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Stevens and an Everyday New York School

SIOBHAN PHILLIPS

IN 1963, TED BERRIGAN founded a poetry journal that would “print anything the editor likes” and “appear monthly” (“Untitled”). He called it *C*, a title taken from Wallace Stevens’ poem “The Comedian as the Letter C.” Berrigan had recently heard Kenneth Koch read this work in a class on Stevens that was “the best lecture I have ever seen or heard on a poet,” as he reported in a letter to his wife (*Dear Sandy* 117). The resulting magazine is one example of how Stevens threaded first- and second-generation authors of the New York School into a weave of twentieth-century influence. Among the pages of *C*, contributions by John Ashbery, Edwin Denby, Koch, and Frank O’Hara mingled with work from Berrigan, Joe Brainard, Dick Gallup, and Ron Padgett under the banner of Stevens’ comedic ghost.

Or, perhaps, his everyday ghost. Descriptions of Stevens’ quotidian poetry read Crispin’s voyage as an early template for the writer’s pursuit of what he called that “inaccessible jewel . . . the normal” (*L* 521). James Longenbach, for example, argues that “The Comedian” shows Stevens’ regard for “the ‘ordinary’ or the ‘humdrum’” (94), while Liesl Olson explains that Stevens saw in this poem’s idea of “‘the normal, the central’ . . . an answer to the lifelong dilemma of how to live” (121). In my own work, I use “The Comedian” to specify the category of Stevens’ everyday poetics (Phillips 77-78, 71-111); it is the repetition of everyday life, I argue—the changing sameness of day after day—that allows the crucial reconciliation of individual imagination and worldly experience. Crispin in “The Comedian” strives to achieve this accord, whereas later poems by Stevens do achieve it, particularly in the repetitions of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” “The Auroras of Autumn,” “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” and many works in *The Rock*.

How, then, does this Stevensian mode relate to the poets of *C*? Can we regard the magazine as an indication that writers of the New York School adopted Stevens’ everyday ambition, as well as its repetitive means? This essay takes Berrigan’s homage as provocation to look more closely at the ways that some first-generation New York School writers took up Stevens’ quest for the “normal.” It aims to test what the varying debts to Stevens’ everyday poetry, among some poets of this group, can tell us about Stevens’ own everyday verse. Affinities, after all, emphasize aspects of the

influencer as well as those influenced: this essay will explore how appropriations of Stevens' quotidian poetics, in the case of the New York School, substantiate the elegiac and social aspects of Stevens' ordinary repetitions.

There is no doubt that Stevens was an admired example for New York School poets, as some of the group's best critics have detailed.¹ When James Schuyler wrote an explanatory letter to Donald Allen in 1960, he cited Stevens and William Carlos Williams as the most important precursors for the "freedom" of his circle (*Just the Thing* 109). Enthusiasm for Stevens provided that nascent cadre with an early mark of distinction. Harold Brodkey remembers meeting O'Hara and Ashbery in college and hearing them assert "that Stevens was a more important poet to them than Eliot, who was a huge influence on half the professors at Harvard" (qtd. in Gooch 138). In addition, there is no doubt that New York School writers were fascinated with everyday life: their scorn for "Eliot's kind of exaltation and incantation and upper-level meaning," as Brodkey put it, produced a poetry that is open to banal materials, amenable to localized reference, and governed by contingent, digressive progress—from Ashbery's charts of commercialized consciousness and O'Hara's chatty records of New York life to Koch's legerdemain with found phrases and Schuyler's humble records of the scene at his window.² If we put together these aspects of New York School poetics, we might see Stevens' endorsement by this group as their recognition of his "lower-level" attention to ordinary experience.

Yet this is not necessarily the case: New York School writers' admiration of Stevens was not always an admiration of the Stevensian ordinary. It was not for Frank O'Hara, for example. The course of his opinions is similar to Berrigan's, in fact, perhaps because Berrigan was O'Hara's most fervent disciple.³ Although the first issue of *C* includes Berrigan's "In Place of Sunday Mass," an obvious homage to Stevens' "Sunday Morning" that also imitates "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" ("My beard is a leaping staff," Berrigan's poem begins [*Collected* 654]), "In Place" does not take Stevens' example as an everyday one. Berrigan's poem presents something closer to a test of sound patterns than a testament of ordinary experience. By the time Berrigan begins to publish in *C* the sonnets that would exemplify his quotidian poetics, he seems to have abandoned Stevensian allusion. In O'Hara's career, similarly, increasing indifference to Stevens accompanies increasingly ordinary poetry, as the poet moves from an appreciation of Stevens' sonority to a rejection of Stevens' remove. O'Hara's attention to Stevens at Harvard relished the aestheticism of Stevens' wordplay, in particular, rather than the older poet's treatment of quotidian life; O'Hara found in Stevens a half-dandyish, half-surrealist affect that could resist modernist seriousness—prizing what Koch, in the lecture that Berrigan heard, hailed as "the surface that really makes a poet interesting" (Berrigan, *Dear Sandy* 117).⁴ Thus it is Ashbery's "faultless music" as much as the "originality" of his "perception" that prompts

dinary evening alone / with a lot of people," is not for O'Hara a viable source of verse.

Other New York School writers, however, challenge this conclusion—James Schuyler in particular. Like both O'Hara and Berrigan, Schuyler wrote poems that are resolutely quotidian, often titled with the date, sometimes apostrophizing the day, and many times chronicling no more than what he did and felt while passing the time. Like both O'Hara and Berrigan, Schuyler moved into a mature phase of this everyday poetics after a period of less successful, more surrealistic poems. But Stevens' presence in Schuyler's poetry seems to deepen rather than wane through the course of the younger poet's career, and Stevens seems to provide a source rather than a contrast for Schuyler's everyday verse.⁸ Consider the late masterpiece "A Few Days," written from 1979 to 1981: as its title suggests, it is the most explicitly everyday poem in Schuyler's corpus, and as its allusions make clear, it is his most Stevensian. "I / have always been / more interested in truth than in imagination," he even wonders at one point, before adding, "I / wonder if that's / true?" (*Collected* 362). In its verbal style, Schuyler's matter-of-fact consideration of fictitiousness seems far from Stevens' grave meditations on the same question—Stevens' description of "an end of the imagination," for example, in the "inert savoir" of "The Plain Sense of Things" (*CPP* 428). Yet in his philosophical preoccupations, Schuyler's musings show his focus on the Stevensian, skeptical divide between reality and poetry, perception and conception.

The comparison specifies the ambition behind Schuyler's unaffected language.⁹ For Schuyler as well as Stevens, one's quotidian musing about truth might demonstrate an agreement of creative consciousness and visible world, an acceptance or acknowledgement of reality that becomes, paradoxically, a triumph for poetry. This acceptance is evident in the plain-spoken "resignation" that is Schuyler's "Good morning," a poem that ends by asking "Silver day / how shall I polish you?" (*Collected* 234–35), as much as the philosophical negotiation that is Stevens' "Poem Written at Morning," which ends with the poet's eye acceding to the "total thing" of dawn (*CPP* 198). For Schuyler as well as Stevens, moreover, accord comes through an appreciation of daily time, that moving, same-but-different pattern of mornings that demands continual, ever-renewed harmony between expectation and discovery. Schuyler's characteristically understated everyday poem "June 30, 1974" seems eminently Stevensian in its dawn description of this paradoxical process. "Why, *that* / dinner table is / *this* breakfast table," Schuyler writes, even while finding "Discontinuity / in all we see and are: / the same, yet change, / change, change" (*Collected* 230). As the poet-speaker looks out across "dunes" and "pond" (228), his breakfast musings compare to Stevens' own morning thoughts—the "daily majesty of meditation" in "Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly," for example (*CPP* 439–40). "We think . . . as the sun shines or

does not," Stevens writes there, so that the very consistency of our "every day" reimagination makes our thinking "a change part of a change."

To emphasize the Stevensian philosophy within Schuyler's everyday verse is also to emphasize a particular aspect of this poetry: its awareness of the mortal threat in daily changes. This is evident through Schuyler's direct quotations of Stevens in "A Few Days"; when Schuyler's niece compares her bedroom to a "GARBAGEDUMP," the poet murmurs of "Some ashcan at the world's end," and when he remembers a dead friend, he reflects on how experience "sends us struggling forth / like 'the green vine / angering for life' and rewards us with a plate of popovers / labeled 'your death'" (*Collected* 355, 358). In these lines, Schuyler not only transposes Stevens' descriptions of apocalypse and rage into a domestic context, but also points out the finality inherent to such ordinariness—as the world-order "end" of Stevens' "Owl's Clover" becomes no more or less than an everyday fact, and as the "blessed morning" of Stevens' "Nomad Exquisite" leads to the deflation of a humble, unsanctified mortality (*CPP* 156, 77). Such insights imbue the whole of Schuyler's diurnal poem, which opens with "count[ing]" the "few days" that "are all we have" in the face of an oncoming "grave" (*Collected* 354). Schuyler uses an attention to daily experience to accept the certainty of deathly imminence. The ostensibly digressive progress of "A Few Days" moves therefore toward a final passage in which Schuyler hears of his mother's passing and can bid her to "rest well" (*Collected* 379). Only this conclusion, it would seem, fulfills the poet's self-injunction at the start: "A few days: how to celebrate them? / It's today I want / to memorialize but how can I?" (*Collected* 356). The shift from celebration to memorial enacts the overall mechanism of Schuyler's poem—and indeed, of his ordinary poetics overall—as daily acceptance of time demands daily mourning of transience.¹⁰

It is precisely this process, moreover, that divides Schuyler's everyday poetry from O'Hara's: O'Hara's attention to the daily, in general, is less a steady register of loss than a determined refusal of its possibility. Whereas Schuyler's present tense would conjure and compare what is gone, O'Hara's would extend and enlarge what is here. Thus his most famous elegy, "The Day Lady Died," recaptures a heightened moment in which time stopped, just as his most famous auto-elegy, "In Memory of My Feelings," wants "what is always and everywhere / present, the scene of my selves" (*Collected* 325, 257). He hopes elsewhere, characteristically, that "we shall be happy . . . we shall continue to be ourselves everything continues to be possible," and attempts to bolster his belief in continuity with the profession that "I love Reverdy for saying yes, though I don't believe it" (*Collected* 329). (This is the same Reverdy who helps O'Hara to forget the fact of loss in "A Step Away from Them," where he reflects that "Bunny died, then John Latouche, / then Jackson Pollock" before restoring equanimity with the fact that "My heart is in my / pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy" [258].) O'Hara's "belief" may be negated, his present-

tense “scene” may be lost; as Dan Chiasson writes, this poet’s “fear of . . . the past” makes him paradoxically “susceptible to memory and introspection” precisely because of his “discounting, in advance, the power of memory and introspection” (*One Kind* 113-14). But O’Hara’s work is nevertheless driven by such discounting, whereas Schuyler’s work is driven by the opposite—“Korean mums,” for example, proceeds in a rhythm of recollection and forgetting that can chronicle the present only by looking back on previous moments and ahead to their possible loss (*Collected* 231-32). The mornings and evenings of Schuyler’s everyday verse thus differ from the lunch hours of O’Hara’s ordinary poetry in Schuyler’s acknowledgement of an everyday threat.

Schuyler’s continuing appreciation for Stevens, then, as opposed to O’Hara’s increasing hostility to the older poet, might help us to see a similar acknowledgement of mortality in Stevens’ practice as well. I have argued elsewhere that Stevens’ quotidian poetry presents a complicated engagement with loss, that he finds in the repetitions of time not only an imaginative reconciliation with reality but also an individual acceptance of death (Phillips 94-111). Like Schuyler, Stevens became more concerned with everyday poetics as he grew older, with the work of both poets’ old age standing at the pinnacle of their quotidian verse.¹¹ “A Few Days” might be tracing the course of Stevens’ own poetry when it turns Stevens’ early investigations of ends and beginnings into a later meditation on death and renewal. Schuyler’s conclusive popovers are followed by a question and an answer that pervade Stevens’ late work: “What will it be like when there’s no / more tomorrow?” Schuyler wonders, then replies that he “can’t quite escape the feeling of death as a sleep / from which we awaken / refreshed, in eternity”—even as he admits that “when the chips are down I plunk / them on nothingness . . . ‘Rest in peace’ / is all I have to say on the subject” (*Collected* 358). Using daily awakening to believe in an existence beyond human finality, resisting the sentiment with a skeptical awareness of annihilation, and nonetheless invoking a pattern of rest and rising as minimal consolation: these turns of thought adapt Stevens’ tactics in *The Auroras of Autumn* and *The Rock*, where belief in the ordinary rhythm of sunrise after sleep and dawn after dreams allows a post-religious confidence in life after death. We can see as much in the coming “wakefulness” that closes “Long and Sluggish Lines,” for example, and the coming “tomorrow” of “The Auroras of Autumn” (*CPP* 443, 362). Indeed, Stevens’ “The Auroras” joins Schuyler’s “Few Days” in the need to make peace with a maternal, mortal reality principle—the dying and then dead figure of Schuyler’s own mother, an “old truth-teller” (*Collected* 379), or the “innocent mother” that is Stevens’ earthly truth (*CPP* 361). When Schuyler’s final “rest well” to his parent deepens the desired serenity of his earlier “rest in peace,” it also recalls the peaceful rest of Stevens’ penultimate section in “The Auroras”: such repose, perhaps, is one fruit of daily attention for both poets.

There are differences, of course, between their senses of dailiness: among the most important, Schuyler's ordinary poems are much more retrospective than Stevens', more indulgent of a sensation close to nostalgia. Schuyler's ordinary progress, also, is much less focused on the novelty of the world's patterned "tomorrows," less wary of the familiarity of the world's ongoing digressions. But the similarities between these two writers nonetheless help to confirm a death-haunted exigency in Stevens' philosophical ruminations as much as a skeptical project in Schuyler's understated reportage. If the urban wanderer of "An Ordinary Evening" presents a figure of scorn for O'Hara, he seems a figure of empathy for the urban walker of "A Few Days," who tries to manage a similarly autumnal situation: "Things should get better as you / grow older," Schuyler writes, "but that / is not the way. The way is inscrutable and hard to handle" (*Collected* 361). Schuyler's condition in "A Few Days" in fact compares closely to O'Hara's description of Stevens' "ordinary evening," which envisions the elder poet strolling through a city "alone with others": "Here it is / the Labor Day weekend," Schuyler writes, "and all my friends are out of town: / just me and some / millions of others, to whom I have not yet been introduced. / A walk in the / streets" (361).

Those "millions," in turn, bring this discussion back to the question of an everyday sociality—an intersubjective connection that O'Hara's poetry strenuously needs and that Stevens' poetry potentially neglects. Schuyler's everyday acceptance of death is as socially articulated as O'Hara's quotidian resistance to mortality: Schuyler's work is full of names and places, often dedicated to specific people, adept at including dialogue and incorporating scraps of conversation. Even the loneliness of his not-yet-introduced walk, in "A Few Days," looks ahead to meetings with those he already knows, since after "A few days . . . friends will / trickle back to / town. Dinner parties, my favorite form of entertainment." But the relationship in Schuyler's work often differs in kind from that of O'Hara, whose "Meditations in an Emergency" ventures forth from the "bosom of another" and boasts that he wants only "boundless love" (*Collected* 197). Schuyler's "The Morning of the Poem" is written to a painter who "do[es] not like to be touched," and the poem assures that audience that "I do not want to be in love with you, / nor you with me" (*Collected* 259).¹² Whereas O'Hara's address of another demands an unstinted response and would collapse any distance between them, Schuyler's expects nothing and exists in a separate togetherness: "I like / to be alone / with friends," he writes in "June 30" (229). Schuyler's best everyday poems—and his most Stevensian, including "A Few Days," "June 30," and "Morning," among others—suggest this paradoxical state of being, in which friends take up their daily tasks with companionable loneliness rather than unifying love.

Might Stevens' ordinary poems suggest a similar companionship? Stevens finds his most tenable social vision at the height of his everyday poetics, when he must rely most fearfully on the innocence in a same-but-

different “tomorrow”: the conclusion of “The Auroras of Autumn” comes with a fraternal “we” (CPP 362). This is the height, moreover, of Stevens’ everyday confrontation with death: the first-person plural that marks the end of “The Auroras” suggests kinship built from a common faith in daily experience against the common threat of human mortality. This relationship, then, is less the exchange of subjective affection—O’Hara’s love—than the recognition of objective conditions. “We thought alike / And that made brothers of us in a home,” Stevens writes, confirming that we “knew each other well” (CPP 361-62). Such kinship revises the “we” of “Owl’s Clover,” in which a “medium man among other medium men” would indulge his desire for nighttime imagination and “turn away from the abominable / Farewells” (CPP 170). It rewrites, also, the “generation” at the conclusion of “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” in which a rhythm of night and day allows the dreams and reality of this group to mix (CPP 150-51). It returns to the collectively repetitive “we” from the conclusion of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” perhaps, in which escapist “escapades of death” yield to the “Mere repetition” of diurnal turns (CPP 350). These poems register only a minimal, unspecified, first-person plural, and the community in Stevens’ brotherhood might not satisfy those who seek a sustained sense of the “interpersonal” or who see everyday poetry as an agent of political constituency. But it does suggest how quotidian experience, in Stevens, can produce a fellow feeling through the sheer fact of its generality—such generality including, as Schuyler puts it in “A Few Days,” that “grave” that “yawns for / one and all” (*Collected* 354). Schuyler’s Stevensian affinities help us to identify this incipient sociality in the earlier poet’s everyday verse.

So do the Stevensian affinities of another New York School poet, one of the friends with whom Schuyler will dine in “A Few Days.” Ashbery’s social sense seems even more Stevensian, in fact, by eschewing the proper-name specificity of Schuyler’s work for a cogent vagueness of human association. Ashbery’s amorphous relationships, however, are as attentive to everyday settings and as sensitive to mortal conditions as any kinship in Schuyler or Stevens. Indeed, if Ashbery has always been linked to Stevens especially closely, among New York School writers, the increasingly elegiac and increasingly everyday preoccupations of his most recent work serve to deepen his connection to this influential predecessor. Here is “Alcove,” the opening poem of *Planisphere* (2009):

Is it possible that spring could be
 once more approaching? We forget each time
 what a mindless business it is, porous like sleep,
 adrift on the horizon, refusing to take sides, “mugwump
 of the final hour,” lest an agenda—horrors!—be imputed to it,
 and the whole point of its being spring collapse

like a hole dug in sand. It's breathy, though,
you have to say that for it.

And should further seasons coagulate
into years, like spilled, dried paint, why,
who's to say we weren't provident? We indeed
looked out for others as though they mattered, and they,
catching the spirit, came home with us, spent the night
in an alcove from which their breathing could be heard clearly.
But it's not over yet. Terrible incidents happen
daily. That's how we get around obstacles.

(1)

Ashbery's tone here may seem as far from Stevens' as Schuyler's often does, Ashbery's wry "horrors" at an "agenda" fundamentally different from Stevens' stark renunciation of "ideas." Yet the approach of spring in Ashbery's "Alcove" nonetheless recalls the approach of day in Stevens' "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself," a work poised at the "earliest ending of winter" (*CPP* 451), and suggests how Ashbery's poetry reworks Stevens' ordinary verse more generally.¹³ Like Stevens, Ashbery describes the combination of experience and novelty in everyday cyclicality: in "Alcove," the coming dried paint of coagulated years admits an accumulation of seasonal returns, even as it expects an extension of such rounds. As with Stevens, moreover, Ashbery's adoption of these rounds includes an awareness of his fellow sufferers in that pattern: their "breathing," domesticated sleep compares to the equally breathy repose of Stevens' natives in "The Auroras of Autumn." Here and elsewhere, Ashbery emphasizes a tendency that is also at work in Stevens' everyday "we": Ashbery shows how daily patterns foster a fellow feeling that resists loneliness as well as solipsism. We assume an empathy with others, Ashbery implies, when we assume the requirements of everyday time.

Ashbery's communal "breathing," as it adopts the rhythms of a "breathy" spring, might therefore compare also to the "out of breath" calendar that opens Schuyler's "A Few Days" (*Collected* 354). Stevens, Schuyler, and Ashbery all seek a human accord with the processes of nature through their simple practice of its temporal habits. All three, moreover, bring to this ambition the general, mortal fear of an ultimate breathlessness: an annihilation threatened in Stevens' "Bare limbs" (*CPP* 362) or Schuyler's "grave" or Ashbery's "hole dug in the sand." Ashbery's assertion that "it's not over yet" and his warning that "terrible things happen / daily" are much less confident, ultimately, than Stevens' trust in "tomorrow" and resistance to imminent "disaster" (*CPP* 362)—more like Schuyler's unbelieving belief in "nothingness" from "A Few Days." Yet Ashbery shows how the question of mortal conclusion continues to inhere in the practice of daily repetition. The ongoing work of an everyday New

York School thus allows an ever-increasing understanding of Stevens' daily poetry. His work is a source for those writers who would make the commingled threat and promise of ordinary life into a common—human, humdrum—poetic task.

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Notes

¹Andrew Epstein, for example, compares the pragmatist subjectivity of New York School writers to Stevens' sense of self (*Beautiful Enemies* 23), and Mark Silverberg notes that the New York School pattern of aesthete, in contrast to other mid-century transfigurations of modernism, was adopted from "Stevens rather than Pound" (19).

²As Silverberg puts it, the "New York School poets present writing as an unexalted, everyday activity"; these writers saw art as "an attentive, engaged way of handling daily experience" (90).

³Many sources confirm Berrigan's admiration for O'Hara; Joe LeSueur remembers that Berrigan quoted O'Hara like "scripture" (193).

⁴Even then, as Brad Gooch reports, O'Hara was praising Williams over Stevens in letters to Ashbery (173–74).

⁵As Maggie Nelson points out, "the poem that contains the phrase that has come to serve as shorthand for O'Hara's poetics ('I do this, I do that') is the chronicle of an awakening" (81).

⁶Marjorie Perloff cites evidence for O'Hara's respectful distance from Stevens even in his early years (61).

⁷One especially illuminating analysis of O'Hara's intersubjectivity is Terrell Scott Herring's, which shows the poet's paradoxical use of mass intimacy; see also Anne Hartman's differing conception of O'Hara's community-building poetics. Izenberg's recent reevaluation of O'Hara's intersubjectivity nonetheless maintains love as the most important value of his poetry (130–37).

⁸Epstein's forthcoming analysis of Schuyler's everyday poetics provides the best description of this facet of his verse and includes a comparison with Stevens ("Each Day").

⁹Raphael Allison's recent analysis attends to the philosophical implications of Schuyler's everyday poetry—and precisely through an analysis of his ordinary language; with its invocations of Stanley Cavell's theories, Allison's work suggests how the tension between articulated meanings and unknowable realities, in Schuyler's poetry, relates to a tension between ordinary phrases and their repressed social content.

¹⁰Mark Rudman notes how "morning for Schuyler is also a mourning" (96), and Daniel Katz describes how Schuyler's "ability to make space in his writing for . . . losses . . . makes him the surprising writer of the 'everyday' that he is" (157).

¹¹Chiasson's account of Schuyler's elegiac aspects notes the role of old age for this late-blooming poet, speculating that if O'Hara had lived, he "would have had to apprentice himself, later in life, to Schuyler's enormous brilliance in handling memory" ("A Hat" 45).

¹²The difference, perhaps, can be indicated by setting O'Hara's famous comparison of poems and phone calls against Schuyler's more characteristic linkage of poems and letters: as Chiasson notes, the former denies mortality ("A Hat" 43), whereas the latter admits a distance that includes even death. "Morning," for example, sends a message to one friend while mourning another who cannot be reached.

¹³In his study of Stevens' use of the season, George Lensing analyzes how this poem conflates spring and morning as an awakening new "self" (229).

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