have its matted resting
 up for winter look) is freaked
 by shade and quartz grit
 bits of light, a pear tree
 rocks at its roots and from
 the eyebrow curves of branches
 or under them flutters absurdly
 its leaves like lashes. And I
 am troubled by hatred for
 the dead. Wind, you don't
 blow hard enough, though
 rising, in the smoky blue
 of evening, mindless and in love.
 Or would be if the wind
 were not above such thoughts,
 above thought, in fact
 of course, though coursing,

cool as water, through it.

James Schuyler

Guest: Red Lilies

This poem sounds like a story—no, like a description of a scene in a house. There is a stove, some dishes, a table, window, supper, pillows, a blanket, a toe, a saucer, hair, a pilot light, and paper folded like a napkin. These are household objects. Very little action occurs in the poem; it is like a photograph of a scene, but a moving photograph. There is stillness and movement. Also, there are objects and images that are not found in a household, but outdoors: an accident, birdsong, a tug, branches, a tree, snow, a thistle, and wings. The meter has trisyllabic tendencies.

The first word in the opening line is ambiguous. There is no identification of the person who dried the dishes. It was “someone.” Some member of the house dried the dishes without anyone else seeing. Also, it was not that “someone has” *forgotten* “to dry the dishes,” or has forgotten to wash them, but in this household it is noteworthy when somebody *remembers* to “dry the dishes.” It implies that the norm in this house is to *forget* to “dry the dishes.”

The word “dry” is also unexpected. Dishes will become dry by themselves—although some will have water spots—so drying the dishes does not seem as important as washing them. If everyone in the house made a habit of forgetting to wash the dishes, that would be a problem. But forgetting to dry them seems less serious.

There is alliteration in line 1 with the words “dry” and “dishes.” There is also a trisyllabic meter to the line, though irregular, which has a dance-like rhythm. This is more obvious in the second line where the meter is regular. It is anapestic. The dance-like rhythm does not fit with the kitchen imagery—unless there is dancing in the kitchen.

The ambiguity is not resolved in line two: “they have taken the accident out of the stove.” Whoever was thoughtful enough to remember “to dry the dishes” also took “the accident out of the stove.” The word that stands out most here is “accident,” because it is not something often found inside a “stove.” Perhaps it was a dish of food gone awry, overcooked or overflowing. In any case, some person has taken care of things in the kitchen. The verb tense (“has remembered” and “have taken”) indicate that the action is already past, that there is evidence of those things occurring, but everything is now still.

“Afterward lilies for supper”; even here there is no movement occurring, despite the acknowledgement of the passage of time. “Afterward” shows that the drying of the dishes and rescuing of the meal happened before “supper.” In this line there is another incongruous word: “lilies.” Are lilies edible? Maybe the only food left in the house after “the accident” in the stove is “lilies.” This line is dactylic, and has repeating consonant sounds: “f” in “afterward” and “for,” “l” in “lilies,” and “r” in “for” and “supper.”

The word “there” in line 3 is separated by a semicolon from the last phrase. It is separated rhythmically from both lines 3 and 4. There is space before it created by the semicolon, and space after it created by a line break. The word is alone. The poem is in stasis with the word “there,” and pauses like the taking of a photograph: things are not moving but are just “there.”

Lines 4 and 5 read, “the lines in front of the window / are rubbed on the table of stone.” Here again there is ambiguity. What kind of “lines” are these? They are, of course, “lines” that are “in front of the window” and “are rubbed on the table of stone”—but there seems to be something missing, some information essential to understanding what the “lines” are. They could be a pattern on the table, or shadows from the window.

The word “rubbed” implies that the lines are drawn on the table, but have been “rubbed” on, or “rubbed” out (smudged). Still, it is mysterious.

And the “table” with “lines” on it is made of “stone.” Maybe this is a clue that the “lines” are lines of grout that separate the stones out of which the table is made. But that assumes that the “table” is made of multiple stones. If it is of one piece, perhaps the lines are not straight, but the variable pattern found in slabs of marble. In this case “rubbed” is not literal, as though someone drew “lines” on the marble.

In line 6, “the paper flies up.” There is a piece of paper in the house (assuming the location is still inside the house). The paper’s significance goes unmentioned. It could be blank, or it could be a newspaper. It “flies,” which is not abnormal for a piece of paper if there is wind—and there is wind in line 7. The position of “up” enforces the meaning of the word: as the paper is suspended in air, the word “up” is also suspended at the end of the line. There is a pause as the reader waits for the next line to resolve the tension produced by “up.”

“The paper flies up / then down.” Its movement is “up” and “down” like flapping—not unlike a bird. This image is picked up at the end of line 8.

Line 8 describes the wind, which “repeats. repeats its birdsong.” The beginning of the phrase is onomatopoeia. The word “repeat” repeats. There is a period placed after the first “repeat” which separates it from the second “repeat.” This repetition also fits with the repeating action of the paper: “up” “down.”

The word “birdsong” brings up the bird imagery mentioned above. The “paper” “flies,” and the “wind” “repeats its birdsong.” Wind is known to whistle through window crevices and, so it is fitting that the “wind” would be coming in the “window” mentioned

in line 4, and blowing the “paper” repetitively. The “paper” could very well be sitting on the “table of stone.”

The poem is describing a scene inside a house but using incongruous images and ideas. Commonplace things are described in unexpected ways so that the reader is kept guessing. The mind plays with the images in ways that would not be possible if things were described in a straight manner. When details are left out of the poem the imagination is left to fill in the details, and when unexpected words are used it causes the mind to reevaluate and dwell on the meaning of the sentences. Guest describes enough of the scene to produce meaning without describing it in a straightforward manner.

Line 9 brings a new scene in the house. There is a “pillow” with “arms” underneath it. The word “those” is ambiguous, making it sound like one should already know which “arms” are being referred to. The image is not unusual—since sleeping habits often include slipping arms under pillows—but the phrase makes it sound almost like the “arms” do not belong to anyone in particular. They are separated from their person. This idea develops in line 10.

“The burrowing arms, they cleave / at night.” The word “burrowing” makes the “arms” sound like small rodents, which are definitely not attached to any person. The word “cleave” indicates that the “arms” produce breaks between the pillow and the bed. It also has the opposite meaning—join together—creating the image of hands meeting underneath the pillow. “Cleave” is reminiscent of a “cleaver” or some kind of knife.

The next line (11) holds the simile, “as the tug kneads the water.” “Kneads” fits with “cleaver” as kitchen imagery, but here “kneads” is used to describe the action a “tug” has in the “water.” This is not an image found in a house, but out in a channel of

water. As the “burrowing arms...cleave,” so also the “tug kneads.” This makes it sound like the arms are not still, as though the person (assuming again that arms have persons attached) is sleeping, but are “burrowing” “cleaving” “kneading.”

The overactive “arms” are “calling themselves branches” in line 12. This image is incongruous after the descriptions of how active the “arms” are. Branches do not “cleave” or burrow, nor do they “knead” water. Even in line 12, the “arms” are “calling themselves” like autonomous creatures who are able to name themselves.

The next line (13) builds on the image of “branches” and resolves some of the tension surrounding the “arms.” It reads, “the tree is you.” Those “branches” are after all attached to a “tree”, and the “arms” are attached to “you.” The “arms” are no longer unattached from a person. “You” is also the first mention of a person in the poem. In the first line it was “someone,” but here the second person singular pronoun changes the scene from general to specific. The sleeping one to whom the arms belong (lines 9-12) was under observation, and is now being identified by the observant speaker in the poem.

“The blanket is what warms it” continues to pull the poem out of metaphor into reality. The arms under a pillow are like branches that belong to a tree, which is “you” – and “you” (the “tree”) are warmed by a “blanket.” But the metaphor continues in the word “it” by referring to an object, the “tree,” instead of a person, “you.”

The “blanket” “warms” the “tree” and consequently “snow erupts from thistle to toe.” Warmth contrasts with the cold of the “snow.” If the “tree” is warming up it follows that the cold would “erupt” from it. The image itself is incongruous; trees do not wear blankets, nor do they “erupt” “snow” like a volcano does lava. Neither do trees have a

“thistle” or a “toe.” The familiar phrase is “head to toe,” but “head” has been replaced with “thistle” producing alliteration.

The semicolon occurring in line 16 separates two parallel phrases: “the snow erupts” in line 15, and “the snow pours out of you” in line 16. The imagery of a “tree” with a “thistle” and “toe” resolves in the parallel word “you”—since “the tree is you” (13).

The images of warm and cold continue in the next line (17) with “a cold hand on the dishes.” Instead of a cold inanimate object “snow,” there is now a cold animate object, “hand.” The last word in this line, “dishes,” repeats from line 1 of the poem. In the first line the verb was in the past tense, indicating that the “dishes” were already “dry,” whereas in line 17 the absence of the verb makes the action a present reality. The beginning of the poem dealt with still objects, and the fourth and fifth stanzas deal with active objects and people (“you” and “her”).

“Placing a saucer inside” is a more specific description of the “hand” and “dishes.” Again, it echoes the first stanza. The dishes have been dried, and now they are being carefully put away. This line (18) repeats a soft ‘c’ sound in “placing” “saucer” and “inside” which also occurs at the end of line 17 in “dishes.” This soft ‘c’ sound fits the imagery of dishes, since ceramic sliding against ceramic makes a soft ‘c’ sound.

The beginning of line 19 is out of place. “Her who undressed” does not fit with “dishes” or “saucer,” nor do people usually undress “for supper.” There is also absurdity in a “saucer” being placed “inside / her”—in a person rather than an object like a cupboard. Objects and persons are being confused in the poem. The word “supper” also

repeats from line 3 in the poem. The soft ‘c’ continues from line 18 in the words “undressed” and “supper.”

Line 20 sandwiches the image of “hair” between “gliding” and “snow.” The first fits with line 19 and the image of a woman, “her.” “Snow” repeats from lines 15 and 16, while “gliding” if associated with “snow” could refer to the action of a sled. The word “that” is like “those” in line 9, and assumes that the reader knows which “arms” and which “hair” are being mentioned.

Then “the pilot light / went out on the stove.” This reveals more information about the “stove” that was first mentioned in line 2. There is no evident connection between taking an “accident out of the stove” and the “pilot light” going out. Time probably passed between the two events, since “supper” could hardly be ruined if there were no flame to ruin it. The two events are also separated by several lines of poetry. These lines, 21 and 22, also return the poem to a more passive phase—not much is happening in these lines, but an *active* flame “went out.”

Similarly, the last two lines revisit the objects mentioned in lines 5 through 8: “stone” “paper” and “wings” (bird imagery). Before the paper was moving, but now it is “folded like a napkin.” The “paper” in line 6 seemed like a “newspaper.” Line 23 does not rule out that possibility, since a “newspaper” could be “folded like a napkin.” At the same time, the “paper” could be a “paper” “napkin.”

“Wings” does not directly refer back to earlier lines; this is the first time the word occurs. However, the bird-like imagery of the “paper” flying “up / then down”, and the “wind” having a “birdsong” is echoed by “wings.” Here the “other wings” create

ambiguity again—these “wings” are not the “wings” mentioned before (implying that there were “wings” mentioned before), but these are “other wings.”

These “wings flew into the stone.” If the “paper” in line 6 was flying “up / then down” on the “table of stone” from line 5, that image could be “wings” flying “into the stone” as line 24 states. There is an apparent parallel.

The last word of the poem, “stone,” reverberates the sound of “stove” from stanza six, and “snow” from stanza five. The repetition of the ‘o’ sound also touches the words “out” “folded” and “other.”

The repetition of words (dishes, stove, supper and stone) in a symmetrical pattern emphasize the center of the poem. The line nearest to being in the center of a 24 line poem is the line “the tree is you” (13). The poem has a warm, affectionate tone. Kitchen imagery and the location inside a house are part of what create this tone. Also the dance-like rhythm in some lines gives the poem a joyfulness. There is an intimacy in the third stanza as the observer notices minute details about the “arms” of the sleeping one, which are tucked underneath the “pillow.” These “arms” which are like “branches” belong to the “tree” which is “you.” This individual has strength and beauty, or at least is so in the eye of the observer.

Red Lilies

Someone has remembered to dry the dishes;
they have taken the accident out of the stove.
Afterward lilies for supper; there
the lines in front of the window
are rubbed on the table of stone

The paper flies up
then down as the wind
repeats. repeats its birdsong.

Those arms under the pillow
the burrowing arms they cleave
at night as the tug kneads the water
calling themselves branches

The tree is you
the blanket is what warms it
snow erupts from thistle
to toe; the snow pours out of you.

A cold hand on the dishes
placing a saucer inside
her who undressed for supper
gliding that hair to the snow

The pilot light
went out on the stove

The paper folded like a napkin
other wings flew into the stone.

O'Hara: How Roses Get Black

This poem is stated in a matter-of-fact tone, with short phrases that feel like thoughts recorded one by one as they occur in the mind. There is controversy in the poem indicated by a number of exclamation points and some violent language.

The first lines are an accusation: "First you took Arthur's porcelain / pony..." The speaker accuses "you" (perhaps a brother) of taking "Arthur's" (maybe another brother) possession; this identifies three persons in the poem. "First" shows that there are more accusations to come. The line has no definite meter which leaves it sounding like naturally spoken words. The exception to this is the alliteration between "porcelain" and "pony." The break between these two words sounds as though the one speaking is gasping for air—perhaps in anger against the crime committed.

The criminal took the "porcelain / pony from the mantel and! dashed / it against the radiator!" The pause between "porcelain" and "pony" is compounded by the exclamation point after "and," and the line break after "dashed." Again, it sounds like the speaker is exasperated, pausing and gasping between his words. The exclamation points place emphasis on the words "and" and "radiator," as the line break also emphasizes "dashed." The emphasis is well-placed since "dashed" is the verb describing the criminal offence. "From the mantel" confirms the location as indoors. There is a "mantel" a "radiator" and a "porcelain / pony."

The following exclamation, "Oh it was / vile!" indicates the serious nature of the offence by showing the extreme reaction of the narrator to it. The "porcelain / pony" must have been a valuable possession of "Arthur's." Either that or it was the attitude of the

offending party that was “vile.” The whole scene is colored by the action of the offending party, and normal household objects are taken under the influence of the “vile” person.

After the exclamation point in line 4 a phrase is tacked on: “we were listening to Sibelius.” That the “w” is not capitalized indicates that this is a continuation of the same sentence, only divided by an exclamation point. These circumstantial details are stated simply, so the tone contrasts with the exclamations that come before it. Earlier the tone was accusatory, but line 4 is parenthetical: *and by the way* “we were listening to Sibelius.”

What causes the shift in tone? It is partly the substitution of a period for an exclamation point at the end of the phrase in line 4. Also the word “we” is used rather than “you” as in line 1. This tone shift helps create a talkiness, as though the mind is adding in random facts. It is not a carefully crafted speech, but has the intimacy and sincerity of just talking. The content in line 4 is more commonplace, and does not involve the destruction of property.

Then comes the second half of the accusation: “And then with lighter fluid you wet / each pretty pink floored rose...” The childish act that came earlier (dashing the “pony” “against the radiator”) merited the description “vile,” but the destruction takes a more serious turn with the “lighter fluid.” Dashing “porcelain” is not as dangerous as pouring inflammable liquids around inside a house.

With the “lighter fluid” the accused “wet” the roses; he did not douse them. The diction in the poem favors simpler words, those used in everyday conversation. What kind of roses were “wet” “with lighter fluid”? “Pretty” ones, “pink” ones; these are common descriptions for roses, while “floored” roses is not. However, it fits with the

indoor location of the incident. If the roses are on the floor, they may be part of the pattern on a rug, which is easily “wet” ”with lighter fluid.”

The alliteration between “pretty” and “pink” is fitting after the alliteration between “porcelain” and “pony” in lines 1 and 2. The alliteration makes the objects appear more vivid by holding the mind on a certain wavelength. The words beginning with the same letter seem to meld into one image, and the sustained attention in the mind on that one image makes it seemingly more vivid.

Line 4 ends with “tossed” which is preceded by a comma, and followed by a line break. Since it is on the same line as “each pretty pink floored rose” it sounds as though “tossed” is referring to the roses. This peaks the reader’s interest, and holds the meaning in tension until the pause is ended by line 5.

It is “you” who “tossed / your leonine head.” The accused is not only described as “vile” in his actions, but also as having a “leonine head.” His “head” has the qualities of a lion, whether this means that his facial features have the fierceness of a lion, or that he is showing his teeth like a lion. Perhaps his hair is like a lion’s mane, and he is tossing it proudly. The word “leonine” also indicates some level of admiration or affection on the part of the narrator, and highlights the ironic tone of the poem; the narrator may be angry but not without some healthy humor toward the situation. As he “tossed” his “head,” he “set them on fire”—the roses.

As he “set them on fire” he was also “laughing maniacally from the bath- / room.” In the poem it is not stated naturally, but the latter phrase is tacked on, like “we were listening to Sibelius” was tacked on in line 4. It is as though the one speaking finished the sentence just in time to think of more details he wished to include in the description of

what happened. Since line 8 is lacking essential components of a sentence (noun, verb) the period at the end of line 7 seems like it should be a comma.

Line 8 also provides more information about the attitude of the accused toward his crimes. He apparently finds them amusing since he is “laughing.” He also sounds like a pyromaniac: “laughing maniacally” while pouring “lighter fluid” on “each pretty pink floored rose” and setting “them on fire.”

“From the bath- / room” seems to be identifying the scene of the crime, where the roses are being burned. “Bath- / room” is split between lines 8 and 9. This causes the line lengths to remain consistent, and it splits a compound word. If the bathroom is where the roses are being burned, perhaps the flames are splitting the bathroom in two. One part has a bath, and the other has a room: the meaning of bathroom is fractured by the burning of the roses. A bathroom is not a place for burning roses.

Then the speaker returns to exclamation: “Talk about burning bushes!” This phrase invokes the imagination because it sounds like there had been some occurrence of “burning bushes” beforehand. It at least had come up in conversation; maybe the speaker had been accused of “burning bushes,” and is now turning the accusation around (*look who is talking!*). There is alliteration here that fits with the “porcelain / pony” and “pretty pink” roses.

At the end of line 9 is “I,” the beginning of the next sentence. It is hanging at the end of the line with a comma after it, waiting for the continuation of the thought on line 10: “I, / who can cut with a word, was quite / amused.” More is revealed here about the speaker. He does not fight with “lighter fluid” or by dashing ponies against radiators, but “can cut with a word.” His reaction to the “lighter fluid” antics is not as flustered as the

language implied in the first four lines of the poem; at the time he “was quite / amused.”

Perhaps the flustered language in lines 1-4 can be explained by the rest of line 11: “Upon reflection I am not.” At the time of the roses being burned the speaker “was quite amused,” but now as he looks back on it he is not. Somehow the distance of time has changed his perspective. And here he lapses again into exclaiming his thoughts.

He says, “Send me your head to soak in tallow!” The word “send” indicates that they are living in different places, which also gives the poem the tone of a letter. They had been living in the same house before (perhaps as young men), but now the one who “dashed” the “pony” and “set” the roses “on fire” must use postage to “send” his “head” over. The writer is not necessarily expecting a head in the mail. It is a threat communicating the writer’s feelings toward the accused. He states his intention to “soak” “your head” in wax with a level of irony. Since the tone of the poem shows some affection, it is more likely that this phrase is sarcastic.

The argument continues in the next line while the tone shifts dramatically: “You are no myth unless I choose to / speak.” Since he witnessed the burning of the roses, his telling the story would start the myth. It is his choice whether the burner of roses becomes a myth or not. He is saying in essence, *your fame is in my hands*. The tone is that of superiority. “Unless I choose” indicates that he is planning not to speak. There is a line break before “speak” which enforces this idea. He says “unless I choose to,” but does not finish the sentence immediately.

Then he tacks on the short phrase, “I breathed those ashes secretly.” Does this confirm that he alone has the knowledge required to create a myth about the burning of

roses? “Those ashes” must refer to the product of the burning. “Secretly” breathing the “ashes” seems to mean that no one else knows what he took in.

He continues his point with another tone shift in line 15: “Heroes alone destroy, as I destroy / you.” He seems here to be more serious about soaking “your head” “in tallow!” He is taking on the role of destroyer, which makes him a hero (somehow), because “heroes alone destroy.” There is still an element of superiority in the phrase, but here it takes on a high tone like an eloquent commander of an army. “Destroy” repeats twice in line 15, and “you” is separated by a line break which emphasizes the repetition of “destroy.” This word fits with “dashed” and “burning” as words describing destructive actions.

And finally he says, “Know now that I am the roses / and it is of them I choose to speak.” If he is the roses then it is he who was burned up. Perhaps this explains why he “breathed” the “ashes secretly.” He has been destroyed as the roses were destroyed, and he and the ashes were equally products of destruction. Even so, he has the ability to make himself a myth—because he *is* the roses, and in speaking about them, he speaks about himself. Lines 13 and 17 share the phrase “I choose to speak” (though it is broken onto line 14 in the first case). He says, “you will not become a myth, but the roses will become a myth—“I am the roses.”

The poem revolves around the image of burning roses, an image of destruction. The speaker and the accused are both destroyers in their own way, the latter using violent action and the former using his words. The poem itself shows an exemplary use of words and tone. As the tone shifts more and more dramatically, the reader can almost hear the words being spoken. It is as if the poem is a record of what the narrator is thinking more than what he is writing or speaking, because of the random phrases dropped in (“we were listening to Sibelius”). The way the words are spoken by the narrator’s mind give clues that the anger he feels toward this burning-of-the-roses event is not uninterrupted by affection (“leonine head”), and humor (“send me your head to soak in tallow!”). *HOW*

ROSES GET BLACK

First you took Arthur’s porcelain
pony from the mantel and! dashed
it against the radiator! Oh it was

vile! we were listening to Sibelius.
And then with lighter fluid you wet
each pretty pink floored rose, tossed

your leonine head, set them on fire.
Laughing maniacally from the bath-
room. Talk about burning bushes! I,

who can cut with a word, was quite
amused. Upon reflection I am not.
Send me your head to soak in tallow!

You are no myth unless I choose to
speak. I breathed those ashes secretly.
Heroes alone destroy, as I destroy

you. Know now that I am the roses
and it is of them I choose to speak.

Koch: Down at the Dock

The poem has a philosophical bent. It is about the nature of the cosmos, trees and love. There is little punctuation (four periods, two commas) leaving the language to fend for itself; the line breaks provide natural punctuation, as in the pauses between phrases of spoken sentences. The language is straightforward, but there are incongruities and other elements in the poem which give it a humorous, quirky tone.

The first four lines set the location and atmosphere of the poem: “Down at the docks / Where everything is sweet and inclines / At night / To the sound of canoes...” There is something romantic and beautiful about the scene (indicated mostly by the word “sweet”). There is alliteration between “down” and “docks” and the dactylic rhythm of that first line continues through to the fourth. There is a slight suspension of that rhythm at “everything” which fits the expansive meaning of the word.

What does it mean for “everything” to incline “to the sound of canoes”? Perhaps “inclines” refers to the waves or the tide which sinks beneath the boats. This limits the word “everything,” however, and the tide does not always sink “at night” but also rises. Since “everything” is inclining to a “sound” it could refer to the turning of the head or ear to listen. “Everything” is receptive—with a “sweet” disposition—to the “sound” of the “canoes.”

The canoes’ sound also contributes to the sweetness of the scene, since one could assume that the canoes make gentle sounds by bumping against the dock and each other. They seem almost to come alive, since they make sounds to which “everything” inclines.

It is “down at the docks” that “I planted a maple tree...” Here is the first occurrence of the first person singular and the first mentioning of a person in the poem.

In the location described above, this person has decided to plant “a maple tree.” Since “down at the docks” does not necessarily indicate that there are plots of dirt and the appropriate weather for planting maple trees, line five is unexpected. It seems like the person absentmindedly placed a maple tree “down at the docks,” without considering whether conditions were favorable.

“And every night / Beneath it I studied the cosmos / Down at the docks.” This person spends time habitually “down at the docks” underneath the “maple tree” studying “the cosmos.” “Beneath” shows the tree as a kind of haven, a place suited to philosophical pursuits, or the study of “the cosmos.” Nature provides the material for his study. This line (7) also sets the stage for further elements of philosophy in the poem (lines 10-13 and 22 particularly).

The musical line “down at the docks” occurs at the beginning (line 1) and the end (line 8) of the stanza. The repetition provides closure to the sentence. It seems as though the stanza is surrounded by “down at the docks”; this is fitting since “down at the docks” is the location in which all the enclosed is happening.

Line 9 introduces more people into the poem, and the tone switches from descriptive to apostrophe. He says, “Sweet ladies, listen to me.” Here is the only period which does not occur at the end of a stanza in the poem. It separates the apostrophic phrase from the next line, and gives it a commanding tone. But the attitude of the speaker is not commanding, but polite (“Sweet ladies”). He is attended by an audience of ladies, and has something noteworthy to tell them. The rest of the stanza is apparently addressed to them.

He says, “The dock is made of wood / The maple tree’s not made of wood / It is wood...” All the time spent “every night” under his “maple tree” has given him insight into the nature of “wood,” which he is now sharing with his “sweet” audience. Line 10 seems fairly obvious, and then line 11 is unexpected, but resolved by line 12. He is making a subtle distinction between things that are *made of* wood, and things that *are* wood. The tree is living, it *is* wood. It is not *made* of wood in that it has not been crafted from an external source of “wood.” The tree is the source of the “wood.”

The “wood” repeats at the end of lines 10, 11, and 12. This identifies the “wood” as a theme in the poem, and as the center of the speaker’s philosophical thoughts at this point. The repetition also makes the phrases parallel one another, almost like the speaker is stating the same truth in different ways. Or perhaps he is stating elements of a truth, since it has the tone of a syllogism. The phrases combine to form a true description of the nature of “wood.”

The next four lines (13-16) contain a simile. Line 13, “Wood comes from it,” confirms that the tree is the source of wood. “Wood comes from” the tree “As music comes from me / And from this mandolin I’ve made / Out of the maple tree.” The music is like the wood, and he is like the tree: products and sources, respectively. Does this mean that he *is* the music, just as the tree *is* wood? The music also comes from the “mandolin,” so it is also equated with “the tree.”

It is more complicated still, since the “mandolin” was “made / Out of the maple tree.” It is not only like “the tree” because it produces music, but also like the “wood” because it came from “the tree.” The word “mandolin” carries a sweetness, because of the tone of the poem and the “music” which comes from it. It also carries some irony. The

tree which was “planted” “down at the docks” has grown and unexpectedly flourished, but has now been made into a “mandolin.” It seems that the speaker and his philosophizing has ended the life of the tree—and made it into a “mandolin.”

The last word of the stanza “tree” rhymes with the end of line 14 “me.” He and the tree are alike, and also rhyme.

Line 17 returns to apostrophe, but this time the “Jealous gentlemen” are being addressed. “Jealous” seems to indicate that the “gentlemen” envy his audience of “sweet ladies” and the philosophical insight with which he is wisely instructing them. He is saying, “Jealous gentlemen,” if you want to be like me “study how / Wood comes from the maple / Then devise your love...” He possesses superior knowledge, or at least superior means of gaining his knowledge.

Study first the philosophy of maple “wood,” and from it “devise your love.” The word “devise” does not seem to fit the context; is it too calculating? The sweet tone of the poem makes this word stand out as scientific or mathematical—drawing the plans for a project—only the project is “love.” Is there an absence of feeling in the *devising* of love?

“Devise your love / So that it seems / To come from where / All is it yet something more...” Here “love” is made analogous to “wood.” “Comes from” in line 18 parallels “come from” in line 21. As wood comes from the tree, so also “love” comes from “where / All is it yet something more.” Line 22 has a cryptic quality to it, as though the speaker does in fact possess some superior understanding of love. Love has to be devised so it “seems” to come from a place that “All is it”—“it” being “love.” Is it the same as the tree being the wood rather than being made from the wood? If so, it is also like the speaker—since he is like the tree—and the music which *is* him.

The word “seems” fits with “devise” in that it makes the gentlemen’s love sound calculated. Is their love true or devised? Or is it just “made of” some external substance, as the “mandolin” is “made of wood”? Love is “made of” or comes from “where / All is it yet something more,” meaning that “All” is love, and even more—love overflowing, or love in essence?

Perhaps the “more” is explained in line 23: “White spring flowers and leafy bough.” All is love in that place, plus there are flowers and leaf-laden trees. The image in this line fits with the theme of the “tree” in the poem, but it also is a physical image surrounded by metaphysical thoughts of the speaker.

The next line (24) repeats “Jealous gentlemen” from line 17, but puts it in a parenthetical tone of voice. The lines before were just explaining a philosophical truth about love, and line 24 seems tacked on. Perhaps this is because of the tone of superiority taken earlier in the stanza; now the tone seems almost condescending. He is saying, “and there is your lesson in love, you “Jealous gentlemen.” There is humor in it.

The last stanza is unlike the first three in that it contains only four lines. It also addresses an audience, but instead of “ladies” or “gentlemen” it addresses “Arrogant little waves / Knocking at the dock.” This equates the “waves” with persons, and “Arrogant” emphasizes this anthropomorphism. There is incongruity between “Arrogant” and “little”; the “waves” are too big for their britches. The fact that the “waves” are “knocking at the dock” hearkens back to the beginning of the poem, and “the sound of canoes.” Perhaps the “waves” are pushing the “canoes” against the “docks.”

Then he tells the waves, “It’s for you I’ve made this chanson / For you and that big dark blue.” “Chanson” is the French word for “song”; he made the song for the

“waves.” This echoes the “music” from “me / And from this mandolin” in lines 14 and 15. It also reflects “the sound of canoes” in line 4: As the canoes make “music” for “everything” which is inclining to it, so also the speaker makes his song for the “waves.”

“For you” repeats in the last line. “For you and that big dark blue.” The “big dark blue” could refer to the ocean. An ocean is “big,” and “at night” it is also “dark blue.” The “waves” are a part of a larger body of water. In the context of the poem, that may indicate that the waves are “made of” the water, while the “big dark blue” *is* the water.

On the other hand, the “big dark blue” could refer to the sky or cosmos which he has studied from beneath the maple tree. This gives a frame to the poem; the beginning of the poem has the sound of the canoes and his studying the cosmos, while the end has a dedication of his song to the sky and to the sound of the waves too.

As “tree” and “me” rhymed earlier in lines 16 and 14, respectively, in this line (28) the words “you” and “blue” rhyme.

The key lines in the poem seem to be placed in each stanza similarly—near the end. Line 7 in the first stanza, line 15 in the second, and line 22 in the third. They are more philosophical lines in the midst of description and imagery, and help give the poem its dreamy, extraordinary quality. By observing the nature of the cosmos, and ordinary objects like canoes, trees, and flowers, the narrator comes to a deeper philosophical understanding of life and love.

DOWN AT THE DOCK

Down at the docks
 Where everything is sweet and inclines
 At night
 To the sound of canoes
 I planted a maple tree 5
 And every night
 Beneath it I studied the cosmos
 Down at the docks.

Sweet ladies, listen to me.
 The dock is made of wood 10
 The maple tree's not made of wood
 It is wood
 Wood comes from it
 As music comes from me
 And from this mandolin I've made 15
 Out of the maple tree.

Jealous gentlemen, study how
 Wood comes from the maple
 Then devise your love
 So that it seems 20
 To come from where
 All is it yet something more
 White spring flowers and leafy bough
 Jealous gentlemen.

Arrogant little waves 25
 Knocking at the dock
 It's for you I've made this chanson
 For you and that big dark blue.

Capstone Synthesis I

These five New York School poems hold certain characteristics in common. The poetry has been often described as painterly, and the following pages seek to define and expand upon this description. A New York School poem tends to 1) perform a statement without making one, 2) exhibit an easy-going, everyday tone, 3) contain some mysterious unresolved complexity, and 4) proceed in slow time and exhibit a playfulness or humor. All five of the poems are pieces of art which do not make statements, but “perform” them. Each one does so in a slightly different manner.

Ashbery’s background in theater shows in “Unusual Precautions,” especially in the third stanza. At first the image is “a movie of a nightmare,” but in lines 11 and 12 Ashbery mentions “the black / Curtain” and “seats” which are theater images. Even as he mentions these objects found in a theater, his poem enacts something as a stage play would. Lehman writes, “for Ashbery, it is important to remember, the poem is the performance of an experience rather than a commentary on experience” (105). Lines 9 and 10 in “Unusual Precautions” describe the movie as having “many episodes / That defuse the thrust of what comes to us.” As was mentioned in explication, this “defusing” by breaking down into episodes is also what Ashbery does in the poem as a whole. He enacts things in his poem on what Hoover calls a “metaphysical stage” (?) He then ends the poem by erecting “a smokescreen...so I can withdraw unperceived—I never like to be around for the last line” (Ashbery qtd. Lehman, 138). It is as though he writes his poems like they are stage productions. As the author he does not play a part in the narrative, nor does he hang around for when the curtains close at the end of the play.

Ashbery's poem "performs a statement" by *enacting* a theater production, while O'Hara uses a similar method of *chronicling*.

O'Hara's poems often chronicle their "own coming into existence—you can trace the poet's footsteps up to the moment when he sat at his typewriter recapitulating the hour he had just spent" (Lehman, 200). This "chronicling" shows up in "How Roses Get Black" in a more subtle way than some of his other poems. Since the events occur chronologically they lead up to the composition of the poem. First the "porcelain / pony" was smashed, and the roses were lit on fire; then the poem explains what was going through the narrator's mind. It is a natural succession: some events occur, there is a reaction to the event, and the result is a letter—or a poem.

The poem "Red Lilies" does not follow suit. Rather than depicting the passage of time as O'Hara does, Guest depicts a very still household of objects. It is like a still life painting, or photograph—a gathering of objects into a framed space. The poem has symmetry, with a center and mirrored ends. The poem itself is like an object. It performs a statement without moving around very much.

Schuyler's poem is full of movement. The title "Evening Wind" denotes movement, as does the imagery of the wind and water in the poem. Schuyler's method is closer to Ashbery's in that he uses language to enact what is being described. But while Ashbery does not enter his own poem, Schuyler writes in lines 24 and 25, "I / am troubled by hatred for the dead." He enters his own poem for a time, but the focus is on his thoughts, and on the wind. At the end he seems to say that the wind courses through thought, as "cool as water" (34). Thus even the thoughts of the poet, as recorded in the poem, are like the wind and water. The poem *enacts* the motion of the "Evening Wind."

Koch goes about it in an entirely different way. He simply states, “Arrogant little waves / Knocking at the dock / It’s for you I’ve made this chanson” (25-27). He has made a “chanson” or song for the “little waves.” The poem is the song, and he has written it for the “waves.” It seems here like Koch is *making* a statement. However, the statement is part of the poem, so he himself as the author enters and becomes part of the poem. He is inside the poem, writing the poem for the “waves” inside the poem. Koch is not outside the work of art, *making* a statement. Rather he is a part of the work of art; he is himself *enacting* the art in his composition of the “chanson.” By these different methods of chronicling and enacting, the New York School poets turn their poems into pieces of art that “perform a statement without making one.”

There are various elements which contribute to the ordinary tone exhibited in the poems. There is talkiness and the naming of objects in O’Hara’s, Schuyler’s, and Guest’s poems in particular. The poems are concerned with the daily and casual in life, and Lehman refers to O’Hara’s poems in particular as “disarmingly immediate and perishable as telephone calls” (184). “How Roses Get Black” gives the impression of being a letter or phone call since its tone is one of direct address. O’Hara uses the word “you” consistently through the poem, maintaining the same voice from beginning to end. While the poem is written and could almost be a letter, something about the tone O’Hara uses makes the sentences sound spoken instead—like over a telephone.

One reason for this “spoken” tone is O’Hara’s free use of the exclamation point. Enthusiasm is not uncommon in his poetry, and in this poem it comes in full force because of the circumstances: “you took Arthur’s porcelain / pony from the mantel! and! dashed / it against the radiator!” These words sound spoken, not written.

The typical reason for O'Hara's poetry having an everyday tone is not as evident in "How Roses Get Black." He does not quote the time of day, or give an itinerary of where he went and what he did during the day. However, he does mention some circumstantial details such as "we were listening to Sibelius."

We see this talkiness and naming of objects in Ashbery's and Guest's poems as well. The tone of direct address is clearly present in Ashbery's "Unusual Precautions" at the outset. An opening quotation mark indicates the spoken word more explicitly than the talky tone in O'Hara's poem. Ashbery also uses the words "you" and "we" as the narrative is directed at some other party.

In addition, the tone at the beginning of "Unusual Precautions" is similar to the halting exclamation in "How Roses Get Black." It begins, "We, we children..." as though the speaker is tripping over words—not writing them. The talky tone in "Unusual Precautions" does not stay consistent throughout, however. Ashbery is consistent rather in his practice of keeping himself out of his own poetry. Whereas the other poets use the pronoun "I," Ashbery's "I" has a feckless habit of sliding into 'you,' 'he,' 'she,' 'we'... (Lehman, 98). This avoidance of "I" renders Koch's "talky" tone less ordinary than O'Hara's.

Ashbery also shows an interest in objects in "Unusual Precautions" but this tendency is more pronounced in "Red Lilies" and "Evening Wind." The fifth stanza of Guest's poem "Red Lilies" gives the distinct impression that something is happening *behind* what is being described. It reads like a Mad Lib, with kitchen objects ("dishes," "saucer," "supper") replacing whatever words were "originally" in place. The entire poem, in fact, shows action through the naming of objects.

Schuyler's poem also names object after object. As a "pear tree" is described in lines 20-24, the words are placed in a cut-and-paste manner. The phrases "eyebrow curves of branches" and "leaves like lashes" cause pasted images in the mind. The "branches" begin to appear as eyebrows, and the "leaves" like "lashes." Rather than the words on the page being replaced with unexpected other words, the image in the mind is replaced with an unexpected, cut-and-paste image.

The focus on objects in O'Hara has the effect of making the poem more ordinary, as just the listing of whatever the poet encounters, whereas in Guest's and Schuyler's poems this naming of objects—because they are incongruously placed—does not make the poems more ordinary but extraordinary.

Koch's "Down at the Dock" also shows some interest in objects, and has a mildly talky tone. The narrator "studied the cosmos" and the objects within it ("the maple tree," "wood"). Philosophically, these objects are significant. But the ordinary tone comes more from the talky tone, which has a different quality in Koch's poem than in the others. It is the result of the absence of punctuation, the location of line breaks, and the repetition of words. When words are spoken they depend on natural punctuation (mainly pauses), which the line breaks supply. As in the poems of O'Hara and Ashbery, "Down at the Dock" exhibits a halting phrasing which mimics the spoken word. The ordinary tone of the New York School poems come from this talkiness and attention to ordinary objects.

The indeterminate quality of New York School poetry is closely tied to the ordinary, everyday quality just described. The everyday voice used in the poetry creates expectation in the reader that things will be stated ordinarily and simply. Hoover refers to a "narrative promise" in Ashbery's and Gertrude Stein's poetry which goes unfulfilled

(21). It is because everyday, narrative qualities are in the poetry that the indeterminacy appears so distinctly. When the reader expects resolution, then the stage is set for unexpected irresolution.

Narrative promise and the denaturing of the sentence—by replacing words or leaving them out—help to create the indeterminate tone exhibited in the five poems. Ashbery's and Guest's poems in particular are rife with indeterminacy.

Since Guest's poetry is closest to L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poetry, it is "Red Lilies" that most obviously exhibits the denaturing of sentences out of the five New York School poems. There are words being replaced and details seem to be left out. Instead of saying "afterward [pasta] for supper," Guest writes, "afterward lilies for supper" (3). And in the next lines the poem reads, "there / the lines in front of the window / are rubbed on the table of stone." It is spoken on the assumption that the reader knows which "lines" they are and why they are "rubbed" on the table. If the sentence had read, "there are lines," it would have seemed like an explanation or description is being offered. Because it only says "the lines," it creates a tension—the reader is expected to know about "the lines," but is not provided with any informative details—and the meaning of the sentence is indistinct. Guest's sentences break down the most in stanzas four and five. In stanza four the poem reads, "snow erupts from thistle to toe; the snow pours out of you." The phrase sounds like it is communicating while at the same time remaining obscure in its meaning.

Ashbery uses similar methods in "Unusual Precautions." There are at the same time ambiguous and talky phrases. There is more complexity in Ashbery's sentences than in Guest's; in "Red Lilies" the single word which has been replaced can be identified, whereas in "Unusual Precautions" this is not the case. The reader is kept in a state of

uncertainty, with the impression that something profound is being communicated, but unable to pin it down. “The theme of misunderstanding... is one to which Ashbery has long been drawn,” and he makes no efforts to resolve the complexity in his poems (Lehman, 100).

“Unusual Precautions,” for instance, has the tone of a speech (with quotation marks) which is meant to communicate. However, the speaker stutters (we, we children), and says phrases like, “Worry and brown desk stain it by infusion,” which are not easily understood. The poem describes “lives” as “circumferential,” at the outset, and ends with an enactment, “we too, around, and all around.” Yet there is no resolution provided. Line 16 reads, “the street crosses your name, and feet run up it.” It seems that the “lives,” the “children” in the poem, and the poem itself all go in a circle.

The most obvious contrast between talkiness and indeterminacy are found at the end of “Evening Wind.” The last sentence says, “if the wind / were not above such thoughts, / above thought, in fact / of course, though coursing, / cool as water, through it.” The talky phrases, “in fact” and “of course” are most typical of O’Hara’s writing. Here they perpetuate the talky tone of the poem even as the meaning becomes indistinct.

Although everyday sentences and talkiness can further the ambiguity and indeterminacy in the New York School poems, if there is no denaturing of the sentences, talkiness wins out. For example, O’Hara’s poetry tends to be talky with fewer ambiguities. He still leaves details out, and states his ordinary sentences as though the reader knows what is being spoken of. The first part of “How Roses Get Black” is more talky, with phrases like “you wet / each pretty pink floored rose.” It is not clear what he is referring to, but O’Hara makes no explanation. The end of the poem becomes more

philosophical, and the meaning more obscure. Since the tone keeps shifting drastically between phrases, the reader is kept guessing at the meaning.

Koch's poem "Down at the Dock" is the least indeterminate though it is philosophical in subject matter. The philosophical statements are presented simply except perhaps in line 22; "all is it yet something more." Here the words seem scrambled so that it is unclear what the pronoun is referring to, and the meaning is ambiguous.

This irresolution and indistinctness causes the New York School poems to take on a dreamlike quality. Dreams are often vague, ambiguous, and indistinct, and rarely resolve, and when the poets integrate these characteristics into their writing, a transcendence comes into being. Dreams also seem to make perfect sense and only upon waking do dreamers realize how vague and indistinct their dreams were. Similarly, New York School poems often seem to make sense even as the meaning is difficult to comprehend. This dreamlike quality is also related to the term "painterly" because the poets were influenced by abstract expressionism.

Hoover writes, "in such work, a metaphysical stage is created for the enactment of meaning. Resolution is not a desired part of the process but rather representation's tangle of fact and imagination" (20). The "facts" of everyday, ordinary events are woven together with indeterminate qualities than spark the imagination.

These New York School poems also proceed in slow time and exhibit a playfulness or humor. A slow tempo naturally accompanies the talkiness in New York School poems. Guest's poem is the slowest, since it is almost unmoving like a photograph. Schuyler's poem has a slow, flowing movement like the water about which his poem is written. Since the poem is observing nature, it gives the impression that the

observer is in a meditative mood, just observing. The talkiness in “Evening Wind” also contributes to the slow time. Line 8 repeats “a palm, the palm” like the speaker is revising as they go. “Down at the dock” also has a meditative mood, as the narrator “studied the cosmos” (7). The repetition of “wood” in lines 10 through 13 slows the tempo, especially because of the line breaks and the philosophical topic at hand. The repetition of words, line breaks, and the observing of nature slow the passage of time in these poems.

The playfulness or humor in these poems fits with their indeterminacy. The juxtaposition of tones causes the playfulness, and creates irony or sarcasm in some places. There are “rapid mood shifts” in O’Hara’s poem, which is continuous with 1950s jazz (Lehman, 194). There is sarcasm as he “threatens” to “soak [your head] in tallow!” The subtle affection that is evident in the poem indicates that it is sarcasm, and that the speaker is not serious. Koch’s poem also has a subtle humor. “Down at the Docks” seems to be a sweet poem, but perhaps far-fetched. Though this poem is not explicitly humorous like many of Koch’s other poems, it is tinged with irony. The philosopher in the poem who studies the cosmos seems to be very wise, “Sweet ladies, listen to me.” But the speech he gives turns out repetitive (“wood”) and talky, and is irresolute. His tone is high-flown and wise, but he does not say anything philosophically profound. Only, “devise your love / so that it seems / to come from where / All is it yet something more.”

These five New York School poems, in different ways and to varying degrees 1) perform a statement without making one, 2) exhibit an easy-going, everyday tone, 3) contain some mysterious unresolved complexity, and 4) proceed in slow time and exhibit a playfulness or humor. The poems that are more talky tend to be less indeterminate while

the more complex, philosophical poems have less of an everyday tone, and tend toward dreaminess.

The combination of the ordinary and the indeterminate, according to the New York School of poets, produces a truer representation of reality. As Hoover writes, “the ‘abstract’ quality of such poems also suggests their mystery...they confront the unresolvable complexities of existence” (20). Consider the following passage,

“Since [Ashbery] says he could find no patterns or rules for either human speech or human relationships, ‘there was nothing in life for my art to imitate.’ He decides that the solution to his quandary is to avoid solving it. ‘I would omit the final scene from my masterpiece,’ he says. In this way ‘my play would reflect the very uncertainty of life, where things are seldom carried through to a conclusion, let alone a satisfactory one.’”

Even as everyday qualities in the poems reflect the reality of ordinary life, so also the indeterminate elements reflect the uncertainty of ordinary life. The New York School poets are confident in their attempts at representing reality, and their techniques narrow the gap between that reality and the art of poetry. The New York School poetry raises questions about the nature of reality and the sufficiency of words to represent that reality. Whether the poets succeed in what they set out to do remains to be seen.

Capstone Analysis II

As an artistic movement, the New York School poets were interested in developing methods for representing the world around them. Reality is what the poets perceive, and language is the medium by which they describe it. Two major qualities that appear in their poems are talkiness and indeterminacy, which reflect the balance between the reliability and the breakdown of language as a representation of reality. If language is reliable then it can be used in a straightforward, ordinary manner, and if language is liable to fail in its representative duty it will break down in indeterminacy. The breakdown of language, however, is perceived as an illustration of the indeterminacy of reality; “the apparent obscurity of such works is due to their realism—their understanding that contradiction, puzzle, and oracle accurately depict the complexities of the metaphysical” (Hoover, 20).

“Red Lilies” points to tangible things as real. Things, like words, slip and break down. Guest seems to be attempting to write one sentence, but words replace words, and a different sentence results. The objects in “Red Lilies” are shifting, taking each other’s places, and as a representation of reality the poem makes the case that real objects are hard to pin down. The experience of objects in reality is not perfectly straightforward; an object may defy categorization or definition. Or “arms” may unpredictably exhibit motion similar to a “tug” that “kneads the water” (lines 9, 11). Since reality is indeterminate, only some knowledge of material things is possible. This knowledge is illustrated by the straight sentences in the poem.

Guest’s poem also comments on the nature of humans. The person described in the poem seems beautiful and complex, but is difficult to perceive through the shifting

objects. The universe is made up of material objects resistant to order, and the human being is a part of the system. While describing a person in the poem, Guest uses various words used to describe objects from nature and from the kitchen. If there is something that sets humankind apart from the rest of the universe, it is not clear here.

“Evening Wind” shows more confidence in the ability of language to accurately describe reality than “Red Lilies.” As a piece of art, it does “take on the ordinariness of everyday events, as well as its plenty, without seeking the heroic, the dramatic, or especially the lyric.” Rather than seeking these, it tangles together “fact and imagination” in a way that animates and enlivens the things that Schuyler describes. He does not wear rose-colored glasses, but tells things “as they are.” In so doing, he does not discount but gives more credit to the metaphysical atmosphere that hangs around physical things.

The transcendent is an integral part of nature. The wind, trees, and other natural objects become animate in “Evening Wind.” Schuyler even acknowledges the “dead” in line 26 of the poem. “Wind” and “thought” are related elements in the poem, and both are intangible. The poem shows that thought, like wind, is a part of nature. Language, then, is more than trustworthy; it depicts reality in a way that is alive, and accounts for the transcendent.

Of the five poems Ashbery’s is the most complex philosophically. Although Guest switches words in her poem, she does not write in paradoxes like Ashbery does. In “Unusual Precautions” the “lives” are real, but they are confusing, chaotic, roundabout “lives.” The poem illustrates the dream-like indeterminacy that characterizes their “lives,” and they are unable to make headway since their lives go in circles. The poem depicts humans as child-like, stuttering (“we, we children”), as “haunted by perimeters,”

and “too porous to hear [the grove...blind, blossoming]. They are wandering aimlessly, unable to perceive what is important; they cannot see their own interests.

This poem meshes with Ashbery’s perspective on real life and on the process of writing poetry and plays. Lehman writes, “For his part Ashbery tosses off complex truths about human behavior in a disarmingly offhanded way: ‘Ambiguity supposes an eventual resolution of itself, whereas certitude implies further ambiguity’” (96). Ashbery takes satisfaction in the ambiguous because of its supposed “eventual resolution.” Because of his philosophy, he avoids the resolution of his own poetry, but revels in the “theme of misunderstanding” (Lehman, 100). “Unusual Precautions” is difficult to understand just as reality is difficult to understand.

“How Roses Get Black,” because it tends toward talkiness and away from indeterminacy, does not seem to throw much doubt on the abilities of language to represent reality. This, however, does not prevent man from exercising an autonomy that creates chaos. The person in the poem acts on objects around him to destroy whatever order had been present. Language is straightforward in describing reality, including the autonomous action of a human being amongst real objects. His choices affect the nature of reality. But despite his destructive tendencies, the poet only reproaches him in sarcastic, humorous tones.

O’Hara exuded love for common, everyday experiences. ‘It was always as if something was happening to him for the first time. He was always a little out of breath and amazed at how beautiful things were. There’s a lot of amazement in his poetry’” (Lehman, 57). So even when the person in “How Roses Get Black” is destroying

household objects, the narrator still shows affection toward him. The person has beauty and value for O'Hara's narrator, even when wreaking havoc on material things.

"Down in the Docks" casts a humorous, ironic light on the nature of language and knowing things. The philosopher in the poem attempts to gain knowledge of the world, love, and love's origin. He then uses his knowledge to compete for the attention of "sweet ladies." Ironically, the philosophy of love that he teaches does not sound impressive. He advises the "gentlemen" to "devise" their love, which makes it sound false or constructed. And the source is "where all is it yet something more"—which sounds mixed up or made up. A small stanza at the end of the poem seems to point to the crafting of a poem or "chanson" as the valuable task, although Koch still jokingly addresses the statement to "arrogant little waves." If there is little value in trying to learn philosophical truths, crafting poems may be a more worthy pursuit.

The study of the cosmos may result not in the discovery of objective truths, but in a method or process of doing. "Koch was intent on using words as an abstract painter uses paint, without regard for their meaning, knowing that new meaning may result. The rupture between language and sense—between 'signifier' and 'signified,' as the French critics were starting to say—is neither deplored nor analyzed but enjoyed for the liberation it bestows" (Lehman, 223). He found satisfaction in entering into the process of writing, rather than the discovery of Cartesian first principles, because of the new meaning that would result.

The poems exhibit varying levels of confidence in language's representative ability. Talky poems depend more on language's honesty, while indeterminate poems point out language's slipperiness. With their typical lightheartedness, the New York

School poets present a clearer picture of reality by showing its complexities. They did not “set out simply to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative. . . . What they were seeking was not an artificial paradise but a new mode of writing to chart out the progression of their hearts, and the movement of their minds. . . .” (Lehman, 37). Since they attempted to stay as close to reality as possible, their work is a valuable reflection on how nature—their hearts and minds—operates, and what the natural world looks like.

Schuyler in particular reminds readers of the metaphysical aspect of nature. This is valuable as a reminder of the truer reality that often hides behind the scenes. When the world looks like it is made up only of material things (perhaps as Guest’s poem implies), the metaphysical or “thought” realm is ignored. “Evening Wind” does not ignore it.

By focusing on objects and moving them around (one instance of indeterminacy) the poets draw fresh attention to what is otherwise ordinary in reality. Objects that are out of place draw attention to themselves. As long as things remain exactly where they are expected to be, they remain unnoticed. By writing in ways that highlight the subjective and indeterminate, the poets draw attention to the nature of reality. The existence of the subjective and the indeterminate imply the existence of the objective and determinate. The New York School poets would not point to God as the ultimate objective reality, but there are still implications that a biblical worldview can draw out.

Though the complexity and indeterminacy of nature is depicted well, it may be overemphasized in some cases. Is it as difficult to acquire knowledge as Koch humorously depicts in “Down at the Docks”? Are “lives” as roundabout and confusing as “Unusual Precautions”? Perhaps so, without an external source of objective reality. Subjective experience needs a base upon which it may rest.

The basic difficulty with New York School poetry is that it pulls subjective experience out of the context of objective reality. Christians place everything within the context of God's objective truth, that He created the universe, and upholds it by the word of His power. All forms of beauty and truth point to the objective beauty and truth found in God. While these poems truly reflect reality in some ways, they do not place that reality within the proper context. Christians would say that the objective external framework is what is really real. The subjective experience within that is only true in so far as it matches true truth.

Now that the major characteristics of New York School poetry have been identified, the worldview presented by the poems must be analyzed. The language of poetry does not directly communicate the worldview which is/was held by the New York School poets. Their philosophies are only revealed implicitly in their art. The question is whether the worldviews implicit in these five poems square with a biblical worldview.

First it is necessary determine what a worldview is. There are basic assumptions to which every person holds, and these assumptions make up his/her worldview. There are two sides to philosophy: ontology and epistemology. Ontology is concerned with what is real and the nature of that reality, while epistemology deals with methods of knowing reality.

The Christian worldview sees God as the ultimate reality. Whatever is true, good, or beautiful in creation points to God's perfection, while evil is the perversion of that perfection. Knowledge can be obtained by the observation of God's created order, but specific knowledge of God is revealed to mankind only in the special revelation of Scripture. Yet even in creation some knowledge of God can be found, for "his invisible

attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Rom. 1:20). God is an unchanging being, and if knowledge of Him can be perceived in the created world, then nature and creation must provide objective knowledge of objective reality. It is possible to know things definitively, despite the seeming indeterminacy and subjectivity of some experience.

How, then, does the worldview implicit in the New York School poems compare? The poems are valuable as fair representations of reality, even of its indeterminacy and subjectivity. Yet, though there is indeterminacy and subjectivity in daily experience, there is also definite truth and objectivity which can be found in God and the truth which points to Him. Kuyper says, “the beautiful is not the product of our own fantasy, nor of our subjective perception, but has an objective existence, being itself the expression of a Divine perfection” (156). While the poems may successfully represent the created order, there are hints (especially in Ashbery) of a limited worldview. The subjective and indeterminate are not linked to a higher reality, but real only in themselves. “Evening Wind” may come closer to acknowledging a higher reality, but what that higher reality consists of remains unclear.

These poets (especially Koch) seem to argue for a pragmatic method of acquiring knowledge. Rather than finding some objective truth to live by, these poets prefer to leap into a process of discovery. Learning does indeed take time, and needs to be a process. Even sanctification is a process of learning, reforming the mind according to the truth of Scripture. There is an ultimate goal, however, of learning. It is possible to “know” definitively, and subjective experiences point toward an objectivity in creation and the

ultimate objectivity of God. The poems may in their subjectivity also point toward an eventual resolution of ambiguity—certitude.

As artists these poets are taking part in a process of divine significance, for “art cannot originate from the Evil One; ...Satan is destitute of every creative power” (Kuyper, 155), and “art reveals to us a higher reality than is offered by this sinful world” (154). Often Christians try to fix things in art. Symmetry and idealism are valued above other artistic endeavors. The contrast, however, between the beautiful and the ordinary in nature emphasizes the beautiful. The New York School poets attempt to represent reality truly, and so their art has great value (despite some inherent problems with worldview).

Works Cited

Hoover, Paul. "Fables of Representation: Poetry of the New York School." The American Poetry Review.

Hoover, Paul. "The Plot Against the Giant..." Jacket magazine. 18 Apr. 2009

<<http://jacketmagazine.com/06/hoover.html>>.

Lehman, David. Last avant-garde the making of the New York School of Poets. New York: Doubleday, 1998.

Kuyper, Abraham. Lectures on Calvinism. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931.