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Soumyaroop Majumdar

Cudgels Against Indifference:

Buddhism, Post-Secularism, and the Orient in the New York School of Poets

The Cold War saw American politics shift to an increasingly religious footing, with the US conceiving of itself as, in the words of a 1950 Cold-War document NSC 68, a ‘spiritual counter-force’ to the godless Communist threat. The influx of Zen Buddhism in the 1950s, in particular the socially engaged form of Buddhism that was enthusiastically taken up by artists of liberal or left-wing sympathies, posed some difficult questions for a country that wished to be seen as a haven for religious freedom. Scholarship on the Beats’ open identification with Buddhism has been substantial, but the first-generation New York school of poets, who were characteristically evasive, as John Ashbery declared, in their ‘avoidance of anything like a program’, performed an indifference to Zen that has slipped under the radar of criticism. My thesis considers the works of John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, Kenneth Koch, and Frank O’Hara to study their more circumspect engagement with Buddhism during the Cold War. The circumspection, as I will demonstrate, is the corollary of tensions between art and religious ideology, given that Buddhism was both an aesthetic as well as a vehicle for countercultural sentiments. At the same time, the poets were mindful of the modernist tendency to secularize art and the dangers of decontextualising a historical ethical practice, and so they presented a range of attitudes towards religion, wilfully, often begrudgingly, embodying—and even denying having inadvertently embodied—Buddhist meditative forms. I do not wish to recast the New York poets’ aesthetic as committedly Buddhist but, instead, show how they related to contemporary Buddhist evangelism, denying overt influences by excluding cultish tones, and complicating how Buddhism was being received in the West at the time.

Cudgels Against Indifference

Buddhism, Post-Secularism, and the Orient in the New York School of Poets

and

Dr Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary

A Creative Portfolio

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Doctor of Philosophy
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2022

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Abbreviations

Some books have been cited in the text using the following abbreviations:

FOI	*Forces of Imagination: Writing on Writing* (Barbara Guest)
GCP	*The Collected Poems of Barbara Guest*
KCP	*The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch*
KOTE	*On the Edge: Collected Long Poems (Koch)*
NFA	*Notes from the Air: Selected Later Poems*
OCP	*The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*
RM	*Rivers and Mountains* (John Ashbery)
SCP	*Collected Poems* (James Schuyler)
SP	*Selected Poems* (John Ashbery)
SS	*Standing Still and Walking in New York* (Frank O'Hara)

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For Rang’bhai

Introduction

Post-Secular Sanctuaries

On 23 October 1977, Kenneth Koch interviewed Allen Ginsberg for *The New York Times*. On 8 January 1978, as Koch's play *The Red Robins* began a three-week run in New York, the newspaper published another interview where the roles were reversed. In the two interactions a clear distinction is apparent in terms of the poets' understanding of the relations between literature and religion. As an interviewee, Ginsberg is eager to talk about his meditation practices and Buddhism, even finding in William Carlos Williams' work an 'intersecting point between Buddhist "mind-fullness" and American poetics'.[1] Meanwhile Koch is evidently keen on keeping the conversation literary. Taking a clear-eyed view of the parley, the editor of *First Thoughts: Conversations with Allen Ginsberg*, Michael Schumacher, notes, 'Ginsberg was at his esoteric best, yet Koch was adept at keeping him on topic'.[2] In the second leg, Ginsberg looks to draw Koch out of his secular poetics, and the latter does not shy away from pointing out the differences between their reading practices.

> Ginsberg: *In your play, one character, a Man in a Yellow Coat, says, 'What can it mean, that we are born into paradise or Nothingness…?' Isn't that like Buddhist* wisdom*?*
>
> Koch: Yes, but I think, rather than being Buddhist wisdom, it refers to that kind of wisdom. It's one of the many references to different kinds of views of life in the play. […] I think you have a tendency to look for a meaning beneath the surface of my work, whereas the meaning is really that surface. A wise Buddhist remark instantly followed by the

---

[1] Allen Ginsberg, 'Allen Ginsberg Talks about Poetry', in *First Thought: Conversations with Allen Ginsberg,* ed. by Michael Schumacher (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 131-40 (p. 138).

[2] Schumacher, ibid., p. 131.

> appearance of a girl pilot talking about a summer resort, has a different meaning from a wise Buddhist remark followed by another one.[3]

Confronted with the Beat poet's practice of looking for traces of Buddhism in modern American literature, Koch resists foregrounding Buddhism in his own work but admits that it is indeed 'one of the many references to different kinds of views of life'. It is a critical act that wishes to dissociate itself from Buddhism and yet finds itself irrevocably caught up with it, a critical act that admits to a circumspection towards Buddhism.

For criticism on the Beats, the impact of Eastern religions is almost unavoidable, whereas in the case of the New York School of poets it is, if at all, a marginal concern. Much of the oversight of the New York School scholarship perhaps lies in the legacies of early, strictly formalist methods of reading the poets, as when Helen Vendler sees in Frank O'Hara's work an 'athletic effort to make the personal the poetic—the personal divested of religion, of politics, of mysticism, of patriotism, of metaphysics, even of idealism.'[4] The social and the historical are swept aside entirely, defining O'Hara's poetry as an exclusively aesthetic object in service of the poetic self. When critics do cast the New Yorkers as sociopolitical actors, the poets appear transgressive and exclusionary. Drawing from Bürger's development of the cultural criticism of Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas, Geoff Ward returns to the latter to retrieve an understanding of the autonomy of art which is predicated on the subversive act of circumscribing a 'secular sanctuary' for itself.[5] Ward echoes Habermas when he says that such a sanctuary 'permits both a cerebral indulgence of desires that might be quasi-illegal in the world outside, and the miming of spontaneity or solidary communication otherwise frozen out of the social world by bourgeois conformism.'[6] It follows that the New York School poem is a space which, in many ways, is constructed as a refuge, a *locus amoenus*. On the one hand, this pastoral *topos* disavows any theological affiliation. On the other hand, the designation 'secular sanctuary' emerges as an oxymoron when we consider 'sanctuary' as a Latin derivative meaning 'holy' (*sanctus*). This neutrality, the co-existence of secular as well as sacral charge in the New York School, forms the crux of this dissertation, leading me to propose a revision to New York School scholarship.

---

[3] Kenneth Koch, 'Writing for the Stage: *An Interview with Allen Ginsberg*', *The Art of Poetry: Poems, Parodies, Interviews, Essays and Other Work* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 181-82.

[4] Helen Vendler, 'Frank O'Hara', *Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets* (London: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 179-94 (p. 183).

[5] Geoff Ward, *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 147.

[6] Ibid.

Recent developments in post-secularist discourses, which are committed to examining and revising the boundaries between the religious and the secular, owe much to Habermas' problematisations of the way the modern secular state perceives the religious. They have brought to light the failures of the former to include the latter as a stakeholder in public life, and the consequences of such failures in global politics. However, Habermas believes the telos of society to be secularisation, and while he calls for more space for religious citizens within public life it must be on the terms of a more inclusive, nonetheless secular, state.[7] Acknowledging the post-secularist's debt to Habermas, Luca Mavelli and Fabio Petito critique the enduring bipolarity in the German thinker's categorisation, particularly his view of the religious as potentially 'irrational' and of the secular as the necessary custodian of institutionalised discourse.[8] Seen through the prism of post-secularist discourse, then, Ward's notion of the New York School as a 'secular sanctuary' appears to be built on a Habermasian 'hegemony of modern secular formations'.[9]

The critic's own cognitive bias is their undoing when encountering the New York School, particularly the poets who form the first-generation: John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, and James Schuyler. Ashbery's poetry, for instance, is designed to disarm the commentator and as a result, as Eleanor Spencer observes, scholarship on Ashbery tends to '[reveal] rather more about the critic than it does about the poetry'.[10] Is there then no scope for a project that grew from a gnawing feeling that something remains to be said about the traces of Buddhism in the work of these poets? Is there a way for criticism to avoid the trap of self-projection within analysis? What happens when criticism is not so much concerned with reading the text as a self-contained, self-regulatory sanctuary as it is with viewing it as an entity which, even in its desire for insulation, initiates multiple levels of interactions, often simultaneously, with its environment?

As I have briefly shown in Koch's and Ginsberg's exchange, and as I will demonstrate over the course of this dissertation, the first-generation of the New York School has indeed responded with circumspection to Buddhism, but at the same time the poets have attempted to sieve a non-dogmatic aesthetic from its religious principles. At the very outset, this study takes note of the interlocked state of religion and the arts, paying heed to Frank Burch Brown when he says, ‘art itself looks different when its complex relation to religion, as well as its significant areas of independence, are brought more clearly into view’.[11] Little scholarly attention has been paid to religion’s artistic life, and there is an equal dearth of discussions about art’s provenance in, and historical tensions with, religion. The reason why there has been no comprehensive study on the New York School’s interest in Buddhism until now is two-pronged. First, critical approaches have tried to rescue the poets from any charge of religiosity rather than focus on the ways in which the poets were themselves enquiring into the ways in which Buddhism was complicating rigid distinctions between secularism and spiritualism. Second, the poets have either been perceived as atheists or believers in heterodox systems of Judeo-Christian faith, and heretofore it has been common practice for criticism to group Buddhism along with orthodox Judaism and Christianity under the rubric of religion. Buddhism, however, is a distinct philosophy which interacts with concepts of religion and secularism in ways that are very different from Judeo-Christian belief. As I will later discuss, the poets’ responses to Judeo-Christian hegemonies have also been hitherto oversimplified and need to be read as a part of the complexities of post-war American politics.

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[7] Jürgen Habermas, 'Religion in the Public Space', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 14.1, 1-25 (pp. 9-12). See Luca Mavelli and Fabio Petito's incisive piece discussing Habermas' 'secular' framework; 'Towards a Postsecular International Politics: Chapter 1', in *Towards a Postsecular International Politics: New Forms of Community, Identity, and Power*, Luca Mavelli and Fabio Petito, eds (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 1-26.

[8] Mavelli and Petito, p. 6.

[9] Ibid., p. 7.

[10] Eleanor Spencer, '"a work of art that the critic cannot even talk about": The Poetry of John Ashbery', in *American Poetry Since 1945*, ed. by Eleanor Spencer (London: Palgrave, 2017), pp. 90-110 (p. 93).

According to Mavelli and Petito, one of the ways to complicate secular hegemonies in Western epistemic systems is to introduce enquiries from Non-Western modes of thinking, and to employ critical apparatus from beyond mainstream secular agendas.[12] While examining the confluence of the New York school and Buddhism, I will apply my understanding of Buddhist ideas that were being circulated in America during the post-war period. Being a view from the margins of criticism, my approach will also allow me to look at poems which have been ignored by decades of secularised critical frameworks. Religions have their own philosophical frameworks which are shaped by culture and context, and the connotative valence of signifiers are modulated by translations and ideology. A study of literature’s engagement with a certain philosophy entails a comparison between the writer’s engagement with those concepts and the inflection of that philosophy in that particular historical moment. By returning to texts and scriptures, and occasionally even to the original language of dissemination, we can gauge the dynamics between the poets and Buddhism as a social and historical configuration. Nor is doctrine the only mode of circulation of religion; Buddhist art and artefacts are also important instruments of religious propagation within a culture. If there has been any scholarly attention on the first-generation New York poets' interest in Buddhism, it is thanks to the commentators of John Ashbery who have noted the poet's enthusiasm for the work of John Cage and the musician's Zen aesthetics. Such criticism, however, has never looked deeper into the ways Ashbery engaged, for instance, with the social and political extensions of Buddhism in its American and Asian contexts.

---

[11] Frank Burch Brown, ‘Introduction: Mapping the Terrain of Religion and the Arts’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, ed. by Frank Burch Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 1-21 (p. 1).

[12] Mavelli and Petito, p. 7.

This is not to say that Ashbery's work needs to only be read through the lens of Buddhism. Notably, Ashbery tried to divest the New York School of classifications when he said that the only way the group could be identified was through 'its avoidance of anything like a program'.[13] Regarding the comment in part as an avant-garde poet's attempt at trail obfuscation, Ben Hickman asserts that 'the New York School certainly does have a reading program, however unprogrammatic it may be'.[14] The New York poets were attending to Buddhism, not ignoring it *en masse*, and each poet's manner of interest is singular and never consistent. Rather than isolate the poets within private 'sanctuaries', my attempt will be to investigate their engagement with Buddhism as a part of a spectrum of American avant-garde interests in the Orient and Buddhism.

***

Building on Ward's designation of the New York School, the title of this chapter bifurcates into two broad strands of arguments along with a third element which will be key over the course of the discussion. In this chapter, I will explore notions of the pastoral mode in the New York School to better define the political dimensions of the sanctuary I am speaking of. Going forward, I will chronicle the sociocultural complexities and the ideological backdrop against which this *topos* was taking shape, reframing the poets' encounter with Buddhism within discourses of post-secularism and Orientalism, the third element of the dissertation.

When Ward circumscribes the New York School 'sanctuary' as the poets' response to dominant ideology ('bourgeois conformism'), he alludes to a historical component of the poems that cannot be discounted. The early writing careers of the first-generation of the New York School coincided with the beginning of the Cold War, a time when American politics had begun to project the nation as a religious power. Judeo-Christian beliefs were co-opted by political players and integrated into 'Americanness' and nationalistic fervour, as when Joseph McCarthy pitted the war against an 'atheistic Communism' as 'that final Armageddon foretold in the Bible'.[15] Zen Buddhism, having altered European art and culture during the late 1890s, swept the US in the 1950s. In America, Zen was not only perceived as an aesthetic form but also as a mode of expression for countercultural sentiments and a religious alternative to orthodox Judeo-Christian traditions. Influenced by monk-philosophers such as D. T. Suzuki and Sokei-an Shigetsu Sasaki, and the translations of Alan Watts, a new generation of artists and poets began to imagine syncretic societies that imbricated with the pluralist ideas of early American thinkers. Andrew Epstein notes how, chafed by McCarthyism, ideological coercion, and Cold War anxiety, artists in post-war America returned to the pragmatism of Emerson and William James, fiercely protecting their individualistic principles.[16] But unlike Emerson, who recognised in Hindu Vedic literature and Buddhist philosophy an echo of his own arguments against New England Puritanism, the New York School did not consider the East as a fount of spiritual revitalisation. Nor did the poets join the Beats in believing Buddhism to be an instrument of political activism. In fact, relations between the New York School and the Beats, as Brad Gooch reports, were not always amicable. O'Hara was once even bullied by Jack Kerouac at a public reading, but it ultimately fell to the New York poet to bring them together.[17] O'Hara's friendships with Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Diane di Prima have been well documented by Gooch, David Lehman, and Lytle Shaw. Despite the bonhomie, and perhaps as a result of it, O'Hara tucks away quasi-complaints and mock-matronly counsel in his poems.

---

[13] John Ashbery, *Selected Prose: John Ashbery* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004), p. 113.
[14] Ben Hickman, *John Ashbery and English Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 115.

> Allen and Peter, why are you going away
> our country's black and white past spread out
> before us is no time to spread over India
>
> ('Vincent and I Inaugurate a Movie Theatre', *OCP*, 399)

These lines were written ten days before Ginsberg and his romantic partner Peter Orlovsky embarked on their first trip to India to pursue spiritual practices. It was 1961, and America's confrontation with its 'black and white past', the Civil Rights movement, was in full swing amidst the Cold War anxiety. For O'Hara, it was a time of reckoning for American liberalism, and to not be counted amongst the faithful amounted to abandoning ship.

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[15] Joseph McCarthy, quoted in Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle Against Communism in the Early Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 88.

[16] Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 17.

[17] Brad Gooch reports an unsavoury shouting match between O'Hara and Kerouac at an event where many Beats and New York poets got together to read; *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), pp. 322-24.

Timothy Gray extends Paul Alpers' definition of the pastoral as a 'sovereign domain' and interprets it in the context of O'Hara's work as 'a locale for those who believe themselves to be in flight from a more sober and proscriptive (though no less imaginative) space, be it a nation, a fatherland, or even one's own interpellated identity'.[18] O'Hara, a gay man like Schuyler and Ashbery, had many reasons to turn away from a society and a political establishment that demonised homosexuals, but they were never enough to make him want to 'take flight'. In fact, the first-generation poets lived in America all their lives, and for the most part they chose New York. Ashbery was the only exception, having travelled to Paris on a Fulbright scholarship, but it was New York he returned to after a decade away. The temporal position of the New York School sanctuary is further defined not in some bygone Golden Age or a potential Utopia, where Harry Levin locates the traditional pastoral, but in the 'here and now'.[19]

Meanwhile Buddhism was infusing the sociocultural order with its emphasis on not merely a geographical present but to ever-mutable temporality and the self as the site of meditative observation. What Emerson and his peers lacked during their day was available more readily in the 1950s—a wide range of translations of Buddhist scriptures, evangelists from the Orient, and Western scholars distilling Zen from Eastern culture and literature. R. H. Blyth, an avid proponent of haiku and Zen aesthetics, praised the attention given to the everyday and the mundane in Bashō's poetry, '*not as symbols of the Infinite, not as types of Eternity, but in themselves*' [emphasis not mine].[20] Alan Watts was calling for a renewed attention on immediate experience, insisting that 'there is never anything but the present, and if one cannot live there, one cannot live anywhere.'[21] The concept of Buddhist nirvana in Zen was different from the soteriology proposed by Hindu and Buddhist texts circulated during Emerson's time. In diametrical opposition to the Calvinists, the Transcendentalists were interested in the yogic idea that one's salvation did not depend on divine grace, and that it could be developed gradually through spiritual labour. While it distanced religion from determinism, liberation was hard work and took time. In the Fifties, with a shift towards Zen *satori*, nirvana was simply a matter of giving up intent and effort and could be attained instantaneously:

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[18] Timothy Gray, 'Semiotic Shepherds: Gary Snyder, Frank O'Hara, and the Embodiment of an Urban Pastoral', *Contemporary Literature*, 39.4 (Winter, 1998), 523-59 (p. 524).
[19] Harry Levin, *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 8.
[20] R. H. Blyth, *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics* (Kettering, Ohio: Angelico Press, 2016) p. 49.
[21] Alan W. Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Pantheon, 1957), p. 144.

‘Nirvana can only arise unintentionally, spontaneously,’ wrote Watts, ‘when the impossibility of self-grasping has been thoroughly perceived.’[22] Suzuki’s ideas of ‘naturalism’ proposed a radical choice:

> There is something divine in being spontaneous and being not at all hampered by human conventionalities and their artificial sophisticated hypocrisies. There is something direct and fresh in this not being restrained by anything human, which suggests a divine freedom and creativity.[23]

Zen spontaneity and improvisation fuelled subversive intent amongst liberals who were dissatisfied with ‘human conventionalities and their artificial sophisticated hypocrisies’ within American society. In art, it accompanied a surge in experimental modes and contributed to the rise of the American avant-garde. John Cage, an avid student of Suzuki’s teachings, and whose influence on the New York School I will go on to study as a part of Chapter 2, was vocal about the use of Zen aesthetics. In a lecture titled ‘Indeterminacy’, he says that ‘form unvitalized by spontaneity brings about the death of all the other elements of the work.’[24]

While the New York poets, particularly Ashbery and O’Hara, were attracted to Cage’s Zen principles, they did not approach it uncritically. Asked by *The New York Quarterly* in 1972 about his habits of revision, in light of a previous quote where he said that he ‘absorbed from Cage and Zen that whatever way it comes out is the way it is’, Ashbery said that he had come to think differently about spontaneity, and that his writing process had changed over the years: ‘I think I’ve moved away really from the total freedom I thought I had when I was beginning to experiment with very free, almost unconscious poetry’.[25] Ashbery recalls that it was with *The Tennis Court Oath* that he realised ‘randomness’ needed to be tempered with ‘meaningfulness’.[26] The 1962 collection was rejected by most critics. Even Harold Bloom who was effusive in his praise of *Some Trees*, Ashbery’s first collection, called ‘Europe’, one of the more heavily fragmented poems in *The Tennis Court Oath*, ‘a fearful disaster’.[27] Explaining his process behind the writing of the poem, Ashbery said, ‘I wasn’t satisfied with the way my work was going and I felt it was time to just clear my head by writing whatever came into it and that's very much the case with that poem'.[28] However, he was not attending myopically to his own absorption of Zen. A few months after *The Tennis Court Oath* was published, Ashbery, a correspondent and art critic for the *New York Herald Tribune* in Paris at the time, reported an exhibition featuring the works of 19th century Zen Buddhist monk Sengai. 'A Zen painting is the work of a few seconds', Ashbery writes in appreciation of the quality of spontaneity in Sengai's art, 'it is slapped down without preparation of [sic] afterthought. Small wonder that Zen has been dragged in to justify much that goes on in the arts today.'[29] Ashbery's message seems to be that spontaneity when misinterpreted can as easily legitimise tasteless art as it can foster avant-garde experiments. On the other hand, he could be pointing at a critical overreliance in the West to read contemporary art within a framework of Zen aesthetics. In either case, Ashbery was reflecting back at American society its own cultural and critical reception of the East.

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[22] Ibid., p. 71.

[23] Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Selected Works of D. T. Suzuki*, ed. by Richard M. Jaffe, vol 1 (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2014), p. 118.

[24] John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 35.

[25] Ashbery, *The Craft of Poetry: Interviews form The New York Quarterly*, ed. by William Packard (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974) p. 115.

[26] Ibid. p. 121.

[27] Harold Bloom, ‘The Charity of the Hard Moments’, *Contemporary Poetry in America* (Spring-Summer 1973), 103-131 (p. 105).

Ashbery's poetry holds two seemingly opposing ideas of temporality simultaneously; accompanying the urgency of the immediate is the inexorable signature of time. Commenting on the New York poet's self-assessment as 'minor', apolitical, and counter-canonical, Oli Hazzard returns to Walter Pater's thoughts on the figure of a minor poet, and he writes

> The mysterious pathos of much of Ashbery's work is partly generated by [a] 'shrinking' from great things, a cost that is absorbed in the service of an open, oblique, nuanced conception of how the experience of reading a poem relates to larger questions of politics and history, which Nealon formulates as 'a defence of apoliticality'. This process of continually turning away or shrinking from direct confrontation with the historical moment delegates to the reader the responsibility to read the poetry in extra-literary or explicitly political terms: or, rather, presents it as an option.[30]

In the New York School, the intervention of the speaker can be said to be predicated on a deliberate self-effacement of the poet. The textual space is emptied of all but traces of the historical and handed over to the reader who can then step in and extend the traces into broader notions of the political and the historical. The withdrawal of artistic energy designates not a disengagement from public space, but a circuitous yet strategic engagement with it. As a sanctuary in and of itself, poetry for the New York School is also a ‘sovereign domain’, a pastoral space, that comes with its own religious implications.

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[28] Ashbery, *The Craft of Poetry*, p. 116.

[29] Ashbery, 'From Zen to Illusions to Abstracts', *New York Herald Tribune*, 16 May 1962, p. 6.

[30] Oli Hazzard, *John Ashbery and the Anglo-American Exchange: The Minor Eras* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 26.

> I interpret this “metaphysical place,” this land where Feldman’s pieces live, as the area where spiritual growth in the work can occur, where the form of a work may develop its inherent originality and the personal meaning of the composer may become explicit. In a more literal way it is the space which must be cleared if the sensibility is to be free to express its individual preference for sound and to explore the meaning of this preference. That the process of finding this metaphysical place of unpredictability and possibility can be a drastic one is witnessed by the necessity Feldman felt a few years ago to avoid the academic ramifications of serial technique.
>
> (*SS*, 115-16)

O’Hara, when writing on the works of Morton Feldman, a friend and a musician who was a protégé of Cage, seemed to bring forth his own vision of a sanctuary. Diligent pruning and ‘clearing’ of dross must be undertaken if it is to be ensured that art does not turn sclerotic like the criticism of poetry, which O’Hara dismisses: ‘[Criticism] makes too much grass grow, and I don’t want to help hide my own poems’ (*OCP*, 510). The poem is an expression of the artist’s ‘individual preference’, and labour is involved in the upkeep of the ‘metaphysical place of unpredictability and possibility,’ a domain which aids spontaneity and creative freedom. Since O’Hara’s artistic sanctuary is a site for ‘spiritual growth’, no longer entirely secular, how do we plot its coordinates in relation to religion? Will Montgomery goes so far as to call O’Hara’s attitude a ‘coy religiosity,’ but declines to read theological or religious doctrines alongside his work, and with good reason: O’Hara grew up with an aversion for Catholicism and was an unapologetic atheist.[31] What, then, was O’Hara trying to wall out?

The New York School, as I wish to establish, can be read as a mode of ascesis where the term ‘spirituality’ carries the impress of the liberal views of its times. Perhaps the writing of poetry is not an exclusionary act as much as a preparatory exercise to keep returning to the world, as Guest writes, ‘the poem needs to have a spiritual or metaphysical life if it is going to engage itself with reality’ (*FOI*, 28). Boaz Huss proposes that a certain connotation of ‘spiritual’ peculiar to the late twentieth century in the West emerged out of a feeling that ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ were no longer adequate to describe new cultural formations which wished to occupy an in-between space.[32] These budding groups preferred a more private, and religious- and metaphysics-adjacent, domain than the materialistic, socio-economic, politically charged public space. Huss cites Jeremy Carrette and Richard King who trace the use of the term ‘spiritual’ to late nineteenth-century Western discourses which juxtaposed European secularism and colonialism with the ‘mystical’ Orient. To the West, the East appeared more holistic, unostentatious, and committedly moral, if less industrially developed. No doubt, as Carrette and King elaborate, the post-secular ‘spiritualism’ programme is an inextricable part of the exoticisation of the East, but the New York School’s response to Orientalism is an aspect I shall attend to later.[33] For now, this much is clear: the term ‘spiritual’ was a strategy for secular actors in post-war USA, such as O’Hara, to splinter from ‘bourgeois conformism’ and invite religious interpretations of ethics and aesthetics without encouraging institutional affiliations. It is as a part of this cultural phenomena that the sanctuary of the New York School needs to be revised as post-secular.

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[31] Will Montgomery, ‘“In Fatal Winds”: Frank O’Hara and Morton Feldman’, in *Frank O’Hara Now: New Essays on the New York Poet*, ed. by Robert Hampson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), pp. 195-210.

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Bemoaning the lack of critical discussion on the secularisation and subsequent post-secularisation of literature, Gauri Vishwanathan surmises that the reasons may lie in the way literature views itself as a ‘secular vehicle for ideas whose possible religious origins were subsequently effaced, as religious sensibility became absorbed into aesthetic form and imagery, especially in modernist writing’.[34] While the modernist effacement of the religious is historically significant, though difficult to plot comprehensively given the slow and gradual nature of the process, the induction of religious ideas, symbols, and motifs into literature becomes as momentous and complex as their erasure. As Zen refocused America’s interest in the way Buddhism is lived in the East and leaves its imprints on cultures, O’Hara felt the need to recontextualise the avant-garde in an Oriental aesthetic. In his essay ‘Nature and New Painting’, he writes for a liberation from ‘stylistic preoccupation’ in art.

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[32] Boaz Huss, ‘Spirituality: The Emergence of a New Cultural Category and its Challenge to the Religious and the Secular’, *Journal of Contemporary Literature*, 29.1 (2014), 47-60.

[33] Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2005), pp. 39-41.

[34] Gauri Vishwanathan, ‘Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy’, *PMLA*, 123.2 (Mar 2008), p. 466 (466-476).

> There is an initial perception which becomes a method: the perception of what painting is, or how it is done, and that is a great pleasure but it is not the highest art can afford. […]
>
> The abnegation by the artist of this delight in performance is age-old. It is returning to us in America, perhaps, via the Orient—Chinese and Japanese art, Zen Buddhism. One of Lady Murasaki's characters (circa A.D. 1000) offers a timely discussion: "In the Painters Workshop too there are many excellent artists chosen for their proficiency in ink-drawing; and indeed they are all so clever it is hard to set one above the other. But all of them are at work on subjects intended to impress and surprise. One paints the Mount of Horai; another a raging sea-monster riding a storm; another, ferocious animals from the Land beyond the sea, or faces of imaginary demons. Letting their fancy run wildly riot they have no thought of beauty, but only of how best they may astonish the beholder's eye. And though nothing is real, all is probable. But ordinary hills and rivers, just as they are, houses such as you may see anywhere, with all their real beauty and harmony of form – quietly to draw such scenes as this, or to show what lies beyond some intimate hedge that is folded away far from the world, and thick trees upon some unheroic hill, and all this with befitting care for composition, proportion, and the like – such works demand the highest master's utmost skill and must needs draw the common craftsman into a thousand blunders." I don't mean to minimize the artistic value of the bravura style by referring thus to a sensibility which is more general in the East – no one who loves the music of Liszt or the painting of Kandinsky can deny the role of vigor and brilliance in Western art. But my quotation does point to a contemporary attitude which is potentially dangerous, the attitude that a quieter gift signifies a "minor" sensibility not standing up to the challenges of bravura execution, that the return to the figure and nature in American painters signifies a falling away from passion, from profundity.
>
> (*SS*, 46-47)

In the essay, O'Hara seeks to radically redefine the parameters of taste and aesthetic by forewarning the avant-garde of their own hortatory propensities. Writing in defence of Jane Freilicher, Robert De Niro, Grace Hartigan, and Elaine de Kooning, artists who allegedly turned away from the abstract expressionist's rebellion against formal conventions and returned to the theme of nature, O'Hara seeks to reframe their work as 'naturalistic' iterations of abstract expression. Rather than interpret naturalism as an accurate artistic representation of nature (in a word, ‘realism’), he proposes that it be evaluated as art that emerges from the painter’s internal negotiations with a nature that is immanent and no different from the nature which exists without. O’Hara locates ‘naturalness’ not as an identifier of theme in the works of the ‘renegade’ artists but in as a condition in their principles of spontaneity and improvisation—principles which, O’Hara says, fuelled the early abstract expressionists. By additionally contextualising it within Zen art (Murasaki’s observation that the artist must have ‘no thought of beauty’ before they can be ‘drawn into a thousand blunders’), O’Hara pronounces a moral indictment of the establishment. Next to the ‘bravura’ of Western art, Murasaki’s meditative strategy is a ‘quieter gift’; this polarity gets distorted in cultural practice as a disparagement of Eastern inferiority. O’Hara not only attacks a dominant reading method which categorises Zen aesthetics as ‘minor’, but also calls into question an overarching cultural trend that is imperialist and ‘Orientalist’.

O’Hara’s 1954 essay performs a critique of Oriental narratives in the West, a conversation that comes to a head only in 1978 with Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. Since related discussions will become important over the course of this dissertation, I want to clarify the context of its use in the following chapters. Ellen Goldberg was perhaps the first to situate Buddhism in America within Said’s thesis. She grounds her research in Said’s proposition that North America’s Orientalist project was, while distinct, a legacy nonetheless of the European post-Enlightenment structures of constructing the East as a social and historical imaginary through imperialistic and racist stereotypes.[35] In the work of the New York School, there is a discernment of being a part of that legacy and a desire to stand apart from it, performing a critique that is carried out from within and without the project. In fact, Said’s thesis becomes particularly useful when exploring the poets’ concerns about the ideological inflections in the post-war spiritual and cultural exchange. Borrowing the idea of ‘discourse’ from Foucault, Said suggests that Orientalism is the product of an interaction between social actors through which certain power relations are expressed.[36] These relations are built on the perceptions of each other not as specific geographical units, but discourses wherein such units are fluid:

> as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it

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[35] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 4. While Ellen Goldberg acknowledges that the West’s conceptualisation of the Orient is underpinned by various structural interpretations such as marginalisation, textualization, mystification, and so on, she comes to focus primarily on the femininization of Buddhism in her article. See Goldberg, ‘The Re-Orientation of Buddhism in North America’, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion,* 11.4 (1999), 340-56.

[36] Said, p. 3.

> reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other.[37]

For the purposes of this dissertation, the Occident will be considered as much a political project as the Orient. The East and the West must refer back to 'traditions of thought' within a network of tropes that mediates the knowledge of one set of cultures and bodies for another. De-humanized, fetishized, or idealized, these depictions are *historical* refractions within various discourses through which the Occident and the Orient interact. I will consider the 'network of tropes' within the post-war literary spectrum, while maintaining the bi-directionality of communication within the channels of this network. This two-way interaction will be noted not only between the Orient and the Occident, but also between post-war American avant-garde and their historical antecedents on both sides of the Atlantic.

Although the Fifties proved a watershed moment for Zen in the US, Buddhism had been trickling in since the nineteenth century. In 1893, a young Suzuki accompanied the Zen patriarch Shaku Sôen to Chicago where, at the Parliament of the World's Religions, alongside other prominent religious figures from the East, they took to the stage to rework the Western gaze of the Orient. At the congregation, the Orientals projected themselves as more spiritually evolved and more mystical *because* less materialistically or technologically expansionist than the Occident.[38] The East was no longer 'backward' or 'underdeveloped'; instead, the concept of 'development' itself was recast within alternate paradigms. As Carrette and King maintain, any attempt to examine the 'spiritual' as a post-secular cultural formation in the West, must acknowledge not only the West's romanticisation of the East but also the ways in which the East constructed a counter-narrative using and extending the stereotypes which had denigrated it in the first place.[39]

As the New York School poem intertwines a multitude of discourses within its bounds, it explores the syncretic possibilities of a reading practice where the spiritual may be formed by blending the secular with the religious rather than excluding the latter altogether. At the same time, it invites the East to participate in the construction of this new imaginary. For Guest, who asks us to 'Respect [our] private language' (*FOI*, 78), the poem is first accessible only within a psychological dimension: 'The "spirit" or the "vision" of a poem arises from the contents of the poet's unconscious' (*FOI*, 28-29). The creative process may be self-driven, but the reception of the work is a social act.

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[37] Ibid., p. 5.
[38] Carrette and King, pp. 39-41.
[39] Ibid.

Together we'll breathe it,
you and I in the sleeve forgiving requiem,
in the priest tinted air.
In the gaslight that ridiculous plume
reminds me of hawks, I admire
their arc, I plunge
my everyday laughter into that kimono wing
what a studio soar! What rapture!
('In the Middle of the Easel', *GCP*, 11)

Gerard Manley Hopkins' raptor ('The Windhover'), a symbol for the Catholic faith, meets Zen's 'everyday laughter'. Within the poem's spiritual drive, we look back at the power dynamics between its religious elements. By returning to Hopkins, a priest in the Roman Catholic Church in 19th century England, a society which marginalised Catholicism, Guest relocates Christian values in order to carry out a cultural integration of Zen. In America, where anti-Catholicism was entrenched as a colonial legacy, it is not literature's revolutionary force but its historical function as a sanctuary for 'minor' entities which allows for a cultural fusion on an equal footing.

In her studies in Orientalism in American modernism, Mari Yoshihara reads Amy Lowell's work as a 'racial masquerade' where the poet essays the part of an Asian narrator in order to not only embody 'exotic' femininity but to also acquire qualities idealised in Oriental women.[40] Guest's lyrical agility mimics Hopkin's falcon, but it is enabled as much by her japonaiserie, her cultural cross-dressing (kimono), and embodiment of Oriental piety, enabling her to look farther beyond dominant ideas of Western femininity. Such aesthetic choices are, however, accentuated by the poet's self-critical awareness.

What half-oriented eyes
have I opened

forcing them to see
the blue heavens
('Turkey Villas', *GCP*, 65-66)

Guest's social commentary is not without a rigorous self-examination. With 'half' demanding to be read as a stressed syllable, the poet in search of spirituality seems to wonder what good adopting a performative Orientalism can achieve. Guest's emphasis is on the need to look towards the East for cultural exchange, but at the same time to be mindful of the artifice the embodiment of the Orient entails. But while Guest's self-criticism is sincere, Koch reveals a more comedic, ironical approach.

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[40] Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 113.

> In the country of the middle
> The person in the middle is king
> No one walking on the outskirts
> No sprechstimme singing in Beijing
>
> […]
>
> "Call Amalgamated Chinoiseries and get me the manager!
> Give me a bowl of the share-holding poundings of the sea!
> Let them be like flowerets on my army bandage!
> I want to never leave the hinges of this diamond sleep!"
>
> ('The First Step', *KCP*)

The title of the poem is an extraction from its epigraph ('A journey of ten thousand li begins with the first step'), a Chinese proverb that goes back to Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*. Religion in China (Zhōngguó, meaning 'middle country') is a historical entanglement of sorts. Koch's allusions are puzzling. Is he referring to Buddhism or Confucianism? A philosophical methodology which prescribes the avoidance of extremes—indulgence and privation, narcissism and self-annihilation—and the middle path (*majjhimā paṭipadā* in Buddhism and *Zhongyong* in Confucianism) is common between the two systems. In Chinese social practices, it is difficult to separate Buddhism, an Indian import, from Confucianism and Taoism, and Koch's Orientalism carries a cultural commentary on the historical fluidity and 'amalgamation' of customs and traditions.

Koch's obscured signifiers reveal an intimate knowledge of Chinese culture, but the same cannot be said about the irate military man he parodies. The loud-mouthed figure becomes a device with which Koch denounces the West's culture of entitlement and its tendency to aggressively corporatize and commodify the East ('Amalgamated Chinoiseries'). Koch juxtaposes Eastern spirituality with the hyperconsumerism and hypermasculinity that characterised American post-war societies, and interrogates the West's Orientalist gaze.

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The first-generation New York School attended to the myriad ways in which the social and the historical are stored within the poem, and how the poem itself is a part of a social and historical context, and there are moments when the poets are writing in one mode and not the other. O'Hara's work, for example, makes it difficult to pigeonhole him as a poet and a social actor because his essay 'Nature and New Painting,' where he forms an unflinching evaluation of his times, must be placed alongside his more contentious pieces such as 'An Image of the Buddha Preaching,' (discussed in Chapter 1). Similarly, Guest's exoticisation of the Orient must be drawn into conversations with her apparent frustration with the difficulty of achieving a subject-object synthesis with Buddhist values in the odal 'Walking Buddha'. And Ashbery's japonaiserie, as he attempts to interpret Zen without leaving behind its ethical concerns, must be analysed next to Koch's travelogue poems where the latter critiques the Orient on its own ground. It is not my ambition to drive towards a singular satisfactory idea which can redefine the first-generation New York School, but rather to study the poems as a range of attitudes where the poets perform often contradicting attitudes towards Buddhism.

The exclusion of James Schuyler from the discussion so far begs explanation. When I began discussing my project with experts in the field, Schuyler's was the first name to come up, and with good reason. His emphasis on attention and a meditative observation of objects does indeed make his work apposite to Buddhist aesthetics, but it soon appeared to me that my decision to examine the New York School's engagement with Buddhism beyond identifying formal and tonal inflections of Buddhist aesthetics in their work meant that I had to make some difficult choices. Schuyler's poems do not reflect the social and historical entanglements of Buddhism in the USA as overtly as the works of the other four. This could mean that Schuyler's attitude is the most circumspect of the group, but I will leave a detailed consideration of his poetics in relation to Buddhism for a longer project. That said, I will attend to his work in passing, where I feel it can speak for the broader conventions of the group and its times.

The two main chapters will be structured such that the first prepares the ground for the second. The discussions in each chapter will be situated within an analytical scaffolding comprising of three broad elements: a particular aesthetic stance of the poets, a literary historical context, and a central thesis. The first chapter will pay attention to the New York School's circumspection to Buddhism as a mode of aesthetic indifference. 'Indifference', suggested by Mark Silverberg as a mode of the group, is also a term that has historically been used to interpret Buddhism in the West.[41] This kinship will allow me to prepare a common ground to examine the implication of 'indifference' in the discrete hermeneutical traditions of Buddhism and the New York School, and the extent to which the poets were complicating this particular interpretation of the Eastern religion. Additionally, I will look at Buddhism's place as a cultural artefact within the poets' Orientalist discourses. 'Is it possible,' the poets seem to be asking, 'for Buddhism to be truly integrated into American society and culture?' As these conversations develop, I will draw out the New York School's circumspections in the context of the Beats' deployment of Buddhism as an ideological instrument.

In the second chapter, I will extend the New York School's Orientalist discourse to study their post-secularist position amidst the dominant religious ideology in American politics and society during the Cold War. Given the centrality of the principles of spontaneity and gestural artistic practices within the American avant-garde, it is important to read the New York School's ideas of breath-based poetics and the ways in which they regulated their critical distance from Buddhism's body-centred mindfulness techniques. One way the New Yorkers were embodying Buddhist philosophy was also, as I will have already established, by responding to and evaluating the Beats' development of meditative poetics. While it will continue to provide a useful point of contrast, I will complicate the literary historical conversation further by introducing the modernists—Eliot, Pound, and Charles Olson—in order to plot the genealogies of New York School's literary post-secularism. Thus, the two chapters will chart a two-part response of the poets to Buddhism. This first chapter will track their circumspection towards Buddhism as a foreign aesthetic and cultural import and the second will examine their embrace of its scope as a social practice.

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'In placing this particular thought | I am taking up the cudgel against indifference' (*OCP*, 384), O'Hara begins 'Fond Sonore'. For a poet as immersed as O'Hara was in the spiritual practice of his art, his preoccupations with advocating for the artist's active social role cannot be ignored, nor indeed the extent to which he used the allusive power of poetic language for cultural commentary. The emphasis of Buddhist mindfulness practices on achieving a state of ‘no thought’ could be interpreted in two ways by the avant-garde: as a methodological precondition for accessing a free flow of creative energy, or as a socially passive, quietist submission to groupthink.[42] The second one played a significant part in building Buddhism’s reputation as an ‘indifferent’ religion in the West, particularly in societies with orthodox Judeo-Christian legacies. O’Hara’s clarification is, thus, a sharpening of focus on the lyric voice against its *fond sonore*, the ‘background noise’ of sociocultural activity. From time to time the New York poets felt a need to etch their own places as distinctive from the mores of post-war culture in the US while bringing into prominence the very environment they wished to transcend. The title of this dissertation alludes to this volatile relationship between text and context, between the first-generation New York School poets and their post-secular and Orientalist ambience.

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[41] Mark Silverberg, *The New York School Poets and Neo-Avant-Garde: Between Radical Art and Radical Chic* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2010), p. 19, 22. See Chapter 1 for a more detailed examination of the poets' works in the context of Silverberg's assessment.

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[42] I refer to the conformist psychological processes involved in policy making in big and small groups, coined on Orwell’s notion of ‘doublethink’, identified by Irving Janis and later discovered in the earlier works of W. H. Whyte Jr.

Chapter 1

‘we must go around you’: Orientalism and Buddhist Indifference

In May 1917, *The Blind Man* magazine featured as its frontispiece an image of an upended, white porcelain urinal titled *Fountain*—by now a familiar landmark in modern art—signed ‘R. Mutt, 1917’.[1] In a rebuttal to The Society of Independent Artists’ rejection of the *Fountain* for an exhibition, the editorial claimed that ‘Mr. Mutt’s fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bath tub is immoral’.[2] Marcel Duchamp later emerged as one of the three editors of the magazine, and also the artist behind the provocative ‘readymade’. The unsigned editorial was followed by an article titled ‘Buddha of the Bathroom’, penned by one of Duchamp’s friends Louise Norton, who wrote:

> The object was irrevocably associated in [the jurors’] atavistic minds with a certain natural function of a secretive sort. Yet to any “innocent” eye how pleasant is its chaste simplicity of line and colour! Someone said, “Like a lovely Buddha”; someone said, “Like the legs of the ladies by Cezanne”.[3]

Sure enough, observed closely, the urinal’s curved porcelain border begins to appear as the form of a seated Buddha [fig. 1].[4]

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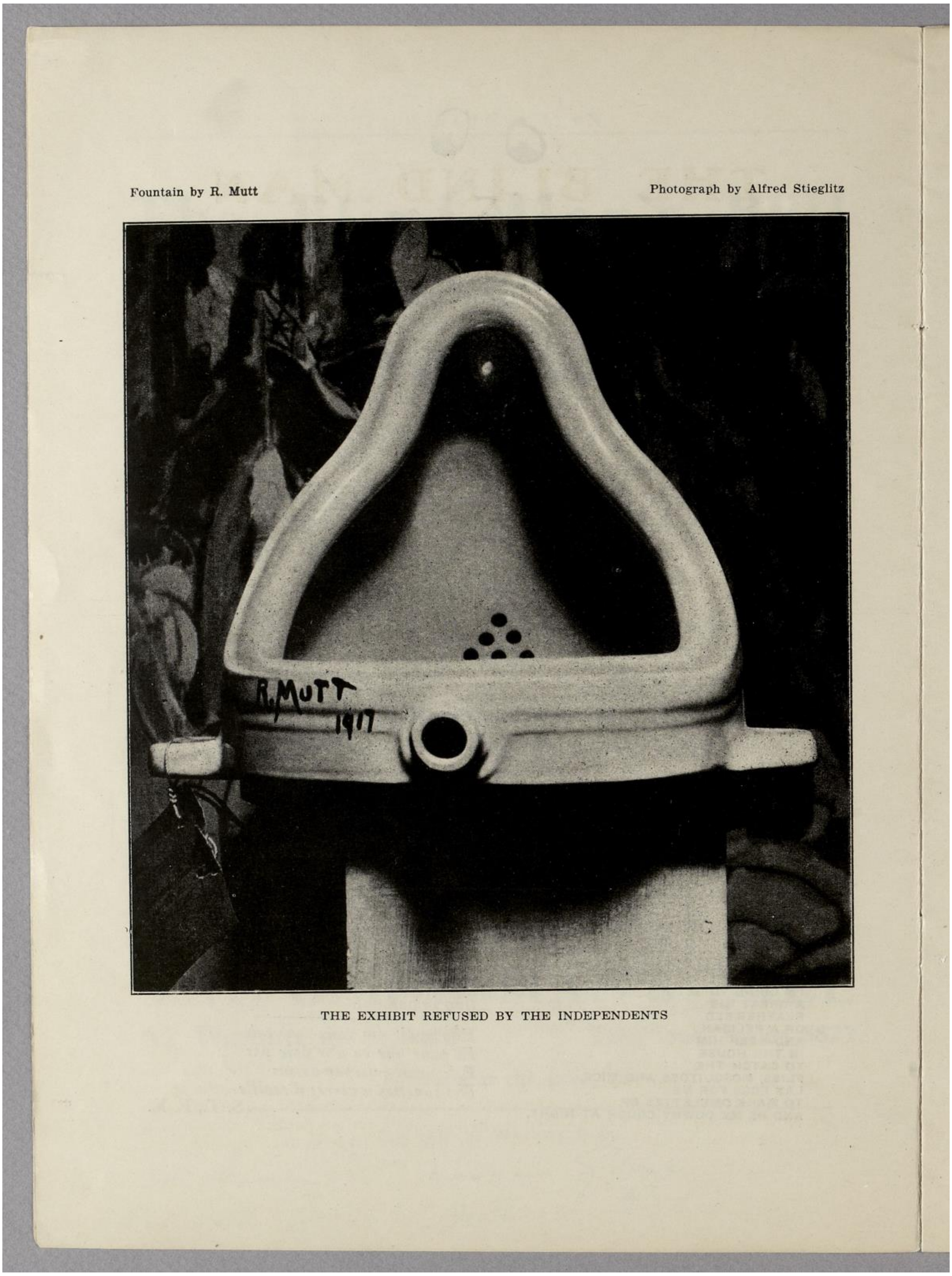
[1] *The Blind Man,* 2 (May 1917), in *Monoskop* <https://monoskop.org/images/6/6f/The_Blind_Man_2_May_1917.pdf> [accessed 13 Jul 2020]

[2] Ibid., p. 5.

[3] Ibid., pp. 5-6.

[4] ‘Fountain’, Ibid.



Fountain by R. Mutt

Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz

THE EXHIBIT REFUSED BY THE INDEPENDENTS

Figure 1 – 'The Fountain[5]

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[5] Alfred Stieglitz, 'The Fountain', 2 (May 1917), in Monoskop <https://monoskop.org/images/6/6f/The_Blind_Man_2_May_1917.pdf> [accessed 13 Jul 2020]

In fact, Alfred Stieglitz, to whom the photograph of the *Fountain* is attributed, wrote in a letter that he intended to '[suggest] a Buddha form'.[6] In her riposte, Norton does not merely point to a visual reference to the Orient but also adopts a Buddhist critical lens.[7] Duchamp's urinal, like all objects and all of existence, is imbued with a Buddha nature or *tathata*, a 'suchness' or 'thusness', shorn of judgments which the human mind otherwise imposes. According to Norton, the jurors' puritanical gaze could notice only the utilitarian functions of the urinal, whereas someone with an 'innocent eye'—such as the *Tathagata*, a 'thus-goer' in Mahayana and Zen Buddhism, who does not protract experience into discrete units of thought and judgement—would see no difference between the profane and the sacred.

In their bid to unsettle a rigid cultural order, the Dadaists were complicating ideas of aesthetics and morality by circulating Buddhist tropes within their art. The group behind the *Fountain* were not the only Dadaist voices to draw references to the Eastern religion. When Tristan Tzara wrote that 'Dada isn't at all modern, it's rather a return to a quasi-buddhist religion of indifference', he placed the movement in a tradition that had historically challenged orthodoxy and institutionalised thought.[8] Buddhist 'indifference' can, then, be understood as a state of detachment and a self-positioning that is consciously marginalised in relation to cultural hegemonies. In Europe, this evasive criticality came to characterise the aesthetic interpretations of Japanese culture in the nineteenth century.

As Japan ended its 220-year self-imposed seclusion from the world in 1854 and resumed international trade, a range of Japanese artefacts, decorative objects, paintings, and artistic prints and fabric flooded the markets of the West. By the *fin de siècle*, Japanese aesthetics had already found favour amongst French poets such as Théophile Gautier, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Charles Baudelaire, and Impressionist painters such as Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, and Edgar Degas who were even labelled *intransigeants* and *japonistes*. The commercial and cultural exchange not only changed Western art but also the material reality of the Occident. In the cheap production techniques of Japanese art and the everydayness of Oriental motifs which impressed Émile Zola, Ian Harris observes the proliferation of the Buddhist principles of immediacy and a call to attend to the mundane.[9] Landscapes and traditional religious themes from the Bible no longer interested the artists as they began to render scenes from cafés, train stations, dancing halls, toilets, and even *cocottes* and daily wage earners at work. Thus, in the hand of the French artists and writers, *japonisme* became a transgressive, modernising force that altered the course of Western art.

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[6] Stieglitz's letter cited by Bradley Bailey, 'Rethinking Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* as a Collaborative Process', in *Creative Collaboration in Art: Practice, Research, and Pedagogy*, M. Kathryn Shields & Sunny Spillane, eds (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), p. 255. Google Books. The poet Guillaume Apolliniare wrote in the *Mercure de France* that he saw 'the shape of a meditating Buddha' in Duchamp's 'readymade', referring to the item as *Le Boudha de La Salle de Bain*. Cited by Dario Gamoni in *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), p. 147. Google Books.

[7] In 2014, a piece by Julian Spalding and Glyn Thompson in *The Art Newspaper* claimed that it was perhaps the Baroness Elsa von Freitag-Loringhoven and not Duchamp who was the artist behind the *Fountain*; 'Did Marcel Duchamp Steal Elsa's Urinal', *The Art Newspaper*, 1 November 2014 <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2014/11/01/did-marcel-duchamp-steal-elsas-urinal> [accessed 22 March 2022]. The basis of this claim was a letter where Duchamp said that it was a 'female friend' who was the true author. Even Norton's name emerged as a possible candidate. Still others saw the whole thing as a ruse, a deliberately constructed ambiguity not at all out of character for the Dadaist, who encourages the destabilisation of their own authorship. It was also suggested that Duchamp might have playfully alluded to his female alter-ego Rrose Selavy. While the question of authorship of the *Fountain* is not the subject of this study, it should be said that the ambiguity draws Dadaism closer to Buddhist principles since, as Cage notices, 'neither Dada nor Zen is a fixed tangible'. Cage quoted by Kay Larson, *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists*, (New York: Penguin, 2012), p. 77.

[8] Tristan Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*, trans. by Barbara Wright (London: John Calder, 1977), p. 108. Buddhism's reputation as a subversive philosophy can be traced back to its beginnings in India where it posed a challenge to Vedic monotheism as well as the Hindu caste-system.

Raymond Isay wrote in 1937, 'pour la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle, le Japon avait été [...] l'équivalent de la découverte d'un continent esthétique nouveau' [for the second half of the nineteenth century, the West's encounter with Japan amounted to the discovery of a new aesthetic continent]; Japan, and not merely Japanese art and artefacts, was brought over to the West.[10] With the *Fountain* and the conversations to do with it in *The Blind Man*, wherein the impress of the Buddha was discernible in material production as well as cognitive processes, Duchamp joined the West's historical, cultural transference of Japan. Notwithstanding Norton's and Tzara's insouciance towards institutionalised conventions, intended no doubt to also undermine a serious critical appraisal of Buddhist overtones, their references need to be read as Orientalist antecedents of the post-war avant-garde in the USA. Tzara's dictum is useful for the purpose of this thesis, to not only plot the New York School in relational terms to Buddhist aesthetics in art and culture, but to also complicate criticism on the poets, as I shall demonstrate later in the chapter.

As an editor of the magazine, Duchamp's collusion in *The Blind Man*'s references to Buddhism cannot be discounted, although he never admitted to having an interest in it.[11] By the twentieth century, Buddhism had become a part of the European subculture, and Duchamp's diversionary attitude could be a quasi-Buddhist indifference turned around on itself. Can the New York School, especially O'Hara who drew from Dada sensibilities, be said to be practicing a similar critical evasiveness that was self-aware of being Orientalist? And can the proposition of this dissertation, that the New York School displayed a circumspection towards Buddhism, be extended to assert that it was in fact a cognate indifference that was strategically turned back on Buddhism itself? And in what sense do the poets 'take up the cudgel against indifference' ('Fond Sonore', *OCP*, 384)?

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[9] Ian Harris, 'A Commodius Vicus of Circulation', in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann, eds (London: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 366-67.

[10] Gayle Zachmann, 'Postcards from Japan: Asian Dissonance in Mallarmé, Zola, and Proust', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 56.3 (Fall 2016), 76-89 (p. 77).

[11] Cage recalls asking Duchamp about any interest in the Orient and the French artist always replied in the negative, in *Where the Heart Beats*, p. 62. The links between Buddhism and Dadaism have always been conjectured. John Cage remembers attending a lecture by Nancy Wilson Ross in 1939 titled 'Zen Buddhism and Dada', and reflects, 'It is possible to make a connection between the two, but neither Dada nor Zen is a fixed tangible. They change; and in quite different ways in different places and times, they invigorate action.' Ibid., p. 77. Also see Larson's reading of Buddhist aesthetics in the *Fountain*, in *Where the Heart Beats*, pp. 46-49.

The word 'indifference' has long been seen as the essence of Buddhism in the West and is really an early mistranslation that has persisted in English to this day. Informed by the cognitive biases of the first Christian missionaries and colonial practices, it refers to the quality of *upekkha*, a state of non-attachment achieved through mindfulness meditation, and recent scholarship has begun to prefer understanding the term as 'equanimity' to avoid misleading semantic registers.[12] The argument is that 'indifference', with its connotations of aloofness, dismissiveness, and apathy, necessitates further qualifications, especially because it leaves no room for interlinked and equally essential qualities such as compassion (*karuṇā*) or loving kindness (*mettā*).

Incidentally, 'indifference' is also a term which has been used to define Buddhist-adjacent art in the West, if only by dint of association. Take for instance John Cage who, perhaps aware of the critical tendency to extrapolate Zen principles from Western art, wrote tongue-in-cheek, 'What I do I do not wish blamed on Zen, though without my engagement with Zen (attendance at lectures by Alan Watts and D. T. Suzuki, reading of the literature) I doubt whether I would have done what I have done'.[13] In praise of the avant-garde musician's work, composer Karlheinz Stockhausen later said, 'Cage is the craziest spirit of combination I have ever come across; […] he has that *indifference* towards everything known and experienced that is necessary for an explorer' [emphasis mine].[14] By casting Cage as a dematerialised ‘spirit’, Stockhausen regards him as a transcendental figure, while also conveying that it is a combinatory aesthetic and not apathy or aloofness which stems from his indifference.

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[12] For early translations of *upekkha* as 'indifference' see Henry Clarke Warren's *Buddhism in Translations* first published in 1896 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1909). Google Books; On recent debates centered on the need to interpret *upekkha* as 'equanimity' instead of 'indifference', see Emily McRae, 'Equanimity and Intimacy: A Buddhist Feminist Approach to the Elimination of Bias', *Sophia*, 52 (2013), 447-462, and 'Equanimity and the Moral Virtue of Open-Mindedness', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 53.1 (January, 2016), 97-108. Also see Yuval Hadash and Natalie Segev's 'The Decoupling Model of Equanimity: Theory, Measurement, and Test in a Mindfulness Intervention', *Mindfulness*, *7* (2016), 1214-1226 (pp. 1215-1216).

[13] Cage, *Silence*, p. xi.

[14] Cited in Robin Maconie, *Other Planets: The Music of Karlheinz Stockhausen* (London: Scarecrow Press, 2005), p. 140. Google Books.

There are dangers in believing that all indifference in art comes from Buddhism, but what I am interested in is the signification of ‘indifference’ and its contextual entanglements with Buddhism in the post-war American avant-garde. Not surprisingly, the New York School, which had admirers of Cage in Ashbery and O’Hara (for more on Cage and the two poets, see Chapter 2), also came to acquire the critical tag of ‘indifference’ over time. Arguing for a neo-avant-garde shift in the work of the New York School poets, Mark Silverberg notes a departure from the principles that distinguished the previous avant-garde movements such as the Dadaists, the modernists, and also the Abstract Expressionists. If antagonism and opposition, both Duchamp’s strategies of critiquing artistic institutions, was an essential component of the avant-garde,

> these poets turned from the habitual rejections of the avant-garde as they understood it to a new attitude of *indifference* [,] less self-certain and ambitious and more neutral and ironic, less transgressive and more deconstructive [….] For [Richard] Murphy, the avant-garde uses *self-criticism* as a means of deconstructing not only the institution of art, but more broadly the “dominant social discourses” which legitimate and stabilize “the social imaginary” [….] Techniques such as de-aestheticization, exaggeration and deformation, and the fragmentation of character are all used to destabilize the dominant conventions of representation and, along with them, dominant beliefs about perception and “reality”.[15]

While Silverberg looks to redefine a historically coded cultural and critical marker to read a ‘new attitude of *indifference*’ in the New York School, he argues for a ‘more deconstructive’ mode in their work. What I propose is that although Silverberg’s evaluation came after the poems I will study, the poets were aware of the categories of ‘indifference’ in reading practices as well as the cultural genealogies of artistic ‘indifference’. The New York School’s uses of ‘de-aestheticization, exaggeration, and deformation’ were strategies to not only confound and regulate critical perceptions of their own proclivity for Buddhist aesthetics, but to also problematise dominant representations of the Orient. As a result, they looked to destabilise the social agendas and semantic registers of mainstream as well as countercultural discourses to do with Buddhist indifference in the West. So, when O'Hara 'takes up the cudgel against indifference', he is going to work on perceptions of the Orient in the historical *fond sonore* as well as on the effects of its contingencies on his poetry.

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[15] Silverberg, p. 19, 22.

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As I have stated in the introduction to this dissertation, this chapter will focus on the New York School's engagement with Buddhism in the context of Orientalist practices, and to do so it is important to study traditions of its representations in the West. Said refers to various binary oppositions between the Orient and the Occident within 'a framework constructed out of biological determinism and moral-political admonishment,' and notes a feminisation of the East in the colonial gaze.[16] This colonial categorization came from a habit of viewing the Orient out of intrigue and contempt. In Norton's article on the *Fountain*, the male-female dialectic is used to subvert gendered power structures that dictate ideas of morality. The jurors are 'atavistic' ('forefather' in Latin) authors of meaning whose hegemonizing gaze only recognizes the object's utilitarian relations with phallic discharge, hence restricting its associative, artistic scope. Liberated by the Dadaist's 'look',[17] Duchamp's 'readymade' expresses a dynamic virginal femininity ('chaste simplicity') through a combinatory aesthetic of Buddhism and Cezanne's female nudes. Although historically feminised and suppressed, the Orient, for Norton, is a spiritual, countervailing force to an erotic, 'immoral' impulse that sees the world strictly as a site for the gratification of male pleasure.

To locate strains of Orientalism in O'Hara's poems is to encounter an interpretative position that complicates the West's historical power relations with a gendered Orient, but in ways distinct from Norton's. The New York poet acknowledges his leaning towards Dadaism early on in his early poems such as 'Memorial Day 1950', 'Night Thoughts in Greenwich Village', and 'Homage to Rrose Sélavy' which was a tribute to Duchamp. In the Introduction I discussed O'Hara's ideas, in an essay from 1950, on absorbing Zen spontaneity into American art and literature, and it was Ashbery who identified a 'French Zen period' (*OCP*, ix) in his early work, referring perhaps to his style around this time. However, in 'Poem' (1950) a tension between O'Hara's aesthetic choices comes to the fore as he writes on the pervasive influence of the Orient while ironizing the West's and his own submission to it.

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[16] Said, p. 207.

[17] E. Ann Kaplan chisels Laura Mulvey's idea of 'gaze' further to indicate 'a one-way subjective vision'. While 'looking' involves a curiosity, a desire to discover through empathy, the 'gaze' is wrought with a subordinating, exploitative intent. See *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. xvi-xvii.

> The birds push apples through
> grass the moon turns blue,
>
> these apples roll beneath
> our buttocks like a heath
>
> full of Chinese thrushes
> flushed from China's bushes.
>
> As we love at night
> birds sing out of sight,
>
> Chinese rhythms beat
> through us in our heat,
>
> the apples and the birds
> move us like soft words,
>
> we couple in the grace
> of that mysterious race.
>
> ('Poem' [At night Chinamen jump], *OCP*, 14)

The East, historically feminised, subordinated and managed by the colonial gaze, switches, in post-war America, to a dominant position having taken on a seductive power. The cultural fusion is also mediated by a Western fetishization of the Orient, through the speaker's intrigue for the East's 'inscrutability' ('that mysterious race'). O'Hara casts China as a temptress who releases songbirds from her 'bushes', enticing America into coupling. The speaker, caught in a Keatsian stupor while very much a part of the intercourse, cannot identify the source of the seduction (birds sing out of sight), and so the intercultural mating, carried out 'in the grace' of the Orient, is less an act among equals than a blessing bestowed on the West. Although the influence of the Chinese pastoral (apples and birds) and prosody ('Chinese rhythms beat | through us') is welcomed, the poem's satirical use of gender stereotypes of race and culture facilitates a commentary on colonial narratives in the aftermath of the Second World war and the Orient's exploitation of these narratives. In doing so, O'Hara critiques the Orient's 'grace' as well as the Occident's erotic gaze, cartooning the power dynamics that accompanied cultural and ideological exchanges in America during the Fifties.

As art critics, the New York poets saw themselves as custodians of taste and moral reverberations within a culture, and O'Hara notes with caution the impact of the Orient on Western critical practices. He highlights the case of Franz Kline whose ingenuity was undermined by drawing genealogical lines to the Orient, delegitimising in the process an artistic integrity that was local. Kline's early work featuring angular, crosswise streaks of black on white came to be widely considered as an avant-garde's interpretation of Japanese calligraphy, but O'Hara was having none of it.

> Kline did not find a deep spiritual affinity in Japanese art, beyond his appreciation of its pictorial values and perhaps a fondness for the diagonal and for the build-up of unified imagery through exquisite detail also appreciated fully by so many nineteenth-century European painters. His influence on Japanese painters themselves has usually led them directly *away* from their own calligraphic tradition, and we know that one of their leading painters, the late Sabro Hasegawa, admired Kline precisely because his work seemed uniquely American.[18]

O'Hara's emphasis on Kline's originality calls for the West to recentre the artist in the process of cultural exchange rather than perceiving him as a passive actor in the historical progress of art. During the Cold War, a time when individual expression in the US was facing social and political coercion to conform to a dominant ideology, the avant-garde was looking for a way to destabilise an increasingly homogenised idea of the patriotic American in pursuit of the capitalist dream. This hegemonic projected image excluded liberals and artists. O'Hara's pitch for Kline, a Bohemian artist with roots in Greenwich Village, as 'uniquely American' could be seen as a ploy to complicate political projections of 'Americanness' at home and abroad. At the same time, with the New York School artists displacing the Paris School after the war, the poets felt it imperative to present American artists as pioneers in the transatlantic market, and O'Hara's placing of Kline in the European tradition is an act that is self-consciously American. Referring to Kline's rising popularity in France and a showcase of Kline's work at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville, Ashbery reports an 'American takeover' in Paris, observing a change in global leadership in the arts.[19] With similar enthusiasm, O'Hara projects Kline as an equal of masters such as the Impressionists whose achievements overshadowed their reputation as '*japonistes*' thanks to an indifference to the spiritual component of Japanese art. If, as a consequence, O'Hara's proposition that Kline reversed the trend of *japonisme* by having an impact on Japanese art seems unfair, it was because there was a debt, not to mention a 'spiritual affinity', to be acknowledged amongst contemporary artists and poets in the US.

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[18] O'Hara, *Frank O'Hara: Art Chronicles 1954-1966* (New York: George Braziller, 1975), p. 48.

[19] Ashbery, 'American Developments Worry French', *New York Herald Tribune*, 7 July 1964, p. 6. Ashbery borrows the term from a 'Sunday Times' article which proudly claimed a 'New York takeover', referring to an all-American show at the Tate gallery; see *Tribune*, May 26 1964, p. 6. Wartime analogies abound in Ashbery's criticism on reviews of American painters in Paris (another piece is titled 'Americans Infiltrate Paris Galleries', see *Tribune*, Wednesday March 8 1961, p. 7), and speak to the near-combative advance of the post-war American avant-garde into European circles of artistic discourse.

Although O'Hara looks to rescue Kline from a 'spiritual affinity' with the Orient, elsewhere he explicitly locates Morton Feldman's work within a spiritual domain (see Introduction). Spirituality is clearly an admirable component of modern art for O'Hara, though his indexical use of the word makes it difficult to gauge the exact sense in which he understands it. Historically, a semantic vagueness characterises the 'spiritual' tag, and much of this vagueness comes from the way 'spiritual' formations accrue meaning in cultures—through their ever-changing relations with 'religious' and 'secular'.[20] While 'spirituality' implies an adversarial stance against capitalist and consumerist cultures, its semantic registers are defined to a great extent by its opposition to religion's 'institutional connotations, prescribed rituals, and established ways of believing'.[21] Indeed O'Hara's apprehensions regarding Buddhism come from his attempts at stripping the religious component from the Oriental aesthetic, distilling a 'spirituality' that is individualistic and self-defined.

Looking at 'To John Ashbery', we might consider that O'Hara is entering the spiritual domain of creativity which he associated with Feldman, defining a new idyll following Theocritus and Virgil, but the Orient, bucolic as it may appear, is no Arcadia. As we have seen earlier, in 'Poem' [At night Chinamen jump], O'Hara sees a new shift in gendered power relations between the East and the West in the post-war era. With the Beats and the San Francisco Renaissance turning ideologically Buddhist, and with some of them even choosing religious conversion, the Orient was no longer the marginal cultural configuration it was before the war. Why then does he enter a camped-up Chinese pastoral in 'To John Ashbery'? As we shall see, an appreciation of Zen aesthetics not the only reason O'Hara visits the East. I want to identify a historical dovetailing of camp and Orientalism with gay aesthetics in order to explain yet another facet of O'Hara's Oriental affinity. It was after all 1954, and the Cold War had already prompted the Truman administration's aggressive programme of a surveillance of suspected communists and gay people, conflating the two groups during the lavender scare.[22]

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[20] Carrette and King, p. 33.

[21] Wade Clarke Roof and Lyn Gesch, 'Boomers and the Culture of Choice: Changing Patterns of Work, Family and Religion in Contemporary America', in *Work, Family and Religion in Contemporary America* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 72. Quoted in Carrette and King, pp. 31-32.

Louise Allen suggests that reading camp's and chinoiserie's development during eighteenth-century European colonial aesthetics can complicate an unambiguously feminine gendering of the Orient.[23] Allen identifies an ambivalence in the reading practices that went on to structure both Oriental and camp—an ambivalence that can be plotted, she argues, in-between genders. It is an affinity that lies not in the eighteenth-century dandy's subjective taste as divorced from the social structure but from within an incipient homosexual subculture. The homosexual, Sontag's connoisseur of camp, 'camps up' the Orient because the two cultural notions gravitate towards each other in terms of aesthetic, both catalogued by the heterosexual, colonial, delimiting gaze as 'effeminate' (not strictly female), 'vulgar', 'deviant', as something 'off'.[24] So when O'Hara, a gay man, slips on the garb of a Chinese poet in 'To John Ashbery' (1954), he travels with his friend, also a gay man, to a camped-up Orient that is met at eye level; he is home.

> I can't believe there's not
> another world where we will sit
> and read new poems to each other
> high on a mountain in the wind.
> You can be Tu Fu, I'll be Po Chü-i
> and the Monkey Lady'll be in the moon,
> smiling at our ill-fitting heads
> as we watch snow settle on a twig.
> Or shall we be really gone? this
> is not the grass I saw in my youth!
> and if the moon, when it rises
> tonight, is empty —a bad sign,

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[22] The red scare saw the harassment and persecution of people with socialist ideologies, branded as Communists. The lavender scare followed, intensifying in 1950, and saw anti-subversive legislations put in place against homosexuals. For more see Geoffrey S. Smith, 'National Security and Personal Isolation: Sex, Gender, and Disease in the World-War United States', *The International History Review,* 14.2, 317-22 (pp. 307-37).

[23] Louise Allen, '"Voila! The Orient!": Camp, Colonialism, and Gender', *Mentalities*, 16.1 (Jan, 2001), 68-79. Allen takes on from Susan Sontag's 'Notes on Camp', which traces camp back to aesthetic developments in eighteenth-century Europe, and specifically, amongst its several roots, to an emergent chinoiserie and Orientalism in art, design, and architecture.

[24] In her essay, Sontag writes, 'Camp is a vision of the world in terms of style—but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the "off," of things-being-what-they-are-not.' *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: André Deutsch, 1966), pp. 275-92 (p. 279). Allen reads the 'off-ness' in camp objects as a theatricalized deviation from standardization, a quality that is both cultural as well as gendered.

> meaning “You go, like the blossoms.”
>
> (*OCP*, 211)

The main principle in camp, as Sontag proposed in her essay, is ‘artifice and exaggeration’.[25] It is an aesthetic which

> sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a “lamp”; not a woman, but a “woman.” To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater.[26]

In the poem, O’Hara’s theatricality does not come across as either authoritative or colonial. Instead, O’Hara exaggerates the Orient rather than manicure it, especially with the camped-up hybridisation of the Monkey Lady, an Oriental body depicted as an in-between species, mythical if not disfigured, transcendental if not bestialised. The figure is also plotted in-between two cultural interpretations—while the feminine traits bespeak Western colonial narratives, the simian is an image frequently encountered in classical Chinese poetry and Buddhist mythology. In a popular tale, a Monkey King rebelled against the heavens only to be a defeated by the Buddha, ending up chained at the bottom of a mountain. Monkey then returns to go on a pilgrimage westward into India in search of Buddhist scriptures and Buddhahood.[27] The part-human, part-simian figure in particular has a varied significance in Chinese folklore, referring back to shapeshifting monkey-demons believed to fornicate with humans, or were-monkeys which transformed into Buddhist monks.[28] By raising the Monkey Lady high above the two poets, O’Hara elevates and foregrounds her genealogical complexity and cultural significance.

Reading O’Hara’s casting of Ashbery as Tu Fu and himself as Po Chü-i, the later poet and Tu Fu’s admirer, through the lens of their rivalry-tinged friendship, Andrew Epstein asserts that O’Hara performs a canonical elevation of Ashbery by representing him as the older poet whom he must emulate, while positioning himself as the figure burdened with the legacy of the great poet before him.[29] It is indeed puzzling why O’Hara does not depict himself as Li Po,

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[25] Sontag, 275.

[26] Ibid., p. 280.

[27] Whalen Lai, ‘From Protean Ape to Handsome Saint: The Monkey King’, *Asian Folklore Studies*, 53.1 (1994), 29-65.

[28] J. J. M. de Groot, *The Religious System of China: Its Ancient Forms Evolution, History and Present Aspect, Manners, Custom, and Social Institutions connected therewith*, vol 4 (Leyden: E. J. Brill, 1892-1910), pp. 200-202. de Groot traces the story of the monkey transforming into a pious monk to an ancient text, the *Süen-Shih Chi*.

[29] Epstein, pp. 248-50.

Tu Fu's contemporary and rival, which Epstein points out would make more sense, given the context of the New York poets' 'sibling rivalry'.[30] There may be no good reason to explain the anachronism, but there is a case to be made, concurrently, for Ashbery to be cast as Yüan Chen, Po Chü-i's closest friend, embodying a friendship that is legendary and exalted in Chinese literature. Be that as it may, in the context of O'Hara's difficult relationship with Buddhism, his decision to play Po Chü-i is significant. A public official deeply interested in Buddhism, Po Chü-i (772-846) was a lay follower and a never-ordained priest who often felt that he compromised his spiritual progress by writing poetry. He would often consider the two as incompatible with each other:

> Since earnestly studying the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness,
> I've learned to still all the common states of mind.
> Only the devil of poetry I have yet to conquer—
> let me come on a bit of scenery and I start my idle droning.[31]

Po Chü-i's poetry is replete with references to Ch'an Buddhism, particularly the *k'ung-men*, or the doctrine of the void, which has its roots in the Mahayana school in India, and which later formed the essence of Zen as it spread in Japan. He addresses the classical pastoral forms of poetry and condemns his own impulse for aestheticism ('let me come on a bit of scenery and I start my idle droning'). O'Hara, on the other hand, subverts the T'ang deference for Buddhism, choosing style over content, or shall we say 'contentment'. The moon *emptied* of the Monkey Lady, Oriental muse of camp, is 'a bad sign', and her absence signifies the end of subjectivity: 'You go, like the blossoms'. O'Hara's performance seeks to drag classical Chinese poetry away from any religious influence, such as the *k'ung-men*, and reintroduce style, which Buddhist quietism would forbid, through camp. O'Hara is walking a thin line between parody and reverence, and it is camp innocence, a performed naivete, that prevents O'Hara's aesthetic reorganisation of the Orient to be construed as a colonial takeover.[32] At the centre of the poem is a child's imaginative play and not a clarion call for a culture war. Under the benign, smiling muse, the two poets with 'ill-fitting heads' resemble infants with little control of their own bodies, a far cry from the steadfast colonialists. Childhood, in any case, is merely a rhetorical device for O'Hara, and at play here is the notion that wisdom and contentment are the privileges of the child, which, as Peter Marinelli notes, can be found in the pastoral forms in the Romantic tradition.[33] If the Romantic, as in Wordsworth's *The Prelude,* returns to the self that was once a child, O'Hara visits a self in futurity or, more precisely, an imagined self within a pastoral sanctuary. Utopias cannot be sustained for long, since, even within the Romantic pastoral mode, as Marinelli reveals, nostalgia forecloses any hope of truly recovering the child's worldview.[34] In O'Hara's poem, a contemplation of death brings about sudden aging ('this / is not the grass I saw in my youth!') and revives the speaker's opening concerns about the afterlife and rebirth. His early negation of transcendence ('I can't believe there's not / another world') has nevertheless developed into ambivalence ('shall we be really gone?'). For O'Hara, the moon's 'emptiness' is not merely portentous. In a poem where the speaker revisits the tensions between T'ang poetry and religion, O'Hara's prophecy is tinged with a refusal of *anatta*, or non-self—the Buddhist principle of non-essential 'emptiness' that governs all material phenomena.

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Translation from Burton Watson's article 'Buddhist Poet-Priests of the T'ang', *The Eastern Buddhist*, 25.2 (Autumn, 1992), 30-58 (p. 41). Kenneth K. S. Ch'en's translation reads, 'Ever since I practiced assiduously the method leading to the Gateway to the Void, | I have dispelled the various kinds of mental perturbation up to now. | Only the demon of poetry is not conquered. | Whenever the gay moment arises, I take pleasure to chant'. See *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 202.

[32] Sontag identifies the performance of innocence as crucial to the camp sensibility. Sontag, 283.

It is here that the poem enters an eschatological double-bind—despite O'Hara's desire for a child's naturalness over doctrinal wisdom, the paradisal afterlife that is the telos of the Romantic pastoral must remain in suspension given the poet's rejection of rebirth at the beginning of the poem. Much of the irony that underpins the poem is founded on the irreconcilability between its aesthetic choices. The spiritual component of O'Hara's Orientalism is therefore unstable, defined by the emotional drive of Western Romanticism and its disconcertment with institutionalised Buddhist belief.

Crucial to O'Hara's destabilisation of the formal and tonal integrity of T'ang poetry are the ways in which his essay of the role of Po Chü-i is at odds with the historical Po Chü-i. The Chinese poet's belief in *samsara* and the circle of life was abiding, unlike O'Hara's rejection of rebirth. In a eulogy he delivered at his friend Yüan Chen's funeral, where he alluded to Buddhist causality, he was assured that they would be reunited in another life.[35] That said, it is might be Po Chü-i's own complicated relationship with Buddhism which O'Hara exploits to define his 'spiritual' poetics. The Chinese poet's initial allegiance to traditional Confucianism and criticism of Buddhism as a 'foreign' religion, an Indian import, divided early scholarship on the matter of his true religious bearings. O'Hara's disavowal of a belief in reincarnation at the beginning of the poem is, therefore, not a swipe at an Eastern mysticism. Instead, he uses his role optimally, exploring all its contradictions to project an indifference towards doctrinal Buddhism. The child that designs the role-play reserves the one he most desires, the one he perceives as pivotal, for himself ('You can be Tu Fu, I'll be Po Chü-i').

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[33] Peter Marinelli, 'The Retreat into Childhood', in *The Pastoral Mode*, ed. by Bryan Loughrey (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 130-35 (p. 132).

[34] Ibid.

[35] 'Whenever there is a conjunction of karmic streams, it must be because of the confluence of previous causes. Can one say that our relationship with each other is merely accidental? In numerous incarnations we have separated and met again. Now we have separated, but who can saw we shall not meet again in the future?' Quoted by Kenneth Ch'en, p. 217.

Epstein is not inclined to consider the images in the poem as anything but facetious depictions of the Orient, and such a poetic treatment could be attributed to O'Hara's camp sensibility. These images are no more than affectations of translated Chinese poetry, Epstein maintains, and rather than aestheticize the Orient their function is to parody 'Western poetry's flirtation with Eastern mysticism'.[36] He does not offer any evidence of the limitations of O'Hara's knowledge of Chinese poetry, and if O'Hara's critical attention to *The Tale of Genji* is any indication (see Introduction) it cannot be said that he was a stranger to Oriental literature. In 'To John Ashbery', there is enough engagement with Po Chü-i's religiosity to determine that the poem is also a deliberately crafted pastiche to destabilise the Chinese reverence for Ch'an Buddhism.

In camp is ambivalence and in ambivalence resistance, and O'Hara is eager that his poetry be read in terms of its aesthetic value and not as a veiled religious instruction. Gary Snyder, on the other hand, reminds the reader of its religious quotient when he closes his 1996 collection *Mountains and Rivers Without End* by quoting Po Chü-I, who wished for his work to be perceived as a 'clarification of the Dharma, and be but another way to spread the Buddha's teachings'. Snyder then casts himself in Po Chu-i's image by adding 'May it be so!'[37] Indeed the poems in Snyder's collection oscillate between using Buddhism as both an organising principle and the subject of the poetry. Such was his investment in Buddhism that it was discussed and immortalised in literature by the Beats. In *Dharma Bums*, Kerouac's 'Zen lunatics', cognoscenti of the Orient, were a new breed of bohemian artists and intellectuals, vagabonds who willingly took up solitude and monastic contemplation, and chief amongst them was Japhy Ryder, a character modelled on Snyder. Ryder is a hiker, traveller, master of haiku, afficionado of tea, an outdoorsman with a 'lumberjack voice' yet 'strangely Oriental-looking with his somewhat slanted green eyes' which 'twinkled like the eyes of old giggling sages of China'.[38] Michael Masatsugu points out the physiological transformation of Ryder in the context of Cold War politics, and insists that the Beat projection of the image of the 'outsider' is a retaliation, consciously crafted to defy a politically driven 'domestic containment'.[39] Citing Jon Panish, Masatsugu discusses Kerouac's embodiment of the Orient as one in a series of takeovers of culturally marginalized races which went against the grain in an American consumerist society that was made up of predominantly white, heterosexual nuclear family systems.[40] The physiological conversion not only stemmed from an American fetishization of the Asian body but also involves actualising Oriental ascetic wisdom in a western body.

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[36] Epstein, p. 249.

[37] Gary Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (Berkley: Counterpoint, 1996), p. 160. Jonathan Stalling notes the homage in the context of Snyder's interest in the doctrine of emptiness, in *Poetics of Emptiness: Transformations of Asian Thought in American Poetry* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), p. 97.

The Beats' cultivation of the 'authentic' Oriental is in sharp contrast to O'Hara's irreverent theatricality in 'To John Ashbery' and elsewhere. While his constant reworking of Zen aesthetics may see the New York poet turn occasionally sardonic, it does push him to consider some contentious ideological positions. In 'Les Luths', his self-image is that of a new-age colonial master, but it is in fact part of a critical strategy, as I will demonstrate.

> Ah nuts! It's boring reading French newspapers
> in New York as if I were a Colonial waiting for my gin
> somewhere beyond this roof a jet is making a sketch of the sky
> where is Gary Snyder I wonder if he's reading under a dwarf pine
> stretched out so his book and his head fit under the lowest branch
> while the sun of the Orient rolls calmly not getting through to him
> not caring particularly because the light in Japan respects poets.
>
> ('Les Luths', *OCP*, 343)

It may be the multicultural vibrancy or the hegemony of French culture amongst the artistic milieu of New York that makes O'Hara feel like an expatriate in his own city, but it is a familiar approach in O’Hara to undercut the authority of the speaker’s subjective position with irony. In this poem it is a ruse to be able to carry out a wider critique of the artist’s function in society.

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[38] Jack Kerouac, *Dharma Bums* (London: Penguin, 1976), 107, 10 & 11. For Kerouac and Snyder's representation as Ryder in Dharma Bums see Gray, pp. 536-37; Michael K. Masatsugu, '"Beyond This World of Transiency and Impermanence": Japanese Americans, Dharma Bums, and the Making of American Buddhism During the Early Cold War Years', *Pacific Historical Review*, 77.3 (August 2008), p. 440 (423-451). Gray puts together a fine account of the San Francisco Renaissance community's anxiety-ridden yet idealizing gaze which Orientalised Snyder as the bearer of a trans-Pacific cross-cultural identity. For the Beats' embodiment of racial minorities during a marginalization of ethnic groups, see Jon Panish, 'Kerouac's *The Subterraneans*: A Study of Romantic Primitivism', *MELUS*, 19 (Autumn 1994), 107–123; Robert S. Ellwood, *The Fifties' Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997) pp. 164-168.

[39] Masatsugu, p. 439

[40] Ibid., pp. 438-441. Here, it must be noted that O'Hara writes against the trend of domestic containment in 'Ave Maria', where he satirically uses the framework of a biblical prayer, casting himself as a modern-day Raphael who canvasses against puritanism and the sexual repression of the youth.

By the time ‘Les Luths’ was written in 1959, Snyder had indeed moved to Kyoto in Japan to immerse himself in Buddhist studies and practices at a Rinzai Zen temple, but pace Gray, the lines from the poem suggest more than an ‘envy’ on O’Hara’s part for the Beat’s ‘off-shore role’ as an arbiter of semiotic directionality in his community.[41] Gray compares O’Hara’s ‘figural entrapment’ within the New York school with Snyder’s similar, if detached, functions within and without the San Francisco Renaissance, dubbing both of them ‘semiotic shepherds’ who faced very different pressures.[42] Snyder, who lived his dream of a trans-pacific union, was able to remove himself from the circles over which he held sway, writes Gray, while O’Hara was a ‘body cathected as the transportable and empty signifier into which all New York could place its fantasies’, a ‘shepherd tamed by his own adoring flocks’.[43] It was a role the New York poet grew weary of and in time wished to ‘escape his predicament as urban signifier’ just as Snyder did.[44] Since Gray lines up his argument with a caveat that O’Hara’s irony confounds any exegetical process, it is tempting to explore the poem’s satirical scope.

O’Hara speaks from within a country caught up in a climate of war (‘a jet is making a sketch of the sky’), and he could appear to yearn, as Gray affirms, for a place that is kinder to artists, but for O’Hara the Orient is a sanctuary he does not wish to escape to. Snyder’s diminutive form in a Japanese garden is exaggeratedly comical, and certainly not a figure O’Hara envies. That the mild Japanese sun—or en-‘light’-enment—does not ‘get through to him’ attests to the futility of his search for spiritual liberation. In Snyder’s ‘not caring’, O’Hara sees an indifference, a dereliction of duty in public life. Although fiercely individualistic, O’Hara has a definite idea of the artist’s role as a social entity during a time of political turmoil. He values pragmatist wisdom over religious insight, and he’d rather shepherd the cultural drifts of a nation than pursue spiritual liberation for himself in a foreign land.

O’Hara’s ironized casting of himself as a colonial figure at the beginning of ‘Les Luths’ allows him to expose the West’s social and historical prejudices towards Buddhism. His self-conscious roleplay alongside his depiction of the Beat poet as an apathetic escapist points to Western religious and metaphysical frameworks that have historically categorised Buddhism as nihilistic, pessimistic, and passive.[45] However, by not alluding to Snyder's efforts in anti-war and environmental activism in America or the political agitations he led on his frequent visits from Japan, the poem does not seek to defend Snyder or his embrace of Buddhism. In fact, O'Hara's self-criticism appears more as a strategy to voice his disapproval of the Beat's social agenda rather than call the social mores into question. O'Hara portrays both poets as hedonists, but only himself as free of any 'illusions' of Buddhism's capacity to become a vehicle of social change.

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[41] Gray, p. 557.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid. p. 551.
[44] Ibid. p. 555.

O'Hara's scepticism towards the Beat's distracted response to Oriental culture does not imply that he looked kindly at their embrace of a socially engaged form of Buddhism. In an interview to Edward Lucie-Smith, he says

> In a capitalist country fun is everything. Fun is the only justification for the acquisitive impulse [….] Art is not *your* life, it is someone else's. Something very difficult for the acquisitive spirit to understand, and for that matter the spirit of joinership that animates communism.
>
> (*SS*, 129)

O'Hara's demurral to participate in the bipolarisation of politics distances his spirituality from the 'acquisitive spirit' and the 'spirit of joinership'. If O'Hara strikes at capitalism's inclination to serve individual taste and convenience over the social life of art, he is equally critical of leftist collectivism that subordinates individual desires to its own ideology. It would not be amiss to say that O'Hara's criticism was articulated to graze the social agendas of the Beats who—Ginsberg and Snyder in particular—felt that radical change could only be brought about through mass movements and civil agitations. Through the politicisation of their poetry, the Beats' brand of American mysticism drew global interest, and their prophetization emerged through a symbiotic relationship between them and their cult following as they globetrotted on the royalties they collected and encouraged their own deification. Ginsberg for instance agreed to be crowned king at a student protest rally in Prague and went on to chant the 'Om Shri Maitreya', a hymn to the next Buddha.[46] Using Buddhism as an ideological tool, he would chant sutras and conduct purification rituals of protest sites, and in the process spectacularised Buddhism and the Orient. By the mid-1960s, this new form of pacifist-antagonism powered by a socially engaged Buddhism had engendered its own subculture, trickling into hip argot, Hollywood, and comic strips, commodifying the East and drawing attention to a new generation of 'Peaceniks'.

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[45] For a history of Buddhism's alterity in Western colonial practices, see Judith Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), pp. 85-114. ProQuest Ebook Central. In *The Antichrist*, despite commending Buddhism for being a more advanced religion in comparison to Christianity, Nietzsche excoriates both as decadent and nihilistic. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, trans. by H. L. Mencken (Feedbooks, 1988) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/19322/19322-h/19322-h.htm> [accessed 23 March 2022].

[46] See Richard Kostelanetz's account of Ginsberg as a 'cultural hero' and a 'true prophet' to the university students in 'Ginserg Makes the World Scene', in *First Thought,* pp. Such hagiographic accounts have only contributed towards the mythologization of the Beats.

For O'Hara, the 'joinership' in communism indicates the dangers of the institutionalisation of the counterculture, and his notion of spirituality is rooted in art's circumspect approach to the ideologization of discourses. Here lies the central tensions of O'Hara's response to Buddhism as an aesthetic: its discursive power as distinguished from its ideological propensities, discourse as withheld from political praxis.

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After O'Hara's death in 1966, John Ashbery wrote an essay reflecting on O'Hara's legacy in American poetry. Lamenting the 'supremely tribal civilization [of his time], where even artists feel compelled to band together in marauding packs, where the loyalty-oath mentality has pervaded outer Bohemia,' Ashbery asserts that

> O'Hara's poetry has no program and therefore cannot be joined. It does not advocate sex and dope as a panacea for the ills of modern society; it does not speak out against the war in Viet Nam or in favor of civil rights; it does not paint gothic vignettes of the post-Atomic Age: in a word, it does not attack the establishment. It merely ignores its right to exist, and is thus a source of annoyance for partisans of every stripe.[47]

Commentators on the two poets have previously noted certain cultural subtexts in Ashbery's defence of his friend. While Marjorie Perloff puts the paragraph in a canonical perspective when she compares O'Hara's work to the Beats' counterculture-defining oeuvre, Stephen Ross centres the New York School's 'indifferent stance toward the "acceptance world" of all establishments, mainstream and experimental alike,' adding that here Ashbery proposes 'indifference can offer a potent form of resistance'.[48] Ashbery contrasts the New York School to the Bohemian subculture in order to articulate a mode of indifference; he is also identifying, when he alludes to the Beats, a *more effective* indifference. According to Ashbery, O'Hara's anti-programmatic poetry is a preferrable operative because 'it cannot be joined', and that it speaks to a circumspection that refuses the ideological transformations of poetry.

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[47] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, p. 81.

[48] Marjorie Perloff, 'Frank O'Hara and the Aesthetics of Attention', *boundary 2,* 4.3 (Spring, 1976), 779-806 (p. 787); Stephen J. Ross, *Invisible Terrain: John Ashbery and the Aesthetics of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 117-18.

David Herd and Ross direct us to Ashbery's defence of his statements written as part of an exchange with Louis Simpson who, in an editorial in *The Nation*, responded to the New York poet's essay on O'Hara. Simpson wrote that 'it was not amusing to be sneering at the conscience of other poets' who had taken up political activism and joined the anti-war movement.[49] Ashbery's reply provides us a clearer view of his sentiments regarding poetry and ideology:

> All poetry is against war and in favor of life, or else it isn't poetry, and it stops being poetry when it is forced into the mold of a particular program. Poetry is poetry. Protest is protest. I believe in both forms of action.[50]

An indifference towards ideology and collectivism, then, qualifies poetry's political scope. On Raymond Roussel's use of poetic images in his work, Ashbery remarks in admiration that 'they are like the perfectly preserved temple of a cult that has disappeared without a trace'.[51] Hollowing out religious signifiers of their dogmatic valence is a manner in which modern spiritual actors operate. According to Carrette and King, the word 'spirituality' itself is 'a vague signifier that is able to carry multiple meanings without any precision. The very ambiguity of the term means that it can operate across different social and interest groups'.[52] In Ashbery's spiritual imaginaries, the signifier is to be 'emptied' of its doctrinal charge along with ideological affiliations so that its political praxis becomes more inclusive. In 'Sonnet: More of Same', Ashbery writes of the achievement of poetry's technique of 'avoidance'.

> Try to avoid the pattern that has been avoided,
> the avoidance pattern.

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[49] Quoted in David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 93.

[50] Ibid.; Ross, p. 118.

[51] Quoted in Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 262. Michael Clune reads the 'temple of a vanished cult' as the strategies of erasure in Ashbery's poetry; '"Whatever Charms in Alien": John Ashbery's Everything', *Criticism* 50.3 (Summer 2008), 447-69 (p. 449). For Clune, the cult signifies the marker of a foreign culture, which is erased from the larger 'temple' of the text. I argue here that the 'temple' is the signifier itself from which the 'cult', its ideological and doctrinal component, is erased.

[52] Carrette and King, p. 31.

> […]
>
> Ask not why we do these things. Ask why we find them meaningful.
> Ask the cuckoo transfixed in mid-flight
> between the pagoda and the hermit's rococo cave. He may tell you
>
> ('Sonnet: More of Same', *NFA,* 345)

The mode of avoidance Ashbery advocates can appear perplexingly facile, buts it is in the principle of avoidance, in its acts of negation, that traces of the avoided discourse remain embedded. For Ashbery, his artistic indifference is irrevocably linked to his debt to the Orient, particularly Buddhism. In an interview, Ashbery admits to a 'cuckoo instinct that makes [him] enjoy making [his] home in somebody else's nest'.[53] In 'Sonnet: More of Same', he destabilises the political establishment by irreverently reworking John F. Kennedy's ideological idiom for a literary context ('Ask not why we do these things. Ask why we find them meaningful') and introduces a proxy figure for the poet. The cuckoo, an empty image not unlike Roussel's 'perfectly preserved temples', acquires meaning only through contiguity and association. It is sustained by the spiritual propensities of both the Occident and the Orient: the pagoda and the hermit's rococo cave.

Buddhist indifference might only be adopted when one adopts a critical distance from the object of mimesis, Ashbery seems to say. His calm acceptance of the Orient, 'the cuckoo transfixed in mid-flight,' is a model of equipoise, an indifference achieved by placing oneself in-between discourses—indifference revised to equanimity. It is unlike O'Hara's part-consensual participation in the post-war cultural exchange defined by eroticised power relations ('Poem' [At Night Chinamen Jump]). The true mimesis of the religious Orient forecloses its institutionalisation by transforming it into an aesthetic object emptied of ideological drive. The immoral political implications of this simulation, particularly the potential defilement of the Orient and its historicity is not lost on Ashbery. In 'On Autumn Lake', he attends to the problematic aspects of a social and cultural integration of the Orient.

> Leading liot act to foriage is activity
> of Chinese philosopher here on Autumn Lake thoughtfully inserted in
> Plovince of Quebec—stop it! I will not. The edge hugs
> The lake with ever-more-paternalistic insistence, whose effect
> Is in the blue way up ahead. The distance

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[53] David Lehman, 'The Shield of a Greeting: The Function of Irony in John Ashbery's Poetry', in *Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery*, ed. by David Lehman (London: Cornell University Press,1980), pp. 101-27 (p. 111).

By air from other places to here isn't much, but
It doesn't count, at least not the way the
Shore distance—leaf, tree, stone; optional (fern, frog, skunk);
And then stone, tree, leaf; then another optional—counts.
It's like the "machines" of the 19th century Academy.
Turns out you didn't need all that training
To do art—that it was even better not to have it. Look at
The Impressionists—some of 'em had it, too, but preferred to forget it
In vast composed canvases by turns riotous
And indigent in color, from which only the notion of space is
        lacking.[54]

The cultural transformation of the Orient in the West may take place through two very different modes of simulation. On the one hand there is the insensitive mimicry of the Chinese accent, and on the other hand the artistic mimesis of the Far East in European art. In the first simulation Ashbery ventriloquises a xenophobic bully who aims to disempower and disenfranchise the Orient, and once called out for it he digs his heels in ('stop it! I will not'). The second approach sees Ashbery return to the historical re-orientation of the West in order to graft the Far East aesthetic onto the American avant-garde.

Ashbery's references to the Impressionist's *en plein air* methods and paintings of shorelines calls into focus the role of *japonisme* in the modernisation of mimesis in European art. Naturalistic painters before the Impressionists had dwelt on a studious representation of their surroundings. Oriental influences fragmented composition and flattened perspectives, and mimesis no longer implied exactitude but rather a replication of natural conditions by entering the scene of the painting physically. In his study on 'Asian dissonance' in French literature and art in the fin de siècle, and its reorganisation of social and cultural discourses in the West, Gayle Zachmann observes that the 'Impressionists were criticized for forsaking mimesis; their 'shocking' images did not conform to academic conceptions of realistic representation. They were also attacked for mirroring far too much.'[55] For certain elements to even be deemed 'optional', as Ashbery suggests in the poem, is perhaps 'too much' for the puritan. In the 19th century, these diversionary techniques allowed the artist to paint with a subjectivity that was inconceivable in academic methods. These deliberate erasures introduced, as Suzuki writes of the Zen way, an ‘indifference to logic’, a certain disregard for the sequential mode of thinking.[56]

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[54] Ashbery, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007), p. 48.
[55] Zachmann, p. 78.

Ashbery’s return to the Impressionists foregrounds an aesthetic mode of mimesis for the American avant-garde, one that reinvigorated rather than curtailed the West’s individualistic expression. Moreover, by pitching the Impressionist’s *japonisme* as a form of cultural resistance to the ‘machines’ of artistic academies, Ashbery evokes the West’s historical notions of the Eastern exotic within a materialistic-spiritual dialectic. The simulative process that socially integrates the Orient in a positive manner is, by its very nature, a radical form of protest against established power structures.

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It would be difficult to imagine a poem like ‘On Autumn Lake’ published in a poetry journal today and for the poet to not be attacked for racist stereotyping. Ashbery’s polyphonic use of a range of speech patterns reflect the complexity of ‘Americanness’ he wished to represent and critique. By unsettling both liberalism and conservatism, the New York School was testing the bounds of socially acceptable behaviour, question bad taste, and redefine contemporary ideas of morality. The Beats too were using similar strategies in their work, as when Ginsberg used regional speech patterns to vocalise anxieties amongst the white demographic during the Cold-War society: ‘The Russia wants to eat us alive. The Russia’s power mad. […] | That no good. Ugh. Him make Indians learn read. Him need big black niggers. Hah.’.[57] However, the two groups were self-conscious about how their work compared to each other’s. According to Lehman, Kenneth Koch felt that the Beats probably saw the New York poets as ‘silly and effete,’ while Ginsberg felt that, to the New York poets, the Beats were ‘too provincial, unsophisticated, narcissistic, self-mythologizing’, and ‘maybe a little too vulgar in the handling of fuck, shit, piss, motherfucker and all that’.[58] In the reflexive evaluations of both poets, there lies a difference in moral frameworks within which their self-assessments occur.

Indeed, these ideas of morality and aesthetic ‘vulgarity’ played out very differently in the poetry of the two groups. Considering matters of sex, there was a lack of consensus even amongst the New York School poets. Guest seldom had erotic overtones in her poems. O'Hara was the most candid of them all and never shied away from celebrating libidinal jouissance. Ashbery reflects on his own poetry and asks

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[56] Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism (First Series)*, (London: Luzac and Company, 1927), p. 266.

[57] Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Viking, 1985), pp. 147-48.

[58] David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (Doubleday: New York, 1998), p. 335.

> […] would *you*
> Put in the things I've carefully left out:
> descriptions of pain, and sex, and how shiftily
> people behave toward each other?
> [emphasis not mine] ('The Problem of Anxiety', *NFA*, 185)

In Ashbery, we are never far from catching the poet stopping in his tracks to contemplate his own self-editorialising mechanisms. Sex only enters his work in the latter half of his career, and when it does his aim is de-aestheticization and exaggeration, to return to Silverberg.[59] Koch uses such techniques to interrogate cultural attitudes towards eroticism using his comic effects in 'The Duplications'.

> "Oh Mickey, can't you stay here more?" cried Clara,
> Hot for some consummation with the mouse;
> "They say upon the shores of the blue Cari-
> Bbean Sea is a pagoda house
> Where mice love more than Deirdre did in Tara!
> Oh, that I there could shed my milky blouse
> And be with you weekend or a year!"
> So saying, she rough-tongued his rounded year.
> ('The Duplications', *KOTE*, 143)

In this long poem, the pagoda is depicted as a safe place for carnal pleasures rather than a place of worship. Here, the defilement of a Buddhist symbol is carried out by deploying Disney characters who would not conventionally form a romantic pair, and certainly adds to the poem's subversive intent.[60] If the critical commentary is a broader sociocultural one, it perhaps speaks to the counterculture's use of Buddhism to devise non-conformist ideas of sexuality within the dominant sexual ideology. In several poems in *Regarding Wave*, Snyder uses overt sexual imagery and elevates it to a cosmic act in which the poet is caught up. In Kerouac, Polina McKay sees a desire to reconcile his Catholicism with Buddhism, noting that 'the connection between sexual pleasure and spiritual fulfilment is predicated on the idea that mindfulness is a direct result of bodily awareness.'[61] For the Beats, Buddhism, particularly the Tibetan forms of Buddhism Ginsberg was interested in, facilitated a new dialogue between sex and spirituality.

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[59] Silverberg, p. 22.

[60] Incidentally, Mickey Mouse and Clarabelle Cow are depicted as romantic partners in Italian Disney cartoons. Koch does make this allusion in the poem, gesturing towards Europe's liberal interpretation of American popular culture.

> In my own experience, I take sex states of mind as sacramental. There's a Buddhist notion that there are certain moments which naturally open your mind or create more space in your mind, such as on the death bed, during orgasm, and at the moment of shock or surprise[62]

Aided by Buddhist spiritual practices, sexual awakening became a metaphor for social change for a new generation of non-conformist Bohemians. If Disney is a coded setting for the capitalist status quo in post-war America, then by reshuffling normative sexual relations in the comics Koch gestures towards the counterculture's transgressive beliefs regarding sexuality and their use of Buddhism to rationalise the libido.

In his essay, David Spurr looks to change the critical perception of Koch as a comic poet to that of a serious poet who explores the metaphysics of the poetic self and the environment.[63] By studying Koch's engagement with Buddhism, I wish to reveal him as an observer of social and cultural practices whose encounters with the Orient complicate the Western perception of an Oriental exotic. For this purpose, I will focus on Koch's travel poems from his final collection *A Possible World*, where the concern is not the East's cultural integration in the West, as it is in Ashbery or O'Hara, but its reverse. In these poems Koch contemplates the West's absorption in the East, and in the very premise of these poems lies a displacement of the Occidental observer, as the poet is transported in the guise of a tourist, a visitor. Despite this shift, Western narratives of the Orient may not always be de-centralised. In 'A Changing China', Koch performs the kind of critique Ashbery constructs in his indictment of racial bigotry.

> I won't come with you, she said, to your demonstration.
> She was afraid of becoming too admiring of what I did.
> I met her at the Friendship Store.
> We ate dozen dumplings with dog.

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[61] Polina McKay, 'The Beats and Sexuality', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats*, ed. by Steven Belletto (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 179-92, (p. 183).

[62] Ginsberg, *First Thought*, p. 168.

[63] David Spurr, Kenneth Koch's "Serious Moment"', in *The Scene of My Selves: New Work on New York School Poets*, Terrence Diggory and Stephen Paul Miller, eds (Orono, Maine: The National Poetry Foundation, 2001), pp. 345-56.

> The handbook has illustrations
> Of different breeds.
> Here a collie, proud and tall,
> Here a scotty, fun and small,
> And the German shepherd so munificent,
> The cocker spaniel so glad to greet.
> Three nights at the Peace Hotel.
> It was filled with peace.
> Peace rambled through its walls
> Its stairways were peaceful its bathrooms were peaceful
> Everything seemed peaceful at the Peace Hotel
> Now replaced by a more modern one called Golden Dog
>
> (‘A Changing China’, *KCP*)

There is no way around the fact that the poem contains unacceptable racial stereotypes, but rather than use them unconsciously, Koch pushes them to the foreground to expose the network of tropes through which the Orient and the Occident engage. Koch’s speaker is an Orientalist traveller, ostensibly a member of the American counterculture who travels to China. Even though he is a liberal and an activist striving for positive change, he is unable to go beyond projecting distorted imaginaries of the East. Koch escapes charges of racial prejudice himself because he parodies the social activist’s default view of China through inherited racial biases. Given that the East is experienced through a myth perpetuated by mass culture (dog-eating) and its image as a repository of spiritual bliss (peace abounding everywhere in the Peace Hotel), it is even questionable whether the speaker has ever travelled to China. If indeed he is a visitor, the speaker seems to be indifferent to experiences that could take him beyond mainstream consumerist perceptions.

Travel, nevertheless, is crucial for reorienting oneself to the world, and the refractions of the Orient and the Occident are truly understood when the observer is open to a degree of self-consciousness. In ‘Behavior in Thailand’, a Western behaviourist’s commentary on and from within the East, Koch’s voice does not come dressed in the transcultural mimicry of Ashbery. Nor does he adopt the risky comic derision he employed in ‘A Changing China’. Instead, he writes of the self-refection that is spurred by cultural exchange.

> Walking
> Up to someone to be introduced
> I remember
> The book on Thai etiquette I read
> Never point with your finger

Or your hand, only with your head
As in soccer, with head—or foot.

(*KCP*)

The tourist's process of disambiguating unfamiliar customs involves an absurd substitution of an unfamiliar greeting with a familiar signifier. Koch presents how the outsider's encounter of foreign customs has him resort to textual mediation: 'I remember / The book on Thai etiquette'. For 'Thai-ness' to be rationalised and reconceptualised by the tourist, it must be reimagined, refigured, and re-textualised. In turn, the tourist's 'outsider' position lends him his own critical lens as he discovers a counter-exoticisation of European progress in the Orient. The Oriental Hotel where the tourist is put up has little by way of local flavour, and instead it is a 'royal dwelling' with 'many European characteristics'. The name of the hotel invites a discursive turn and points to the way the East 'Occidentalises' and commodifies itself textually and visually for Western consumption.

In the realm of experience, no discourse is stable; there is no text that will not be recontextualised. However, by observing the complex set of responses between cultures the outsider conducts a demystification of the East. The approach—markedly different from the activist's in 'A Changing China'—is by observing Buddhism as a lived religion.

A huge sleeping Buddha
Lying on his side
Is made entirely of gold
Worth inestimably more to his worshippers
Than he would be on the currency exchange
He is here, instead of there.

Buddhist monks
About seventeen to twenty-two years old
Saffron-robed, they brush past passersby on the road
As if they were the money, themselves,
The world was spending
Continually helping itself to improve.

[…]

In one kind of Buddhism (Mahayana)
You get credits for good actions
And this can help you escape from life
I.e., the life cycle which is so unsatisfactory

> One such action is paying for the release of a little bird
> Which will be captured again at once and recaged, and its freedom
> sold to someone else
> To do this costs five baht, forty cents.
>
> (*KCP*)

The poem traces Buddhism's material organization of society from a temple to the streets of Thailand, and even beyond the human world.[64] As a lived religion, Buddhism draws relations not only between monks and the laity, creating an embodiment of religion that is experienced sensorially (as monks in saffron robes 'brush past passersby on the road'), but also between humans and the natural world. This network, however, is ordered, and often hierarchical, subordinating nature as a part of its material configuration, as the speaker discovers; the caged bird is certainly not a willing participant but an instrument in service of the sacred.

As the speaker's gaze follows the unravelling of lived religion, he focuses on its economic ramifications. In practice, religion is in fact defined by a 'materialism' it seeks to doctrinally exclude—the world of material possessions and commerce. A tourist can accrue credit in the karmic cycle of life by releasing a caged bird, and a monetary value comes to be attached to this act; embodied, the sacred may bend to the laws of market economy. Koch's speaker is witness to an entanglement of religion and commerce in material practice, an entanglement that religion derives its significance from. In order to demystify the East, the outsider imbibes the language of finance in his tonal and semantic registers; monks are religious currency ('as if they were money, themselves'), though the value of the sacred object, such as the statue of the Buddha, is incommensurable with its material worth.

The speaker of Koch's poem seems to be awake to the contradictions of lived Buddhism in Thailand, perhaps because he is an outsider without a stake in social hegemonies around him. Such a degree of separation is valuable, which makes cultural exchange fruitful, as Bakhtin writes,

> In the realm of culture, outsideness is a most powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of another culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly (but not maximally fully,

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[64] I take my understanding of the material culture of lived religions from David Morgan who defines it 'in terms of several categories of practice that put images and objects to work as ways of engaging the human body in the configuration of the sacred'. For Morgan, religion is not merely a textual or a conceptual practice but also 'happens materially, taking shape as embodied practices that configure the worlds of mortals and others'. David Morgan, 'The Material Culture of Lived Religion: Visuality and Embodiment', *Mind and Matter: Selected Papers of Nordic Conference*, (London: PhilPapers, 2009), pp. 15-31 (pp. 15-16).

> because there will be cultures that see and understand even more). A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths.[65]

The dialogic interaction between the New York School and the foreign is a process which reorganises both actors; before the poet can conceptualise new questions for the other culture, he instantiates and embodies the 'foreignness' *within* himself. Consider how Koch, at the beginning of 'Behavior in Thailand', attempts to rationalise an unfamiliar custom of greeting. Since the unfamiliar bodily gestures must first be understood by reframing the signifiers within a familiar framework of cultural behaviours, the new conception entails the *reproduction* of a hybrid culture. In the next chapter I will discuss the poets' embodiment of Buddhism in greater detail, but for now I am interested in how Koch's interaction with the material culture of Buddhism as a lived religion brings about *cultural reproduction*.

> Whatever you see
> Will be there again
> With not the same people
> And you are not the same
> But the baby will be born
>
> (*KCP*)

Religion as a social and cultural practice is about growth, and growth occurs through the ever-burgeoning materiality of religion in society. 'Embodiment is a principal register for religion,' Morgan reminds us, and 'without it we fail to understand one of the most powerful aspects of religious behavior. Religions operate on and consist of, make and are made by bodies.'[66] For O'Hara, the meeting between the East and the West is imagined as a copulative act between aesthetic practices imagined as bodies. In Ashbery, cultural integration is engendered in the poetic self, a mimetic figure that interposes itself between the Occident and the Orient. Doctrinal Buddhism, which was the focus for countercultural formations in post-war USA, may not have interested Koch, but his indifference cannot be mistaken for an ignorance or rejection of its ramifications as a ‘practice’. For Koch, Buddhism is a social and a cultural act which is one way to configure the material world and introduce new bodies of order into it.

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[65] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. by Vern W. McGee, Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, eds (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 7.

[66] Morgan, p. 16.

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In Guest, ‘materiality’ does not designate concepts when embodied, mediated, or circulated in society, but a condition which an idea demonstrates during the very process of its becoming. In an essay, she writes, ‘To arrange its dimensions the poem stretches (looking outwardly and inwardly), thus obtaining a plasticity that the flat, the basic words, what we call the “language of a poem,” demand, and further, depend on.’ (*FOI,* 78). For Guest, as for the rest of the New York School poets, the plastic arts—sculpture, painting, modelling—would present new ways of thinking about poetry. The formal innovations of the poem are to be determined by its ‘suppleness’, its multiplicity of registers, speech pattens, connotative energy, and its associative propensities.[67] For Guest, the plasticity of the poem develops as it ‘stretches’ its formal properties, and so it appears to be self-defined, but Guest complicates this thought further when she returns to Hegel:

> [Hegel] believes that art exists in absolute freedom and is allowed to attach itself freely, he says, to any form it chooses that will help it “exercise the imagination.” […] The poem is enjoying a spatial freedom before it settles into the images and rhythm and order of its new habitat on the page.
>
> In this state of suspension the art that is created is infinitely susceptible to new shapes because no shape can be regarded as final. No form is safe when the poet is in a state of perpetual self-transformation, or where, as Hegel suggests, the artist is in a condition of “infinite plasticity.” This position of “subjectivity” or “openness” the poem desires to obtain, free to be molded by forces that shall condition the imagination of the poet.

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[67] Andrea Brady looks briefly at Guest’s ideas of ‘plasticity’ in a review of one of her collections; see ‘Shadowy Figures in “Quill, Solitary Apparition”, *Chicago Review*, 53/54 (Summer 2008), 120-125. By focusing on Guest’s interest in the medieval and the historic, Brady sees the poet’s formulation of ‘plasticity’ as a critique of modern art’s too-modern preoccupations, going on to examine the role of the ‘shadowy’, spectral poetic self. Rather than a critique, I see Guest as extending modern artistic practices into poetry so as to better capture the interrelationships between the poem’s and the world’s ‘plasticity’.

(*FOI*, 106)

While the poem's plasticity is self-determined, it is also acquired as it 'attaches itself freely' to extraneous forms. In no way stable themselves, these forms may be rendered further pliable when they establish contact with the poem. The poem is, then, to borrow Catherine Malabou's view of 'plastic' objects, 'at once capable of receiving and of giving form'.[68] In fact, the process of creation entails an exchange of plasticity between the poet and her environment, with the view of achieving a protean quality that is self-engendered as much as transferred.

In an interview to Mark Hillringhouse, Guest complains that writers are too austere compared to painters who prefer to work in larger studios and for whom the workspace has a direct impact on the work they do. She remarks, 'I don't think writers put enough demands on their surroundings. It's almost as if they're afraid to do it, as if it were indulgent and detracts from the mysteriousness of their occupation.'[69] Guest's expectation of poetic inspiration from her surroundings is part of her search for an 'infinite plasticity', and indeed in 'The Old Silk Road,' it is the spatial dimensions of her workspace which draws the poem out.

When beauty that's arranged — the choir — the desk

mocks and beckons

the quiet groceries
the task, even autumn; not very strong
their arm lift —

when the self-dividing verb
pushes

The Old Silk Road
puts down a foot;
we like to hear that noise of grapefruit
being young and shy

T'ang

T'ang seeds

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[68] Catherine Malabou's extensive developments of Hegel's ideas of 'plasticity' throws further light on the philosophical and theological aspects of the concept; *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, trans. by Lisabeth During (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 8.

[69] Barbara Guest, interviewed by Mark Hillringhouse, *The American Poetry Review*, 21.4 (July/August 1992), 23-30 (p. 24).

T’ang

('The Old Silk Road', *GCP*, 139)

While the poem is goaded into plasticity by her study ('the desk | mocks and beckons'), certain forms such as the domestic space and the season ('the quiet groceries | the task, even autumn') are unable to respond ('not very strong | their arm lift') to the poem's responsive imaginative drive. To confer 'infinite plasticity' on the world, the poem must discover some semantic ductility for itself. As the 'self-dividing verb *pushes*', Guest announces a sense of urgency, making demands on the spatial dimensions of the poem, while also implying language's obstetric functions. The poetic mind is *pushing* out new creative possibilities as in childbirth; language is undergoing cellular fission, 'self-dividing' and increasing its own connotative capacity. This act of acquiring and giving form turns into a gendered one, and at the same time it bespeaks an asexual independence. It is the moment Guest achieves optimum plasticity, or what she calls 'a state of perpetual self-transformation'. Tethered earlier to a life of domesticity (the groceries, the task), the woman speaker successfully assumes the artist's role, and when the Orient enters the poem there are no signs of gendered power struggles, the likes of which we see in O'Hara. In fact, the lack of gender conflicts in the poem perhaps owes much to the transformational state of the poetic self, an entity to whom enduring gendered markers cannot be ascribed.

As the poem extends spatially and temporally beyond the poet's workspace towards historical channels of communication with the East, it discovers that the Orient brings a malleable quality of its own. The Orient rearranges the domestic space, which was earlier inflexible and restricted the poet's role, leaving behind its imprint in the poem—the metonymic grapefruit and the promise of self-engendering spirituality in the seeds of T'ang art. There are hints of femininity in the grapefruit, given that it is 'young and shy', but it is not a poem that is deployed for a post-Enlightenment 'management' and distortion of the Orient. Moreover, the Orient reveals a plasticity that goes beyond pliability; it also 'designates those things that lend themselves to being formed while *resisting* deformation' [emphasis not mine].[70] Guest's perception of the Orient's plasticity acknowledges the East's ability to hold out against interpretive manipulation ('puts down a foot'), a resilience which perhaps neutralises its historical management in the West.

Earlier, we saw O'Hara attempting to distil a T'ang aesthetic from T'ang poetry's religious agendas ('To John Ashbery'), whereas Snyder was interested in extending T'ang's religious agendas into his own work. The latter was more aligned with the T'ang tradition where, as Stephen Owen observes, poetry entailed 'the ultimate formal evacuation of the religious content from religious form transferred to art.'[71] In both cases, the struggle lies in the allocation of authority; one resists a deference towards Buddhism while the other admires it unreservedly. I wish to place Guest's attitude towards Buddhism between O'Hara's and Snyder's by demonstrating, in the next poem I have chosen, how indifference is not inculcated by localising and withholding authority but a quality that is circulated freely during the exchange of plasticity between the poet and her world.

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[70] Malabou, p. 9.

Ekphrasis is a form that concerns itself primarily with the exchange of plasticity between the art object and the poet, and conventionally it has been shaped by male poets, many of whom chose either to focus on feminine forms represented in art or mark the objects and artefacts themselves as feminine.[72] These depictions in poetry were always formulated by male experiences and encrypted within heteronormative ideas of who or what a woman is or should be. Only recently has literary criticism begun to borrow critical strategies from cinema and visual arts studies to problematise the heavily gendered legacy of the male gaze in poetry. Sarah Lundquist, whose article on Guest in 1997 was one of the first discussions to broach the subject, finds in the New York poet an awareness of the skewed history of gendering in art. She asserts that '[Guest's work] offers to complicate and inform theories of gendered art criticism which analyze the male gaze. To look at a painting via a poem by Barbara Guest is to enter the arena of the "female gaze"'.[73] In 'Walking Buddha', Guest addresses the silent form of the Buddha, but his averted monastic gaze serves the poet an opportunity to construct a coded critique of the historical indifference of male writers and critics towards women's desires and female poets.

Should I forget your scales
in confirmation of your knighthood

or voice what is petal-soft
in the cracked eye-lift?

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[71] Stephen Owen, 'How did Buddhism Matter in Tang Poetry?', *T'oung Pao*, 103 (2017), 388-406 (p. 392).

[72] Jane Hedley follows W. J. T. Mitchell's proposition that ekphrasis is an 'othering', gendered act that expresses an 'alienation' of object from the beholder. Conventionally male, these expressions of distancing are '"sublimated" versions of our ambivalence about social others', Hedley cites Mitchell in her essay, 'Introduction: The Subject of Ekphrasis', in *In The Frame: Women's Ekphrastic Poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler*, Jane Hedley, Nick Halpern, and Willard Spiegelman, eds (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009), pp. 15-40 (p. 22-23). Google Books.

[73] Sarah Lundquist, 'Barbara Guest, Ekphrasis, and the Female Gaze', *Contemporary Literature*, 38.2 (Summer 1997), 260-86 (p. 265).

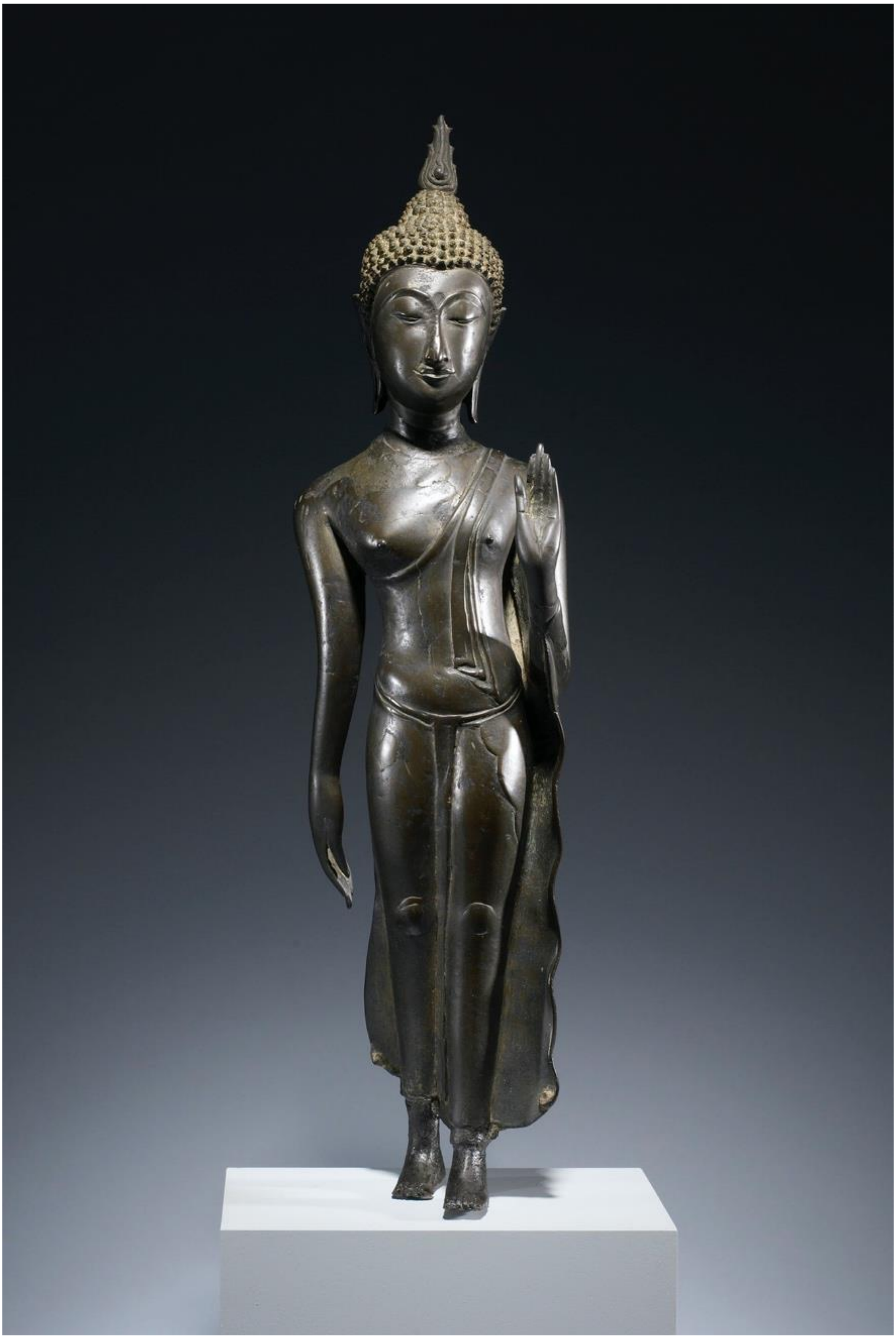

Figure 2: Walking Buddha[74]

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[74] The Walters Art Museum, 'Walking Buddha' <https://art.thewalters.org/detail/36064/walking-buddha/> [accessed 24 March 2022].

Not circular or fleeting
but *swinging*

pushed forward by your idiom
like a giantess opening a window sash

You refuse to remark
the offering below your building

you refuse to go downstairs
because your gait is forward
we must go around you

Brilliant decision!

A frangipane rewards you
with color streak

in the wet season

that coloring protects

better than ghee, better than opium

A metal eye that cannot open

stretched as far as elephant, yet firm
in its enclosure

Diadem head!

(*GCP*, 67)

The diadem, a flame-like finial on the Buddha's head, is the *ushnisha*, signifying wisdom and enlightenment. In more opulent, bejewelled forms it is regarded as a crown, recalling the Buddha's pre-ascetic life as the prince Siddhartha. Guest's semantic plasticity allows her to use the artefact's visual signifiers of the Buddha's princehood in his earlier life to portray a standoffish male figure who has recently gained social capital in the form of a knighthood. The speaker's use of apostrophe goes beyond imputing motives to the statue's speechlessness, which Hedley notes is a stock strategy in ekphrases;[75] 'Should I forget your scales | in confirmation of your knighthood?', she asks, drawing attention instead to how a man's canonisation exculpates him of having devalued and underprivileged, or even having ignored, female subjectivity; the woman poet does not measure appreciably on the gender ‘scales’ of the male artist. The towering figure is indifferent to supplications from the speaker (‘You refuse to remark | the offering below your building’), while she is ‘pushed forward by [his] idiom,’ objectified within the confines of an inherited, gendered tradition of poetic form.

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[75] Hedley, *In the Frame*, p. 31. Apostrophe , Hedley says, is designed to '[imply] that the silence is wilful, or could be given up in response to entreaty, or that the poet knows what the ekphrastic object really means to say'.

At the same time, Guest is spurred by the plasticity of Buddhist idiom. Although Guest’s realisation ‘we must go around you’ is, on the surface, a capitulation, an admission of interpretative failure in the face of an aesthetic, cultural, and historical divorce from the artefact, it leads to a valuable, philosophical mimesis. The statue’s historical silence is a metonym for Buddhist indifference, and it is instructive and demonstrable as a practice for modernity. Guest’s successful transplantation of this indifference is a revelation for the poet and produces an eureka moment (‘Brilliant decision!’). In her essay, ‘A Reason for Poetics’, Guest elaborates on the spiritual nature of such a turning point in poetry:

> The conflict between a poet and the poem creates an atmosphere of mystery. When this mystery is penetrated, when the dark reaches of the poem succumb and shine with a clarity projected by the mental lamp of the reader, then an experience called *illumination* takes place [,] arrived at through concentration, through meditation of the poem, through those faculties we often associate with a religious experience. (*FOI*, 21)

As Owen notes, the T’ang poets too had religious terminologies for poetic accomplishments, which they referred to as ‘enlightenment’.[76] In ‘Walking Buddha’, Guest’s moment of ‘illumination’ brings rewards for the poetic self, the protective colour denoting a covenant between the poem and the plastic arts. Given that it carries more significance than ghee, an important component in Hindu fire rituals (*havan*), and opium, Guest affirms a higher form of ascesis than fixed orders of religiosity and drugs can afford. The ‘you’, hitherto assigned to referents without the poet, now carries the inscription of a reflexive turn as the poem addresses itself and the poet at the same time. The speaker’s embodiment of Buddhism’s historical silence induces a self-cognitive awareness imbued with plasticity; ‘the metal eye that cannot open’ refers not only to the sculptor’s artistic representation of the Buddha’s meditative state, but also the speaker’s own generative resilience (‘stretched as far as elephant, yet firm | in its enclosure’). This transformative manoeuvre fulfils the poem’s dual objective: it reflects Guest’s ‘formal evacuation’ of religious content from Buddhist art and simultaneously resolves the poem's commentary on gender discourses. The speaker's circumambulation of the object is a symbolic move; the female poet's indifference to masculine resonances in poetry neutralises the disregard of the historical male gaze.

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[76] Owen, p. 392.

By returning the idea of plastic individuality to the idiom of religion, Guest complicates Hegel's belief that the modern age had pronounced its divorces with both religion and art as rational methods of enquiry. For Hegel, it was philosophy, and not art's destruction of conceptual thinking, which would prove sufficient to account for religion's failures.[77] Guest's extensions of both philosophy and institutionalised religion demonstrate an aesthetic that is not merely confined to a sensuous representation of the truth, but one that dynamically alters, and is willing to be altered by, both philosophy and religion. In Guest's extensions of their concepts lie her avoidances of the same, and she comes closest to Ashbery's mode of 'avoidance', and perhaps of the four poets, she locates her circumspection towards institutionalised Buddhism most overtly within its emphasis on meditative self-reflexivity. In Buddhist meditative forms, the practitioner is instructed to prioritise focusing the mind on their bodily sensations in order to discover phenomenological and ontological truths, and, as we shall see, the New York poet's turn inwards towards the poetic self was often too adjacent to Buddhist aesthetics for them to not have to further develop, complicate, or disavow their associations with doctrinal Buddhism. While I have addressed the poets' responses to Zen as a cultural import and their strategic criticism of the Beats' ideological takeover of Buddhist ethics, their complex range of attitudes towards the Eastern religion still need to be studied as a part of America's modernist aesthetics during the Cold War. In the next chapter, I will look at the poets' closer engagement with Buddhism, and their deployment, if at all, of its body-based philosophy to extend poetry's social and historical role.

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[77] G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, 2 vols, (Oxford: Oxford University Press—Clarendon, 1975), I, pp. 9-14.

Chapter 2

Pagoda Field: Post-Secularism and the Embodiment of Buddhism

For scholars such as Dianne Kirby, the Cold War was 'one of history's great religious wars, a global conflict between the god-fearing and the godless'.[1] In Jonathan Herzog's extensive thesis where he defines the Cold War's 'spiritual-industrial-complex', religion is no longer strictly a papal decree but a part of post-war commercial and political instruments to reconfigure public spaces.[2] Strategically distanced from the 'atheistic' Communists and secular states such as France who lacked sufficient drive to condemn political opponents, the USA presented itself as a 'covenant nation', unreservedly committed to injecting Judeo-Christian values into mainstream discourses.[3] If Buddhism—broadly seen as agnostic or atheistic—escaped direct political condemnation in a climate that was unkind to atheism, it is perhaps because of a concerted political effort to project America as 'not only the leader of the free world, but also the world's greatest champion of religion'.[4] In Chapter 1, I have argued for the New York School's rejection of the socially engaged Buddhism endorsed by the Beats, but the New York poets' encounters with Buddhism were far too complex to be understood as a series of outright disavowals of its ideological propensities. Like any religion, Buddhism is a historical accretion of thought and practices which extend into the public space, and its impact in society may be defined by its interpretations as an aesthetic form. In this chapter, I will address the New York poets' embodiment of Buddhism and the Orient, and the tensions in their own relationships with the post-war spectacle of religion in the public domain. Alongside this, I will examine their revisions of Buddhist aesthetics within the modernist secularist project.

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[1] Diane Kirby, 'Religion and the Cold War – An Introduction', in *Religion and the Cold War*, ed. by Diane Kirby (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 1-22 (p. 1).

[2] Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex*.

[3] Ibid., p. 4.

[4] Ibid., p. 107. Herzog chronicles Eisenhower's formation of the United States Information Agency (USIA) and the Operations Coordinating Board (OCB), which carried out propaganda operations against Communism in Islamic countries and pro-Buddhist countries. Through their concerted efforts in South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand, post-war Americanism demonised Chinese and Soviet Communism as anti-religious and anti-Buddhist. See p. 151.

During the early years of the Cold War, several members of the avant-garde began to show an interest in the body-mind complex as a ground for subjective expression. Among the poets, Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, and Frank O'Hara strongly advocated physiologically-driven processes concerned with writer-reader energy transfers. As Olson writes in 'Projective Verse', poetic composition and prosody was to be determined by the 'laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings.'[5] It is, however, important to plot these poetic developments as a part of the artistic zeitgeist of the times, as intersections of similar ideas in currency during the post-war era. In an extensive study on the avant-garde enthusiasm for improvisatory strategies and intersubjectivity in post-war American art, Daniel Belgrad situates Olson at the centre of many such convergent practices at the Black Mountain college.[6] Belgrad notes the gravitational pull the likes of Olson, Robert Creeley, and Pound had on Ginsberg but draws only a vague sketch of the latter's Buddhist meditational practices.[7] Not even Kerouac, a practicing Buddhist for many years, whose influence on Ginsberg's spontaneous writing Belgrad acknowledges, is considered as a stimulus to discuss the latter's Buddhist aesthetics. Zen, in fact, is discussed only in relation to its impact on the plastic arts, primarily pottery. O'Hara and the other first-generation New York poets are omitted altogether.

Other critics have pointed out the interest the three poets shared in using the breath as an instrument of metrical composition.[8] Amongst the early O'Hara scholars, Marjorie Perloff identified the New York poet's circumspection of the 'revolutionary fervour' and 'mystique' of the Beats on the one hand and a selective appreciation of the 'epic ambitions' of Olson's post-Poundian project on the other.[9] On the whole, critics agree that O'Hara's work imbricated, if at all, with Olson's breath-prosody rather than with Ginsberg's Buddhist poetics and his view of language as a ‘physiologically based system’.[10] Keeping with tradition, Will Montgomery sidesteps Ginsberg’s shadow as he explores O’Hara’s use of the wind as a spiritual metaphor, and indeed there is reason to believe that the New York poet would have no truck with Buddhist body-centred meditative practices.[11] O’Hara himself refers to Olson and Pound by name, and not Ginsberg, when he speaks about the need to ‘establish one’s own measure and breath in poetry […] rather than fitting [one’s] ideas into an established order, syllabically and phonetically’ (*SS*, 17).[12]

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[5] Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse', *Poetry Foundation* <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69406/projective-verse> [accessed 15 March 2022].

[6] Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Art in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 142-75.

[7] Ibid., pp. 199-204.

[8] For scholarship on O'Hara and his poetics of the breath, see Josh Robinson, '"A Gasp of Laughter at Desire": Frank O'Hara's Poetics of Breath', in *Frank O'Hara Now*, pp. 144-59. On intersections between O'Hara, Olson, and Ginsberg, see Lytle Shaw, *Frank O'Hara and the Poetics of Coterie* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), 290-91 n. 39. According to Paul Christensen, Ginsberg, when read alongside Pound's *Cantos* and Olson's 'Projective Verse', 'suggest a model of organic consciousness central to modern poetry', see *Charles Olson: Call Him Ishmael* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 219 n. 9.

[9] Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet Amongst Painters*, (London: University of Texas Press, 1979), pp. 14-17.

In his study of O’Hara’s odes, John Wilkinson briefly looks at his contempt for the Buddhist, monastic renunciation of pleasures of the body in ‘Ode on Causality’, noting that ‘[he] was impatient with all religion impartially’.[13] To say that O’Hara maintained an antipathy for all prescriptions of a divine moral law is sound, particularly in matters of sexual desire. O’Hara was a committed atheist, an apostate Catholic, and, as Montgomery does in his reading of the poem ‘Wind’, it is fair to locate in O’Hara’s poetics a ‘movement from sexual repression to the fulfilment of desires that a Catholic upbringing had anathematized’.[14] Nonetheless, Buddhist doctrines evoked, as I will show, a range of responses that appear simplified when O’Hara’s rejection of Christianity is extrapolated to his attitude towards Buddhism.

‘Ode to Michael Goldberg (‘s Birth and Other Births)’ (1958) is less an ode to Michael Goldberg and more an autobiographical poem, and, by turns, a reflexive determination of its own method of composition. The poem reaches a point of reckoning when O’Hara recalls himself amongst Goldberg and some friends discussing ethics in the time of Cold War anxiety, when the everyday had been recast in terms of power relations and fears of a Soviet germ warfare had taken over. O’Hara sees personal growth in such a time not within spiritual or philosophical systems but as a biological process, ‘more and more cells, like germs | or a political conspiracy’ (*OCP*, 297). The crisis has trickled down to the private space, and even interpersonal relationships are fraught,

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[10] Ginsberg speaks admiringly of Sanskrit as a ‘physiologically based system’ [sic] tracing its phonetic development back to yogic practices, quoted by R. Bruce Elder in *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1998), p. 436.

[11] Will Montgomery, ‘“In Fatal Winds”: Frank O’Hara and Morton Feldman’, in *Frank O’Hara Now*, pp. 195-210.

[12] Andrea Brady gives a detailed account of Olson’s and O’Hara’s mutual admiration and espousal of each other’s poetic programmes, as well as O’Hara’s direct responses to ‘Projective Verse’. See ‘The Other Poet: John Wieners, Frank O’Hara, Charles Olson’, in *Don’t Ever Get Famous: Essays on New York Writing after the New York School*, ed. by Daniel Kane (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2006) pp. 317-47 (pp. 324-37).

[13] John Wilkinson, ‘Where Air is Flesh’: The *Odes* of Frank O’Hara’, in *Frank O’Hara Now*, pp. 103-19 (pp. 110-11).

[14] Montgomery, p. 205.

each reason for love always
a certain hostility, mistaken
for wisdom
(*OCP*, 297)

Amidst the bewilderment and doublethink, the stage is set for an examination of the individual's energy field, a recalibration of ethics through an immersion in the body-mind complex.

from round the window, you can't
see the street!
you let the cold wind course through
and let the heart pump and gurgle
in febrile astonishment,
a cruel world
to which you've led it by your mind,
bicycling no-hands
leaving it gasping
there, wondering where you are and how to get back,
although you'll never let
it go
(*OCP*, 297)

In a rather 'projective' turn, O'Hara appears to adopt Olson's push to 'work in OPEN, or what can also be called COMPOSITION BY FIELD, as opposed to the inherited line, stanza, overall form'.[15] As the poet allows the 'cold wind' of the 'cruel world' to enter his body, he gives in to the spontaneous drive of the mind, 'bicycling no-hands', verbalising his observations of the body-mind aggregate. The prosodic measure is the poet's own breath rather than a prescriptive order, and its resonances with Ginsberg's meditative poetics are significant.

Well-versed in Theravada as well as Tibetan forms of Buddhist meditation, Ginsberg speaks of his writing process as beginning with the circumventing of the 'babble of language' and his beginning to 'feel with [his] body more'.[16] For him, consciousness is essentially a 'feeling-sensation' awareness that the writing of poetry entails the 'stilling of superficial mind yatter and a sinking of the mind into the heart area'.[17] In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, *rlung*, meaning 'wind', 'breath', or 'vital energy', is of prime importance among the three bodily humours.[18] An imbalance of *rlung* in an individual is believed to cause a range of 'wind illnesses', physiological and psychological ailments such as intense heart disorders or anxiety. The treatment is for the mind to heighten its awareness of sensations by 'flowing' along with the breath within the body, using it much like a horse or vehicle.[19] In O'Hara's ode, the external wind of a diseased society, a 'cruel world', is mindfully attended to as it courses through the body as breath. The mind-breath complex sinks into the heart, and the poet notes the 'pump and gurgle' of the organ. To identify these sensations within the body, the mind rides the breath, as it were, 'bicycling no-hands'.

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[15] Olson, 'Projective Verse'.
[16] Ginsberg, 'Identity Gossip', in *First Thought*, pp. 38-48 (p. 41).
[17] Ibid.

Although Montgomery's focus on O'Hara's figurative, quasi-spiritual use of the wind as spirit in this section is not misplaced, its sociocultural implication remains half-formed in the absence of a synchronic reading of the verse paragraph that immediately precedes it. Following a confrontation with the political propaganda that surrounds him, and before he claims agency through his own energy-field aesthetic, the poet distances himself from an association with organised religion.

> […] it would still
> keep me out of a monastery if
> I were invited to attend one
>
> (*OCP*, 297)

O'Hara's rebuttal of any charge of religiosity, especially before he embarks on a diligent scansion of his own bodily sensations, invites a reading through a Buddhist lens, one he deliberately evokes in order to play down. The ecstasy at hand is not Buddhist liberation or religious wonder but a 'febrile astonishment'. Montgomery arrives at the verges of O'Hara's self-realised religiosity but governed by a critical decision to depict himself as secular he does not cross over into the tensions with Buddhist evangelism that the work contains.

During the post-war years, American poets were curious about Oriental spirituality and meditational forms, but Buddhist practitioners were also eager to spread their ideas across the Occident. Michael Masatsugu's historical account of the dissemination of Buddhism on the Pacific coast comes to focus on the interactions between ethnic Japanese Buddhists and convert

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[18] Yeoli-Tlalim calls them humours for want of a better term. Rlung can be traced, after all, back to Greco-Arab notions of medicine. See Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim, 'Tibetan "Wind" and "Wind Illnesses": Towards a Multi-Cultural Approach to Health and Illness, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 41 (2010), 318-324; Susannah Deane, 'rLung, Mind, and Mental Health: The Notion of "Wind" in Tibetan Conceptions of Mind and Mental Illness,' *Journal of Religion and Health* 58 (2019), 708-24.

[19] Geoffrey Samuel, 'Unbalanced Flows in the Subtle Body: Tibetan Understandings of Psychiatric Illness and How to Deal With It', *Journal of Religion and Health*, 58 (2019), 770-94 (p. 779).

Buddhists during the early post-war years.[20] In the process he brings to sharp relief the political motivations behind the first conversions of white Americans which included the Beat poets. Masatsugu observes that Japanese American Buddhists who reached out to white Americans in their eagerness to integrate themselves into the American society did so strategically, knowing that several members from the art and literary community perceived Buddhism as a potent nonconformist response to religious hegemonies in America at the time.[21] D. T. Suzuki's visit at this time provided an impetus in an exchange which satisfied both parties and accelerated the propagation of Buddhism in the West.

O'Hara is aware of how closely his poetics comes to Zen aesthetics, and he rejects the anticipated invitation from the spiritual-liberalist nexus, the likes of which had spread across the Bay Area. Despite Cold-War anxiety and propaganda in the public sphere, O'Hara's secularist agenda entails the removal of religious association from the private domain as well. The religious order is seen as limiting, restrictive, and walls the individual away from the world: 'from round the window, you can't | see the street!' It cannot be said that 'monastery' precludes an allusion to Christianity, but the deliberate obscuring carries Buddhist connotations, especially given the body-based poetics which follows. Perhaps it is a quietist, isolating meditative practice that O'Hara distrusts and was alert to.

If, in his ode to Goldberg, O'Hara is suspicious of Buddhism's evangelical scouting of poets and intellectuals for indoctrination, in a later poem he attributes the conversions to the failings of American post-war ideology. Looking to atone for its violent acts during the World War, the nation submits to Buddhism: 'didn't you know we was all going to be Zen Buddhists after | what we did you sure don't know much about war-guilt' ('For the Chinese New Year & for Bill Berkson', *OCP*, 391). O'Hara does not see America's turn towards Zen as a result of a genuine interest in spirituality but as a reparative act in the aftermath of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. The Rockefeller Foundation, for instance, carried out a series of cultural and philanthropic exchanges towards the rebuilding of Japan between 1946 and 1952, and Suzuki's visits to America for his lectures in the Fifties was arranged under its aegis. For O'Hara, opening the nation's doors to Zen is a diplomatic gesture aimed to assuage a sense of culpability, but in his jibe at Christian guilt lies a further debasement of the nation's dominant religious ideology.

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[20] Masatsugu.
[21] Ibid.

O'Hara's poems carry the historical ruptures of the war and its inflections within the ideological predilections in America, observing society's experience of the Orient as a spectacle of post-war spiritual exchange. Later in the poem, the conversion that was earlier rebuffed is complete, 'don't touch me because when I tremble it makes a noise | like a Chinese wind-bell' (*OCP*, 392). In the post-war era, the artist's body is capital in an economy where religion and spirituality are currency. The Chinese wind-bell is, in O'Hara's poem, an image of the Orient, part of a spectacle which, as Guy Debord asserts, is 'the material reconstruction of the religious illusion'.[22] Converted into the embodiment of this illusion, and aware of its far-reaching power, the poet warns his friend to stay away from him. 'The spectacle subjects living men to its will', Debord reminds us, 'to the extent that the economy has brought them under its sway. […] [It is] at once a faithful mirror held up to the production of things and a distorting objectification of the producers'.[23] It is for no other reason but war guilt, writes O'Hara, a consequence of power relations, that the Occident turns to Zen. When embodied, this spectacle carries the threat of inducing further sleep and blind allegiance towards the hierarchies of power that generate it since it falsely objectifies the Orient as well as the spiritual marketplace that produces it.[24]

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In 'An Image of the Buddha Preaching', the distortions of the post-war spectacle are not alluded to but presented in the formal choices and the manifold critical registers of the poetic voice. The poem was written as a response to a catalogue of an exhibition displaying Buddhist art in West Germany, but it bears no overt ekphrastic element as the title implies. Rather, as we shall see, the poem is a dramatic monologue in the voice of an Indian diplomat to Germany in the aftermath of World War II.

> I am very happy to be here at the Villa Hügel
> and Prime Minister Nehru has asked me to greet the people of Essen
> and to tell you how powerfully affected we in India
> have been by Germany's philosophy, traditions and mythology
> though our lucidity and our concentration on archetypes

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[22] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), pp. 17-18.
[23] Ibid., p. 16.
[24] The spectacle is an instrument through which the 'ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise'. See Debord, p. 19.

> puts us in a class by ourself
>   “for in this world of storm and stress”
> —5,000 years of Indian art! just think of it, oh Essen!
> is this a calmer region of thought, “a reflection of the mind
> through the ages”?
>   Max Müller, “primus inter pares” among Indologists
> remember our byword, Mokshamula, I rejoice in the fact of 900 exhibits
>
> (*OCP*, 323)

The Indian civil servant’s speech introducing Buddhist art from India is an opportunistic act that attempts to build relations with Germany while tactically carving a niche for India on a global stage. The addressees are presumably German bureaucrats, connoisseurs, and/or the press at an art exhibition, and the diplomat’s rhetoric turns counterlogical and vague under the pressures of his desire to extend India’s political capital within the context of art and culture. His ingratiating tone as he claims that India has been ‘powerfully affected’ by German culture and history is contradicted by his later stance of projecting Indians as a self-reliant and ancient race (our concentration on archetypes | puts us in a class by ourself). By referring to archetypes, or in Jungian theory a legacy of images in the collective unconscious, in this case an image of the Buddha, the diplomat suggests the rich historicity of Indic religions and cultural traditions. However, the semantic indeterminacy of his message turns the speaker’s primitivistic agenda into a potentially prickly one. On the one hand, ‘concentration’ evokes a state of meditative absorption, bespeaking the spiritual context of his rhetoric. On the other hand, the word recalls the Holocaust and shackles Germany to its own ‘war guilt’. But what could be the rationale behind such a provocative act?

Wilkinson sees the poem as O’Hara’s ‘dismissal of Buddhism, including [an] unfair smirching with Nazism,’ but it performs a far more complex critical act that sees Buddhism as an instrument in an elaborate political project of the Orient.[25] O’Hara’s ventriloquism is a commentary on the Orient’s spiritual and cultural expansionist project. If in ‘For the Chinese New Year & for Bill Berkson’ O’Hara calls out America’s Judeo-Christian ideological frameworks, here he prepares an indictment of the East’s counter-‘Orientalist’ programme. By dropping references to the Holocaust, reminding Germany of its violent past, and at the same time exoticizing and stereotyping the East as spiritual and non-violent, the Indian envoy constructs a binary opposition within his rhetoric. As a part of its post-war political project, the Orient baits the West with ‘war guilt’, trapping it in its religio-political network.

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[25] Wilkinson, *Frank O’Hara Now*, p. 110.

Along with the domestic anxieties of his time, O'Hara's work carries iterations of the anxieties of a culture war with the East. In the post-war years, Ruth Benedict's 1946 study of Japanese culture, a part of the research initiatives of the U.S. Office of War Information, popularized notions of America and Japan as 'guilt' and 'shame' cultures respectively.[26] The anthropological view states that nations where individuals abide by social mandates of conduct and good behaviour are 'shame cultures' and those where the sanctions of morality are internal are 'guilt cultures'. For Benedict, the shame-guilt schism seemed apt given the contrasts between American and Japanese processes of catharsis. The private practices of confession and psychiatry—one religious and the other secular—were both successful strategies in the U.S. when it came to alleviating guilt, whereas in Japan the Zen Buddhist practices of self-discipline are more socially embedded.[27] Although Zen is a private spiritual undertaking, Benedict observes that it involves training oneself to disable the 'self-censorship of shame'.[28] In the event of wartime culpability and counter-culpability, O'Hara perceives American and Western guilt to have fallen prey to the Oriental psychosis of shame, although his camp levity simultaneously deflates any serious notions of 'shame' and 'guilt' cultures. As the U.S. meets Japan, Zen disables the former's recuperative modes by creating a perpetual demand for itself. In 'Ode on Causality', he derides the 'mild apprehension of a Buddhist type' and keeps the Orient at arm's length when he points out that the Oriental moon is 'not our moon | unless the tea exude a little gas and poisonous fact | to reach the spleen' (*OCP*, 303). By circulating 'Orientalist' binaries of the East and the West within the spiritual-violent dialectic, the Oriental aesthetic is an instrument of shame which evokes 'war guilt'. The East's ideological takeover is total. It goes to work on the human sensorium through tea ceremonies and Chinese poetry (of which the moon is a metonym), seducing the West with Buddhism embodied and materialised within cultural practices of shame.

In 'An Image of the Buddha Preaching', the ancient Buddhist artefacts are similar repositories of insidious dialectics and defining the Indian bureaucrat's rhetoric is India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's policy for international relations. Nehruvian socialism, moulded by Gandhian principles of non-violence, was also greatly coloured by the Prime Minister's admiration of Gautama, the Buddha.[29] During the Cold War, Nehru formulated a policy of non-alignment which was adopted by countries that wished to remain neutral and adopt a collaborative, dialogic approach towards maintaining peace. Nehru was an avowed secularist, but his global pitch for a newly independent, peace-oriented India initiated a revivification of Buddhism in the country. There were concerted efforts to adopt Buddhist iconography as a part of state insignia, refurbish pilgrimage sites, and use Buddhist messages of world peace in diplomatic communications.[30] In O'Hara's poem, the speaker foregrounds India's role as a peace broker in global politics, promising a 'calmer region of thought' to a 'world of storm and stress'. The Buddhist artefacts and India's cultural heritage ('5,000 years of Indian art!') are metonyms for India's spiritual legacy. These are no mere artefacts, the diplomat seems to say, but analgesics against global disorder.

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[26] Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Boston, Mass.: Mariner Books, 1989). EBSCO Books, (first publ. by Houghton Mifflin, 1946).

[27] Ibid., pp. 223-52.

[28] Ibid., pp. 251.

[29] David Geary in *The Rebirth of Bodh Gaya: Buddhism and the Making of a World Heritage Site* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), p. 38-39.

Not only is Buddhism dispensed as a remedy for a beleaguered Occident but also proffered as an alternative for European art. Buddhist aesthetics are 'calmer' alternatives, the envoy suggests, compared to the high emotional registers prescribed by *Sturm und Drang* ('storm and stress'), Germany's aesthetic response to Enlightenment-led art in the late 18th century. Interestingly, proto-Romantic representations of the Orient as a utopia were consequences of Europe's break with rationalism. With Buddhist professing to be, as Suzuki puts it, 'more intuitive than discursive, more mystical than logical,' the Indian diplomat interrogates Europe's need for a more paroxysmal, if equally counter-rational, aesthetic.[31] The speaker continues to devalue the West as he reminds the listeners of Indologist Max Müller whose appreciation of Indian culture prompted him to dub himself 'Mokshamula' (Sanskrit for 'foundation of liberation'). The hubristic rhetoric soon turns burlesque as the speaker trades coherence for an indulgence in the acoustic soundings of 'terracotta'. As he enumerates archaeological discoveries to extend his boast of the historical India, he transforms into a caricature of the Buddha rather than a respectable representative of his culture.

> I deeply appreciate filling the gaps, oh Herr Doktor Heinrich Goetz!
> and the research purring onward in Pakistan and Ceylon and Afghanistan
> soapstone, terracotta-Indus, terracotta-Maurya, terracotta-Sunga,
>   terracotta-Andhra, terracotta fragments famous Bharhut Stupa
> Kushana, Gandhara, Gupta, Hindu and Jain, Secco, Ajanta, Villa Hügel!

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[30] Ibid., pp. 38-42. For Nehru's push for Buddhist ideology in Indian politics see Douglas F. Ober, 'Buddhism in Colonial Contexts', Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 12 <DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.565>; Douglas F. Ober, 'From Buddha Bones to Bo Trees: Nehruvian India, Buddhism, and the Poetics of Power, 1947-1956', *Modern Asian Studies*, 1-35.

[31] Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, p. v.

Anglo-German trade will prosper by Swansea-Manheim friendship
waning now the West Wall by virtue of two rolls per capita
and the flagship BERLIN is joining its “white fleet” on the Rhine
though better schools and model cars are wanting, still still oh Essen
    Nataraja dances on the dwarf
    and unlike their fathers
    Germany’s highschool pupils love the mathematics
    which is hopeful of a new delay in terror
    I don’t think

(*OCP*, 323)

In a poem that satirizes all its subjects without exception, it is hard to absolve the poet of tasteless mockery and a misplaced sense of self-righteousness. O’Hara mimics a non-native English speaker’s solecisms (‘in a class by ourself’) and morphosyntactic errors (‘hopeful of a new delay in terror | I don’t think), but he pushes the envelope with his gratuitous use of ‘terracotta’, drawing attention to the clipped ‘t’s and tapped ‘r’s of the Indian accent. With the later invocation of Nataraja—an artistic rendering of Shiva, the lord of classical dance forms and dramatic arts in Hindu texts—we look back at the repetition as a crescendo of tabla beats or *bols* (te re ke te) vocalised by singers during classical dance performances. The poem too is a dramatized performance, an artistic representation.

On the Victorian dramatic monologue, Herbert Tucker has an observation:

> It represents modern character as a quotient, a ratio of history and desire, a function of the division of the modern mind against itself. […] The quantum leap from text to fictive persona […] is […] “framed,” defined and sustained as a put-up-job. […] [O]ne way to begin explicating a dramatic monologue in the Browning tradition is to identify a discursive shift, a moment at which either of the genre’s constitutive modes—historical line or punctual lyric spot—breaks into the other.[32]

The major ‘discursive shift’ in ‘An Image of the Buddha Preaching’ is left until the last line. Several measures of reform in Germany have erased a sordid past, but are we ‘hopeful of a new delay in terror’? The lyric ‘I’ undergoes a fracture at this point since, logically, it does not serve the diplomat’s interest to scuttle his clever transplantation of Indian antiquity within the contemporary ethos of industrial progress in Germany. Surely it is O'Hara's scepticism surfacing in the composite lyric-self to have the last word when he expresses his doubts whether terror has been entirely averted. The poet breaks the spell before the poem ends by exposing the persona of the diplomat as a 'put-up-job'. However, we hear the poet speaking not *of* an unholy cultural co-option within the Cold War spectacle, but from *within* it. He too, like the diplomat, is only an image, incapable of demonstrating the moral power to impart sermons effectively.

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[32] Herbert Tucker, ‘Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric’, in *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, Virginia Jackson & Yopie Prins, eds (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. 147.

As an ekphrasis, the poem is a beguilement, in that its object of mimesis as professed in the title is not an artefact but the spectacle of post-war rhetoric. The poem is an enquiry into the relations between aesthetics and ideology, and the insidious ways in which the latter co-opts the former. Ekphrasis lends its mimetic mode for the poem to play out the modernisation of religion, revealing the provenance of the past in the historical present, a present in which history participates and is never truly expunged.[33] But while the modern uses history to perpetuate itself, the poetic form holds it back from being eternalised. The lack of punctuation across the poem encourages us to read the last line of the poem ('I don't think') as a self-contained syntactical unit. Without thought there can be no memory, no history, only a modernity that supplants itself.

The mimetic mode affords O'Hara a larger beguilement with regards to a poetic statement, one that is deliberately tucked away in the satirical and musical scope of the poem. Mimicry can indeed be a problematic form of racial and cultural othering, and there can be no doubt that the poem's puerile impersonation deliberately offends. Unlike Ashbery in 'On Atumn Lake' (see Chapter 1), here O'Hara does not draw critical attention to mimicry as a problematic form of racial and cultural othering. Nor is it O'Hara's aim to entertain. His imitation attracts scrutiny instead of approbation, drawing critical attention to itself and subsequently, through the conduits shared by mirrored things, to what it mimics. Like the diplomat, the poet is a mere imitation of a respectable preacher. It is perhaps, ultimately, in the poem's sacrifice of its own ideological voice, that O'Hara's moral and critical function lies, making evident that a rhetorical likeness is never the thing it seeks to represent, and instead it brings to the fore its own ideological functions.

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[33] David Ferris' excellent study on Hellenism seeks to identify the relations between aesthetics and politics, history and modernity, while developing a self-aware theoretical process. Speaking specifically on Romantic Hellenism, in his chapter on Keats, Ferris delineates a common hazard of ideological criticism in romanticism, such as initiated by Jerome McGann, in perceiving the aesthetic as existing in counterpoint to, and independent of, any ideological function. The ideological, Ferris argues, is contained within and expressed by the modern aesthetic at the same time that it is excluded, so that modernity may express itself. In laying down its divorces from history or politics, modernity is able to find a form, a form that recognises the idea, and indeed the ideal, of the historic, the social, and the political, failing to entirely reject them. See David Ferris, *Silent Urns: Romanticism, Hellenism, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000). On Ferris' departures from McGann, and his study on Hellenism in Keats' ekphrases see pp. 52-84.

O'Hara's distaste for the surge of post-war religiosity far outstrips any concerns to curate a benign, self-assured image. His apprehensions are direct and less formally managed in 'Ashes on Saturday Afternoon' (1952), where he relies on tonal inflections to perform anxieties that gripped Cold War secularism. Addressed to Ashbery—'Ashes' to O'Hara—as a plea for help, the poet finds himself in a landscape where religious indoctrination and warfare are enmeshed: 'bombs, cathedrals and the zeppelin anchored | to the hill of dreams' (*OCP*, 78). Epstein's assessment of 'Ashes on Saturday Afternoon' factors in the poet's atheistic repudiation of Catholicism and, separately, his resentment towards Cold War politics alike, but does not explicitly contextualise O'Hara's disgust for the ideological propensities of religion in America during the Cold War. If O'Hara demands from Ashbery 'languages more livid than | vomit on Sunday after wafer and prayer', he is asking for a more controlled and efficient response than the overwhelming aversion he can muster towards Catholic practices. O'Hara's anxiety manifests in his poetics of the body; ideological conversion, or mind control, triggers an affective response of revulsion. The speaker's bodily reflux is a rejection of the holy spirit he was meant to embody through transubstantiation.

Priscilla Wald reviews American literature and cinema of the Fifties and reports that the threat of a personhood was 'conceived as the theft of mind and body'.[34] Socio-political hysteria labelled several outsiders, liberals, Communists, and homosexuals, as the 'other', a threat that brought disease, their ideas 'infectious'. The Eucharist, presumably contaminated with religious ideology, causes biological indisposition, as O'Hara subverts the dominant semantics of illness and infection within the socio-political narratives.[35] It is no longer the 'othered' individual but the body politic which is the threat. Epstein compares O'Hara's candid references towards his homosexuality to Ashbery's reticence and hears an admonishment in the poem for a more uninhibited poetic counter to standardised homophobia, a call for Ashbery to 'choose *exposure* rather than concealment, […] *speech* rather than silence' [emphasis not mine].[36] As I track the poets' orbital paths around religious ideology, I wish to propose another torque on the binaries of speech and silence in the poem and in American literary culture. 'Silence' and the 'void' had already become a synonymous with Zen, and, surely, by resisting their pull, it is the Zen concept of Sunyatā which O'Hara distances himself from. To understand Buddhist 'emptiness', we must return to the origins of Zen, to the Mahayana form, which can be traced back to Nāgārjuna, the founder of the *Madhyamaka* School in India. Nāgārjuna's *Śunyavāda*, or the 'Doctrine of the Void' progresses on the central argument that objects do not contain an intrinsic nature or substance, and are, therefore, empty.[37] Buddhist philosophy lacks a theory of creation. There is no soul, or 'doer' at the centre of a form. There is no object-ness to an object, whatever it may be, just as a chariot is made up of several parts, none of them the chariot itself. The 'chariot'—as a signifier and a self-contained image—may only be considered 'a useful fiction'.[38] One would think that such a principle would appeal to O'Hara, destabilising, as he frequently does, the centrality of a subject matter in poems such as 'Easter' and 'Second Avenue'. O'Hara's struggle against the gravitational pull of the void suggests an interest, if not an attraction, all the same, an interest that must be mediated by Ashbery ('You, dear poet, […] | must save me from the void's external noise'). In Epstein's analysis of 'Ashes on Saturday Afternoon', Ashbery's elevation as the speaker's saviour is not explored in light of his connection to the 'void'. While Epstein considers O'Hara's exhortation for Ashbery to return to poetic speech in the wake of the latter's highly unproductive period in the early Fifties, it must at the same time be contextualised through Ashbery's own ideas of poetry's spiritual capacity and the two friends' encounter with Cage's music just a month earlier.[39]

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[34] Priscilla Wald, *Contagious Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 161.

[35] A sudden interest in virology amplified these inflections in political language and stereotypes. See Ibid., pp. 157-212.

[36] Epstein, p. 246.

Looking back on his agonising writer's block, Ashbery says,

> I went through a period of intense depression and doubt. I couldn't write for a couple of years. I don't know why. It did coincide with the beginnings of the Korean War, the Rosenberg case and McCarthyism. Though I was not an intensely political person, it was impossible to be happy in that kind of climate. It was a nadir.[40]

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[37] *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, trans. by Mark Siderits and Shōryu Katsura (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2013).

[38] Siderits gives the frequent example of the chariot in his commentaries to Nāgārjuna's scripture. The simile of the chariot is popular in the Buddhist tradition, going back to the Milindapanha, a dialogue between King Menander I and Nagasena, a Buddhist monk. See *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way*, p. 23. The *Śunyavāda* comes full circle in the *Vigrahavyāvartani*, where Nāgārjuna addresses various arguments against Śūnyatā. Here he considers his own doctrine to be 'empty', because language itself is a relational construct. *Vigrahavyāvartani*, trans. by Jan Westerhoff, *Oxford Scholarship Online* (2010) <DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199732692.001.0001>.

[39] Epstein, p. 245.

[40] Ashbery, interviewed by Richard Kostelanetz, cited in Marjorie Perloff's '"Transparent Selves": The Poetry of John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 8, American Literature Special Number (1978), 171-96 (p. 172).

Ashbery wrote to Jane Freilicher in 1951, during this nadir, stating that only a return to the writing of poetry could help ease his anxieties about an increasingly uncertain future, but poetry, writing itself, had become a site of personal discontent.[41] Sometime in the same year, he confides to Freilicher about poet and publisher James Laughlin enquiring whether Ashbery thought of his own work as camp. '[My work] *is* awfully gay,' Ashbery reflects in his letter, 'and I hate to have people I don't know think of me as one of those *young* writers' [emphasis not mine].[42] He goes on to write, 'My poems are usually in the form of solemn precepts for spiritual conduct (I didn't mean that to sound so pompous)'; therefore, 'once the people […] start thinking that I'm below them these precepts will fall flat, as will my desire to write the poems.'[43] Homophobia in the Fifties was enough for a young Ashbery to want to dissociate his writing from his sexual orientation; public concealment of his homosexuality was not a compulsion but also a conscious choice that stemmed from preserving the spiritual aspect of his poetry. For him, religion, as it was understood in the public space, was not something to subvert or write in opposition to, but to negotiate with, and even make compromises for, especially if one wished to be inducted into certain literary circles. In Ashbery's encounters with Buddhism, I wish to study the ways in which the delimiting effect of the public, as well as the terms of contracts through which it engages with the private and the marginalised, is reworked through his understanding of Zen.

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On 1 January 1952, along with O'Hara, Ashbery attended a music recital that injected new life into his writing.[44] The second half of the evening featured the premiere of John Cage's *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* and *Music of Changes*, based on the principles of the I-Ching, the ancient Chinese book of divinations. Performed by David Tudor, it was a forty-five-minute performance which enthralled the young Ashbery. '[T]here were banging chords, followed by long periods of silence', he remembers.[45] The experience 'jolted' him, and he was left '[feeling] profoundly refreshed', and '[he] started to write again shortly afterwards'.[46] Cage's Zen aesthetics resonated with an entire generation of musicians, painters, poets, and performance artists alike, and for Ashbery, the musician's aleatory mode of composition became a touchstone of artistic composition for him. Ashbery recalls O'Hara also being 'tremendously impressed' by Cage's music (*OCP*, ix). Could 'Ashes on Saturday Afternoon', then, written a month after their first encounter with Cage's music, be O'Hara's early warning call to Ashbery about the nihilistic and sublimative properties he perceived in the new inspirational aesthetic? If so, why is Ashbery elevated to a messianic figure ('You, dear poet, […] | must save me from the void's external noise'), and what sort of salvation does O'Hara seek from him—through the balancing of a new poetics? Who is shepherding whom?

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[41] Ashbery, Letter to Jane Freilicher, Jane Freilicher Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, (14 August 1951). Quoted by Karin Roffman, *The Songs We Know Best: John Ashbery's Early Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), p. 202.

[42] Ashbery, Letter to Jane Freilicher (1951), quoted in Ibid., p. 197.

[43] Quoted in Ibid., p. 197-98.

[44] Roffman, p. 278. For an account of Ashbery's first encounter with Cage's music, also see Will Montgomery's chapter 'In Fatal Winds: Frank O'Hara and Morton Feldman,' in *Frank O'Hara Now*, p. 195; *Where the Heart Beats*, p. 206.

The difference between O'Hara's and Ashbery's attitudes towards Zen lies mainly their responses to, and interpretation of, Zen meditative silence. O'Hara was certainly aware of Ashbery's view of poetry as a form of spiritual expression, the latter's deeper understanding of Zen, and perhaps even had faith in his negotiations of the new aesthetic. O'Hara's void is enclosed within a periphery of noise, and he resists its pull. Giving in completely would mean the end of speech, importantly poetic speech. Ashbery, on the other hand, uses the gravitational field of other artistic principles to maintain an optimal distance from Zen. In 'Sonnet: More of Same', discussed in the previous chapter, he paints an image of his poetic process, the artist suspended between the 'pagoda and the hermit's rococo cave'. The speaker, represented by the 'cuckoo transfixed in mid-flight', is an acquirer of poetic forms, whose subjectivity draws on spiritual traditions without spectacularising them. Unlike O'Hara, Ashbery uses Zen not only as a spiritual presence within his poetry but also as a means of formal arrangement. If, to return to Debord, the spectacle is 'the material construction of the religious illusion', then Ashbery borrows the Zen aesthetic, empties it of religious ideology, and uses it as material for poetry. Alongside his strategic embodiment of Zen, as I will go on to demonstrate, he confronts the problem of an imperialistic management of the Orient, which entails modernising Eastern mysticism in service of the demands of a secular agenda.

O'Hara rejected any role of institutionalised religions in a personal ethical code, but Ashbery was always interested in religious texts and their impact on, and tensions with, his own sense of ethics and morality. 'I've gotten religious all of a sudden', declared Ashbery to a friend in 1946.[47] As an undergraduate at Harvard, Ashbery came to read the Bible and Hindu philosophy and found himself drawn to T. S. Eliot's religiosity. A detailed account of Eliot's attitude to religion and its relationship with poetry is too complex to sketch here, nor is it the scope of this study, but a brief overview is useful to understand the role of religion in post-war poetry and Ashbery's oeuvre. In his criticism, Eliot saw both poetry and religion as essential and distinct: 'Literature can be no substitute for religion, not merely because we need religion, but because we need literature as well as religion.'[48] Despite his view that literature and religion should maintain a separation in modern society, he recognises, as he does when reading Matthew Arnold, that when public life is secularised and religion is relegated to the private domain, 'partly retired and confined' as a set of beliefs, literature and religion begin to bleed into each other.[49] As a graduate student at Harvard, Eliot devoted his time in studying theology, and the tensions between his Western philosophical framework and his Oriental studies—particularly Sanskrit, Pāli, Hinduism, and Japanese forms of Buddhism—are evident when he writes,[50]

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[45] Ashbery, interviewed by Roffman, 2012. Quoted in Roffman, p. 279.
[46] Ashbery quoted in Perloff, 'Transparent Selves', p. 172.

> A good half of the effort of understanding what the Indian philosophers were after—and their subtleties make most of the European philosophers look like schoolboys—lay in trying to erase from my mind all the categories and kinds of distinction common to European philosophy from the time of the Greeks. My previous and concomitant study of European philosophy was hardly better than an obstacle. And I came to the conclusion—seeing also that the 'influence' of Brahmin and Buddhist thought upon Europe, as in Schopenhauer, Hartmann, Deussen, had largely been through romantic misunderstanding—that my only hope of really penetrating to the heart of the mystery would lie in forgetting how to think and feel as an American or a European: which, for practical as well as sentimental reasons, I did not wish to do.[51]

In Eliot's estimation, post-Enlightenment interpretations of Hindu and Buddhist thought, a 'romantic misunderstanding', was in need of revision, which he endeavoured to work out, and while he saw a superiority of the Orient over the Occident—a perspective abhorred by O'Hara but one that modernists such as Ginsberg and Olson would inherit—it would come up against Eliot's own refusal to relinquish his Western mode of thinking through 'categories and all kinds of distinction'. Through his religious and theological studies, Eliot was eager to rework various modes of conceptual thought, especially the rigid distinctions between 'literature' and 'religion', 'religion' and 'philosophy', and 'religion' and 'secularism', but only as far as a separation between the Occident and the Orient could be maintained. He welcomes the East on the condition that it pose no threat to 'Americanness' or 'Europeanness', or indeed to Judeo-Christian thought.

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[47] Ashbery, Letter to Bob Hunter, Robert Hunter Private Collection, Thetford, Vermont (16 June 1946); quoted in Roffman, p. 140. For an account of Ashbery's early interest in religion see Roffman, pp. 140-41.

[48] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 2nd edn (Glasgow: University Press, 1934), p. 48.

[49] Ibid., p. 402.

[50] For Eliot's studies on the Orient, see Thomas Michael LeCarner, 'T. S. Eliot, Dharma Bum: Buddhist Lessons in *The Waste Land*', *Philosophy and Literature,* 33.2 (October, 2009), 402-416 (p. 403).

[51] T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1934), pp. 43-44.

Like Eliot, who remained steadfastly Christian despite his studies in Buddhism and Hinduism, turning Anglican later in life, Ashbery always retained his faith in Christianity, admitting that 'the idea of a personal God with whom everyone "has a chance"' appealed to him, though only in the latter half of his career does he begin to mention god in his poetry.[52] Still, what attracted Ashbery are the aesthetic formations of faith: 'religions are beautiful because of the strong possibility that they are founded on nothing. We would all believe in God if we knew he existed, but would this be much fun?'[53] And so in poems with biblical themes, Ashbery blends self-referential circularity with hermeneutics, since the very early, instructive, ontotheological 'A Sermon: Amos 8:11–14' to the later more irreverent and agnostic 'The Ecclesiast', and to the even later 'Little Sick Poem' which reads as a confession of a digressive amanuensis. The East, however, left a deep impression on him in his early days as he consumed its religious essence in the modernist literature he encountered. He was moved particularly by E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, of which he wrote highly to a friend, saying that it was 'one of the best books [he'd] ever read', and that 'parts of it made [him] ecstatic'.[54] Set in colonial India, the novel's central conflict takes place when the British visitors visit the Marabar caves, a series of seemingly endless tunnels which precipitate an existential crisis in Mrs Moore. The claustrophobic experience of the cave's resounding echoes, seem to her to say 'Pathos, piety, courage-they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value,' and as a result, she is forced to re-evaluate her Christian theological values.[55] Against the imaginative void projected by the caves, Mrs Moore struggles to reconcile a metaphorical emptiness of conceptual understanding with her Christian beliefs of a supreme god on whom all existence is predicated. The conflict, in part, appears to be between silence and speech, between the indecipherable echo 'boum'—the sound of existence replicating itself in a vacant space—and Mrs Moore's 'poor little talkative Christianity'.[56]

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[52] Roffman, p. 140.

[53] Ashbery, 'The Invisible Avant-Garde', in *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles 1957-1987*, ed. by David Bergman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 389-95 (p. 391).

[54] Ibid.

[55] E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India*, 2nd edn (London: Penguin, 2005) p. 139.

It may be that Ashbery had no knowledge that Forster modelled the Marabar on the Barabar caves which were carved into the hills of Bihar, in Northern India, by Asoka, the Buddhist king.[57] The original caves have Buddhist sculptures and inscriptions in Pali, and the religious history of the location was surely noted by Forster on his visit. The Buddhist ideas of 'nothingness' passed through the book into the New York poet, who riffs off Forster in an article on Jorge Luis Borges. 'Everything exists, nothing has value', Ashbery cites Forster in appreciation of the Argentinian master's world, only to then modify the borrowed quotation: 'everything has value—an equal value, but a value nonetheless'.[58] Ashbery's reworking of Forster's quote reveals as much about his quarrel with a philosophy of nothingness as much as his respect for Borges' work. That 'everything exists', is not enough. For Ashbery, an all-encompassing void, a lack of any 'value' at all, amounts to the dangers of a lack of telos.

If Ashbery is concerned with the loss of agency, it is because of his wariness of the dictates of the body politic. In an interview that followed the publication of his third collection *Rivers and Mountains* (1966), Ashbery elaborates on the germination of possibly one of his most dystopian post-war poems, 'These Lacustrine Cities'. He says that the poem was meant to be a vignette on the history of civilizations.[59]

> These lacustrine cities grew out of loathing
> Into something forgetful, although angry with history.
> They are the product of an idea: that man is horrible, for
>   instance,
> Though this is only one example.
>
> (*RM*, 9)

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[56] Ibid.

[57] Details of Forster's trip to the caves are mentioned by Pankaj Mishra in the introduction to the novel on p. ix. Later in the story, an Indian magistrate who '*displays* interest in archeology' [italics mine], refutes a claim that the caves were Buddhist, and ascribes them to the Jain tradition. See Ibid., p. 209. Benita Parry picks up on the character's designation and evaluates the traces of Jain mysticism in the book without considering Forster's possibly ironical portraiture of an official who, in the company of Muslims and British colonialists, might be eager to inflate his own authority by *displaying*, even fabricating, his expertise about a culture the foreigners do not have a thorough understanding of. See Parry, 'Materiality and Mystification in "A Passage to India"', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 31.2 (Spring, 1998) pp. 184-187 (174-194).

[58] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, p. 103.

[59] Ashbery, interviewed by Bruce Kawin, 'Literary Workshop', WKCR-FM Radio New York, 5 May 1966.

Modern establishments grow out of a forgetfulness of their origins, despite harbouring a sense of resentment towards the civilization that precedes it. Expatiating on 'an idea: that man is horrible', Ashbery notes that he found a 'burlesque way' to speak about factors that have configured human history, such as Puritanism, Calvinism, and the concept of original sin.[60] As the modern city depicted in 'These Lacustrine Cities' grows, the orthodox religious ideas coalesce into a panopticon-like structure for surveillance.[61]

> They emerged until a tower
> controlled the sky', one whose 'artifice dipped back
> Into the past'.
>
> (*RM,* 9)

In 'Panopticism', Foucault traces the history of state-control back to mechanisms and regulations of social discipline developed by religious institutions. In post-Enlightenment Europe, he says, these 'technologies of power' merely passed into the hands of the state, and according to Foucault the modern state develops it further.[62]

> The efficiency of power, its constraining force have, in a sense, passed over to the other side – to the side of its surface of application. He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.[63]

As such, the human subject is a *homo moralis*, the interface through which the 'morality of institutions' and 'individual morality' interact.[64] The state's management of the individual is complete when it manages the subject without coercion, when the submission of subjectivity to its propaganda is total, wilful, and performed through automatisms. I do not wish to suggest that Ashbery was using Foucauldian theories of power relations, but it can help to understand his performance of poetic subjectivity caught up in the tyranny of a religious ideology in 'These Lacustrine Cities' through the French thinker's ideas. The 'artifice dipped back | Into the past' is, seen through a Foucauldian lens, the legacy of 'technologies of power' which the state inherits from religious institutions and goes on to perfect. Modernity entails the concurrent advancement of the spectacle my materialising the religious illusion. Under the gaze of the tower of surveillance, Ashbery continues,

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[60] Ibid.

[61] It was Shoptaw, perhaps, who first likened the tower to a panopticon. *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry* (London: Harvard University Press, 1994) p. 81.

[62] For Foucault, 'discipline' is not to be identified with a governmental organisation or its methodologies. '[I]t is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a 'physics' or an 'anatomy' of power, a technology.' See Foucault, 'Panopticism', in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 215. Foucault himself was interested in Zen Buddhism and even spent a month training in a Zen temple in 1978.

[63] Ibid., p. 202-03.

[64] Thomas Scanlon sees the two as components of political philosophy, which is directly concerned with the moral standards of the individual as well as the institution. See Scanlon, 'Individual Morality and the Morality of Institutions', in *Institutions in Action: The Nature and the Role of Institutions in the Real World*, Tiziana Andina and Petar Bojanić, eds (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), pp. 73-88. Foucault views the individual as *homo œconomicus,* an interface between the government and the individual, such that the individual has been 'governmentalized'. The individual is not identifiable through a particular economic habit but the 'grid of intelligibility' which imprints on the human subject and brings it under the control of the state.

> all that hate was transformed into useless love.
>
> Then you are left with an idea of yourself
> And the feeling of ascending emptiness of the afternoon

The conversion of hate into 'useless love', which is the effect of the artifice of religious ideologies, precipitates the transfer of the state's control over to the individual whose subjective position has garnered very little agency at this point. The voice is passive ('left with') and as Ashbery recalls in his radio interview, he intended it to be a dream of history, but one where the poet figure, the dreamer, is caught in someone else's dream.[65] The earlier hateful idea of religious ideology ('that man is horrible') may well be an imago for the individual's self-knowledge ('idea of [oneself]'). The idea, too, has metamorphosed—hate has indeed turned into 'useless love'.

For Ashbery, the emptiness exists alongside a trajectory of emotional ascent led by 'feeling', a sign of the triumph of Romantic individuality. Whether 'emptiness' indicates a philosophy of nothingness or a desultory state of mind, it remains that the individual must contend with the various instruments of discipline that surround him ('others | Who fly by [him] like beacons' and the night which is a 'sentinel'). In his interview, Ashbery specifies that the 'ascending emptiness' refers to 'a feeling of depression perhaps with a kind of exhilaration'. Perhaps it is a simulation of the debilitating political crisis Ashbery witnessed in America in the grip of Cold-War anxiety in the early Fifties, when he found himself unable to write poetry and went on to encounter John Cage's music which lifted his spirits. The poem begins to

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Similarly, the *homo moralis*, I propose, is the governmentalized individual who self-regulates his own morality in accordance with the desires of the state. For Foucault on *homo œconomicus*, see *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collége de France 1978-79,* ed. by Michel Senellart (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 252-53.

[65] Ashbery, 'Literary Workshop'.

accommodate from this point onwards a polyphony of voices in which we hear the tyrannous body politic divulge that 'we have all-inclusive plans for you'—a resounding send-up of dominant discourses of heteronormativity during the Cold War—but the poet, we are told, 'will be happy here. Because of the logic | Of [his] situation, which is something no climate can outsmart.'[66] The poet figure, to return to Foucault, 'inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles': that which mandates actions and that which carries out the mandate. Nevertheless, it is the poet who '[has] built a mountain of something, | Thoughtfully pouring all [his] energy into this single monument'. The noun 'something' obscures the biblical 'faith that can move mountains', but functions here as a placeholder, and the grandiosity of the monument is held in check by its indeterminate use.

Ashbery constructs a secularised aesthetic by taking over religious language through stealth. In Cold War America, religion has entered the public domain and seeks to bring the individual under its sway, but the individual is simultaneously at work on a 'private project', '[w]hose disappointment broke into a rainbow of tears'. As a singular, not merely countably single, monument, the poem has brought about a transformation, as David Rigsbee notes, the imagistic quality towards the end is 'not destructive but restorative'.[67] The poet has not been completely mechanised by the agents of discipline. That there is cathartic possibility is testament to the fact that the subjugation of the poet figure is inextricable from, and perhaps even contingent on, his triumph.

The spectacle of religious ideology may have objectified the poet figure, but what about the poem itself and its function as a mirror held up to this distortion? What can be said about the poem as a 'private project' which turns around to examine the effects of the public domain within itself? What, then, is the historical function of the poem as a singular monument? Going forward, my focus will be on the quality of 'emptiness' in Ashbery and the ascendency or vertical movement that accompanies it, a state of ennui which is complicated by an exhilaration and an aesthetic direction, and how Ashbery brings into play a secularised Zen.

We have already glossed over Ashbery's early interest in religion, and a way to read his post-secular poetics can be to assume a part of it finds provenance in his understanding of religion. As Vishwanathan asserts, the advent of secularisation has never taken shape in a spiritual void, and alternative spiritual systems have long been used to disempower dominant religious establishments such as Christianity and Judaism in the West.[68] The Beats thus used not only Buddhism but also marginal Christian doctrines such as Gnosticism—historically seen as a problematic discourse by colonisers who projected the supremacy of orthodox Christianity—to construct a politically-charged secularism.[69] For Ashbery, one does not supplant the other. Instead, they act as instruments of deterrence as the tyrannical propensities of Puritanism cancel out against the social indifference of the more nihilistic interpretations of Buddhist philosophy, preventing religious extremism within poetry. Plotted between the hermit's rococo cave and the pagoda, his poetry usurps religious sensibilities, looking for, as he writes in 'Soonest Mended', 'a kind of fence-sitting | Raised to the level of an esthetic [sic] ideal' (*SP*, 88). 'What is Poetry', an *ars poetica* he wrote when he began to teach poetry for the first time, explores the aesthetic consequences of a spiritual mode of fence-sitting. The spiritual component, however, seems distant at first, and a tussle between form and content is foregrounded.

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[66] In Ashbery, the pronouns do not refer to a specific entity and are interchangeable, adding to the polyphonic effect. Several scholars have noted this aspect in Ashbery. John Emil Vincent has conducted a long study on this matter, *John Ashbery and You: His Later Books* (London: The University of Georgia Press, 2007). Ashbery also discusses polyphony in 'These Lacustrine Cities' in the radio interview.
[67] David Rigsbee, 'Against Monuments: A Reading of Ashbery's "These Lacustrine Cities"', in *Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery*, ed. by David Leman (London: Cornell University Press, p. 218.

> The medieval town, with frieze
> Of boy scouts from Nagoya? The snow
>
> That came when we wanted it to snow?
> Beautiful images? Trying to avoid
>
> Ideas, as in this poem?
>
> (*SP*, 236)

Reflecting on the composition of the poem, Ashbery says that it began as a 'conflation of two memories', both involving groups of boy scouts.[70] One was on a visit to Chester where he and a friend bumped into some boy scouts at a railway station, and the other was a brief encounter with a group of Japanese scouts who had the word 'Nagoya' emblazoned on their uniforms. As in much of Ashbery's poems the two incidents from his life, in and of themselves, do not seem to have any contextual significance in the poem. '[W]hat is poetry?', Ashbery muses while looking back on the poem, 'It's perhaps meant to imply that poetry can be just about anything the poet happens upon when trying to write.'[71] While it may seem that spontaneity is the driving artistic concern in Ashbery's poems, in a review of art shows devoted to Chinese and Japanese paintings, he writes,

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[68] Vishwanathan, p. 467.
[69] For Gnosticism and Oriental theism see Ibid., 469.
[70] Ashbery, interviewed by J. P. O'Malley, 'Interview with a Writer: John Ashbery', *The Spectator* <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2013/02/interview-with-a-writer-john-ashbery/> [accessed 12 November 2021].
[71] Ibid.

> writing and painting have been much more closely related in the Orient than elsewhere. Both require manual dexterity; both must express spontaneously and *correctly* a fleeting impression. The combination of spontaneity and exactitude is one of the things that appeal to us in this art, which must obey the rules even when it breaks them'.[72]

The lesson learnt from Orientalia is that spontaneity is to be paired with exactitude, a subversion of tradition must accompany a deference to it. In 'What is Poetry', Ashbery's 'fleeting impression' of the world links back to cultural memory and, as I shall demonstrate, concerns about the way a poet's reading practices of Oriental literary forms dovetail with his own consciousness.

With the progression from a seemingly throwaway reference to Nagoya, moving on to 'The snow | That came when we wanted it to snow' the poem invokes Derek Mahon, whose 'Snow Party' was published just two years before *Houseboat Days*. Ashbery's interrogation of poetry's historical value is unmistakable, given Mahon's juxtaposition of the poet Matsuo Bashō at a snow-viewing party in Nagoya against synchronous political shifts which oppress and kill thousands. While Mahon remains ambivalent about the moral function of Bashō's silent snow-viewing and art's political relevance, Ashbery reframes the figure of the aesthete.

Ashbery's appetite for orientalia saw him turn to the study and collection of Japanese forms of poetry such as haiku and haibun. In '37 Haiku', collected in *A Wave* (1984), Dean Brink notes a return to the traditional Japanese haiku form, performing a critical revision of the haiku in American literary practices.[73] In 'What is Poetry', the reader would not be amiss in hearing irony, 'Beautiful images?' as 'Merely beautiful images?'. The poet seems to be in a revisionary mode as he questions not only Hegelian ideas of aesthetics as a strictly sensuous representation of the world, but also the American modernist legacy of Imagist poetry. In 'Vorticism', Pound wrote, 'THE IMAGE IS NOT an idea', but a vehicle 'through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing'.[74] Pound himself drew from his readings of haiku while writing 'In a Station of the Metro'. Later reading practices diverted the focus of haiku poetry from ideas towards objects, and Pound's principles of the 'one-image poem' gradually devolved into prettified vignettes in American haiku traditions. Ashbery's poem enquires into such late-modernist practices, critiquing the artist's impulse to manage nature and supplant the social and the historical with the aesthetic.

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[72] Ashbery, 'Four Shows of Oriental Art in Paris', *New York Herald Tribune*, 12 December 1962, p. 6.

[73] Dean Brink, 'John Ashbery's "37 Haiku" and the American Haiku Orthodoxy', in *Globalization and Cultural Identity/Translation*, Pengxiang Chen and Terence Russell, eds (Jiaoxi, Taiwan: Fo Guang University and University of Manitoba, 2010), 157-165 (p. 160).

[74] Ezra Pound, 'Vorticism', *The Fortnightly Review* <https://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/vorticism/> [accessed 16 March 2022].

In a hokku written at a snow-viewing party in Nagoya, Bashō captures an eagerness which visitors from Edo (modern-day Tokyo) such as him might have felt.

> well then,
> let's go snow-viewing
> till we all fall down[75]

Bashō would travel to Nagoya to watch snowfall and also be a part of a community of poets and disciples. Three years before writing the hokku, Bashō had turned to Buddhist practices and was already a lay Zen monk. Monastic life, however, had not taken away Bashō away from social life; the subject of the poem is not a singular observer but a collective. And despite the shift towards a brooding tone in his work after taking up monkhood, lightness, a trait (*karumi*) that becomes the guiding principle of his late work, surfaces in this hokku. The speaker anticipates slipping and falling on the way to the snow-viewing but prefers youthful exuberance, making haste so as not to miss the snowfall. In Bashō's Japan, the spectacle of nature drew people together and built communities. It is the human subject that responds and adapts to climatic changes, an equation that is flipped in Ashbery's poem. In the Anthropocene, ecosystems are managed, and environments are regulated by humans; it snows when we desire snow ('The snow | That came when we wanted it to snow'). But what is the status of 'snow'—where snow is a metonym for poetry—that is managed, aestheticized, and governed by a misreading of tradition?

Haruo Shirane's valuable study of Bashō's poetry resituates the importance of cultural memory in Bashō's haiku, returning to the ways in which Bashō engaged with, reworked, and reinvigorated haiku conventions in Japan.[76] In American reading practices, the circumvention of such social and cultural aspects of haiku began, Shirane emphasizes, with the High modernists, particularly with Eliot's poetics of depersonalisation. Eliot's anti-Romantic proposal of the 'objective correlative' preferred the transfer of emotion through the enumeration of objects and events, and not through the poet's subjective experience. The objective-subjective dialectic that followed began to be governed and mediated by the fiction of a strictly objective view. As Shirane observes, realisation was no longer to be expressed but elicited through the juxtaposition of images.[77] In 'A Few Don'ts By An Imagiste', Pound writes,

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[75] Matsuo Bashō, *Selected Poems by Matsuo Mashō*, trans. by David Landis Barnhill (Albany, State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 64.

[76] Haruo Shirane, *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Bashō* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

> An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. […] It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.[78]

The modernist shift towards nonrepresentational poetry meant that the poem needed to be a fragmented plane of variables that would elicit emotional responses within the readers according to their own subjective positions. After the mid-20th century re-emergence of Zen, R. H. Blyth, Kenneth Yasuda, and Harold Henderson made significant contributions towards the popularisation of haiku poetry. Amongst them, Blyth and Yasuda emphasised the need to read haiku in line with Zen philosophy. The former, influenced greatly by Alan Watts' and Suzuki's writings, reformulated the subjective-objective dialectic at this point, writing of the Zen experience as something haiku could offer: 'a state of mind in which we are not separated by other things, are indeed identical with them, and yet retain our own individuality'.[79] Blyth adds that writing and reading haiku is a 'self-annihilative' process, while Yasuda compares them to a state of 'enlightened, nirvana-like harmony', returning specifically to the Buddhist notions of intersubjectivity.[80] Separations between phenomena, bipolarity itself, is seen to be 'useful fictions', and the haiku was thus repositioned within Zen ideas of Sunyatā, or the void. This gave rise to a reading practice that searched for a 'haiku moment' and a 'sudden liberation' which was in fact a derivative of satori, a state of awakening in Rinzai Zen which can be experienced by a Zen practitioner through intuitive absorption. That Pound alludes to satori in his article in *Poetry* but does not situate it within Buddhist practices is demonstrative of the ways in which literature and literary criticism can conceive of hermeneutic processes that rarefy religious doctrine. Thrill and wonderment, 'that sense of sudden growth', is an emotional response to the aesthetic and are no longer seen as rapture.

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[77] Ibid., pp. 43-44.

[78] Pound, 'A Few Don'ts By An Imagiste', in *Poetry*, 1.6 (Mar 1913), 200-206 (pp. 200-01) <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/58900/a-few-donts-by-an-imagiste> [accessed 23 March 2022].

[79] R. H. Blyth, *Haiku*, vol 1 (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1949-52), p. iii; quoted in Shirane, p. 44.

[80] Blyth, *Haiku*, p.44; Kenneth Yasuda, *The Japanese Haiku: Its Essential Nature, History, and Possibilities in English* (Rutland, Vt, Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1957) p. 24. Both quoted in Shirane, p. 45.

It is such a modernist process Ashbery undertakes in 'What is Poetry', performing a cross-cultural, cross-temporal exchange with Bashō's Zen ecopoetics but at the same time conducting a critical revision of modernism's Orientalist practices by re-evaluating the dynamics between image and thought, and between objectivity and subjectivity.

> […] In school
> All the thought got combed out:
>
> What was left was like a field.
> Shut your eyes, and you can feel it for miles around.
>
> Now open them on a thin vertical path.
> It might give us—what?—some flowers soon?
> (*SP*, 236)

The New York poets positioned themselves antithetically to New Criticism which drew from modernism and had come to dominate academic literary theory during the onset of the Cold War. A poem was considered a self-contained vessel and analysis avoided reader-responses, ideological underpinnings, or historical and cultural contexts. Such elevations of form over content fell neatly in line with contemporaneous groupthink, where the individual body was no more than an instrument of the body politic. In Ashbery's poem, 'thought', that sign of criticality and agency, was 'combed out' into a tract of emptiness. As in 'These Lacustrine Cities', the emptiness is characterised by desolation, but the field is not all barren, merely fallow with the promise of creative action. Ashbery's 'field poetics' uses the open space as a setting for a regeneration and redefinition of the subjective position, and the significance of the combed-out individuality is repossessed by the artist's subjective drive.

For O'Hara speech and immediacy must mediate historical silence. Artistic action can provide what modernity cannot: 'when I get lofty enough I've stopped thinking and that's when refreshment arrives.' (*OCP*, 498). The emergence of the artist from the chrysalis of thought marks a movement away from 'lofty' self-importance and towards creative purpose, as though concerns of ideology and literary subjectivity cannot run concurrently. Ashbery complicates this cyclical relationship further when he says,

> For me, poetry has its beginning and ending outside thought. Thought is certainly involved in the process; indeed, there are times when my work seems to me to be merely a recording of my thought processes

> without regard to what they are thinking about. If this is true, then I would also like to acknowledge my intention of somehow turning these processes into poetic objects, a position perhaps kin to Dr. Williams's "No ideas but in things," with the caveat that, for me, ideas are also things[81]

Under the gaze of the literary observer, the thinking being is reframed as a 'poetic object', defining an act of artistic involution that revises William Carlos Williams' object-based poetics. In Ashbery's mode of inward reflection, Ron Silliman notes a similarity with Larry Eigner's poetry which, as Silliman asserts, 'transcended the problematic constraints' of Olson's speech-based 'projectivist' poetics.[82] Eigner himself pointed out that his poetry originates in 'thinking' rather than speech, and it prompts Silliman to identify a similar, distinctly meditative trait in Ashbery:

> If, however, you read Ashbery the same way you do Larry Eigner, as a model of consciousness itself, the place of presence refocuses in a new way. Ashbery in *Three Poems* reminds me, more than anything, of the Buddhist adage that *You are not your thoughts*, and with the underlying idea that thinking itself represents a form of anxiety. The whole purpose in meditation of focusing on breathing is precisely to make the individual conscious of the degree to which thinking goes on, even when one pays it no mind. Meditators never fully banish thoughts—it's not even clear if that would be doable—but rather get distance from them, so that when thoughts rise up & intrude on the meditation one can simply turn them aside.[83]

Ashbery's peculiar poetic process of 'recording' thoughts as if they were things can be said to be a consequence of his disengagement from thought, a disruption in the thinker's habitual identification with the process of thinking. The moment the thinker realises that 'You are not your thoughts', anxiety turns into observation; during this transformation, thinking and observation work concurrently. Buddhist meditation (*vipassanā*) can be said to be the practice of honing this faculty. In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the seminal discourse on meditation in Buddhism, the lay monk is advised systematically. They must first close their eyes and focus on the breath, leading their mind gradually on to 'watching the body within as body', steering away from thinking, and observing the way emotions manifest as sensations and vice versa.[84] In another *ars poetica*, 'And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name', also in *Houseboat Days*, Ashbery presents meditation as an aesthetic activity when he writes,

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[81] John Ashbery, *Other Traditions* (London: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 2.

[82] Ron Silliman, *In the American Tree*, ed. by Ron Silliman (Orono, Maine: The National Poetry Foundation, 1986), p. xvii.

[83] Ron Silliman, 'Four Contexts for "Three Poems": "Three Poems" (1972)', *Conjunctions*, 49 (2007), 283-301 (p. 300). Andrew DuBois also notes the meditative strain in *Three Poems* and that it 'corresponds to a meditative practice of regular and focused attentiveness'; *Ashbery's Forms of Attention* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2006), p. 66. Criticism on Ashbery has for a long time followed the modernist programme, coring Ashbery's attentiveness of its religious contexts. A few, such as Silliman and DuBois have noted overtones of religiosity but have not joined all the strings. When joined, the allusions come together to suggest a pattern which points to specific spiritual backgrounds. This gesturing in the New York School is as important as the de-contextualisation of religious language and imagery, and even reinforces context albeit with caveats.

> The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind
> Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to
>   communicate
> Something between breaths
>
> (*SP*, 235)

Silliman's use of the example of Buddhist meditation to explain Ashbery's method of composition, a collision between an 'empty mind' in ascesis and proto-Romantic digressive thought patterns, is not critical whimsy but in fact an aesthetic model we encounter in Ashbery.

In 'What is Poetry', following the poem's allusion to Bashō, a Zen lay monk in his time, the speaker's instruction in the imperative ('Shut your eyes, and you can feel it for miles around') takes the tone of a teacher of meditation, guiding the reader, as it were, to a new spiritual ground. In a Buddhist context, 'feeling' can be read as an experience of bodily sensations, which gradually appears as conditional and interrelated with the external world that stretches for 'miles around'. Ashbery's strategy resituates American modernist poetry in-between high modernism's depersonalised poetics and Blyth's Zen poetry of 'meaningful touch, taste, sound, sight, and smell', a 'poetry of sensation', poetic content as an extension of form.[85] Ashbery's 'open-field poetics' and embodiment of a meditative 'feeling-sensation' awareness also brings a 'projectivist' poetics into conversation with Buddhist aesthetics, a separation maintained ardently by O'Hara based on the reading that poetry professed a mode of action which religion could not. It defined the individual's role within the public space better, while religion relegated the artist to self-indulgent silence, sequestered from social responsibilities. In Ashbery, the artist uses meditative silence to find a way back to the public space. His 'feeling-sensation' poetics questions modernism's anti-Romantic poetics of depersonalisation and becomes a means to acquire empirical knowledge. It reveals the contingencies of both objectivity and subjectivity, and thereby holds the narcissistic propensities of solipsism in check.

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[84] To observe the body-mind phenomena is not perceived in Buddhist traditions as inaction or passivity but an awakening; the technique is called Vipassanā, 'a special manner of seeing' or 'insight'. This practice extends through various forms into Zazen, or Zen sitting meditation. See *Sayings of the Buddha: A Selection of Suttas from the Pāli Nikāyas*, trans. and intro. by Rupert Gethin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 141-55.

[85] Blyth, *A History of Haiku*, vol 1(Japan: Hokuseidō Press, 1963), quoted in Shirane, p. 44.

O'Hara, it must be said, wasn't the only poet trying to grapple with Buddhism's role as an instrument of private enterprise in the public space. Olson himself harboured a vexed fascination for Buddhism. He had read Buddhist scriptures and philosophy, particularly Suzuki's and Christmas Humphrey's works, and he speaks about his admiration for Buddhist thought in a letter to confidante Frances Boldereff, but follows it up with an admission: 'it makes me nervous, for I do not like to conjure up a picture of myself as a religious [sic]'.[86] Nonetheless, he states unequivocally that Buddhism was 'the antidote to the religious' which 'rotted west-wise'.[87] For Olson, it was time for the West to introspect.

> Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which *western man* [emphasis mine] has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects.[88]

If Olson is wary of being typecast as 'religious', it is because of the public role Buddhism had already taken up in American politics, or perhaps it is because of an understanding of how religion is inseparable from public life alongside a concern of how it would affect his private domain. Paradoxically, it is the end of this very presumption of separation, between the internal and external that Olson demands. His vision of the West is one which sees an end of power relations between the public and the private, one that may use cultural imports including religion, but must purge, in the process, religion from itself. Ashbery confronts the difficult duty that art finds itself performing in Cold-War America: to become a haven for marginalised religions, mysticism, and occultism that was banished from public spaces in the ideological appropriation of Judeo-Christian thought, and yet define a lyric subjectivity that is not contingent on them. Ashbery's poem steers clear of considering the West as spiritually corrupt or in need of emancipation, although his is a critical act as much as an aesthetic one, mapping and at the same time embodying a sociohistorical moment in literature in America.

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[86] Olson, *Charles Olson and Frances Boldereff: A Modern Correspondence*, eds Ralph Maud & Sharon Thesen (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), p. 514. Ralph Maud gives an account of Olson's private library and his reading habits on Buddhism in *Charles Olson's Reading: A Biography* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois, 1996), p. 186.

[87] Olson, *A Modern Correspondence*, p. 464.

[88] Ibid.

The next instruction of Ashbery's meditative speaker ('Now open [your eyes]') in 'What is Poetry' leads us not to an objective world-out-there reality as much as an imaginative space 'on a thin vertical path'. The act of reworking history is a question of looking beyond sociocultural boundaries, and as Ashbery states in his article on Oriental art in the *New York Herald*, spontaneity, or the individual drive, must come together with exactitude, with traditional forms. The Zen tradition is a cultural phenomenon that must be acknowledged as an irrevocable part of the post-war American aesthetic. Comparing Ashbery's methods of allusion to Eliot's, Ben Hickman observes that rather than climb to a privileged site where the past is interpreted and percolates downward to the present, 'Ashbery uses the trope of inattention'—the reading of literature as a distracted practice that interweaves with the process of writing in the present—'to allow the past to represent a picture of the mind in its present situation.'[89] In Ashbery, and especially in 'What is Poetry', the faculty of attention is not easily distilled from distraction. What the speaker feels, and encourages the reader to feel, is scattered 'for miles around'; diffusion runs concurrently with concentration. However, there is a centripetal movement as the speaker's meditative focus draws inwards, and on to a 'thin vertical path'. Unlike Eliot, who sends the reader back to urtexts, as he does when he alludes to the Buddhist *Ādittapariyāya Sutta*, the 'Fire Sermon discourse', in *The Waste Land*, Ashbery speaks from within a contemporaneous spectacle where historicity is constantly being reorganised as modernity. Eliot's Orient is a set of scholarly coordinates that lie beyond the poem, and the reader must first familiarise themselves with Oriental antiquity to salvage modern Western civilization, whereas Ashbery constructs within his subjectivity, as Cage advises in his 'Lecture on Something', a confluence of Western and Eastern aesthetics.

> Actually, there is no longer a question of Orient and Occident. All of that is rapidly disappearing; […] the movement with the wind of the Orient and the movement against the wind of the Occident meet in America and produce a movement upwards into the air—the space, the silence, the nothing that supports us.[90]

In Ashbery, the vertical axis represents a trajectory of transcendental feeling as well as a movement of aesthetic unity. Art dovetails with cultural and historical indices. Exploring

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[89] Hickman, p. 123.
[90] Cage, quoted in *Where the Heart Beats*, p. 3.

Ashbery's principles of inclusivity, David Herd reminds us that while Ashbery's polyphony may not be dialogic in the sense that the different voices do not always acknowledge each other's presence within a poem, they 'constitute the cultural background against (and knowledge of) which successful communication has to take place.'[91] The 'private project', which Ashbery refers to in 'These Lacustrine Cities', is a public one as well. However, unlike O'Hara, where the aesthetic may offer a refuge from the political, in Ashbery, the question about poetry's emancipatory powers might be beside the point. Any 'sudden liberation' is held in check at the end of 'What is Poetry': 'It might give us—what?—some flowers soon?' (*SP*, 236). Given the nonchalant approximation 'what?', the flowers appear to be a payoff which, while welcome, is not entirely the reason why the poet undertakes the task of writing; he places little importance to any sort of reward. Bathos is a familiar device in Ashbery, primarily used as a ballast for elevated rhetoric, and as Ross reminds us, the lack of a satisfactory resolution in an Ashbery poem often lies in the poet's 'refusal' as much as his 'inability' to provide it.[92] In 'What is Poetry', it achieves a very specific effect. It deconstructs the concept of transcendence in line with zazen (Zen form of meditation) reflexivity which forewarns the meditator of the desire to attain a 'special state'.[93] Such conceptualisations only divert the mind away from the psychosomatic phenomena, what Ginsberg calls, as I have earlier mentioned, the 'feeling-sensation' experience. S. N. Goenka, a teacher of Vipassanā meditation, speaks about the dangers of turning meditation into a pursuit of pleasurable sensations rather than an enquiry into selfhood and the development of noble qualities (*pāramitā*), and while Ashbery's telos is not altogether oppositional poetic language allows him to take a more non-didactic approach.[94] In 'What is Poetry', the 'flowers' are viewed with a scepticism that is alert to the compulsive critical and writerly practices of using the poem as a medium of transcendence. There is no final exegesis or an 'enlightened, nirvana-like harmony' amongst critical readings. Ashbery's revision of Japanese poetry in American literary practices proceeds by superseding the language of zazen while preserving its ethical framework. But more importantly, the multivalence of religiosity latent in Ashbery renders secularism as a part of it, obscuring whether secularism is in opposition to religiosity, having usurped it, or if it is a natural consequence of religiosity.

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[91] Herd, p. 114.

[92] Ross, p. 138.

[93] Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, ed. by Trudy Dixon (New York: Walker/Weatherhill, 1970), p. 26.

[94] S. N. Goenka, *Meditation Now: Inner Peace through Inner Wisdom* (Onalaska, Washington: Vipassana Research Publications, 2015), p. 107.

To the New York School, spirituality is religion unsettled, as James Schuyler exemplifies,

> […] But
> what if it is all “Maya,
> illusion?” I
> doubt it, though. Men are not
> so inventive. Or
> few are. Not knowing
> a name for something proves nothing. Right
> now it isn’t raining, snowing, sleeting, slushing,
> yet it is
> doing something.
>
> (‘Empathy and New Year’, *SCP*, 77)

The concept of maya in Hinduism and Buddhism is a complex philosophical development which I have no space to discuss here, but briefly it may be described as an ‘illusion’ or ‘appearance’ that arises from self-centeredness, conceptualisation, value assignation, and being blind to the ‘thusness’ of existence; maya neither points to idealism nor to realism. To believe that Schuyler is entering a serious philosophical discussion against Vedic and Buddhist doctrines is to miss the cavalier attitude of his vernacular. While spirituality depends on religion for its sustenance, it de-centres it from conversations by proposing new extensions of doctrinal arguments. Schuyler does not reject the philosophical argument of maya since he too considers the phenomenological world as governed neither by idealism nor realism (‘Men are not | so inventions. Or | few are.’). Rather he posits that perhaps the true representation of phenomena in poetry may lie in the most obscure, more secular, signifiers (‘something’ instead of ‘maya’).

As we have seen, a pushback against the post-war intensification of faith in America does not come without its own complications. A decontextualization of religion goes hand in hand with the gradual expansion of social consciousness which the New York poets aspired to in their work. When Hickman identifies that ‘Ashbery’s history of the present is an attempt to democratise intertextuality and place it on a broadly anti-symbolist footing,’ he notes that Ashbery’s destabilisation of links between symbol and idea does not stem from an ahistorical poetics, rather simply a peculiar way in which the historical may be ‘presented’.[95] Nonetheless, the erasure of context that is introduced by poetic allusion can amount to a new hegemony of the author's identity, and can be counteractive to a project that strives to be equitable. Ashbery can, therefore, go against his own grain when he constructs atmospherics in his poems, even recontextualising what has been unmoored by allusion. At the end of 'Elephant Visitors', he turns to practices of material culture: 'Until which time we sign off—wait, the lotus | wants to say something: it's MADE IN JAPAN' (*NFA*, 101). The urgency with which the poet plays the role of a mediator, giving the last word to the lotus, points to the sociocultural histories of material production. By returning the Asian artefact, as it were, back to its source, the speaker addresses the need for a dismantling of imperialist practices of cultural appropriation in American literature. A re-symbolisation of the image of the lotus involves returning it not only to Japan, but also to Buddhism, which carried the image of the lotus to Japan from India through China. It is not between religion or secularism, however, that Ashbery looks to choose, since 'everything has value—an equal value, but a value nonetheless'. It is context and culture which gives rise to ethics, and it is for the sake of maintaining a social equilibrium that poetry ascribes values to anything at a given point in time.

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[95] Hickman, p. 124.

Strategically, it is even in the interest of a secularist such as O'Hara to occasionally carry out the usurpation of religion by embodying religious ethics without disassociating himself from tradition. In 'Meditations in an Emergency', he uses the devices of religion to speak about the futility of looking anywhere else but within himself for agency.

> I've tried love, but that hides you in the bosom of another and I am always springing forth from it like the lotus—the ecstasy of always bursting forth! (but one must not be distracted by it!) or like a hyacinth, 'to keep the filth of life away,' yes, there, even in the heart, where the filth is pumped in and slanders and pollutes and determines. I will my will, though I may become famous for a mysterious vacancy in that department, that greenhouse.
>
> (*OCP*, 197)

To extend his meditation on romantic love and individual expression, O'Hara nests in a section from the Zen prayer of 'Bodhisattva's Vows and Deeds': 'The very moment when thus pure faith is awakened from the depths of our being, a lotus of enlightenment will open up in bloom. Each lotus flower carries a Buddha in it.'[96] In a Buddhist context, the lotus is a symbol of the purity of an enlightened mind and body, which grows out of the muck of desire and worldly attachment. Armed with the familiar Buddhist instruction not to be distracted by ecstasy, O'Hara, for whom religiosity is undone by Eros, finds use for the metaphor of the self as mired in filth, which nonetheless holds the promise of a blooming flower. While the quest for transcendence is diluted by O'Hara's facetiousness, his tribute to immanence is underpinned by the Buddhist belief that spiritual experience is self-driven ('I will my will') and may emerge out of desire and need not necessarily be contingent on its banishment. Religion plays a role in rejuvenating subjectivity; secularism can after all find a use for religious motifs.

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[96] Suzuki, D. T., *Selected Works*, p. 60.

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Post-secularist discourses have begun to germinate around the thought that the 'religious' and the 'secular' are not after all opposites at loggerheads. Current commentators caution against the formulation of religion in unitary terms and insist that it is a concept which may be defined, altered, and even 'manipulated', deliberately or inadvertently, by both secular and religious actors.[97] Much remains to be said, however, about how literature can, and has in the past, interrogated the boundaries of religion and secularism, and sees its own functions as a vehicle of secularisation as well as sacralisation. In the New York School, a clear post-secularist strategy is discernible in their response to the dominant religious ideology and also as a series of navigations around the religious-secular binary of post-war American modernity. For Barbara Guest, Buddhist thought becomes one of the tools that informs her understanding of the methodologies of the writing and reception of poetry. This interaction between poetry and Buddhism happens against a backdrop of a larger set of interactions between reader and writer, modernity and the historical, the East and the West, and, as I will later show, the syncretic encounters between Buddhism and Christianity. In her critical essay 'Shifting Persona', she examines the critical agency and the duality that complicates its own assumptive centrality in the work it accomplishes.

> When the person who is you is the viewer, you believe an extraordinary strength exists in that position. You are outside the arena of dispute or creativity or blasphemy, dwelling in a private space where emotive speculation is stronger than fact or action, each of which passes before

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[97] See Samantha May, Erin K. Wilson, Claudia Baumgart-Ochse & Faiz Sheikh, 'The Religious as Political and the Political as Religious: Globalisation, Post-Secularism and the Shifting Boundaries of the Sacred', *Politics, Religion, and Ideology*, 15.3, 331-46 (pp. 339-40).

> you in an attempt at dissimulation which you are free to dispute. This is called the orchid position, because of the extravagant attention the viewer demands.
>
> […]
>
> Yet inside the window is the person who is you, who are now looking out, shifted from the observer to the inside person and this shows in your work. When you are the inside person you can be both heavy and delicate, depending upon your mood; you have a sense of responsibility totally different from the you outside. You occupy the lotus position.
>
> […] The lotus position is one of exaggerated self-dependency, in which the eye goes inward so frequently that rest stops are required, something like paragraph encasings.
>
> These rest stops can be seen in the shifts that take place between the persona of the creator and the persona of the observer.
>
> (*FOI*, 36-37)

The inner space of a poem, an ‘arena of dispute or creativity or blasphemy’, is a site of strain and conflict. The poet remains in the private domain outside the poem until she enters the circuitry of poetic language, a public space which brings her into dialogue with tradition, the historical, the modern, and the sacred. The orchid position is one that deals with ‘emotive speculation’, while the lotus position, a closed-eye state of inward reflection brings the poet to a dialogic, diffuse state. Poetry, then, is not quite Romantic in that it is not Wordsworth’s leisurely recollection of images reflected on the ‘inward eye’;[98] it is not an expression of ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’.[99] Nor is it an arena where one might experience O’Haran paroxysms, the ‘ecstasy of always bursting forth’. Drawing on Buddhist discourses on meditation which recommend sitting in *padmasana*—literally ‘lotus position’—Guest problematises Western colonial interpretations of meditative practices as passive navel-gazing.[100] For Guest, poetry is a crucible, a site demanding action and ‘a sense of responsibility’, and meditation involves not self-indulgence but ‘self-dependency’. Poetry brings about a fluctuation between creative life and the observer. A rapid exchange precipitates between the two positions, both interdependent on and inseparable from the other.

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[98] William Wordsworth, ‘I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud’, in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 304.

[99] Wordsworth, ‘Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*’, Ibid., p. 598 (pp. 595-615).

[100] Guest’s parallel evocation of the foetus (foetal) position, the ‘inner person’ as an infant, cannot be discounted. Elsewhere she calls the infancy of the poem the silence that bears it (*FOI*, 20), a state of inchoate artistry that is the source of the poetic act. The poetic landscape for Guest, then, also retains characteristics of a womb akin to the Platonic *chora*, a receptacle with maternal connections to the observer outside.

The fluctuation of the lyric figure in Guest is in fact an interaction between manifold binaries, and its appraisals of secularism in tandem with religion, and of European religions with 'other' religions, are concurrent. In her essay, Guest goes on to write,

> [The poetic] landscape appears solitary and yet there in the short grass is the hidden person placed there by the writer who desired a human instrument to bear witness to this attempt to construct with a fictional or real landscape a syllabus of art. (*FOI*, 41-42)

To use the poetic landscape as a 'syllabus' of art, art must be studied but also considered as a heretical decree which undermines the monolithic status of religious orthodoxy (OED). The hidden persona within Guest's poem, the intuitive witness in the lotus position, confers a spiritual authority to the writer. It presents the poetic landscape as a 'subaltern counterpublics', a form of speech in which Nancy Fraser sees a critique of the dominant public. Following Habermas' ideas of the 'public sphere', an arena where discourses and debates are produced and circulated by entities critical of the state, Fraser contends that public spaces are in fact stratified and are comprised of multiple discourses within levels of power. She goes on to define subaltern counterpublics as 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs'.[101] Guest's post-secular counterpublic uses the persona occupying the lotus position not only to voice allegiances with historical 'heresies' but also, as we shall see, to relinquish authority that comes with rhetorical speech.

> Counting you as one of us
> among the rushes
> the difficult pebbles, these stones…
>
> Quiet the water, it can do more,
> we prefer it still, the birds not chattering.
> We like your voices because they have more portent.
>
> […]
>
> Even as you turn

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[101] Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Source Text*, 25/26 (1990), 56-80 (p. 67).

> In the wind woodenly I catch a different sound,
> enough to separate you from them
> bringing, as you do, the bandages
> from tree to wounded tree.
>
> (‘Clouds Near the Windmill’, *GCP*, 79)

At the very outset, even for the speaker who, while a subaltern herself, has the authority to induct outsiders into channels of disputes and debates (‘Counting you as one of us’), the public terrain is not easily negotiated (‘the difficult pebbles, these stones’). In the second verse paragraph, Guest defines the language of her counterpublic as silence, and goes on to state that an exegetical flexibility exists in tranquillity (‘Quiet the water, it can do more’). The function of this witness is not simply to be a ‘portent’ in the sense of an exceptional and admirable entity (OED), but also, by carrying bandages betokening violence, to augur the recurrence of a horrific past. The commemorative silence of the poem’s interior space cannot be diminished by contemporaneous voices (the speaker is able to ‘separate you from them’) and retains a valuable link with history.

Speaking of her interest in the spiritual quality of silence, Guest mentions in an interview,

> I was thinking about the religion of quietism. […] I think [quietism] is a beautiful word, and it indicates a settlement, and there’s so much that’s unsettled and I think that quietism is settling things down [sic].[102]

Guest’s interest in Quietism places a diachronic torque on ‘quiet’ in ‘Clouds Near the Windmill’, returning to the doctrine of the Spanish priest Miguel de Molinos. Quietism emphasised the withdrawal from action, and an engagement in silent contemplation, thereby allowing the divine process to have freer reign. The doctrine gained traction in parts of Europe in the late 17th century and ‘quietism’ soon became a pejorative term. Molinos was ultimately condemned by Pope Innocent XI and sentenced to life in prison where he later died. In its capacity as an ‘arena of dispute or creativity or blasphemy’ (*FOI*, 36), the poem becomes a vehicle of sociohistorical significance of several subaltern ethics and religiosities. Just as Ginsberg used Gnosticism with subversive intent in his work, Guest looks towards fringe religions in the West, along with Buddhism, to construct her counterpublic. Her Quietist

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[102] Guest, interview by Cathy Wagner, ‘Freedom, Confinement and Disguise: An Interview with Barbara Guest’ <https://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/archive/online_archive/v2_4_2006/current/workbook/bg_wagner.html> [accessed 23 Nov 2021].

‘settlement’ finds expression through a gradual eclipse of the visually observable world into a space of undisturbed imagination: ‘Abiding calm / as light less curious now / and even less significant’. Guest’s heretical turn, unsettling the function of a Catholic syllabus, moves on to a final religious gesture through a transformation of the poetic landscape.

> Later we will watch the shadowless
> birdwing and those straight lines
> harsh without a tremor,
> resembling pagoda field,
> resembling stalks with your imagination.
>
> The land is rutted with carriages,
> they have their hoods pulled down.
>
> (*GCP*, 79)

The arc of poetic speech, moving on from an appreciation of quietude in nature to Quietist contemplation, from the induction of a subaltern entity into a subordinated social group to the group’s ultimate disbandment (or do the carriages mark some sort of meditative congregation?), is punctuated by the emergence of a ‘pagoda field’. Guest’s allusion to the convergences of the poetics of her time performs a revisionary socio-political act beyond the mere critical act of suggesting Buddhism’s entanglement with contemporary energy-field aesthetics. By bringing Western religious marginality to coincide with Buddhist and avant-garde philosophies of relativity, she de-centres not only the dominant ideology of orthodox Christianity in post-war America but also Eurocentric narratives of modernity: ‘Rejoice / in ancient nothingness’ (*GCP*, 55). Given that Guest instructs us to ‘Think of the past as the modern poem runs along beside [us]’ (*FOI,* 102), the act of remembering forms a crucial aspect of her work; tradition is not simply to be valued but also to be used as a buttress for preparing the ever-renewing clearing of a poem’s ‘pagoda field’. Along with the self-dependency of meditative intuition, ‘[t]he poem needs the archaic to support it’ (*FOI,* 93).

I wish to revisit ‘Walking Buddha’, a poem I studied in Chapter 1, to demonstrate how, through her appraisal of a statue of the Buddha, Guest emphasises the need to understand and embody the qualities of non-violence by returning to the historical.

> The masons have finished their research
>
> not a cubic inch more
>
> There is:

The arm whose elongation

the open hand

the chest measurements

                    Rough cement ruled

an original of *Art Brut*

unrailed staircase

a smash knee surface

to conceal the bronze asperity

                    essentials of being classical
                    in a violent world before the decline

under slip-shoe palm

(*GCP*, 68)

A rationalistic method to know the statue is perhaps abandoned rather than finished. The masons, as though hesitating, second-guessing their own data, produce fragmented results that render the statue unknowable in any way through numbers: ‘The arm whose elongation | the open hand | the chest measurements’. Guest favours an aesthetic evaluation of the craftsmanship instead. The statue’s unacademic ‘crudeness’ and lack of formal sophistication seem to prefigure Jean Dubuffet’s volte-face from institutionalised art forms by curating work created by ‘outsiders’ such as inmates in psychiatric asylums, children, autodidacts, folk artists, and graffiti and tattoo artists. If Eliot sees Eastern philosophers as intellectually superior to their Western counterparts—mere schoolboys in comparison—Guest pits Buddhism as an outsider, nowhere in the academic arena, and all the more admirable for that.

In ‘Walking Buddha’, ‘Rough cement ruled’ does not merely indicate the moulding of artistic materials, but also marks a discursive shift, carrying connotations of governance and Buddhism’s historical public life. The freestanding figure of the Buddha, particularly the walking form, was first conceptualised in the canonical Sukhothai style, and Guest may even be referring to an era considered to be the first Thai kingdom. In modern Thai narratives the Sukhothai era saw a ‘golden age’ of Buddhism when rulers embraced it to govern efficiently and with compassion.[103] This explains a noticeable attitude in Ashbery and Guest: their embodiment of Buddhism forms a subaltern counterpublics which confronts Western modernity with the ways in which religion is socially lived and practiced in Eastern traditions. Guest's reference to Buddhism's political modernity suggests its importance in earlier civil societies and the ways in which it has been seen by many sovereign states in the East as essential to social and political health. The borders between the religious and the secular blur in Guest, as do the borders between literature and religion, and sacrality and blasphemy.

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[103] Chatri Prakitnonthakan speaks of the historiography of the Golden Sukhothai era as ‘*partially* invented’ [emphasis not mine] by modern Thai nationalist narratives. See ‘The origins of Sukhothai art as the Thai golden

That said, Buddhism, in Guest's poem, never quite emerges as a serious alternative or threat to mainstream Judeo-Christian ideology, as it does in the work of the Beats. As Michael Warner amends Fraser, subaltern counterpublics 'maintain, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status'.[104] Stripped of its doctrinal aspects, desacralized to the point of an aesthetic, Guest's image of the Buddha can inspire no mass movement, and, therefore, cannot be a functional opposition to dominant discourses. It carries a message, however, of moral and ethical transformation, a reminder of the 'essentials of being classical | in a violent world before the decline || under slip-shoe palm'. Published in 1968, a year that saw major escalations in the Vietnam war, the poem carries Guest's excoriation of American neo-colonialism along with a historical evaluation of her world as a violent one. To do so, she uses a fable which has its provenance in Buddhism. The Chinese myth of the Monkey King is one I have referred to briefly in my reading of O'Hara's 'To John Ashbery' in Chapter 1. The simian figure, an upstart rebel a la Prometheus, who brings havoc to heavenly order, is punished by the Buddha because of his hubris. He ends up being crushed under the cosmic palm of the Buddha. Guest's allegorical commentary is an indictment of modern neo-colonialist barbarity which is fated to end 'under slip-shoe palm'. Not Buddhist non-violence, but meditative death-awareness is introduced as a counterforce to violent political ideologies. To paraphrase Guest, 'we must remember the values of non-violence before we destroy ourselves'.

Guest's formal decision to choose religious mythology for an allegory, especially following the failure of scientific and rationalistic methods to apprehend the Buddhist artefact, forms the crux of her post-secular counterpublics in 'Walking Buddha'. Her primitivism opposes the conservative, progressivist ideologies of her time and is, in this sense, aligned with Olson's. The Late modernist believed that modernity had much to learn from history and indigenous peoples, and it led him to conduct archaeological digs for artefacts among the Mayan ruins in Yucatán. Just as an excavation of subaltern civilizations could reveal to

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age: the relocation of Buddha images, early Ratanakosin literature and nationalism', *South East Asia Research*, 27.3 (2019), 254-70.

[104] Michael Warner, 'Publics and Counterpublics', *Public Culture*, 14.1 (Winter 2002) 49-90 (p. 86).

modernity its own histories of conflict, so could poetry—which was for Olson an excavation of the self—reveal new possibilities in language and humanism.

In a sociohistorical study on Olson, Mark Byers traces the philosophical splintering amongst left intellectuals in the immediate aftermath of the world war and the discovery of the concentration camps.[105] Sidney Hook excoriates the leftists in his essay 'The Failure of the Left' (1943) by branding them inept idealists who had, in Hook's opinion, 'succumbed to a metaphysical approach to politics' despite a false adherence to 'scientific politics'.[106] Tracing the arguments of Dwight Macdonald in 'The Root is Man' (1946), Byers' reveals Hook's reductionist view in Macdonald's clear delineation between two emerging strains of leftist approaches. On the one hand there were the progressivists who insisted on the supremacy of science over nature and saw history through the dialectical materialism of technological goods in service of enhancing the condition of human life. On the other hand, there were the radicals, who proposed a return to an examination of man and his personal experience through his sensory capacities, and for whom whether technology improved the condition of mankind in any way was moot. Byers posits Olson in the latter category, as someone who developed a new articulation of primitivist aesthetics that focused on 'experiential radicalism'.[107] The end of the Second World War certainly did not imply an end of modernism for Guest, but the post-war avant-garde did see the need to de-rationalise poetry and redefine its socio-political functions by way of a radical primitivism. The past and the East both become categories to embody in her counterpublics; they are not categories that will usurp Western thought, but they may prompt a 'settlement', a middle-ground of new aesthetic and ethical discovery. In problematising the status quos between religion and secularism during her time, Guest was already anticipating, as it were, Luca Mavelli and Fabio Petito's call for a radical shift in the way the secular interacts with the religious.

> The question raised by the postsecular, then, is not just one of incorporation of the presence of religion or of the power of secularism into existing theoretical frameworks, but one of conceptual innovation to account for a transformation that invests the very structures of

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[105] Mark Byers, *Charles Olson and American Modernism: The Practice of the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp.23-44.

[106] Sidney Hook, 'The Failure of the Left', *Partisan Review*, 10.2 (1943), 165-77 (p. 165). Quoted in Mark Byers, p. 23.

[107] Ibid. p. 25.

> consciousness and power, and existing understandings of political community.[108]

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The project at the heart of the New York School demands structures of power to constantly maintain a high degree of solubility in their environment, and this is possible only when the environment itself is in a state of flux. It is for this reason that in these poems the private is in dialogue with the public and the sacred commingles with the profane. By perpetually allowing for alterations in consciousness, the New York School poets make enquiries into new definitions of the religious and the secular, where the question of whether the poem is one or the other is no longer the central question. Although the New York School poem is a device built to unsettle any critical act that wishes to disrupt its homeostasis, it was intended to have a public life, and it remains incumbent on criticism to report the exigencies of its formal choices and rhetorical acts, however contingent the poem's nature.

In a sequence from Kenneth Koch's play *The Red Robins*, Ni-Shu, a historical figure who was a poet and an official during the T'ang dynasty, hands out poetry criticism to Santa Claus. Speaking on American literature and its historical tensions with an inherited language, the Chinese character claims that the achievement of the former lies in its ability to frustrate the legacies of semiotic processes in English: '[T]he American writer, in being able to dispense with the central, nay crucial nub of the creative process, has created a literature that is unrivalled anywhere for its weirdness and for the apparently helter-skelter triviality of its concerns.'[109] Koch's embodiment of Ni-Shu, as when O'Hara casts himself as Po Chü-I in 'To John Ashbery', is a dramatic ploy to reassess the conventions of modern American literature rather than faithfully reconstruct a Chinese past, and it appears that one way to release American literature in English from its transatlantic fetters is to claim kinship elsewhere.

> [American] books, to return to my main point, do come to bear certain (perhaps accidental) resemblances to the literatures of such out-of-the-way places as Africa and the Far East, but they will never resemble any English work until they have fled full circle, perhaps all the way around the globe: through Irish, Finnish, Hindustani, Turkish, Melanesian, Afghan, Japanese, and so forth. For English is what the American

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[108] Mavelli and Petito, p. 1.

[109] Koch, 'Chatting with a Chinese Philosopher', in *The Art of Poetry*, pp. 94-96 (p. 95).

> ‘language’ or literature is being created FROM, therefore of necessity
> by very definition fleeing from.[110]

As American literature turns eastward, its interaction with other cultures curiously endows it with more Englishness, causing it to resemble even more what it is fleeing from. This is no surprise since the English language indeed owes much of its growth to its encounters with foreign cultures, mainly as a part of its colonial expeditions. For Koch, American literature differs in the way that its peripatetic life is driven by the need to free itself from the historical grip of English colonialism. Exactly how Koch feels that American literature must come to resemble the English—in terms of its place within the European canon or in terms of aesthetic, or both—is debatable, but the paradox is clearly laid out: decolonisation, any act of de-centring power structures, develops a parity, and perhaps even a stronger likeness than before, between the dominant and subordinate actors. The difference lies in the way that the local—American literature understood as a subaltern actor in relation to its transatlantic peers—meets the global, which occurs not through the creation of new centres of power, but by maintaining its subaltern status as a runaway fleeing from the colonial grasp. In his final collection *A Possible World* (2002), Koch writes an ode ‘To Buddhism’, drawing up complex relationships between the religious and the secular as he resists new forms of colonisations.

> How calmly and gently you approach me in Thailand
> And propose that we sit down and talk
> In the pollution and in the heat, that we find a little fresh air, shade,
>   and talk. You
> Explain some principles—I already know a few [principles]
> From my college days when I subscribed to a periodical named *Cat’s*
>   *Yawn*. A Zen periodical,
> It was so named the editor said because those words make no sense. I
>   didn’t
> Understand why he said they made no sense. However, I was drawn
>   to the koans.
> You tell me about the two different vehicles
> And the life of Gautama, which I know. […]
> Amazing! But where would I fit you or you into me? It won’t happen.
> Reluctantly, I lose you, never having had you. This is so much in line
> With what *Cat’s Yawn* said about you and what you told me
> That I imagine its [sic] making you smile.

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[110] Ibid.

(*KCP*)

Buddhism comes dressed in the garb of a salesperson or a member of the laity making a pitch. The speaker of the poem already knows a few principles, and about the life of Gautama, so the knowledge on offer is scarcely useful to him. As a comment on the commodification of Buddhism in the age of globalisation, the poem is less an indictment of spiritual consumerism and more a depiction of the ways in which the East and the West participate in the spiritual marketplace at the local level. It is all a part of a negotiation around a new set of power dynamics between two subaltern discourses. Just as O'Hara uses camp to meet Buddhism on equal terms, Koch reworks the power structures he faces in a foreign land by depicting Buddhism, a dominant discourse in Thailand, as a figure that poses no threat to literary subjectivity. In fact, the Western traveller even enjoys a slight leverage, bringing an end to the pitch with a peremptory 'It won't happen'. Only once the deal falls through is the speaker's desire for a subject-object synthesis revealed: '*Reluctantly*, I lose you, never having had you' [emphasis mine]. Neither a colonisation of the American body nor a cultural integration can be contrived. However, that Buddhism is, in the end, pleased indicates that the failure to perform the synthesis is staged. As I will show, the embodiment of Buddhism is ultimately carried out by the poet's objective to decolonise literature.

A question remains: how does the name of the Zen periodical *Cat's Yawn* make sense to Koch? What did the journal say about Zen and, indeed, which Buddhist principles does the poem align with? These questions cannot be answered without filling in the hermeneutical spaces Koch deliberately leaves in the poem. It is best that we take his interest in Zen hermeneutics, which he encountered in *Cat's Yawn* ('I was drawn to the koans'), seriously and approach the poem itself as a koan-like heuristic vignette. Traditionally, the Zen koan exercise is intended to bring students to realise the representational nature of language and thoughts, compelling them to rework conventional modes of thinking and associative practice. The Zen master employs unexpected gestures or suprarational utterances using rhetorical devices such as paradox, hyperbole, non sequiturs, irony, and allusions—utterances which, according to Suzuki, display a 'logical discontinuity' and are 'apparently nonsensical', presenting the conditions for satori to manifest itself and 'start a dialectics of its own'.[111] It is general practice for the master to ask a student to refer to a verse from the *Zenrin-kushū*, demonstrating their understanding of one perplexing remark by finding another that is relevant. In the suprarational aesthetics of the Zen koan, Koch finds it analogous with the logical discontinuities of English nonsense literature. The poem, seen through Koch's Carrollian atmospherics of the seemingly *nonsensical* title of *Cat's Yawn* and the enigmatic smile in the end, the final image of Buddhism morphs with the Cheshire Cat, or, to be precise, the 'grin without a cat'.[112] The runaway poet displaces his own colonial heritage from the centre by adopting Zen hermeneutics, though he cannot shake off certain aspects of the tradition he is 'fleeing from'.

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[111] Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism (Second Series)* (London: Rider for the Buddhist Society, London, 1950), p. 63. For literary devices in koans, see Steve Heine in *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, 'On the Value of Speaking and Not Speaking: Philosophy of Language in Zen Buddhism', in *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. by Steven M. Emmanuel (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2013), pp. 349-65 (p. 350).

While hybridity enables a subaltern actor to design an efficient counterpublic, it can also allow for marginal religious discourses, even when maintaining their marginality, to insinuate themselves into 'secular' public spheres, extending their own cultural circulation and relatability. A synchronic reading of the poem invites a glimpse into the textual dissemination of Buddhism in America. Published between 1940 and 1941, *Cat's Yawn* was initially a small journal which recorded Zen master Sokei-an Shigetsu Sasaki's talks for a core group of students, his larger circle of followers, a few institutions, and some members of the general public. Sokei-an was a proponent of the use of *Alice in Wonderland* as a text and meditation device for his American students to understand Zen koans better.[113] Lewis Carroll's book has since provided writers and academics on Buddhism with the framework of nonsense literature to defend and legitimise Zen in the West.[114] Koch's reference to *Alice in Wonderland* is, then, a diachronic one brought to bear simultaneously on Buddhism's textual practices, which, through its collusions with the 'runaway' poet, extends and seeks admissions into new public spheres. By throwing a light on Buddhism's aesthetic ambitions, Koch unsettles any assumption that Buddhism seeks to build hierarchies through a consolidation of power and effacement of secularism.

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[112] Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 2000), p. 69.

[113] Janica Anderson and Steven Zahavi Schwartz, *Zen Odyssey: the Story of Sokei-an, Ruth Fuller Sasaki, and the Birth of Zen in America* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2018), p. 70, 111.

[114] Heine, p. 357; Daniel Doen Silberberg uses Lewis Carroll's plot as a point of departure on his musings on Zen in *Wonderland: The Zen of Alice* (Berkely, CA: Parallax Press, 2009); P. Law, 'Alice in Enlightenedland', *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, (Spring 1997) <https://tricycle.org/magazine/alice-enlightenedland/> [accessed 3 December 2021]

Koch’s distortion of Buddhism with nonsense literature is also a portrait of the poet’s composite subjectivity, and a useful one to consider the poets as a group. Their attitudes towards Buddhism are as distinct as they are of a piece, varied as they are similar. While Koch, Guest, and Ashbery demonstrate a directionality of secularism that seems mandated by Buddhism’s reflexive maintenance of its own marginality in relation to subjectivity, O’Hara, for whom secularism entails the exclusion of religiosity, struggles against the ironic futility of its own counterpublics. A counterpublic cannot help but draw its own definition from that which it opposes, even when professing its divorce from it, and perhaps effectively documents the historical tensions around the efforts to socially integrate the Orient in America. Buddhism, whether revised, rejuvenated, or rejected, whether used as an oppositional discourse or undermined as a public actor posing a threat to personhood, enters, alters, and energises the New York School in myriads of ways. And when Koch points out in *The Red Robins* that American literature may even come to resemble the Far East ‘accidentally’, he is acknowledging the compound nature of the discourse, and the perpetual state of osmosis that characterises its parts such that they cannot be regulated by a single actor.

Vishwanathan’s assessment of modernist literature’s self-definition as a secular project, with which I began this study (see Introduction), must be revised given the multitude of ways the American avant-garde complicates ideas of what constitutes the modern. The New York poets’ complex range of attitudes towards Buddhism and the Orient show how the origins of religion may not always be effaced. Traces of religion may be used to extend ideas of modernity, or, even without the poet being aware of it, it may colour language by dint of being a social, cultural, and historical form of enquiry into ethics and rationality. The shifts *between* these attitudes of acceptance and demurral are where the innovations of these works lie, not to mention the demand they place on social actors to attend to the transformative possibilities of consciousness.

Conclusion

This dissertation began by exploring the New York School's interest in poetry as a spiritual activity and its parallel circumspection towards Buddhism against the backdrop of the post-war Oriental exchange in the USA. In the first chapter I examined O'Hara's assimilation of aesthetics from Oriental Buddhist traditions, Ashbery's concerns whether Buddhism could be culturally integrated in America without using it as an ideological instrument, and Koch's learnings from cultural materiality in Buddhist practices in the East. With Guest, however, I intended to complicate some of the propositions I had made up to that point by suggesting that she locates her indifference towards Buddhism within its doctrines of self-reflexivity. This turn of argument presented me with a foundation for the second chapter where I argued that the New York School's embrace and embodiment of Buddhism lay in their acceptance of the reflexive functions of the poetic self, further defining its social and historical scope. To this end, I used recent post-secularist discourses to etch more clearly the poets' deliberate problematisation of modern secularist ethics as well as the dominant Judeo-Christian ideology during the Cold War. Following O'Hara's critique of religious co-option by the East and the West, I discussed Ashbery's and Guest's formal and tonal inflections of meditative practices as they looked to unsettle mainstream notions of modernity. Finally, I studied Koch's use of Buddhism as a counterpublic and his demonstration of its ability to infiltrate dominant discourses. Given the historical flexibility and social adaptability of Buddhism, an indifference towards it can appear incidental, provisional, or even performative.

As I have mentioned in the introduction, much remains to be said about Buddhism in Schuyler. Perhaps another analytical framework can accommodate his circumspections. Similarly, this thesis could be a starting point to examine the New York School's subsequent generations in order to reflect on the New York School's changing attitudes towards religion and secularism.

> I should have spent my life
> meditating so deeply that the thought of death
> would be relaxing like a breeze or a feather[115]
>
> (‘Where is My Head?’)

In Ron Padgett’s post-secularist regret lies an insouciance towards meditation, but not without a light-hearted ribbing of his generation’s non-empirical approach towards Buddhism. If Ashbery makes it difficult to discern whether his secularism is a consequence of religion, Joe Brainard perceives the two as separate practices, although, at the same time, he ends up confounding the idea of secularism as a total abnegation of religion.

> I think I genuinely try to keep an open mind about religion. Not, however, so much because of religion as because of keeping an open mind.
>
> Knowing very little about Tibetan Buddhism, I’ll grant you that it’s a lot more interesting than Protestantism.
>
> But “interesting” (let’s face it, folks) is a slightly dubious compliment.[116]
>
> (‘Religion’)

And what about Anne Waldman, whose interest in Buddhism as well as New York aesthetics places her in-between the two groups?

> Mantras grow from experience &
> from the collective knowledge
> of many generations[117]
>
> (*Iovis*)

The New York School recognises its own position as a social and historical entity while addressing its entanglements with religious practices. A critical interest in directions I have suggested could further define poetry’s role in a time when, as Ronald E. Pursuer observes, a neo-liberal takeover of mindfulness practices is afoot.[118] Multinational companies are stealthily corporatizing Buddhism by extracting meditation and relaxation techniques from their concomitant ethical concerns, presenting potentially dangerous consequences for mental health in a world that sees mindfulness as a mere instrument to increase productivity.

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[115] Ron Padgett, *Alone and Not Alone* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2015), p. 16.
[116] Joe Brainard, *The Collected Writings of Joe Brainard*, ed. by Ron Padgett, (New York: The Library of America, 2012), p. 467.
[117] Anne Waldman, *Iovis* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1993), p. 173.
[118] Ronald E. Purser, *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality* (London: Repeater, 2019).

In the introduction, I briefly referred to the Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893 as a defining moment in the reorientation of not just interfaith exchange but also cultural and historical interactions between the East and the West. It was a moment which hastened the formation of the 20th century's global spiritual marketplace, not to mention the profound impact it had on arts and culture. In 1993, Chicago hosted the second session, with a third, a celebration of the 130th anniversary of the first session, planned for 2023. Religion is making rapid strides to occupy more public space, and big corporate is keeping pace, absorbing religious discourse for its own interests. Somewhere poets are paying attention; their mantras are growing.

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…

Dr Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary

A Creative Portfolio

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Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English Studies
Durham University
2022

For Didun

Alap

you don’t know anything / about birds
if you turn up / willy-nilly / in the monsoon
what can take wing / in these winds / even Sushant’s café
is shut / means no birds no people
come back next year / and don’t bother
looking at website-shebsite / just come
for now / here’s chai / and poee
why not take the bus / across to the ferry
on the other side / beautiful island this one is
ilha dos fidalgos / although its local name / choddnem
is not like you say / diamonds of yashoda
or some god / (chorão also it is called
but we call it / choddnem) / I’ll tell you
chhodnem comes from ‘chor’
meaning thief / and ‘ne’ meaning ‘not’
once a lady dropped / her necklace
and came back / many hours later / found it right where
she dropped it / no crime here, baba / where will you run?
but we have suffered / some say
it was the first plague / that split the people
and the christians / moved away
the hindus remained / in the east / the plague
returned / a hundred years later
and once again / with the spanish flu / generations
have fled the island’s / insalubrious air
but keep coming back / to reclaim / empty houses
even now they live / through bad network
the ingress / of brackish water / in wells

The Peacock

That lumbering train,
tarpaulin wings brushing
stone chips and dust,
that heaving gush to the
terrace, keeping watch
over flowerpots
and threats from
the neighbouring
desert—always
a song and dance
about everything—a block
of iridescence against
the co-operative's cream.

The spit and crackle
of tempering in daal.
Heeng laps the morning
sun and from time to time
it all turns dark. He
agglutinates
in blood-iron notes
of dampened earth,
the frantic beating of
wooden windows,
white noise,
tarring to clarity
against the neon
gradient of night,
his plume a
tousled glisten
off the ledge.

Alipore Zoo

Always the big cat enclosure first,
their moans swelling the bell curves
of our brags. Tigers—*drugged of course*—
stretched out on rocks across a moat:

meagre Lakshman rekha for
the two drunks with garlands, short work.
The pong of spoonbills, whisked by scamper.
A cockatoo on the mesh wiring

climbing beak-and-claw. Between
the drying wings of ibises
and Shah Rukh’s open arms the bubbling
of a meme, and surely some usurper

now where the litigon would strain,
on his hind legs, towards the roof.
Other days, caught in the snarl of school
rush hour, a few minutes on the bridge,

a glimpse of the elephants, and once,
not too long ago, in a cage
a stone’s throw from the gurdwara
at the Rashbehari crossing,

a sloth bear; backdrop of boxing ring
and soaped-up bathers at a public
tube well, he’d sit dribbling
fruit pap, accustomed to intrigue.

Adda

In our pauses the trundle of lorries,
nightlong cavalcades
echoing between tarmac
and the mortar of overhang.

Halal, No Beef
nailed on the walls
of Haji Saheb. Splashed
bucketfuls dissolve
the day’s muck,
seek out stray kebabs
from under counters,
all brought gushing onto
the pavement by a jhaadu’s
scraped arc; the shutter
comes down on its own feet.

Swirled, the saccharine
milk and water take on
a slow russet. Fruit-stall by day,
the only one around that has seen
a change of hands. This is jugaad,
we agree, life as a portmanteau.

Fish truck: first sign of morning.
Meltwater collects in potholes through
the unloading; chappals spatter
mud onto calves, lungis at half-fold.

The driver lights up, hands cupped
against the bluster of a saloon
trailing Raftaar. Bitter,
brown-paper smoke of beedi,

steam of reboiled chaa
touching mahogany.

Gully Cricket

Ashdown cul-de-sac, where the road distracts
into lane and backyard garage, hits
a wall. Fade in from the gullies, an idiolect:
wickets etched in chalk or chipped brick

and to preside over the glass and gardens
encumbering the laws, our laws: boundaries
closer, stricter penalties offset by more
rewards on offer; boldnesses turn modest,

each tap a paraph; closer, impassive,
the eyes we played to, locking antlers;
and closer still, the fetchers of balls
from open sewers. Enlarged, the hold-ups:

passers-by, a ferrywallah's buffed-down
consonants, cryptic broadcast of the everyday—
bangles, jaggery, toys, pickles,
ghugni, cobbling—in folkish tenor.

The twang of a cotton carder's bow.
CAA, Godhra, Babri demolished,
1984, The Emergency, Godse, partition—
each traffic-thinning bandh meant cricket for us.

Oriole

I

Prussian blue winter.
Too late for him
to go back to bed.
Cawing
came to us
from the palms
on the unhoused
plot. Picking
the crows
out of the birdsong
he addressed the insoluble
chorus and parsed it
in Bengali;
my interest
turned parabola
with sleep in the
papercut air.

II

I ceded land.
The birds
went back to
his Chattogram.
From a hill
you could see the
thickening trunk
of Karnaphuli
planted on
the coastline.
Thin strips
of bare earth
rib water into
ponds, bandage
the paddy fields he'd
had to give up.

III

A clang orbits
centripetally
to rest: plates
and pans go back,
china when
guests are over.
Vegetables on a cart
covered with gunny
sacks, a grocer
gone for bhaat ghum—
rice sleep.
The fan burrs,
a jostle of birds
on the kamini tree.
An oriole
lords it over
the stalled hour,
a বউ কথা কও—
its name its call.

Main Samay Hoon

Alloyed waters. Pierhead Lock stratus-wrapped.
Amidst these quiet boats and paper gulls,
an egress. Waking as I did on weekends,
not to noise but swelter, and finding the fan
switched off, I grew to detest mornings. Needless,
the return to sleep each time I jammed the switch
back on, sending shockwaves a floor above
to him. Loud hawking, Mirchi Top 20,
‘Main samay hoon’—all tapered away in coolness.
A game that was no game, the switch a site
to establish control over my future until
one of us gave up. Nor was silence always
his means, though silence was fit chastening
for transgressions I could only guess at.
Grunts and one-word answers marked his way back—
indifference to things we racked our brains to say.

Vidyasagar Setu

Transposing gridlocks
in abiding shuffles
at the toll gates.

Where the strings
attach, a superhero’s
perch, or with
Chanchal Lahiri,
gone down to out-Houdini
ordinariness….
Rather, the terraqueous
septum, sequined Hooghly
masticating
marl and refuse.

A bideshi with me, and it doubles
the fare. Baksheesh puts
in motion the long reach
of oar, punts us through.
To move against the tide
is to grope for matches.
Tight squeeze between
the levee and
anchored barges,
rust and patina
annexations.

Was that a dolphin?—Where?
The world fine-tunes
its breaches
behind my head,
no matter my spins.

Flotillas of water hyacinth
trawl Thermocol slabs.

On the left, a tableau,
idols washed up.
The goddess’ mount, a lion
mid-lunge at Mahishasur,
shapeshifting
buffalo-demon stripped
to straw man
by the river. It’s been
weeks—months
since immersion.
Maa Durga looks up
from among polybags,
sandals, cordage of coir,
marigold garlands,
a doll. Tides
take what they can
from the mother’s clay—
punya maati—cow dung,
cow piss, the river’s own,
and priest-begged earth
from a Sonagachi doorstep.

The agreed hour ticks on
past puchka- and bhelpuri-wallahs,
diners at viewing windows,
drain pipes, sludge streaks;
bloated carcass of a calf,
crows feed, no ruckus;
a college gang at Prinsep ghat
swigging Old Monk and Coke,
hooting at each passing couple;
fluted pillars uplit in orange.

Once through the channel
made weak with clutter, we slip
into the centre, bulges and eddies
designing calm over the quick
swap of alliances; moving with it now,
a simpler way back to the start.

Tabled above, lay
of beam and cross-beam,
underbelly broadening
towards us from Howrah.

Whoops and yells clamber up
to test its unwalled acoustics;
a dangling keenness to sound.
A steamer packed with
weekenders sends us swells.

Tigerwatch at the Sunderbans in May

Only two-headed honey collectors enter these swamps,
masks of Dakkhin Rai—Lord of the South—stare you down
when they turn their backs.
Eyes up in the trees,
Bonbibi in their hearts.

We skirt the islands, busy ourselves with the not-exultant,
the blissless confluences, the dolphin spotting spot.
Late afternoon shallows
brim with mudskippers.
Some of us doze off lunch, some return to the gunwales;
the sputter of motor we cannot shake off.

What sanctum there is against the sun,
where the foliage thins out, laying bare
outcrops of trails—the comings and goings
within these marshes—
is truly mapped from above.

Sundari-tree pixellations:
not even water at the margins can lure;
nothing foundry-wrought afoot.
Only chital
look up as we pass,
one leg primed to stamp.

The lady from Pune has had enough:
Sher! Sher!—all turn
to starboard: a shrub
bristles. Ignition
killed, cameras
trained, we bob
about, but nothing more.

I had seen the foraging monkey
she hopes does not re-emerge.

The guide leans in, smirking,
Better she goes to Bandhavgarh
or Ranthambore,
in English for my friends.
Also, they have pugmark-wallah stamps
for showing 'fresh marks'
to visitors like her.

Around a bend, a dead tree
holds up the commensal birds
that didn't leave. For a moment
the sun doesn't scorch at the prow—
a shrill rattle: *the ruddy kingfisher*—
and we are no longer vigilant.

A Stone Pond Below Kashyem

for Bikram Ghosh

Tadpole repertory. Water striders,
laughing doves, deodar tang, cicadas, et al.
Under ocular canopy, cupped in slates
that have outworn the hands
that laid them: my *place of clear water,*

although no refreshment arrives as this Bengal
continues to bind and hasp that one:
If the Bangaals indeed owned
all the land and ponds they claim to,
Bangladesh would've been as large as India.

Even so, that other pond, mud-banked
hand-me-down left behind
by my grandparents in haste like essentials—
that comb, that karahi, that book—
may have been spectred forth by my rapt
exhales coming off the long schlep from Kashyem.

Lowered into its waters,
a small cage, and in it a squirrel.
My grandfather can't remember
what he had for dinner yesterday,
but some things he can't shake off,
a wanting-to-see-for-himself:

the scrape
of claws, a nose taking
what air it can
get. In judders
the boy's arm records

the last throes underwater until all
is still. Hobnail innocence. Water sluices
through the mesh as the cage is raised,
and the algae and lily pads drift in
to cover the spot where the boy stood.

A Picture Of My Mother At Trafalgar Square

A severed time—lambent, her sari breaks
the flagstones with paisley and polka dots;
sindoor-parted hair coiled to chignon—before
she gave up on music,

slipped into her rage.
One more monument off the list.
One more tourist indifferent to the lion Landseer
modelled on a corpse, no less lifelike

for the spine’s clothesline sag—we see grace,
the composure of a dog—
as children on the plinth tiptoe palm-to-rump,
20-somethings kick back between

the paws weathered bronze. Had I not been
her confidant, I would not have known
of the child she was carrying then,
soon-to-be stillborn.

The pigeons feed around
her sari’s fall, populate
the bottom of the frame
like placid heads at the theatre,

incidental to the drama her stare
has found amidst their blur….
Gravitating,
our memories gherao us—

refurbishments back home;
in a hole-in-the-wall loft
cleared of boxes, a mother bird
and her dowdy squab huddling at the back.

The mistri prodded them
with a long pole but they wouldn’t budge,
so they were sealed in. *Two Anarkalis,*
someone said. Everybody laughed.

Krishna's Feather

'as if for evidence
on which a life depends'

- *Geoffrey Hill*

I

I pick the other blue god.
Not Rama but the cow herder
called by many names.
Errant and lascivious,
in-all-corners-of-the-world piper
who chides,

> *What good is the knowledge of minutiae, O Arjuna!*
> *With a fragment of my being, I sustain all of creation*.

Krishna, red-footed booby
shot down by Jara
out hunting deer,
and it comes full circle:
Rama's slaying Vaali
from the thickets
is redressed in a later life.
By my own design,
says Krishna, dying.

We begin anew,
and all around a rank compulsion
to pick that other god,
to give in to the saffron wave
that would take us back centuries.
How many, you wonder, have been
driven from renewing love.

II

Clouds come and go
do not stop to lower.
Distant rumblings keep a gopi scouring
the sky an even copper.
Could the blue waters of Yamuna
have hidden my Ghanashyam?

Not a god I turn to now,
but the peacock feather wedged
in the crown of a god.
That a thundercloud—*evidence on which lives depend*—
may condense to rain.
That a gloss
of rachis and barbules
may conceal a god.

III

A child orphaned in ‘an accident’ is unmoored
years later by a passing remark about her mother:
she of the knee-length hair and high wattage

smile, Shakti herself,
How could she do what she did?
Allow a voice, child, as good as eyes,

to begin anew.
Anger is irreducible.
Could it be that the last argument, its each new level,

the reek of kerosene
as her maxi dripped small puddles on the floor,
his played-up indifference, obscured it?

And was it her last raise that blew it out of proportion—
the match she lit?
Laws are laws, no?

In his bid to stamp out the fire, he doubles it.
She runs for the winter blankets
to smother the flames. Love, too, is irreducible.

His mouth gapes open.
A cry decomposed already to vowels
blunders up the stairwell.

IV

Varnish on wood bubbles up
under burnt flesh, white walls blacken blazed—
nothing that couldn't be restored,

and that would be all
if it weren't for that other voice;
those who carry on
must say it plain or abrade the blows of truth—
attrition either way.
Years later, a disclosure is wrested
from one who was in the ward.

Her moans banked up, asking them
to tend to him instead, a monotone
that parried their relay to her that he didn't make it,
until she knew for certain she was going.

One who never gave way, never swerved for the world,
to hear her say, *It was all my doing*.

V

I remember flinching
as she raised her hand,
this time an innocuous reach
for a higher shelf, but it was
a bell I'd long begun to tick to.
Too late, my de-creasing,
she'd seen how I saw her before
I could see her. She
tethered me tighter
to her call. Evening fell
on unlit walls, a lozenge
of light repeated the window grille.

VI

Rain enters
        a stone.
No need to name this feeling, child.
Name a condition
    and it becomes contagious.
            Once we’re done with a voice,
            may it come to rest

                        in the static of thisness.
            Let us know the myths

                        that take form, what forms

can make of air.

The First Morning

i.m. Sutapa Majumdar

A loss so long ago
I cannot find it.

The very next morning—
the first morning—

the pin-drop
sun fell dully
on wood;
every object
affixed the room.

On a hook
my kurta hung,
starched
white to moth-wing.

The air
soft-pelted with
incense,
the others
let me be,
and walking
through the
still pall
stirred up
curlicues—
smoke chased
them down

inefficiently.
In the
eye-bulge

of the blank
TV screen
shone ample windows
and I,
mirrored, neaped
in bed.

I was free and could not tell anybody.

Dr Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary

I

What good to tally all that’s suburban
to birds? More than naming is more naming,
and so it’s over and done with:
ibises, brahmin kites, one osprey,
five of the six kinds of kingfishers, egrets,
black-winged stilts, a heron.

Some condiments at the door. My world often arrives
wearing green, surrounds me in gifts
and inadvertent purchases,

like how no lack of jetty could keep us: kutcha banks,
quaggy red soil stippled with gravel.
Rang’bhai, my grandfather, pushing 90, is not easily dissuaded. The event we dreaded most
plays out innocuous as the first cup of tea.   Hands to hold,
on the boat and bolstered, recites,

mookam karoti vāchālam panggum langhayate girim
yat-kripā tamaham vande paramānanda-mādhavam.

I praise Him,
whose compassion turns the speechless
garrulous, makes the cripple
scale mountains,
the blissful Madhava.

To the ranger,
Deu borem korum—God bless:
no other way
to give thanks
in Konkani.

II

Shy cheers
drown out our surroundings.
A thin line which, allowed
its fluencies, would reveal
skittishness, distensions.

Punch of diesel and drone
from ferries. Ribandar and Chorão
exchange swarms of the first
scooties and tempos of the day. Bumpers
of hasty sedans
scrape the boat’s
iron tongue obtuse
with the concrete ramp.

Off the banks
and onto the Mandovi;
a tinkling asks to be considered,
shavings of sun anneal all
in passing, prompt us
to containment.

        Today, unable
to step outside,
we review our collections.

III

To speak of parallax:
one constant, the other generic;
one generic within its constance,
the other steady in its changes.

So readily we obey
a call to
pandemonium:
pots and pans,
bells, gongs and claps.
As our Prime Sevak, soi-disant chowkidar, repackaged a foreign brainwave
   and pitched it: to show solidarity
with the medical fraternity,
            or battening on the lode
            of superstition—to drive evil away—who can say?

How to depose one who performs
a split between two moving vehicles?
We see your Van Damme and raise you
our own Ajay Devgan from *Phool aur Kaante*.

IV

To devise willingly, from time to time,
a more severe lockdown
than the one imminent,
keep wiping the mildew off the moment,
its resemblances intact,
to see whatever we see now as a holdover,

yet nothing prepares us
for the lagoon. Waders feed assured in expansive shallows.
No curlews, no flamingos in four-five years.
Fewer migrations bring fewer modulations.
Not a single vagrant.
We lose specifics
once we’ve captured them,

and resumptions
show their bellies.
CAA forgotten,
Shaheen Bagh finally
disbanded, protest
murals whitewashed.
A legion watches over it all,

and though the lagoon persists,
poles mark out
estuarine depths,
serve as addas for the raptors,
kingfishers distinct
only to the trained eye.

Onwards past these borders,
casinos moored,
shellacked and cavernous;

to when a drum roll sent
the belly dancers—*gori/ item/ chikni chameli*—
running through
the crushed velvet curtains,
the ham-turned-
presenter whispering, *Ask them*
if they want to
come with us
once we're done,
not asking.

Always a lockdown more severe
than the one enforced,
to give oneself the slip,
inhabit more.
A step ahead knowing
how it all pans out
whether we are
ready or not.

V

Day 2, on Zoom, Abiral delivers
the turn: *So this is*
what the Kashmiris felt like.

Later, Ravish Kumar on Prime Time
explains the difference:
lockdown vs clampdown.
Our revisions of ‘essentials’,
recompense for wage-earners,
the luxury of internet.
Now imagine months of this.

5 August 2019,
a land swallowed,
its flag subsumed—
we could rush in,
settle anywhere
in the valley, honeycomb.
10 days before
Independence Day:
as in a mix-tape
the order meant something.
A blurring, a border,
an embrace, a not-asking.

The best bit about mangroves:
you have already argued down any hope of getting close.
Our journey crackles on
through the inlet, passages
through branches, allowances made for reruns.
Something impersonates
a woodpecker—given the glut of crabs
around small hills of mud,

the yackety-yak
of pincers, we surmise.

To speak of parallax,
the mouth that speaks our changes.

I have fears
one might introject the other, both able to receive so well;
I never saw
a real thing outlined.

VI

No end in sight
prompts several;
familiar assurances
echo through the gathering
of intelligence. Something of a redness
asserts itself, a talon sprung clean,
only palash.
Disclosures withheld;
we buy time in
the breaking down of
our days
into chewable goals.
Care goes
where it would not.

VII

I feel a nudge to move
towards light,
so plainly it follows that darkness
cannot hold wisdom.

Darkness, like any form of auspice,
can do with
a good shake so it may reveal
its ocellated fan,
a hover of resolve which arrests
and freely gives
the whites of its intent. We congregate,
take our places,
reassured someone will call out
the halfness
of the decrees, but once they stumble out,
who cannot
but root for the caravans, the migrant’s long
walk home?
Once home, pinned under a shower,
disinfected.
Viscount Radcliffe, we have finally taken up your blindness,
our lines writhe.

VIII

Our radii preset,
distances bloat
as we pass each other,
hands gloved
on Tesco runs.
A new fear has cleared
the shelves.
Everyone might be
smiling more,
I can’t say.

        I remember Maa
calling over someone new
because the last help quit, fed up
of being beaten.
Younger, bright,
the new girl walked in and sat down on the sofa.

Maa smiled—*Murkho*.

To her: *Not there. On the floor*.

Years later when asked
if caste was still a problem,
I absolved the cities: *In the villages maybe.*

So out of touch.

You can’t see what is everywhere,
what has lost its name.

IX

In a hollow,
unaddressed,
left to leaven,

it is time
to turn to Didun,
my grandmother,
somewhere beyond
the nimbus of
skin and drugs.
News of every twitch,
every lift
of her hand
expecting
my sister’s face,
or her daughter’s touch.

Her swings:
manic,
Wayfarers
over her wild
eyes, nostrils bulging,
in English:
Do you think I am mad?
She demanded
Rang’bhai fall
at her feet,
and he did
to even things out.
Impossible sleep,
she spoke
to crows of sex.
We turned asphalt

to slow her down,
hid the photo frames,
moved breakables
out of her reach.

Dimmed, nothing
but the fear of death,
we’d all turn silly.

A routine with rest
took our days
between extremes.

A new dome now,
a middle place
beyond her swings.

And now to Rang’bhai,
attentive to the wildfire
we cannot see,
as Krishna
instructed Arjuna:
Dukkheshu-an’udvighṇa-
manāha sukheshu-
vigatha-sprihaha
Veetha-rāga—
He whose mind is
unruffled in the midst of sorrows,
does not crave pleasures,
is free from
attachments—
Mug and pail
in hand, rubs
the leaves
as one inspects
fabric,
taking it in—clear
whinge of lime,
something to nurse.

X

Once, orange pekoe—
no milk no sugar, the way he likes it—
and Tagore:

Mājhé mājhé tôbo dyakha pāi,
chirodin kyano pāi nā

Sometimes thine glimpse I get, always why I do not get…
I get thine glimpse sometimes, why I do not get always…
Why I get thine glimpse sometimes, not always…
Thine glimpse… I get… do not get why… sometimes…

I do not get….
So out of touch.

Now and then a glimpse of you,
never always.

He asks me,
Who is this 'you'?

Could be anyone—a friend, lover, nature, god...

What if 'you' also meant 'I'?

Tagore anchors him.

Later, Parvathy Baul:

Kāla āmār pāgol korilo ré,
Ār ghôré roi kyamoné.

O Kaala has driven me crazy,
How can I stay at home!

He asks me,
What is Kaala to you?

Kaala as in black, darkness can be disorienting.

Sure, but Kaala also means
Krishna, the Dark One.

He goes on about bauls and their Vaishnava roots,
the blindness that is Radha’s,
how a word circulates,
and I listen for the most part.

But Krishna is blue. Why call him Kaala?

Why make him blue?
Who painted him blue?

XI

Of colour temperature, *Cameras do not 'know'. They guess by the references we give them*, instructs Akshay Sir. White-balanced, blues and oranges even out. *But watch what happens when you set the camera to blue.*

Clear sky, points his forefinger at the sun, thumb right-angled. *The thumb gives you the darkest blue in the sky*. An oculus. Blue, darkness lightwashed. I forget what the camera sees once keyed to blue.

The colour of forgetting—the colour drained of all colours, or does it contain all, not knowing which to give rein?

The blues my sister
grew up with, being the dark one.
Why has your skin turned moyla?

Someone pipes up,
Oh, she was by the sea all summer.
An explanation,
a not-asking.

XII

All kohinoor, Majaal,
the day name came to him,
Majaal, 'audacity',
knowing we wouldn't know,
our own rekhta.org, Majaal
who said art is fire not water
forgetting earth
staleness and weight, form
that thinks itself to mess.

What use is art
if we still bristle,
if we cannot leave grit
where it lies—

> fire I got from Majaal,
> that art is earth I got from Abiral

The Three Shoes

Sunday Lunch

Available from

12 pm – 3pm

They give up on going to Sedgefield. It's 2.30 and there's no way they'll make it. They walk in and heads turn, eyes follow them right up to the counter. Majaal asks for two roasts.

> *Sorry, we don't serve food here.*

> *Oh, are you not serving today?*

She breathes deep—*Murkho.*

To Majaal, *I said we don’t serve food here.*

Majaal says he’d like a drink. Abiral says let’s get out, we’re hungry. All gemstone, Majaal.

Later they meet up with a friend, who shakes his head,

That’s disgraceful, mate. This wouldn’t happen in the south. In London you’d blend right in.

XIII

There’s a colour in my mind
that cannot quite make it
across the marl.

To call it struggle
is to be inattentive,
To call it out
   is to be inattentive.

                              What reluctance—
                                  or is it sprawl that
                              brought us today,
                              fetid accruals rise up
                                    in adda, talk splinters
                              to barge-
                              slow, spun-sugar
                                 punditry

                                                            and I wish,
                                                            when someone
                                                            asks me
                                                            Was reality TV real?,

I could turn a camera on them
to elude a defence
and yet devise
an explanatory system

XIV

O Kaala has driven me crazy,
How can I stay at home?

News anchors refract into shrill cosplay, the faithful affect,
makes the artist sit up.
A constant enemy keeps us going. Never short of war, so readily
we obey a call to lock up.
So many acculturated to the latest, so quick to scoff and call out panic,
when what boredom they would
affirm in their own obligatory companies, to the steady ticking
of the worldometer, can be drawn
dripping on its own condensations, and all this while
panic itself
dribbles back from the giddy first few days, through warrens unwatched,
back to sustenance.

Cinched,
a darkness more settled,
a knowing no beam can afford.

It comes time to review our collections,
habit-watching the length
of our days,

to unseat
that which clings to the eye,
and aid its scatter, broadcast, breath.

XV

Proceed to lancing, and once potable,
memory
goes down marking its trail
a god's blue.
I inch closer for the rattle of high-rise
confections,

> *I'll let go of the driver and the cook tomorrow.*
> *Tough to manage without them.*
> *Anyways, these guys are tough. They can take it.*
> *Their immunity is higher than most*

And for the apolitical adman
that managed to remain omnivorous until now:

> *Boss, they infected themselves deliberately.*
> *It's not even a suicide mission, very low risk*
> *#tablighijamatvirus #coronajihad*

And a forwarded message, words shortlisted
for a neologism contest, of which *circumvent (n.),*
an opening in the front of boxer shorts worn by Muslim men.
A *Hahaha!* to the rest, but add
I'd drop circumvent before forwarding,
and receive in reply, *Humour beyond community ;),*
and then the self-referentiality of silence when one prods, *Meaning?*

Somewhat inadvertent the quick fixes, dead ends,
the dogged tightening and release of perimeters
that dragnet whatnots,

and inadvertent, just as purchases, some elisions,
and several by design so an immunity may be figured,
plotting learnt avoidances.

XVI

When Tagore
wrote of Krishnakali,
how much did he mean for darkness to hold?

Krishnakali āmi tārei boli
Kālo tāre bôley gānyer lok.
Meghlā diney dekhechhilem māṭhe
Kālo meye, kālo horiṇ chokh

Krishnakali, a lily, to me;
‘dark’ to the villagers.
Once, in a field
on a cloudy day,
darkling, her dark doe-eyes…

At the boatman’s suggestion
we decide
to walk back,
dropped off
at a path
entering the forest.
Just one kilometer.

We look up,
stop and listen, but nothing gives.
More crabs.
Snaps and rustles, whims of wood
lost to Rang’bhai,

a single step
is all—*just one*
kilometre—his hands
rinse the air
for balance,
gauging

the see-saw
of each flagstone—
what happens in monsoon country,
the fitful softening and hardening of soil.

XVII

As when picking up a language,
no idea where it’s coming from, a shape
rampages into view. The artisan’s rejections,
a heap of diacritics and italics to revive a devi.
Forest-black. The chiselling gets matted into
the tribute’s nakedness, her surfeit of arms,
garland of severed heads dripping
would-be demons, red squirm of tongue
to lap up the spritz before it hits the ground.
Thoughtlessly trampling on death, time,
you bite your tongue in embarrassment—
a moment of awakening.
Kaali, a form so far out she wants to live
among us drained of myth, unknown.

XVIII

Drones fly by
over empty streets
to Hans Zimmer.
Night streets of green-eyed
leopards, deer, civets. The bundobust
once necessary no longer matters.

Streets taken to,
taken over, so many taken in—a place to claim
when the music stops.

An outage eases in.
To go gently, as Didun did, stepping into darkness,
remembering to breathe, soluble as a star.
Here begins the loss of sense.

Body steps back
into body, strains no more to meet recessions
but sends its own warm tides, bloviates.

Learning the surge   as one learns
to twist a doorknob   and walk in,
speak one’s silence
through erosions   of looking back,
clear-willed
foam.
Collaborations, the moon calls in birdsong
fricatives.
No vahana acknowledges this.
Windrow   voices
gleam along the range
and there comes a time
to let our guard down

Notes to Poems

p. 128: heeng – ‘asafoetida’.

p. 129: Lakshman rekha - A line drawn by Lakshmana in order to protect Sita in some of the later versions of the epic Rāmāyana. While living in exile in the forest, Sita notices a golden deer and asks Rāma, her husband, to bring it to her. Sita, who expected Rāma to return immediately, begins to worry and asks Lakshamana to look for his elder brother. Lakshmana, under orders from Rāma to protect Sita, draws a boundary around their dwelling and instructs Sita not to cross it. Once Sita is alone, the Rakshasa king Rāvana approaches Sita in the guise of a travelling mendicant, begging for alms. He tricks Sita to cross the line drawn by Lakshmana and abducts her.

p. 130: jhaadu – ‘broom’, especially those made with hard bristles from the dried leaves of a coconut tree.

p. 136: ‘Main Samay Hoon’ – ‘I am Time’, the characteristic opening to the iconic 90s tele-series *Mahabharata*, a retelling of the Indian epic. Each episode began with a first-person account of Time narrating the story so far, the morals learned, setting the scene for what lay ahead.

p. 136: Mirchi Top 20 – A popular Indian radio programme in the Nineties.

p. 137: Chanchal Lahiri – A local magician who drowned in the Hooghly in 2019 trying to replicate Houdini’s underwater trunk escape. ‘Chanchal’ means ‘restless’, ‘fickle’, ‘brisk’, but also ‘fortune’, and is another name for Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth.

p. 137: bideshi – ‘foreigner’ in Bengali.

p. 138: Sonagachi – Renowned as Asia’s largest red-light district.

p. 140: Dakkhin Ray – Depicted as part man, part tiger, Dakkhin Ray is believed to hold dominion over the animals of the Sunderbans, especially the tiger, and is in eternal conflict with Bonbibi, the goddess and protector of the forest and the locals. Dakkhin Ray is to be appeased and Bonbibi prayed to before anyone enters the forest.

p. 140: sher – ‘tiger’ in Hindi.

p. 145: mistri – Foreman.

p. 145: Anarkali – Love interest of the 16th century Mughal prince Salim, who was later known as Emperor Jehangir. Their romance is arguably apocryphal and has been rendered in popular books and films. Legend has it that Salim's father, Emperor Akbar, disapproved of their relationship and had Anarkali entombed alive.

p. 147: Ghanashyam – 'black cloud' or 'dense darkness', a childhood name of Krishna.

p. 158: gori – 'white woman'. When used as an adjective, it means 'fair' and may be ascribed across ethnic groups.

p. 158: item – Mumbai slang for 'woman' or 'girl', or more accurately 'babe'. Certain inflections of tone will suggest promiscuity.

p. 158: Chikni Chameli – An extremely popular 'item number' from the Hindi film *Agneepath* (2012). Item numbers are upbeat, sexually provocative song-and-dance routines featuring, mainly, women, and are regular features in Bollywood films. The central performer, or 'item girl', has little to no role in the film beyond her performance, and is restricted to a walk-on part at the most. The women are usually portrayed as bold, candid, sexually aggressive, and often depicted as a moll. The 'item number' marks a break in the narrative of the film, its function is to disrupt the plot with spectacle.

p. 163: murkho – 'fool', 'ignorant', or 'illiterate', depending on the context and intention.

p. 168: moyla – When speaking of complexion, translates to 'dark' or 'black'. Its primary meaning is 'grimy' or 'dirty'. Inflections of tone can carry the intended meaning closer to the latter.

p. 177: vahana – Vehicle of the gods, usually an animal or bird.